

**Contemporary Roles of Chairpersons, Principals and Teacher Nominees in Primary  
School Boards of Management: A Case Study in the Republic of Ireland.**

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by

Michael Peter Buckley

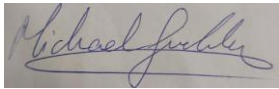
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## Summary

The governance model for primary education in the Republic of Ireland is a unique structure shaped by complicated historical developments. The system was conceived in the 1800s and made law with the introduction of the Education Act in 1998. It is currently facing a crisis of sustainability with mounting calls for reform and warnings about the over-reliance on volunteers. This research seeks to link policy discourse with the lived experiences of board members through an examination of the internal dynamics of the governance “triad” of the chairperson, principal and teacher nominee.

A qualitative case study methodology was employed to investigate Catholic primary schools in the Diocese of Meath. This facilitated the collection of data via semi-structured interviews, with twelve participants, which was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Furthermore, the research is supported by a dual conceptual framework involving Role Theory, to analyse the dynamics within the board, and Sensemaking to investigate the perceptions the participant held about their role.

The findings from this study suggest that Irish primary school governance is a ‘negotiated practice’ and not just a structure compliant with the regulations. Role ambiguity was present especially in the action chairpersons who did not have a background in the education sector. Furthermore, principals regularly engaged in active sensemaking when managing autonomy. They often utilised the Board of Management not only for oversight, but as a strategic "buffer" for role protection and to validate challenging decisions made when required.

The study highlights a certain degree of democratic deficit in some school contexts in relation to the profile of board members. It recognises that schools within an urban setting find it challenging to recruit members whose backgrounds and experiences reflect the demographic and socio-cultural composition of their school communities. The study also finds that voluntary

members, such as the teacher nominees, contend with role strain in dealing with the extra workload needed to fulfil their governance duty in a voluntary capacity.

Ultimately, this study contends that the sustainability of this model is rooted not within its formal frameworks but in the dedication of the local stakeholders. It is a system that is currently functioning because a group of people come together to ensure that the needs of the children and community come first. To enhance sustainability, this study suggests that (a) patrons develop proactive diversity recruitment strategies (b) teacher nominees are allocated adequate time to prepare for board meetings to ease role strain and (c) professional development focuses on developing the relationship between the chair and the principal.

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## Dedication

*Caoimhe, you are a truly remarkable woman. I am so proud to call you my wife and best friend. Since the day I aired the notion of starting this journey you have been nothing but supportive. You always knew when to ask how things were and more importantly when to leave me to stare into the television to ponder. You are the main reason I am at the stage where I am writing this dedication, it is because you have been by my side every step of the way, accepting every sacrifice.*

*Where you get your strength and patience from, I will never know. You are a true inspiration to our two wonderful daughters Molly and Katie. Your dedication to them is something that I am truly grateful. This is not only the end of this chapter in our lives, but it also signals the beginning of a new chapter, one where we can spend more weekends together as a family, where we can go on holidays and you are not left to mind the girls as I spend hours in Listowel Library. I am truly excited about our future.*

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*Dad xxx.*

### **List of Acronyms and Abbreviations**

|         |                                                                          |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACARA   | Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority                |
| BOM     | Board of Management                                                      |
| CNS     | Community National Schools                                               |
| CPSMA   | Catholic Primary School Management Association                           |
| DEIS    | Delivering Quality of Opportunity in Schools                             |
| DES     | Department of Education and Skills                                       |
| DEY     | Department of Education and Youth                                        |
| ETNS    | Educate Together National Schools                                        |
| EU      | European Union                                                           |
| ISCA    | Independent Schools Central Australia                                    |
| IMF     | International Monetary Fund                                              |
| INTO    | Irish National Teachers' Organisation                                    |
| IPS     | Independent Public Schools                                               |
| IPPN    | Irish Primary Principals Network                                         |
| LAOS    | Looking at Our Schools 2016 A Quality Framework for Primary Schools      |
| MAT     | Multi Academy Trust                                                      |
| MCEETYA | Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs |
| MSBA    | Minnesota School Board Association                                       |
| NCSE    | National Council for Special Education                                   |
| NPM     | New Public Management                                                    |

|        |                                                        |
|--------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| OECD   | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education                      |
| RTA    | Reflexive Thematic Analysis                            |
| SSE    | School Self Evaluation                                 |
| USA    | United States of America                               |

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# **Chapter 1: Primary School Governance: Context, Rationale, and Research Design**

## **1.1 Introduction.**

The governance model for primary education in the Republic of Ireland described by Coolahan (1981, p.141) as "unusual, complex, and interesting" is a unique entity compared to other international contexts. It is a complexity that is lived out daily for school leaders in 3,100 primary schools nationally. This thesis begins by highlighting a central paradox between a governance model conceived in the 19th century, formalised in the 1970s, legally enshrined in 1998, and now faced with a 21st-century crisis of sustainability.

This "unusual" system is a direct result of the "enduring influence of the Catholic Church," which established a "binary power" (Ryan, 2014, p.68) dynamic between Church and State. The contemporary Board of Management (BOM) is a direct result of this historical journey. 1975 saw the creation of the formal BOM designed to replace the single clerical manager which was often the parish priest. Today it serves as a complex entity. It is the place where three competing forces come together namely the Department of education and Youth (DEY), the patron and the school community. It is a place that must be managed by a small group of volunteers. These volunteers are required to navigate the pressures of leading a complex organisation through implementing top-down policy demands from the DEY, whilst negotiating the historical authority of the patron.

The modern-day reality for these voluntary boards is one of increasing pressure and demands. This is driven by an increased focus on accountability (Verger et al., 2024), rapid pluralistic change taking place in Ireland (Murphy, 2019), and an ongoing crisis in school leadership workload (Creagh et al., 2023). This study argues that the 50-year-old voluntary model faces

increasing challenges in responding to 21st-century educational demands. It contends that the model as currently structured, creates profound and unsustainable levels of role ambiguity and role strain for the critical actors.

The contemporary landscape of school governance in Ireland is the result of a complex historical trajectory shaped by an evolving legislative framework (Curry, 2017). Despite the persistent calls from contributors, such as the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2022), for systemic change and recognition of the challenges modern day BOMs are facing. There remains little empirical research exploring the internal dynamics of these bodies. To address this gap, this study focuses on the 'triad' of actors central to school governance, namely: the chairperson, principal and teacher nominee. This study homes in on their perceptions and lived experiences. Furthermore, it provides a qualitative exploration of their perceptions and how they enact and make sense of their roles at this important juncture of school governance in Ireland.

## **1.2 Aims of this study**

This study explores the perceptions and experiences of chairpersons, principals and teacher nominees who served on a BOM from 2019 to 2023. It is set against a backdrop of both local historical debate and current international themes. The aim is to bridge the gap between high-level policy and the lived reality of board members (their experience of governance). To achieve this, the study has three specific objectives:

- 1) To trace the Irish primary school governance model through its historical evolution from the 19th-century to the modern day,
- 2) To place the "unusual" Coolahan (1981, p.141) Irish context within a broader international context, including England, Australia and USA

- 3) To investigate the lived perceptions and subjective realities of chairpersons, principals and teacher nominees, capturing through a qualitative approach, how they understand and experience their roles on a primary school BOM.

Due to the scarcity of literature within this field (Mifsud & Wilkins, 2025), this study adopts an approach that is exploratory in nature. It is underpinned by a dual conceptual framework that integrates both Role Theory and Sensemaking. Role Theory examines the structural dynamics such as role identity, ambiguity, strain and conflict. Furthermore, Sensemaking highlights the processes the participants use to navigate various uncertain moments. By employing this dual approach this study provides a robust structure for analysing the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews which will allow for nuanced findings to develop from an under researched context.

### **1.3 Institutional and Policy Context of the Study**

This study is built upon the systemic and historically rooted tensions embedded in the governance of Irish primary schools. The Irish education system is not a typical public system in the international sense. Rather, it is an aided system as noted by Ó Buachalla (1985). This means the State (through the Department of Education and Youth) provides most of the funding for a network of schools that are privately controlled by the Catholic Church as patron, controlling nearly 90% of primary schools (Connolly et al., 2023). This governance framework in Ireland is defined by path dependency (Akenson, 1970). The system's current structure is a direct result of numerous decisions made in the 19th-century.

First, the 1831 establishment of primary education saw the British administration partner with existing religious bodies. It was the Catholic Church, who at this stage established itself as the *de facto* provider of education. This established ecclesiastical control before the State's full involvement with this ecclesiastical power becoming ingrained. When democratic reform was proposed by the British government through the 1898 Local Government Act, which suggested

a more democratic way of governing schools, the Church hierarchy rigorously opposed the bill to preserve the status quo of their managerial control (Coolahan, 1981). The establishment of BOMs in 1975 was not a radical democratic reform. It was a negotiated compromise between Church and State. It was, as O'Reilly (2012) describes, a "minor reversal for the dominance of religious influence" (pg. 19). The Church insisted upon, and was granted, a majority representation on these new boards, ensuring its control remained intact. Finally, the Education Act (1998) solidified in law this 19th-century "binary power" (Ryan, 2014, p.68). The 1998 Act notes that the BOM is appointed by the patron and under Section 15 is legally accountable to the patron for upholding the characteristic spirit - ethos of the school (Education Act, 1998).

This historical context is not merely background; it is the current operating system in which the schools of today are being managed. The 1998 Education Act, cemented the unique and powerful function of the patron, thus, creating structural obstacles to democratisation that do not exist in the comparative contexts of England, the United States of America, or Australia. This historical legacy places the modern day voluntary BOM within a complex environment where the volunteer board member is the fulcrum upon which conflicting demands rest: the legal statutory demand to serve the patron and uphold the ethos of the patron. Leading a contemporary school involves significant pressure due to an environment increasingly shaped by accountability and standards. This emphasis is driven by multiple factors, including the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), PISA results, standardised testing, and the calls for increasing performance measurement. There is a strong and vocal section of Irish society who are demanding greater diversity and secularism within the education system. Such demands that have been underscored by the 2011 Forum on Patronage and Pluralism and further intensified by the rapidly changing demographic of Irish society. This study aims to understand what happens to the voluntary members of the board who are placed in the middle of these competing and often contradictory demands.

## **1.4 Rationale for this Study**

The historical evolution of policy and practice provides important insight into the layered complexity of this issue. However, the immediate justification for this piece of research is explained by the following two pillars. The first pillar is an urgent policy gap in school governance identified by the State's own Inspectorate which has identified the current model of governance as unsustainable. The second pillar comes from the author's "insider" positionality as a current teaching principal and BOM secretary. This provides a unique practice informed perspective on how this policy crisis is navigated and lived at school level. These two pillars establish both the internal and external warrant for the study, whilst also framing the qualitative and interpretivist approach adopted throughout the research.

### ***1.4.1 Pillar 1: An Urgent Policy "Gap"***

This study pivots from the historical context to the immediate, modern-day situation. The current state of primary school governance presented in a forthright and clear manner by the DES (2022). His commentary on them provides the primary, external, and most powerful justification for this thesis.

In his report Dr. Hislop reported that the workload of school principals, who are the de facto managers of the entire system, has become 'unsustainable (DES, 2022 p. 321). He noted that the voluntary nature of BOMs, particularly in smaller schools, are often ill-equipped and overwhelmed by the sheer range of complex competencies. Such complex issues including financial management, data protection, human resource issues and child protection legislation now form part of the everyday management of schools in Ireland. Crucially, DES (2022) identified a systemic consequence of this skills-gap. He noted that when the voluntary board is overwhelmed, its unfulfilled responsibilities do not just disappear. Instead, they land back on the desk of the school principal, further contributing to an already unsustainable workload.

Hislop's most damning and widely cited summary of this systemic failure was presented at the report's launch where he raised the concern that: "We have outsourced our second most important public service to volunteers... This makes the job of the Irish principal impossible" (DES, 2022, p.321). This commentary from such a high-level official has undoubtedly created an urgent and unavoidable need for research. DES (2022) has identified the problem as: the model is broken.

In identifying the current governance model as unsustainable, DES (2022) has provided a critical warrant for this study. However, an exploration on a macro-level alone cannot fully explain how we have arrived at this point. This study is designed to be a qualitative follow-up to populate the DES 2022 framework with the lived realities of the key actors. By thoroughly examining the human element this study offers a thick description of the lived realities of governance in Irish primary schools. It will put forward what perceptions these actors have of their role and how they make sense of the decisions that are made. This study demonstrates that the unsustainability mentioned by DES (2022) is not only a systemic flaw but a result of role ambiguities and strains.

#### ***1.4.2 Pillar 2: An "Insider" Positionality***

This study is further distinguished by the unique "dual lens" of the author. I am not only the researcher but also a practitioner immersed in the field of school leadership and primary school governance. I am a teaching principal of a medium-sized, Catholic patronage, rural, primary school, appointed to the position in 2023. This appointment took place approximately halfway through this doctoral work. Furthermore, as well as being principal I am currently serving as the secretary to the BOM. Within the constructivist and interpretivist framework of this study, this positionality is a core methodological asset. It is argued that insider researchers always have a passion about the topic that they are working on McClintock et al. (2003). Furthermore, Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) have put forward the opinion that insider researchers have three

distinct advantages when undertaking research. Firstly, an ability to better understand the issue, secondly, the insider will not disrupt the flow of the social interaction and thirdly, the insider will be able to extract true data from the participants as he can relate to them.

I am experiencing the exact role ambiguity and systemic strain examined within this study. As BOM Secretary, a role typically held by the school principal, I am placed at the heart of the very governance processes under investigation. Being appointed as a teaching principal during the doctoral journey I have been provided with a real-time lived perspective on the very sensemaking a school leader must go through to navigate a governance structure that is unsustainable (DES, 2022).

This "insider" positionality serves as the source of the data and does not undermine it. It provides a certain degree of access and understanding that an "outsider" researcher could not possibly achieve. Furthermore, it provides a deep insight into the norms and tensions that exist within the BOM and the human processes in navigating and avoiding role conflict. Finally, this "dual lens" approach offers an empirical foundation for this study. The rationale for this study is twofold; it addresses an urgent call from the highest policy level (Dr. Hislop) and is driven by an internal understanding of the current issues from the perspective of an insider.

## **1.5 Research Question**

Dr Hislop's work provided a lens through which to explore school governance, particularly in the context of Catholic patronage which predominates at primary level in the Republic of Ireland. He highlighted the complex relationship between governance, management, leadership and administration in these schools. Leadership in these schools can be transformational following models of contemporary practice. Some schools may adopt a distributed leadership model, while others follow an instructional model, leadership practice in many schools remains largely traditional. There is a clear need for further work examining governance in these schools, particularly as new pressures test existing models. Governance in primary schools is

currently at a pivotal juncture, shaped by historical complexities and required to respond to contemporary calls for change. A case study examining governance in Catholic primary schools may offer a valuable contribution by contextualising these historical complexities and providing insight into how key actors perceive, enact, and make sense of their roles. Against this backdrop, the following research question guides the study:

What are the perceptions, role enactments, and sensemaking processes of Chairpersons, Principals, and Teacher Nominees on Boards of Management within the Irish primary education system?

## **1.6 Methodological Overview**

The research aims and the "insider" rationale require a methodological approach that can capture the rich, subjective, and socially constructed nature of governance in Irish primary schools. The study is grounded in an interpretivist theoretical perspective with a constructivist epistemology acknowledging that the "reality" of governance is not an objective fixed entity. It is socially constructed by the participants involved in the day-to-day realities of school governance. It is important that these multiple subjective realities are captured and an effort is made to understand them.

To achieve this the study employs a qualitative case study approach. The case study approach provides for an in-depth exploration of this complex environment within its real-world context. The "bounded system" for this case is defined as four Catholic primary schools in the Diocese of Meath. Semi-structured interviews have been employed as the primary data generation method. This method was chosen for its flexibility as it allows the researcher to investigate emerging themes from the literature whilst exploring the lived experiences of the participants in their own words. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to ask follow-up questions to gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the participants which will ultimately provide a richer more nuanced data set.

A purposive sample was also employed comprising of the key "triad" of actors at the centre of the governance process, namely the chairperson, principal and teacher nominee. In total twelve BOM members were interviewed during the months of February and March 2024.

Data from the interviews was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). This is a method that perfectly aligns with the interpretivist paradigm employed for this study. It acknowledges the researcher's role in the construction of meaning. This analysis was guided by following dual conceptual frameworks: firstly, role theory was used to examine the structural and social perceptions of board members as to their roles identifying points of role identity, role ambiguity, and role conflict, and secondly sensemaking theory was used to investigate the process by which participants made sense of the ambiguities and conflicts that occur in their governance role. This methodology helps move beyond what BOMs do and explores how their key members experience and understand their roles. It provides the qualitative framework necessary to answer the research questions.

## **1.7 Structure of Thesis**

The thesis proceeds in a logical "funnel" structure. It moves from the broad macro-context to the specific local analysis. The chapters are organised as follows: chapter one presents the rationale and background to this study. It introduces both the national and international context in relation to school governance whilst also outlining the aims of the study. chapter two provides the conceptual and contextual foundation for the study by examining the literature on school governance. It begins by exploring key governance theories, principles of good governance, and the contrasting skills-based and stakeholder models. The chapter then examines governance arrangements in the United States, England and Australia, identifying common themes relating to accountability, democracy, leadership and autonomy. Building on this international perspective, the chapter traces the historical development of governance within Irish primary education, focusing on the influence of patronage, the emergence of Boards of Management

and subsequently the significant legislative reforms. It concludes by examining the contemporary governance framework in Irish primary schools, establishing the context for the empirical investigation presented in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter three presents a justification for the methodological approach taken in this study. The theoretical framework is explored whilst the research approach is outlined and the data collection tool is presented. Chapter four presents the findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews. Four chairpersons, four principals and four teacher nominees were interviewed for this study and the chapter is presented in a thematic fashion based on the major themes explored in chapter two. Chapter five summarises the main findings from the semi-structured interviews and provides a comparison between these findings and the literature that was explored in both chapters two and three.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

Chapter one sets out the aims of the study, the rationale and context. Irish primary school governance model is at a critical juncture today. The historical "binary power" and "path dependency" which defined its creation have resulted in a rigid structure that is now trying to support school governance in a more complex modern-day environment. The clear warning from the DEY's own former chief inspector, Dr Harold Hislop in 2022, is that the system is unsustainable and that it is outsourced to volunteers who are overwhelmed. This warning clearly provides an urgent and unavoidable imperative for new policy research.

This study answers that call. It intends to move the narrative of systemic failure to analyse what perceptions the actors have of their role and how they make sense of that role. It also provides an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the perceptions and sensemaking processes of the key actors. Furthermore, it offers a critical, evidence-based, and human focused contribution to the timely national conversation on the future of Irish school governance.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the literature relating to school governance and explores the various models, structures and influences that have shaped governance arrangements within one educational setting. The chapter begins by examining key theoretical and conceptual understandings of governance. It then considers the governance arrangements that operate within selected international jurisdictions to identify common governance trends, policy influences and challenges shaping contemporary educational governance.

Building upon this international perspective, the chapter subsequently examines the historical development of governance within Irish primary education. Attention is given to the evolution of patronage and its influence on governance structures. The chapter traces the establishment and development of Boards of Management and examines the increasing emphasis on accountability and stakeholder participation. It also explores the legislative and policy reforms that have contributed to shaping contemporary governance arrangements. Throughout the chapter, connections are drawn between international and Irish governance developments highlighting areas of convergence and identifying distinctive characteristics of the Irish governance landscape.

The chapter ultimately provides a conceptual and contextual foundation for the present study. It establishes a context for investigating the roles, responsibilities and relationships of those involved in the governance providing a framework through which the experiences and perception of key governance actors can be understood and analysed.

## **2.2 Influences on Governance in an Education Setting**

Various organisations have a profound impact on a country's policy particularly in education (Liu, 2022). This has come about since the 1980s when the concept of governance gained added importance in the operation of public services, particularly education (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024). One of the main focuses is on enhanced "internal performance monitoring and reporting among public service workers" (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024, p.350). Some core ideas about 'good governance' is grounded in the emphasis on new public management concepts; decentralisation and school-based governance with accountability for the implementation of productivity incentives (Mundy & Verger, 2015). Clearly, the agenda promotes a top-down hierarchical typology of governance.

## **2.3 Principles of Good Governance**

Allen and Plank (2005) inform us that schools have undergone great transformation in response to calls for equity, excellence, accountability and choice. Newman (2001, p.12) considers governance to be '... linked to a wide range of theoretical perspectives and policy approaches' and to be in pursuit of exercising authority, control and direction. Examining governance in more general terms Bevir (2012) considers it to be about 'all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market, or network, whether over family, tribe, formal or informal organization, or territory, and whether through laws, norms, power, or language' (p.1). Viewing governance in a normative light - rules based with strict objectives and roles - or in a descriptive light - shaped by the interactions between traditional and emerging actors forming so-called self-organising policy networks (Rose, 1999) - it will adapt and adjust to the context. Quan (2018) supports this view, noting that understandings of governance can differ between and within differing contexts.

In considering good governance, Watson et al. (2004) emphasise the requirement for clarity of roles and the essential need for community input, particularly within the education and school

context. To respond to the needs of learners Rogers (2013) is of the strong view that decision making must be transparent, accountable and efficient to be effective. By promoting “participation - community involvement - and having strong measures of accountability it is through these democratic measures that governance will aid the erosion of inequality” (UNESCO, 2019, p.4). The type of governance that is evident in schools has evolved in response generally to external factors usually beyond the control of the institution. Social change, demographic changes, curricular change and a greater emphasis on financial oversight has necessitated this response. It is possible to track these changes using a three-level typology of governance; hierarchical, market and network governance, which will be individually examined within the next section.

Two models dominate the discourse surrounding board composition in schools and the public sector (Connolly et al., 2017). This section synthesises the literature to illustrate how governance models, rather than existing separately, incorporate elements of earlier typologies. Consequently, an exploration of each model highlighting their strengths and limitations within the context of school governance is warranted.

### ***2.3.1 Skills Based Governance***

The ever-increasing pressure placed on BOMs to operate under a business-orientated model requires them to adopt practices that are traditionally found within the private sector. Building on this, Wilkins (2015) argues that schools are now required to function as small businesses. As schools can be considered small businesses, this then can mean that when selecting members for the board the focus will be on specific skills that can assist in the effective management of the school. Wilkins (2016) further explains why this is happening by stating that skills from the private sector are now needed more than ever within the education system. This demand, Wilkins argues, is vital for fulfilling the performance accountability demand placed on schools. Finally, this approach of using methods and skills from the private sector is further supported

by Blackmore et al. (2021) who believe that public sector organisations such as schools should use skills and methods from the private sector to enhance their overall effectiveness.

Connolly et al. (2017) argue that this skills-based paradigm prioritises competence over representation and creates governing bodies that stand in contrast to a stakeholder model. Building upon Ball's (2003) argument that schools are incentivised by financial rewards tied to student performance, Dobson et al. (2020) contend that the strategic formation of skills-based boards is ultimately directed towards improving student outcomes within the context of these performance driven targets. As the needs of the school change, the skills mix that is needed to govern will also change resulting in boards appointing new members in order to make them self-sustaining (James & Sheppard, 2014). One advantage of this, according to James and Sheppard (2014), is that the members often have a personal interest in the financial stability of the school and its sustainability.

Despite the advantages of the skills-based governance model, several concerns have emerged from literature that warrant careful consideration. Ball (2003) initially highlighted the evolution of education into an auditable product, where business expertise is prioritised to satisfy compliance checking. Building upon this, Young (2007) voices concern regarding the marginalisation of 'lay' knowledge in favour of managerial knowledge. Expanding this point further Young (2007) argues that 'lay' knowledge is often dismissed as 'vague conceptions of common sense' (p.42). Another significant concern that has been raised is in relation to the lack of transparency associated with this model. The absence of openness, lack of a stakeholder voice and a focus on the micromanagement of the institution (James & Sheppard, 2014) displays fundamental undemocratic tendencies. Therefore, this model risks marginalising the very community the school serves and thus undermining trust. Connolly et al. (2017) attributes this situation to the emphasis on skills over representation and constituting boards based on expertise.

Further concerns have been raised regarding the skills-based model of governance contributing to a more corporate and less educational focus. This is an issue that has been put forward by Blackmore et al. (2021) who assert that schools who operate within a skills-based model are mainly focused on improving the school's marketing position and resources. One such way of acquiring additional resources according to Blackmore et al. (2021) has been through the election of political representatives to school board.

### ***2.3.2 Stakeholder Model***

A significant amount of governance literature stresses the value of lay participation in schooling. For instance, Holt and Hinds (1994) assert that it is dangerous to limit education to professionals solely. The value placed on "lay" governors is a component of a larger strategy for public services. Traditionally, governors have been viewed as not requiring an educational background. Creese and Earley (1999, p.71) claim that 'Governors are ... lay people and their strength has always been seen in these terms'. Building upon this perspective, Lozano (2005) argues that the stakeholder model of governance has emerged because there are 'groups of people without whose support the organisation would cease to exist' (p.60). Within the Irish system the dominant stakeholders include the DES, the patron, parents, teachers and community representatives and all of these are integral to its successful operation (CPSMA, 2013). Since the formation of BOMs in 1975 the influence of the patron has diminished (Coolahan, 1985) and with that, the type of governance can be seen to have moved from a hierarchical typology to a network / market blend.

A core element of this blended model is its democratic nature, where the local stakeholders are freed from bureaucracy and enabled to be responsive to the local needs as see fit (Brennan, 2011). As a result of this Brennan (2011) explains that the school board members can exercise considerable influence in the implementation of policies and have considerable discretion in the control and management of the school. Accountability within this model is shared with

collective responsibility for the decisions made (Brennan, 2011). The stakeholder model displays strong characteristics of a network governance typology. It relies on collaborative relationships (Geddes, 2008), mirroring the horizontal rather than the hierarchical structure of network governance (Davies, 2011). The collaborative nature of the model develops a sense of collective responsibility, shared purpose and empowerment (Gilchrist, 2009) and can result in a more democratic form of governance (Gaventa, 2004).

Scrutiny of the stakeholder model of school governance has raised various concerns that may warrant further examination of its drawbacks and challenges. Engaging with parents in governance is a well-documented challenge (Connolly et al., 2011). This point is supported by Heystek (2011) who argues that parental participation is hampered by a lack of expertise thus leading to a lack of desire to participate in school governance. Of particular importance is the insight developed by Balarin et al. (2008) who note that the stakeholders may not have the adequate expertise to govern effectively. This has been referred to as ‘governance capital’ by James et al. (2010) which will vary according to the school’s socio-economic context. A lack of expertise has impeded the stakeholder’s ability to hold school leaders to account (James et al., 2010). Additionally, boards made up of elected parents are linked to several issues including a lack of long-term planning and strategic monitoring, as well as a high turnover rate (James & Sheppard, 2014).

The stakeholder model while promising democratic input can present pitfalls for good school governance. Bush and Gamage (2001) note that the power dynamic between the lay and professional board members may exist thus requiring strong leadership from both the chairperson and school principal to prevent conflicts. Subsequently, Fassin (2009) argues that ambiguity and vagueness have surrounded roles and responsibilities within this model of governance which has added to its challenges. Finally, James et al. (2010) echo this concern regarding conflict, noting that school governing is beset with a range of conflicts around roles

and responsibilities. These views underscore a need for clear leadership and role definition in order to reduce potential conflicts and enhance school governance.

## **2.4 Contrasting Models**

### ***2.4.1 Local Districts and the Superintendent Model***

Education in the United States of America (USA) has been a local issue (Henig, 2013) with the role of state institutions and local districts being the main players in the governance of schools (Savage & O' Connor, 2015). Each of the 14,00 districts across the USA operates differently and can be considered a fragmented system of education policy especially when it comes to school governance. It was deemed imperative to keep politics out of education in the USA to avoid the taint of patronage and party (Finn & Petrilli, 2011).

Management structures at a state level were established to act as a buffer (Finn & Petrilli, 2011) from conventional politics. States established their own boards of education with some members appointed by the governor and others elected. This localised aspect of school governance is viewed as democratic and can be traced back to 1891 when Massachusetts passed legislation that gave each district control over the financial and administrative operations of its schools (Danzberger, 1992). This system of separate educational governance subsequently developed into the model for modern day governance structures (Danzberger, 1992). The role of the federal government is restricted to the powers granted to it by the Constitution giving the states greater power than the federal government given that education is not mentioned in the Constitution (Farris, 2012). Each state, except Hawaii, has a two-tiered governance system which enables each local district to be governed by either an elected or appointed school board (Sawchuk, 2020). The responsibilities of each school board are directed by such factors as the states and federal constitutions, rules from the Department of Education and state boards of education (Farris, 2012). The typical school board member is an elected representative (Sawchuk, 2020). There are requirements for people to be eligible to serve on a school board.

For example, in Minnesota the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA, 2020) requires that a person be 21 years of age, eligible to vote, be a resident of the district and not a convicted sex offender (MSBA, 2020). In Ireland, however, there are no other formal eligibility requirements for a person to serve on a board and no requisite knowledge or necessary skills.

Boards of Independent Schools Districts (2022), highlight that the school board's purpose is to govern the public school district by establishing policies, creating rules and setting budgets. School boards in the USA have a crucial role in effective school governance (Todd-Smith et al., 2024). According to the National School Board Association (NSBA), school boards are expected to “commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision” (NSBA, 2019). Leading on from this, The Boards of Independent Schools Districts (2022), describe the role of the school board as providing for the control of the district through the election of six to seven members to form a board of directors.

Training is provided to each school board, not by the federal government, but through private non-for-profit organisations. One such organisation is the Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA) and it provides school boards with relevant training to help each member understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to governance (MSBA, 2020). This draws on similarities within the Irish system as training for BOMs provided to Catholic patronage schools is mainly provided by the Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA). The MSBA School Governance Model states that it is the role of the school board to firstly continually evaluate the effectiveness of the school board, superintendent, and district outcomes, secondly, to establish broad district expectations, parameters, and a strategic plan, and thirdly to adopt the policies, budget, and contracts for the district’ (MSBA, n.d.a). Furthermore, training for board members is also provided by private organisations and consulting firms such as Teamworks International.

One of the main responsibilities of the school board, in the USA, is to appoint and oversee the function of the school district superintendent (Weiler, 2015). The knowledge deficit that can be present within this sector makes it unlikely that the board members will understand complex educational issues around policy and pedagogy, so they rely on the guidance and knowledge of experienced and skilled superintendents. The superintendent serves as chief executive officer for the public school district (MSBA, 2017) and while the school board governs the district, it is the superintendent's responsibility to manage the day-to-day operations of the system (Devarics & O'Brien, 2019). As a non-voting member of the school board, the superintendent offers feedback and advice to the board on key decisions placed in front of them (Devarics & O'Brien, 2019). The superintendent is accountable to the school boards through various accountability frameworks. One such framework is the District Effectiveness Report (Rue, 2022). These reports offer progress in key strategic areas, for example; budget management, academic achievement, and curricular programming (Rue, 2022).

#### ***2.4.2 England: Autonomy, Accountability, and Academy Trusts***

In England, school governing bodies have significant discretion to determine their management structures as they are not prescribed by national or local government (Bush, 2016). They are only legally bound to appoint a headteacher. The governing body can no longer be considered a critical friend supporting the headteacher but is responsible for three core functions; ensuring clarity of vision and ethos, setting the strategic direction, and holding the headteacher to account for the educational & financial performance of the school (DfE, 2015, p.7). The 1988 Education Reform Act plays a significant role in the management of schools in England as it assigns responsibility to the school's governing body for overall strategic planning (James et al., 2013).

In recent years there has been a shift in how the English school system operates, how it is governed and held accountable (Dobson et al., 2018). This shift began in the early 2000s when New Labour introduced academisation for schools who were failing (DfE, 2016). This provided

schools with greater freedoms and independence in relation to financial and staffing issues but also raise the standards expected of governing bodies (Wilkins, 2015). This is significantly different to what is the case in school management in Ireland. Academies in England are free to set their own admission arrangements and can deviate from national pay and conditions for staff (Sibeita & Jerrim, 2021).

One feature of the English system that runs counter to increased levels of individual school autonomy is the increased role played by Multi Academy Trust (MATs) (Sibeita & Jerrim, 2021). An MAT acts as a governing body for a group of Academies. Decision making has been taken away from the local context. The MAT has control over many functions including remuneration and conditions of work, the curriculum, and budgets. Political leaders claimed that that “greater freedom and autonomy... would create lasting school reform” (Gove, 2012, p.3), however, this has been contested by schools as they have still felt constrained by government requirements (Higman & Earley, 2013). Academies operate as charities based on a funding agreement with the central government, having no formal interaction with the local authority (Bush, 2016). More accountabilities have been placed on school boards in regard to the performance of their school with oversight and inspections from Ofsted.

Free Schools in England are new state-funded schools. They are independent of local authorities and based on charter schools in the USA. They can be established by parents, community groups, universities, teachers and businesses (Mills et al., 2019). Legally, free schools are similar to academies and are governed accordingly following identical governance procedures. However, the main difference is that free schools are newly set up schools, whereas academies have been converted from previously council run schools (Media officer, 2022). The management of free schools can be innovative in their approach, particularly in relation to employment issues. Wiborg (2018) contends that the management of free schools can circumvent teacher unions as they are classified as single employer institutions and can implement their own teacher contract and working conditions. Another such innovation is in

relation to the extension of the school day relative to that of local authority schools. In some cases, the working day may be extended by more than two hours.

Both free schools and academies follow an inspection model supplied by Ofsted. Performance is monitored by a Regional School Commissioner, of which there are eight in England. These commissioners are appointed by the DfE (ESFA, 2019) and are legally obliged to intervene in academies and free schools, when governance is deemed to be inadequate.

#### ***2.4.3 Australia: Decentralisation and Sector-Based Management***

To a greater extent, the management of schools in Australia is more decentralised than in Ireland and can vary from state to state (Keddie, 2015). Governance is primarily the responsibility of each state with national mandates shaping the direction of the curriculum, school testing and funding. The complete schooling system spans thirteen years and within that there are different types of schools; government funded and controlled, non-government schools (Independent schools) and faith-based schools (Catholic or Islamic) (Unda et al., 2022). Ultimately, the respective state or religious community or independent group governs the school (McCormick et al., 2014). However, if the board is deemed ineffective or substandard, then, bureaucratic intervention is likely (McCormick et al., 2014). Over time, there has been increased accountability placed on school boards for the performance of their individual school (ACARA, 2009). Up until the 1970s there was a highly centralised system of education in Australia (Lingard et al., 2002). Since then, school-based management has been a feature of the government-controlled schools (Gammage, 2008). One of the key aspects of the school-based approach are School Councils, which are representative of the stakeholders including the government (Farrell, 2008). Their role is central in managing schools and a concerted effort has been undertaken to clarify the roles of the Councils, and that of the school principal as far back as 2006 to formulate a set of governance rules based on best practice (Gammage, 2008).

The Catholic Church is the second largest provider of education in Australia (Pitkin, 2012). Defined territories called archdioceses and dioceses are governed by Archbishops and Bishops who meet annually to collaborate on church matters at the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), (ACBC, 2008). For the past sixty years each of the twenty-eight archdioceses and dioceses has had responsibility for the management of Catholic schools within its own region. (Catholic Education, 2006). Catholic schools form the largest system, with most being run by the local parish (Austen et al., 2012). At a national level the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), has primary responsibility for representing Catholic education. The governance of Catholic schools can differ from state to state although they mainly operate within a systemic environment (MCEETYA, 2008). With the introduction of the Independent Public Schooling Policy in Australia many Catholic schools now govern autonomously and classify themselves as part of the independent school sector and not the Catholic school sector (ABS, 2008).

The independent school sector is made up of schools that are self-managing entities not governed by a central authority (MCEETYA, 2008). They draw on the demand for greater efficiency and accountability (Keddie et al., 2020). The idea of self-managing schools was first introduced in Australia in the 1990's by the then Conservative government with the intention of streamlining and rationalising the public school system (Keddie et al., 2020). The key decision makers in independent schools are the boards, and they are accountable for the effective functioning of the school (McCormack, 2007). To ensure high standards of financial and social accountability, self-management in independent schools is viewed as vital (ISCA, 2008b). The implementation of the Independent Public School Policy (IPS) has been considered, both politically and publicly, as a positive move with decisions principally being made at a local level (The State of Queensland, 2014). A report by the ISCA in 2008 noted that independent schools have been a success due to their autonomy and good governance structures. Even though school contexts vary, school governing bodies are well founded and have the

support structures in place to allow them to ‘recognise and address the challenges they are facing’ (p. 2). However, anecdotal concerns have been raised regarding governance in new established schools. Some have struggled to implement and maintain good governance structures unlike established older schools that have had these systems in place for an extensive period. The reduced local government involvement in Australia school governance (Southgate et al., 2025) contrasts sharply with the framework found in both the Irish and English systems.

## **2.5 Key Issues**

The international literature reviewed, thus far, highlights several recurring issues that have shaped contemporary approaches to school governance across different jurisdictions. Despite significant differences in governance structures and their historical development, common concerns emerge regarding accountability, democratic participation, leadership and school autonomy. These themes are evident across England, Australia and the United States and reflect ongoing attempts to balance effective oversight, stakeholder involvement and educational improvement.

The literature further demonstrates that governance reforms have altered the expectations placed on governing bodies and those who occupy key governance roles. Increasing demands for accountability, greater stakeholder engagement and more complex governance responsibilities require a reconfiguration of leadership relationships within schools, especially between chairpersons and school leaders. The following sections examine each of these key issues in greater detail and consider some of their implications for contemporary school governance.

### ***2.5.1 Accountability***

The concept of the audit society highlights the increasing emphasis on measurement and oversight in public governance (Power, 1999). In education, accountability has influenced how schools are organised and governed (Ranson, 2003) and has become increasingly

multidimensional extending beyond central government to a range of societal stakeholders (Hansen et al., 2022). Governments across many OECD countries today are concerned with how to hold schools and their governing bodies accountable for their decisions (OECD, 2012).

Accountability is central in the operation of schools (James et al., 2014). The stakeholder approach to governance represents a horizontal form of accountability that is far removed from the traditional hierarchical conceptions of accountability (Brummel, 2025). However, it can be very dynamic and susceptible to periods of change and turmoil (James et al., 2010). Periods of significant stakeholder impact indicate their ability in both managing crises and hold school leaders to account as their concerns are reflected during these periods (Connolly et al., 2017). There is increased pressure on schools to be accountable for their performances. There has also been a shift to incorporate a particular skillset in new board formations (Connolly et al., 2017).

Accountability can also be understood in terms of internal professional responsibility (Jenlink, 2017). The skills model is more focused on board members being appointed for their individual skills usually rooted in professional experience and qualifications (Connolly, et al., 2017). There is the expectation that board members with specific expertise gained from their own professional careers can bring valuable insights and competence to the governance of the school. There is the assumption that these ‘professionals’ will be able to use their experiences and skills to challenge leaders and to hold them to account with a view to improving school performance (Connolly et al., 2017). Wilkins (2014) notes that due to the professionalisation of school governing bodies in countries such as England, Australia and the USA, there has been a shift in accountability focus of governors. This may account for the shift in how the English school system operates, how it is governed and held accountable (Dobson et al., 2018).

School accountability is a major aspect of education policy in the USA (Stevens et al., 2024). 2002 saw the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act which tied school performance to consequences. From this, one policy approach has emerged, called disruptive accountability,

where education is improved by altering the environments in which the students learn (Stevens et al., 2024). This approach is dominant in urban areas of the USA where disadvantaged and racially minoritized children are education (Valencia, 2012). Market-based accountability measures placed competitive strains on school leadership. Schools are pressurised into attracting ‘customers’ and any reduction in enrolments acts as an accountability measure (Stevens et al., 2024) identifying the need to make improvements or even close.

In Australia, schools are required to collect, analyse and report on data that includes student achievement, student attendances, staff absences, parental opinion and enrolment (Gurr, 2007). Schools in Victoria are required to prepare a school self-evaluation report and use this to set the strategic goals for the forthcoming year. The policy context in Australia in relation to governance has seen an increase in external accountability measures (Keddie, 2015). All schools have been aligned with an increasing demanding accountability framework as evidenced by a greater requirement of reporting as a condition of government funding (Pitkin, 2012). This increase is due to the moral panic regarding the poor state of public schooling in the country (Apple, 2013).

### ***2.5.2 Democracy***

Research findings have indicated that democratic practices regarding school governance impacts school effectiveness in a positive manner (Golby, 1993). This positive impact is a key reason why democratic school governance has been promoted on the basis that it better harnesses the capacities of the local community in the governing of the school and in particular parental involvement and engagement (OECD, 2011). Ranson et al., (2004) have found that school governing bodies have underrepresented their local community when it comes to school governance. New devolved governance practices have been found to ‘divide’ parents between those who are skilled and unskilled in their ability to contribute to school governance (Gerard & Savage, 2022). White, middle-aged, middle-class men were in the majority and became the

dominant representatives on boards and this did not reflect the composition of broader community. It indicated a clear move towards professionalising school governance (Wilkins, 2015).

As seen from the literature, the concept of democratic school governance impacts school effectiveness positively. Its implementation varies significantly when comparing the skills-based and stakeholder models of governance. It is essential to explore how democracy sits within these contrasting models. The stakeholder model of governance is viewed as a very democratic approach to governance as the stakeholders are identified, engaged with and their interests / stakes prioritised and responded to (Connolly et al., 2017). Bryson (2004, p. 22) conceptualises stakeholder as: “the term refers to persons, groups or organizations that must somehow be considered by leaders, managers and front-line staff”. The stakeholder approach to governance has its origins in the notion that there are “groups of people without whose support the organisation would cease to exist” (Lozano, 2005, p. 60). These definitions and conceptualisation are in line with approaches to democracy, where the interests of those who part take in the service must be acknowledged and given the opportunity to influence the service (Connolly et al., 2017).

Parental input into school governance is an important aspect of the stakeholder model of school governance. Parents have been a part of the stakeholder approach to governance for years and they are viewed as promoting a citizen approach to governance (Wilkins, 2010). Ensuring the parental voice is heard has proven difficult especially in low socio-economic areas (James et al., 2011). However, parent governors complain about the technical and professional language of the educational world, and this proves intimidating and off putting them forward to serve on a school board (Farrell & Jones, 2000). However, the model provides the opportunity for broad participation when and where there are difficulties and barriers to meaningful involvement. This raises the question whether a skills-based approach which focuses on specialised expertise may provide more effective than democratic school governance.

The skills-based model of governing can be considered undemocratic since it prioritises competence over representation (Connolly et al., 2017). Skills based boards are largely exempt from locally elected involvement, undemocratic and lack stakeholder engagement (Allen & Gann, 2022). These viewpoints add weight to the contribution of Rhodes (2000) who noted that there is a commonplace observation that this new skills-based approach to governance has a democratic deficit. Skills-based boards have a higher danger of becoming accustomed to their routines, fearful of taking chances, and interested in the micromanagement of the institution (James & Sheppard, 2014).

However, within England a skills-based approach to governance has been supported by the government who have called for greater epistocracy (rule by the most knowledgeable) in a way some schools are governed (Wilkins, 2018) and has allowed them to move away from a stakeholder model of governance (Connolly et al., 2017). The result of this Wilkins (2018) warning is that the ordinary citizens and local communities find themselves on the outside. Ranson et al. (2004) contend that English governing bodies have been shown to underrepresent the broader school community by only including parents from white middleclass backgrounds. Furthermore, Gerrard and Savage (2022) argue that community and parental involvement in school governance is frequently understood in performative and compliance-based terms, with the capacity for democratic decision-making being seriously undermined.

A growing body of research, particularly from Kogan et al. (2021) has shown that there is a disparity in representation in the governance of public schools in America. More than 80% of school board members are white (Hess & Meeks, 2010) with racial and ethnic minorities making up most school enrolments in the public system and do not believe that they are responsible for closing the racial achievement gaps (Flavin & Hartley, 2017). Furthermore, recent research has shown that most of those who cast votes in school boards elections do not have children enrolled in local schools and have a clear demographic disconnect (Kogan et al.,

2021). However, America's education system faces potentially significant representational and democratic challenges that previous governance reform did not address (Kogan et al., (2021).

Up until the 1970s there was a highly centralised system of education in Australia (Lingard et al., 2002). However, since then, school-based management has been a feature of government schools in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia and Queensland (Gammage, 2008). One of the key aspects of the school-based approach is School Councils who are representatives of the stakeholders (Farrell, 2008). The democratic deficit in school governance in Australia is not a grave as in England (Kimber & Ehrich, 2011) yet, concerns have been raised regarding the path it is going down. The Western Australian Department of Education (2016) have put forward policy clearly outlining that board members are most fundamentally about their potential contribution to the management of the school, describing the ideal board member as "one with the knowledge, skills and capacities... to serve effectively on a board" (WA, Department of Education (2016, p.2). Gerrard and Savage (2021), draw on similarities to this position and the work of Young (2016) conducted in English schools where the 'skills 'are quite clearly linked to business practices where the parents professional labour mainly possessed by white middle-class people is valorised.

### ***2.5.3 Leadership***

Good school governance requires strong leadership from two main actors namely the chairperson and the school principal (Leechman et al., 2019). The chairperson and school principal relationship is by far the most important relationship within the governance structure of a school, with the chair acting as a critical friend whilst holding him / her to account for the performance of the school (Leechman et al., 2019).

As a result of the drive for more accountability and having a more democratic decision-making model of governance, schools have moved away from the top-down hierarchical management model to one where a large proportion of decisions are made locally (Wilkins & Gobby, 2020).

Leadership is a key function of governance thus meaning that the exercise of governance in an organisation is not only limited to those in formal positions such as designated governors (Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024). The role of educational leaders has evolved considerably over time as education system has been transformed (Walker & Hallinger, 2013). Now schools are accountable for the outputs and performance of their students (OECD, 2012).

School leadership is impacted greatly by the governance model adopted by a board (Lee & Hallinger, 2012). Within the stakeholder model of governance, questions regarding the suitability of governors have been raised particularly in their ability hold the principal to account for his / her actions. Due to the volunteer aspect to the role, chairpersons may not have the adequate expertise to suitably question decisions taken by in school management or have the ability / experience to set the direction, develop people and lead change (Gurr, 2015) to improve teaching and learning. This is due to the nature of the stakeholder model and the need for the volunteers not to have specific knowledge or skills to serve.

The literature cautions that tensions have emerged in contexts where school leaders are appointed based on professional expertise while other members of school boards serve in voluntary roles. Hangartner and Svaton (2014) attribute these tensions to the unclear delimitation of responsibilities, alongside the increasing tendency of professional school leaders to question the authority of local supervisory bodies largely composed of volunteers. This has been echoed by Leechman et al. (2019) who assert that the chair of a school board needs to clearly understand their role within the governance structure as though their leadership maybe less visible than that of the school principal is no less important.

Since the 1980's there has been a shift towards market-based reforms which have strengthened the status and importance of educational leadership to schools (Wilkins & Gobby, 2020). There has been an increased imprint of business practices on school culture especially in relation to standardisation, as a means of governors holding school leaders to account for the educational

performance of the school. From this perspective educational leadership in England is considered a tool (Wilkins & Gobby, 2020) to govern schools by changing how they operate based on systems which make them appear more transparent and accountable. Furthermore, in England there has been a move to compel school leaders and governors to undertake certain roles and responsibilities so regulators and funders within the system can monitor their performance (Courtney, McGinity & Gunter, 2018) which has implications as to the type of leaders needed to be effective. Building on this, Wilkins and Gobby (2021) note that a key role for school leaders in England in the current education landscape is to maintain the sustainability of the school as a high-performing entity in the local marketplace and strengthens accountability upwards to regulators.

There has been increased pressure placed on school leadership in Australia especially with reforms in relation to IPS and the governance of those schools (Wilkins & Gobby, 2020). There has been increased stress placed on school leaders in relation to the competition of school resources and students due to greater autonomy. This has resulted in school leaders modelling their professional identities on the Chief Executive Officer role of private companies (Gobby, 2013). According to Wilkins and Gobby (2020) there has been a significant values drift due to the increased governance burden placed on school leaders, with corporate and financial targets prioritised over curriculum and pedagogical leadership.

#### ***2.5.4 Autonomy***

Autonomy is a complex multidimensional phenomenon that reflects differing school contexts and governance structures (Salokangas & Wermke, 2020). It varies according to the set of functions over which decision-making powers are decentralised. It is a concept that has been widely used interchangeably within the public sphere. Schools taking on greater decision-making responsibilities, rather than relying on a centralised ‘command and control’ structure, has been expressed through various terms beyond autonomy (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013a). There is very strong consensus globally that greater school autonomy drives up academic standards within schools. It is regarded as a catalyst for enhancing school performance by increasing parental choice or by placing the authority in the hands of the people who have the most knowledge about the school context (Klein, 2017). It is important to establish the correct conditions for school leaders to address the requirements of their schools at a local level (Cobbold, 2014). This involves reducing inefficiencies that have previously come with more hierarchical typologies of governance (Gobby, 2013).

We must be cautious that not all commentators agree with the role autonomy plays in the performance of a school. Skerrett (2019) warns that there is a lack of evidence connecting school autonomy and academic success and that it is a “process of deception that has been carefully orchestrated and nurtured” (Smyth, 2011, p.99). There has also been concerns regarding how an increase in school / system autonomy has led to students from poorer backgrounds being further disadvantaged (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). There can be tensions between autonomy and how it gets “constituted through and by the conditions of privatisation, commercialisation and marketisation” (Keddie, 2018, p.3).

In Australia many schools have a high degree of autonomy. The Independent school sector is made up of schools that are self-managing entities not governed by a central authority

(MCEETYA, 2008). The implementation of the Independent Public School Policy (IPS) granting greater autonomy to schools has been seen both politically and publically as a positive move as the best decision making often occurs at a local level (The State of Queensland, 2014). Since 1988 English schools have had a considerable degree of autonomy (Skerritt, 2019). Nevertheless, this autonomy that is granted is within a specific framework by defined local authorities and surrounded by a performativity regime that appraises schools based on results and inspection outcomes (Moreton et al., 2017). Recently there has been a greater shift towards a more automaniac system mainly through the academies program (Boyask, 2018) and fuelled by a transnational trend (Skerritt, 2019). This has provided the opportunity for charities and private organisations to control schools that are still being funded by central government but has offered the chance for schools to be more innovative in their approach (Brown & Greany, 2018). Such innovations may include the adjusting of teachers pay, working conditions and the experimentation of the curriculum to meet local needs (Skerritt, 2019).

**Table 1: Comparative Overview: Governance Across Ireland, England, Australia and the USA.**

| <b>Governance Dimension</b>       | <b>Ireland</b>                                     | <b>England</b>                                  | <b>Australia</b>                         | <b>United States</b>                        |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <b>Level of Autonomy</b>          | Moderate autonomy within the national framework.   | High autonomy, particularly academies.          | Varies by state; generally moderate.     | High local autonomy.                        |
| <b>Role of Principal</b>          | Educational leader and ex-officio BOM member.      | Headteacher is accountable to governing boards. | Chief executive and educational leader.  | Works within district and board structures. |
| <b>Parental Representation</b>    | Formal representation on BOMs.                     | Parent governors are common.                    | Varies by state; generally encouraged.   | Through elected boards and advisory groups. |
| <b>Community Representation</b>   | Community nominees via patron structures.          | Community and co-opted governors.               | Community involvement varies by state.   | Community influence through local boards.   |
| <b>Patron/Religious Influence</b> | Historically significant denominational patronage. | Limited outside faith schools.                  | Varies by sector and state.              | Limited to public education.                |
| <b>Accountability Mechanisms</b>  | Department of inspections and patron oversight.    | Ofsted and DfE accountability systems.          | State authority oversight and reporting. | State accountability and board oversight.   |

|                                 |                                              |                                        |                               |                                               |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Democratic Participation</b> | Stakeholder representation embedded in BOMs. | Multiple stakeholder governors.        | Consultative approaches vary. | Strong local democratic tradition.            |
| <b>Key Governance Challenge</b> | Balancing representation and effectiveness.  | Balancing autonomy and accountability. | Consistency across states.    | Balancing democratic control and performance. |

## 2.6 From Ecclesiastical Control to Contemporary Governance

The international literature highlights several recurring themes in school governance, including increased accountability, greater stakeholder participation, enhanced school autonomy and growing expectations of educational leadership. While these developments are evident across England, Australia and the United States, they have emerged through different governance arrangements and institutional histories. The Irish experience reflects many of these international trends, particularly in relation to accountability and stakeholder participation. However, the enduring influence of patronage, denominational control and the unique structure of Boards of Management have produced a governance model that differs in important respects from those found elsewhere. The following section examines the historical development of school governance in Ireland and analyses the extent to which international governance trends have shaped contemporary practice.

Historically, the oversight and management of Irish primary schools was a complex interplay of both religious and political factors. In 1831, primary education was established on the island of Ireland by the British administration, which ruled at the time. This social experiment (Coolahan, 1981) proved significant, as it meant that Ireland was one of the first countries in Europe at that time to provide free elementary schooling (Ryan, 2014) that was interdenominational. It would be naïve to think that Stanley’s policy of universal education for the Irish population was an act of “altruism” (Ryan, 2014, p. 57) on behalf of the Whig

Government, as Coolahan (1981) asserts that Ireland was a social laboratory for the British government at the time as new initiatives were frequently tested in Ireland before being introduced in Britain.

Establishing a State controlled school system was a way of controlling an unruly rebellious people (Coolahan, 1981) with an apprehension on the part of the English that the Irish population were educating themselves without any State supervision. Inglis (1998) noted that having a population of almost seven million uncouth peasants living nearby became a major concern for the authorities which were supervising the development of Britain as the core area of world capitalism. The new system was put in place to foster political loyalty and facilitate cultural assimilation (Coolahan, 1981). Lee (1987) puts forward the other opinion that the function of the new system was to perform “a massive brain-washing operation, obliterating subversive ancestral influence by inculcating in the pupils a proper reverence for the English connection, and proper deference for their social superiors, defined according to the exquisite English concept of class” (p.28).

A significant feature of the Irish education system during this early period was its control by the ecclesiastical bodies (Ryan, 2014) such as the Catholic Church. Parents had little or no voice in their children’s education as an appointed manager, the parish priest who controlled the day-to-day management of the school (Akenson, 1970). Unlike governance arrangements that later emerged in jurisdictions such as the United States, where locally elected school boards became central to educational governance, early Irish primary education was characterised by a highly centralised and patron-controlled structure with limited opportunities for democratic participation by parents or local communities. In governance terms, authority remained firmly hierarchical rather than stakeholder based. The sensitivity around the relationship between the state and their roles within the education system (Ó Buachalla, 1985) stems from the historical precedent where children, parents and the local community were marginalised in the decision-making process of the local school (Ryan, 2014). This legacy of ecclesiastical domination has

shaped the role of the Catholic Church in education with major implications for how schools are governed even to this day. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the structural and ideological implications that have manifested.

In 1921 the Catholic Church argued that it would be desirable if the new state “would recognise and respect the principles which must regulate and govern Catholic education” (Ó Buachalla, 1988, p.60). The church extended its influence on families by prohibiting them from sending their children to non-Catholic schools. Archbishop McQuaid was forthright in his assertion of church authority in the education system, declaring that church approved schools were the only ones that could provide a truly catholic education to the children of Ireland.

Ó Buachalla (1985) contends that the Irish education system is an ‘aided’ system in which the state assists the church by means of funding to provide educational services at all three levels. Critically this established a system in which the state gave the church functional leadership, creating a split governance structure. O’ Donoghue and Harford (2011) trace the rise in power of the catholic church back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The British state sought to dominate the Irish Catholics through the introduction of Penal Laws. This resulted in the Irish gentry going into exile. Furthermore, O’ Donoghue and Harford (2011) explain that the priest then replaced them as leaders in local communities. The parish priest’s leadership role within the communities increased as a new generation of reforming bishops such as Bishop McHale Archbishop of Tuam became more assertive in the church’s role in protecting Irish catholic interests most notably within the area of education (Andrews, 2001). With this power according to Ryan (2014) came influence in the structural aspect of the education system. The British government had proposed in the Local Government Act of 1898, a new democratic way of governing schools through the introduction of BOMs. However, this was opposed by the church. They argued that the status quo should be preserved in relation to how schools were managed (Walsh, 2011). The resulting impasse between the Government and the Catholic hierarchy resulted in lasting consequences, contributing to underfunding and a substandard

education system for much of the 20th century (Walsh, 2011). This contrasts with developments in countries such as Australia and the United States, where governance structures increasingly evolved towards localised decision-making and community participation. In Ireland, governance authority remained concentrated within church-state relationships, limiting opportunities for broader stakeholder involvement.

Since the foundation of the Irish State, Irish bishops were distinctly clear in their message that they had a clear role to play in education (Ryan, 2014). Their influence in the Irish political sphere continued with a newly formed Irish government and its introduction of the Education Act (1919). This Act contained reform measures in relation to teaching, educational provisions and structures (Coolahan, 1981). Once again, the church's hierarchy (O'Reilly, 2012) was concerned that it would dilute its power in education, and the politicians of the day took this opposition extremely seriously (Coolahan, 1981). This period saw Irish society 'deeply rooted in a complex and apparently inseparable mixture of nationalism and Catholicism' (Dunn, 1988, p.89). Mirroring this view, Fleming and Harford (2014) also observed that the catholic church's control, through key services such as education and health positioned its ethos at the heart of Irish society. 1926 saw the catholic church solidifying its control over primary education when the State recognised the catholic church's authority to dictate all aspects of the school day by placing religious instruction at the core of the curriculum. Controlling education at this time was paramount for the church, as it was an instrument by which it could keep close watch on the Irish population through "moralisation and discipline" (Inglis, 1998, p. 40). The State legitimised the role of the church at this time both formally and informally through such policies related to admissions, employment and curriculum (Inglis, 1998). Within a historical context, catholic schools were established and managed at the discretion of the various religious orders (Connolly et al., 2023). Initially, the concept of patronage was to control religious education, however over time, this gradually extended into all aspects of school education in Ireland (Collins & Meehan, 2020). The catholic church thus sought to encourage a religious ethos in

their schools by promoting the celebration of religious festivals and through the promotion of daily prayer (Connolly et al., 2023). The dominant model of governance was rooted in 'command and control'. Local schools exercised little autonomy.

The growth of small, rural schools constitutes another enduring structural consequence of the influence of the church. This legacy is still present in 21st century Ireland with 45% of primary schools having fewer than 100 pupils enrolled (Coolahan, 2012). This fragmentation stemmed from the church hierarchy insisting that separate schools were built for Catholics and that both boys and girls were to be educated separately. Push back did come from the Board of Commissioners during this period with the introduction of an amalgamation policy (Ryan, 2014) but the bishops opposed it on moral grounds (Akenson, 1973). This structural rigidity can be viewed as a direct challenge to modern day leadership and efficiency.

The key decision-makers in independent schools are the boards / councils, and they are accountable for the effective functioning of the school (McCormack, 2007). To ensure high standards of financial and social accountability, self-management in independent schools is seen as vital (ISCA, 2008b). A report by the ISCA in 2008 noted that independent schools have been a success due to their autonomy and good governance structures. Even though school contexts varied overall school governing bodies were well founded and had the support structures in place to allow them to recognize and address the challenges they were facing' (p. 2). Anecdotally, different voices have raised concerns regarding governance in new established schools who have struggled to implement and maintain good governance structures unlike established older schools who have had these systems in place for an extensive period.

The 1950's in Ireland saw the government release a report from the Council of Education (1954), which displayed clearly that the position of the church in the Irish education system was still prevalent and totally backed by the State (Ryan, 2014). The report highlighted that, the duty of a school was to not provide an education but to "train their children in the fear and love of

God” (Williams, 1999, p.323). This demonstrates that in a relatively short period of time an undemocratic system of primary schooling existed in Ireland (Ryan, 2014) where a private religious order had a significant say in its management and function. There were two stakeholders in education and this “binary power” (Ryan, 2014, p.68) existed post-independence up until the 1970’s when political, cultural and international influences provided a catalyst for how schools were managed and who would be involved in their governance.

## **2.7 A Shift Towards Democracy**

The following decades saw a shift in school governance that facilitated greater autonomy in decision making and greater participation. Parental involvement and parental voice became more prominent, and the role of the European Union played a significant part in the transformation. This change reflects the complex interplay between social, political and educational forces that shaped the educational landscape.

The introduction of Boards of Management represented a move away from hierarchical governance towards a stakeholder model which resembled trends observed internationally. However, unlike England or Australia, Irish governance remained strongly shaped by patronal authority. From 1975 on, there was slow but significant change for the parental voice within the Irish education system. This coincided with a broadening of power structures in society (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010), whereby, citizens were now being encouraged to partake in decision making in society. This became particularly evident with school governance as parents acquired representation on boards (Walshe, 1999).

BOMs had now become welcomed by parents and their representative bodies (Walshe, 1996) with democratic structures put in place to facilitate a more open decision-making process with board members now being responsible for the appointment of assistant teachers, the delegation of duties for the principal and for devising school policies (CPSMA, 2004). The following individuals were selected as the final members of boards for schools with six or more teachers: the school principal, one elected teacher, two elected parents, and four patron nominees (one male, one female), (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2010). To ensure that patrons, teachers, parents, and community members were equally represented on the board the composition was altered in 1997. To achieve equitable representation for parents on boards, the National Parents Council-Primary (NPC-P) overcame resistance from representatives of church to see that these changes

were implemented (Walshe, 1999). The role of the patron was still paramount as the Constitution Review Group (1996) outlined

‘The patron of a national school is responsible for the nomination of the board of management of that school although parents and teachers have a role in electing representatives to the board – the names to be subject to the formal approval of the patron. The patron also plays an important role in setting up the selection board for a school principalship and for approving all appointments to a school. The patron also has the power to assume management of a school in the event of unsatisfactory performance by a board of management. (p.316)’

In 1991 the second OECD Report called for “devolution of responsibility for management and delivery of educational programmes” (OECD, 1991, p.65). However, the recommendation went unheeded (Ryan, 2012). Public debate during this time on the effectiveness of BOMs was minimal at best and legislation enacted in 1998 would cement the powers of the patron by writing into law the functions of the BOM their responsibility to uphold the ethos of the school and how they are accountable to the patron (Ryan, 2012).

Within the Irish primary system, the role of the parent in school governance was formalised through the establishment of BOMs in 1975. This step was seen as the first significant change in the management of national schools since the establishment of the system in 1831 (Coolahan et al., 2012). It can be viewed as the starting point in the current stakeholder model of governance in the Irish system. However, up until 1992 parents held a minority position compared to that of the patron’s representatives (O’Connor, 2012). The Green Paper on Education, Education for a Changing World (Government of Ireland, 1992) flipped the representations on BOMs by reconstituting them providing the patron with a minority representation. This has undoubtedly marked a significant shift in the balance of power within school governance. In Ireland, today, parents have statutory rights to representation on all school BOMs (O’Connor, 2012). This increased parental representation reflects broader

international trends towards democratic school governance. However, unlike the elected school board tradition found in many American districts, parental participation in Ireland remains embedded within a governance structure where patron authority continued to play a central role.

## **2.8 The Emergence of Democratic Governance**

Crucially, the 1970s marked a pivotal turning point for governance within the Irish education system. Until the 1970's, the Catholic Church dominated Irish culture and many aspects of its society (Sally, 2021) and the main political parties did not challenge this dominance (Maher & O'Brien, 2017). This period of the 1970s is significant for this piece of work as BOMs were established for the first time within the Irish primary system. This was implemented through the issuing of a document entitled "Boards of Management of National Schools - Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure" (Walshe, 2009). Until this point, the management of primary schools in Ireland had been wholly controlled by the patron (Ryan, 2012). Now BOMs were established which gave a voice to parents, the school principal and other stakeholders.

Initially, church authorities insisted on having a majority representation sitting on the boards as this would have ensured their rights as owners of the properties (O'Reilly, 2012). The patron appointed four out of the six representatives of small schools and six out of the ten members of large schools, including the chairperson. This was a complicated process with much deliberation between stakeholders, and the first twelve years of BOMs were problematic (Walshe, 1999). O'Reilly (2012) expands on this point by informing us that this episode was as a case of the state asserting its power and was a "minor reversal for the dominance of religious influence in Irish education" (p.19). Similar developments were evident internationally, where traditional hierarchical models of governance were increasingly challenged by reforms promoting stakeholder participation and devolved decision-making. However, unlike England and Australia, Irish reforms occurred within a governance framework that continued to preserve significant patronal influence. However, it has been argued by Ferriter, 2012a) that this signified

the beginning of the departure of the dominant role that the Catholic Church played in school governance towards a more democratic model of governance.

Further structural changes to the management of Irish primary schools came to the fore during this period. The idea of an intermediate tier (O'Reilly, 2012) between the Department of Education and individual schools was proposed by prominent civil servant Sean O'Connor to the Catholic Primary School Managers in 1973. Once again, there was significant push back from the church as they viewed this new system to dilute their "existing levels of managerial autonomy" (O'Reilly, 2012, p.27).

## **2. 9 Legislative Reforms**

During the early 1990s, there was a clear political commitment for comprehensive educational reform (O'Reilly, 2012). This manifested in the Green Paper (1992) Education for a Changing World and the White Paper Charting our Education Future (1995). The White Paper signalled real change in the devolution of power away from the church to Educational Boards and a move towards a more democratic approach to school management with accountability measures put in place also (p.23-24). Ryan (2014) asserts that the White Paper pointed in the direction of significant change in terms of the democratisation of school management, devolution of power and the rights of minority groups to have their rights respected in relation to ethos. However, due to time constraints and government changes there was a delay in passing this legislation (O'Reilly, 2012). It took until 1997 for Education Bill No2 (1997) to be published but there was no provision for education boards. It was intended that then White Paper would pave the way for the introduction of a significant piece of legislation in relation to education and the 1998 Education Act which would end a rather "hectic" (O'Reilly, 2012, p.31) period in educational legislation.

Connolly et al., (2023) draw attention to the fact that nearly 90% of primary schools are controlled by the Catholic Church today and 3% by the Church of Ireland. Five hundred and

sixty thousand students attend primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Connolly et al., 2023). There are 3100 state funded primary schools in the Republic of Ireland with approximately 135 special schools which are attended by over 8000 students (NCSE, 2023). Non/multi-denominational schools account for approximately 8% of primary schools (NCSE, 2023). This type of school is relatively new where the education provided is not based on religious models (Connolly et al., 2023). The diocesan trustees are usually the owners of the state funded Catholic and Church of Ireland schools in Ireland (Connolly et al., 2023). Non/multi-denominational schools will usually have a board nominated by such bodies as Educate Together, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and An Foras Pátrúnachta, which supports Gaeilscoileanna

The Education Act, 1998, was the most comprehensive education legislation enacted since the foundation of the State in 1922. Walshe (1999) contends that it was designed to give a sense of direction to Irish education as it stepped into the 21st century and to broaden the ownership of education in Ireland - more autonomy for schools – a more democratic forum. Further commentary claims that the Act was to advocate a partnership model of school management involving the patrons and the State, parents, teachers and other stakeholders. It mirrored the position of certain partners and significant behind the scenes negotiations between the Church and State showed where the power really lay.

The Education Act 1998 formalised a partnership approach to school governance that reflected international trends towards decentralisation and stakeholder participation. However, unlike England's academy system or Australia's independent school sector, the Irish model continued to preserve a legally significant role for patrons within school governance arrangements. The 1998 Education Act specified that the patron of a school is the entity that establishes the school (Connolly et al., 2023). The BOM is appointed by the patron and thus determines the ethos of the school (DoE, 2021a). This role and power as set out in law creates a central role for patrons

such as the Catholic Church to have significant power in the governing of primary schools in Ireland (Connolly et al., 2023)

## **2.10 Agenda for More Reform - Improved Accountability and Leadership**

### **Change**

The evolving demographics of the Dáil and Irish society coupled with the formation of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in primary education in 2011 resulted in school patronage and the role of the patron emerging as a prominent policy concern (Connolly et al., 2023). The near monopoly of catholic primary schools in Ireland is a product of Ireland's history and the belief systems of the Irish population (Coolahan et al., 2012). 2011 saw the education portfolio of Ireland go to Mr. Ruairi Quinn of Labour, who aimed to change the power structures that had been controlling education since the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, the government coalition proposed to take over the management of half of all Irish primary schools, which were under the control of the Catholic Church, within two years. This proposal aimed to bring education and the governance of schools in line with the significant societal changes in Ireland and to challenge sections of the establishment who had been key stakeholders in education for almost two centuries (Coolahan et al., 2012). The reasons that led to this proposal were based on the demographic and values changes taking place in Irish society, lobbying by groups such as the teacher unions, Educate Together, parents, and voices from minority rights groups, the influence of international organisations like the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), and the commitment of a Minister for Education to far-reaching reform (Ryan, 2014).

To inform the government on the best way to proceed with divesting patronage, the Forum for Patronage and Pluralism was set up under the chairmanship of Professor John Coolahan in April 2011. The advisory group produced a report for the Government that recommended how best to proceed with divesting patronage. The report suggested that the education system must adapt to meet the needs of a diverse society and that there is a clear demand for multi-denominational

and non-denominational schooling (Coolahan et al., 2012). The report made extensive and compelling recommendations for change providing a blueprint for real alternatives that could help change the face of Irish education and implications for school governance. The debate surrounding patronage reform demonstrated a distinctive feature of Irish school governance. Whereas governance reforms in England, Australia and the United States have frequently focused on autonomy, marketisation and accountability, Irish reforms have concentrated more heavily on questions of patronage, ethos and educational pluralism.

The advisory group suggested that divesting of patronage should occur in areas where there is evidence of parental demand for a change of patronage (Coolahan et al., 2012). Evidence was obtained by conducting surveys on parental preference in specific locations. In areas of population growth, new schools would be created with a patronage system that reflected parental preference. Change of patronage was to be accomplished in a “cost-neutral” way by using the existing stock of schools rather than by the creation of new school buildings. The report also addressed the necessity of making “stand alone” schools more inclusive. To judge parental demand, it was recommended that parents in thirty-eight towns be asked what model of patronage they would like via questionnaires (DES, 2012). Following this, a report on the options of patronage would be drawn up and the catholic bishops would be required to respond. The surveys of parental preference for a patronage model were completed in February 2013 and the results showed that of thirty-eight towns surveyed twenty-three requested a change of patronage with twenty favouring patronages to be provided by the multi-denominational Educate Together (DES, 2012).

## **2.11 The Predominant Model of Governance in Irish Primary Schools**

Every BOM must have a chairperson appointed by the patron, who is entitled to vote and have a second and casting vote in the event of a tie. The patron is required to include the school community and/or members of the board in a consultative process when appointing a

chairperson (DES, 2019). Guidance on the appointment of a chairperson requires patrons to consider potential conflicts of interest and the individual's capacity to fulfil the duties of the role (DES, 2019). Read in this way, these considerations appear to constitute the primary formal criteria for appointments. The principal or elected teacher nominee is not eligible for appointment as chairperson/acting chairperson and he or she should not have a direct relationship with any serving staff member or board member.

The school principal is given the role of secretary to the BOM. DES Circular 0008/2013 outlines the possibility of paying an allowance to principals who act as secretaries to BOMs. Circular 0079/2007 provides a general description of the duties of the principal when acting as secretary, but the BOM may assign additional duties as required (DES, 2019). The duties of the recording secretary are limited to keeping minutes of meetings, setting the meeting agenda in consultation with the chairperson and principal and recording decisions made. This is a powerful position regarding decision making.

Parents and teachers each have two positions on the Board. The involvement of more stakeholders, such as parents, community representatives and school leaders (CPSMA, 2023) in school governance and the decision-making process evidenced a more modern approach to school governance in Ireland. While Donnelly (2013) refers to this as a seismic moment in the history of Irish education, one might argue that this represents more of a development in the governance of schools rather than a sudden change. This development reflects broader international trends towards greater stakeholder participation (Gleeson, 2021), accountability and distributed governance in education. Furthermore, as Ireland operates within this sphere, it has come to display many features like that of nations such as England, America and Australia in social and educational policies (Lynch, Grummel & Devine, 2012) whilst also retaining its unique character.

Contemporary Irish school governance can therefore be understood as a hybrid model. It incorporates many internationally recognised governance features, including stakeholder participation, accountability mechanisms and increasing expectations of school leadership. At the same time the continued influence of patrons and denominational ownership distinguishes Ireland from governance arrangements found in England, Australia and the United States. Consequently, while Irish governance has increasingly converged with international trends, it retains several distinctive historical and institutional characteristics.

## **2.12 Leadership**

There have been many calls for change to the models of school governance and leadership adopted in Irish primary schools. The role of the principal has been a topic of concern voiced by the Irish Primary Principal Network (IPPN), the representative body for principals in Ireland. In 2016, the IPPN highlighted that a clearer definition of governance and management would be gained if the principal were to attend meetings, provide reports, and contribute to governance matters without serving as a member of the board. According to the IPPN (2016), "governance and management will be more clearly defined if the principal is in attendance at, reporting to, and contributing to governance, but not a member of the board" (p.4). This approach would ensure that the principal could provide their expertise and experience in a positive manner while avoiding potential conflicts of interest. This option put forward by the IPPN (2016) is in line with the view of Farrell et al. (2017) who see the principal as being accountable to the governing body. How they are held accountable is through the form of reporting to the board. Effective accountability according to Farrell et al. (2017) can be achieved when governors can scrutinise and challenge information given to them by principals through reporting.

This undoubtedly highlights the need for strong and effective leadership from school chairperson in the effective governing of a school. This requires that the principal and the BOM have a clear understanding of their respective leadership and management functions in

relation to the function of the school (IPPN, 2014). The DES highlights the importance of the BOM in supporting and facilitating the school leadership in their school (DES, 2023). Each school context can be characterised by the interplay of three governance mechanisms: markets, hierarchies and networks (Mincu & Davies, 2019). School leaders need to understand their role within the governance structures (Leechman et al., 2019). The chairperson even though sometimes less visible than the school principal must share the same passion for owning the vision of the school (McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016). Effective school leaders set the direction of the school, lead change that improves teaching and learning, build trust in a safe and secure environment through both instructional and distributed leadership practices (Gurr, 2015). School leaders and the school principal have been viewed historically as site managers, but this is no longer enough (Murphy et al., 2000). The role of the chairperson and principal are critical in school governance, and it may be useful to interrogate what their perceptions of their role as leaders on the BOM and what influenced these perceptions

Despite being the overseer of primary and secondary education in the Republic of Ireland, the Department of Education (DoE) exercises limited authority over school management (Lee, 1989). Historically, clerical bodies such as the Catholic Church and Church of Ireland have held primary responsibility for school governance (Connolly et al., 2023). While denominational schools possess autonomy in shaping their ethos and values, the curriculum for all publicly funded schools, excluding religious instruction, is mandated and inspected by the DoE (DoE, 2020d).

BOMs are accountable to the patron and the DES and can put considerable strain on the decision-making process. The board is responsible for upholding the ethos of the school and is accountable to the patron, while also being accountable to the DES for policy implementation and the curriculum (DES, 2023). Due to this central involvement the patron has a key role in the governance of primary schools in Ireland (Connolly et al., 2023). The role of the patron has been described as a significant (Coolahan et al., 2017) and is not commonplace in other

countries. Under the Education Act, 1998, primary schools in Ireland are governed by BOMs. The functions of the board are set out in Section 15 of the Education Act, 1998, which notes that the board is responsible for managing the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents. The Minister for Education and Youth set out policy through various types of legislation. The onus is then on the school to implement this policy (CPMSA, 2020). The board acts on behalf of the patron to ensure that it carries out its statutory duty laid out in the Education Act 1998 (CPMSA, 2020). The BOM is required to manage the school on behalf of the patron, and they are held accountable by both the Minister and the Patron (CPMSA, 2020). Finally, the principal oversees the day-to-day management of the school including providing direction to all staff members and is also in charge of the implementation of decisions made by the board of management of the school and is accountable to the board (CPMSA, 2020). This high degree of centralisation contributes to a high degree of conformance to one type of governance model. Leadership within governance can consequently be viewed as conformity to a restricted form.

Today, BOMs of primary schools are appointed for a term of four years (DES, 2019). The current term has run from December 2019 and is due to conclude in November 2023. The BOM is required to provide an appropriate education for each pupil in its care (DES, 2019). In carrying out its functions, the board is required to adhere to the policies determined by the Minister of Education and must uphold and be accountable to the patron (DES, 2019). There is an obligation on the board to keep the patron informed of decisions and proposals of the board, publish the policy of the school concerning admission to and participation in the school (DES, 2019). Additionally, the board must use the resources provided to the school from grants provided by the Oireachtas to make reasonable provision and accommodation for all students.

The Education Act 1998 clarifies that the board has no right over or interest in the land and buildings of the school that it governs (DES, 2019). It is essential that the board adheres to the provisions of the Act, as well as to the relevant circulars of the Department of Education and

Skills, and the Rules for National Schools that are currently applicable. This legislation sets out the parameters within which the BOM must operate, to fulfil its responsibility to provide an appropriate education for each student at the school for which it has responsibility. A key function of a BOM is that of enhancing accountability downwards to various stakeholders and to enhance accountability outwards (Wilkins & Gobby, 2019). Ranson et al. (2005) note that a key role of a school board is to bring lay and professional judgements to bear upon the actions of those who run schools namely headteachers and middle leaders.

All eight members of the board of management are appointed in various ways (CPSMA, 2020). However, once they have been appointed, they must act together as a unit. Each member has their own role and exploring their perceptions of that role and how they came to make sense of it will give insight into the actual role they play in the decision-making and governance of the school. Individuals are cautioned not to act in a way that is representative of the various groups within the board (CPSMA, 2020). Being recognised as a corporate body according to the CPMSA means that the board remains the same entity, even though its members may change over time. This has significant implications for decision-making, as decisions made by a past board must be honoured by new boards. In other words, the board itself is a legal entity that persists over time, even as its members come and go, and this continuity requires that new boards respect and follow the decisions made by their predecessors as per the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2019). In a school that has more than one class teacher, the board of management should consist of the following members: two direct nominees of the patron, two parents of children enrolled in the school (one mother and one father) elected by the parents' the principal, one other serving teacher elected by the teaching staff and two extra members agreed by the representatives of the patron, teachers and parents.

## **2.13 Conclusion**

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that school governance has undergone significant transformation internationally. This has been shaped by increasing demands for accountability, stakeholder participation, leadership effectiveness and school autonomy. Across jurisdictions such as England, Australia and the United States, governance reforms have sought to balance democratic representation with the need for expertise, strategic oversight and improved educational outcomes. While these reforms have emerged in different institutional and political contexts, common themes are evident, particularly the growing expectations placed on governing bodies and the evolving relationship between governance and school leadership.

The Irish experience reflects many of these international developments while also retaining distinctive historical and structural characteristics. The establishment of Boards of Management, the expansion of stakeholder participation and the increasing emphasis on accountability illustrate Ireland's engagement with broader international governance trends. However, the continued significance of patronage, denominational influence and the statutory role of patrons distinguish the Irish governance landscape from those found elsewhere. Consequently, Irish school governance can be understood as a hybrid model that combines elements of international governance reform with institutional arrangements rooted in Ireland's unique historical development.

Taken together, the literature highlights that governance is not simply a matter of organisational structure but is fundamentally concerned with the distribution of roles, responsibilities and authority within schools. Despite extensive discussion of governance reform, there remains limited understanding of how key governance actors interpret and enact their respective roles within the contemporary Irish primary school context. This study therefore seeks to build upon the existing literature by examining the governance responsibilities, relationships and

experiences of those involved in the governance of Irish primary schools. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how governance operates in practice.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodological considerations that demonstrates alignment with the research aims. The philosophical underpinnings of ontological relativism and epistemology of constructivism are laid out guiding the selection of an interpretivist theoretical perspective to explore the multiple, socially constructed realities of the participants' roles. The study is positioned as a qualitative case study that focuses on the roles of the chairperson, principal, and teacher nominee. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility in capturing rich lived experiences. The analysis is informed by a dual conceptual framework comprising (i) role theory, which structures the examination of role conflict and ambiguity, and (ii) sensemaking theory, which supports interpretation of how participants negotiate and account for their roles. Finally, this chapter details the attention paid to ethical practices, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and employing continuous reflexivity. The qualitative standards of trustworthiness, credibility and dependability, were applied to ensure the findings are a robust representation of the participants' reality.

### **3.2 Contemporary Approaches to Researching Governance in Education**

Since the mid-twentieth century educational leadership scholars have been exploring dynamics, phenomena, contexts and perceptions using qualitative research (Barnhardt et al., 1979). Brooks and Normore (2015) have highlighted a paradigm shift that has taken place in leadership within the public sector that has now placed new expectations on research that is become influential in social sciences and policymaking

The main purpose of research is to contribute to the development of knowledge through self-critical inquiry in a systematic manner (Stenhouse, 1986). While the goal of education research is to advance knowledge, what differentiates it from other types of research is its focus on expanding knowledge that helps educators reach their goals in a systematic and critical fashion (Carr, 2007).

Hostetler (2005) argues that “high-quality educational research is concerned not only with sound procedures but also with beneficial aims and outcomes” (p. 16). Within the field of educational leadership, scholars have emphasised the need for approaches capable of capturing the complex dynamics of real-world practice (Lochmiller, 2018). This qualitative study aligns with research in educational leadership and administration that prioritises in-depth qualitative inquiry to understand the perspectives of school leaders and administrators (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Thomson, 2017).

In relation to this study, the research questions are timely for stakeholders and policymakers in Ireland. The issue in relation to the sustainability of school governance structures in Ireland has been raised and it is the ‘goal’ of this work to understand the issues from the view of the insiders as they have experienced them.

### **3.3 Ontological and Epistemological Stance in this Study**

The deep philosophical assumptions held by the researcher influence the practice of research (Creswell, 2014). Brooks and Normore (2015) note that it is vital to consider epistemology and purpose when designing and conducting qualitative studies within the field of educational leadership. Leading on from this, they opine that it may be necessary for the researcher and the research itself to speak truth to power when conducting research in this field and it is a scholar’s moral obligation to think through the reasons, they have for designing the study in a particular manner (Charmaz, 2006).

Qualitative studies of educational leadership have been critiqued for giving insufficient attention to the relational, power, and gatekeeping dynamics that shape the research process (Brooks & Normore, 2015). This study is informed by a relativist ontological position, which rejects the assumption of a single objective reality and instead recognises reality as socially constructed and multiple (Pring, 2015; Hammersley, 1992). As the research explores participants' experiences and perceptions, it acknowledges that meaning and truth are interpreted differently according to individuals' roles and lived experiences (Celik, 2019; Levers, 2013). These multiple realities are represented using extensive participant quotations, allowing diverse perspectives to be foregrounded within the analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Epistemology (Crotty, 1998, p. 3), was informed by constructivism. This view argues that knowledge is not passively received but actively built to make sense of the world as it is experienced (Jaworski, 1994). Within this social constructivist theory participants must be given the opportunity to express their understanding of events as their knowledge is acquired through their unique experiences of serving on boards and through the meanings they have socially negotiated with other parties involved in school governance.

### **3.4 A Theoretical Perspective: Interpretivism**

It was appropriate to adopt an interpretivist approach as it aligns with my ontological and epistemological beliefs. Interpretivism is dependent on a constructivist ontology (Irshaidat, 2022) and acknowledges the presence of diverse realities and perspectives that arise from individuals' interpretations of the surrounding world (Flick, 2013).

The research paradigm adopted in this study is interpretivism. This places particular value on experience and typically employs qualitative methods, such as interviewing, to access participants' subjective meanings (Lather, 2005). Central to this paradigm is the view that meaning is embedded within the social world and can be accessed through engaging with participants' interpretations, which are then reconstructed and theorised by the researcher

(Goldkuhl, 2017). Accordingly, interpretivist research privileges an “inside” perspective, seeking to understand phenomena through the lived experiences of those directly involved (Mack, 2010). In this study, engaging closely with participants reflects the interpretivist commitment to recognising that individuals actively construct their own realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2013), and that these differing constructions are central to understanding governance practice.

### **3.5 Conceptual Framework**

This study employs both role theory and sensemaking as a conceptual framework to explore the roles of the participants on a BOM. In the Republic of Ireland and internationally, the socio-political context for the school sector has changed considerably (Connolly et al., 2023), with greater focus on performance and effectiveness (Skerritt, 2019). The demands placed on a voluntary group by external stakeholders (LAOS, 2022; DES, 2023) impacts how the participants of this research perceive and make sense of their roles. This dynamic of external pressure colliding with internal role perceptions is highly relevant in the field of educational leadership research.

I employed this dual conceptual framework to provide both a structure for analysis (role theory) and a process for interpretation (sensemaking). Role theory, according to Biddle (1986), concerns the patterns and roles that govern social life, helping to explain behaviours based on expectations. Roles are personalised (Major, 2003), meaning each participant will experience and enact their role differently. Role theory offers a necessary structure by which I can explore the participants' perceptions of their roles.

By also employing a sensemaking framework, I was able to provide a process by which “people generate what they interpret” (Weick, 1995, p.13). It enables the participants to turn circumstances into a situation that can be described by words (Weick et al., 2005), allowing meanings to be arrived at (Mills, 2003).

### **3.6 Role Theory**

Role theory posits that actors are placed within an organisation and enact roles based on the expectation of others and how they perceive the role (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The origins of role, as it is discussed in role theory, come from the scripts memorised by stage actors (Biddle & Thomes, 1966). Central to this methodology is the individual who is the key informer because “individuals might hold the same role but engage in very different tasks or identify with the role

differently' (Diekman & Schneider, 2010. p. 492). Role theory therefore provides an effective framework for understanding the unique perspectives of each participant. Schmidt (2000) used semi-structured interviews to obtain data to attempt to capture the subtleties and sophistication of department head tensions by drawing on the components of role theory. This qualitative approach adopted by the researchers allows them to better understand the factors affecting how individuals experience their roles, something this study focuses on.

Since the 1980s, substantial global initiatives have been implemented to increase educational accountability (Leithwood et al., 1999). In this context, understanding the roles of school leaders and governors is central to discussions of school effectiveness (Normore, 2004). Where aims, responsibilities, and expectations are clearly articulated, accountability systems are more likely to function effectively (Normore, 2004). Conversely, the capacity of school administrators to perform their roles and be held accountable is undermined when role expectations are unclear.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the roles of the chairperson, principal, and teacher nominee, examining how role identity, role clarity, role ambiguity, and role conflict shape their decision-making and contributions to BOMs. The qualitative approach adopted is consistent with prior studies, such as Schmidt (2000), which employed semi-structured interviews to capture the subtleties of leadership tensions through the application of role theory.

Several key role-related aspects regularly discussed within the organisational literature (Sluss et al., 2011) are relevant to this study. Hardy and Conway's (1978) seminal work highlights dimensions such as identity, ambiguity, and conflict. These concepts will inform the development of the interview guide and the analytical synthesis of this study (Goncalves et al., 2024).

### **3.7 Key Concepts Underpinning Role Theory**

The symbolic interactionist approach forms the basis of role identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1994), referring to the meaning a person plays in the role they occupy (Burke & Tully, 1977). To gain an understanding of the roles the participants play, it was imperative to determine how these individuals subjectively interpreted their roles and the associated expectations.

#### ***3.7.1 Role Identity***

Role identity has evolved to include how individuals actively shape and define their roles (Stryker, 2007). Understanding this is essential for advancing individual-level knowledge of the effect of roles. This dual role aspect has caused conflict in the past (Ebbers & Wijnberg, 2017), leading to the areas of role clarity, conflict, and ambiguity.

For good organisational function it is imperative that role expectations are clear (Sluss et al., 2011). Role clarity refers to an individual's certainty regarding expectations surrounding their work role (Bush & Busch, 1981). Role clarity and role ambiguity are conceptual opposites as role ambiguity is antonymous with role clarity and according to Kahn et al. (1964) refers to one's degree of uncertainty as to expected behaviours and attitudes. The consequences of role clarity have been highlighted as providing a structured working environment (Sujan, 1986), an increase in job performance (Fried et al., 2003), and is the precursor of job commitment (Ashforth & Saks, 1997). Leading on from this, a high level of role clarity reduces the negative impact of role demands and role strain (Lang, Thomas, Bliese, & Adler, 2007), which impacts this study as commentary suggests that many BOMs are ill equipped to deal with the responsibilities of their role.

### ***3.7.2 Role Ambiguity***

Role ambiguity (the conceptual opposite of clarity) occurs when expectations regarding a functional role are unclear (Tubre & Collins, 2000) or when there is confusion over a role, responsibilities, or limits (Biddle, 1986). Stewart (2018) notes that role ambiguity occurs when it is not clear how an individual should fill a role. Furthermore, Biddle (1986) suggests that confusion over our common knowledge of a role, responsibilities, or limits may result in role ambiguity. One such area where ambiguity can arise is the aspect of self-evaluation/teaching and learning. Within the Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2019, DES note that there is:

... a statutory duty on the Board to ensure that an appropriate education is provided to all the school's pupils. To effectively carry out this duty, appropriate and regular oversight by the Board of teaching and learning in the school should be in place. (DES, 1998, p.9).

Role ambiguity can present itself within a BOM when there is confusion or lack of clarity about who is accountable to whom in a school. Thus, it is important to have a clear outline of a role from the very beginning, otherwise conflict will likely arise (Biddle, 1986).

### ***3.7.3 Role Conflict***

In their foundational text on role theory, Biddle and Thomas (1966) defined role conflict in terms of; inconsistent standards as viewed by the individual or by others, attributions of these inconsistent standards to others, and negative feelings associated with perceived inconsistencies in expectations.

Governor Perry noted that effective governing bodies have clearly defined roles and responsibilities (The New York Times, 2011). Biddle (1986) states that role conflict can occur when individuals have dual roles, and expectations and behaviours of one of their roles are inconsistent with the execution of the other (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). Research addressing opposing demands in functional roles often uses the concept of role conflict. Anicich and Hirsch

(2017) provided an example of middle managers who experience role conflict because they are confronted with different expectations from superiors and subordinates. This is worth exploring in relation to the participants in this research. It is widely accepted that the most effective boards have a clear understanding of their duties and roles and work to see that these are fulfilled (DES, 2019). In relation to the role of the school principal on the board this aspect is interesting as in Ireland the role of the principal on a board of management is usually identified as recoding secretary (DES, 2019).

### **3.8 Sensemaking and Sensegiving**

This section outlines sensemaking theory and its relevance for understanding how participants in this study interpret their roles on BOMs. Sensemaking refers to the process through which individuals construct meaning by integrating new information with prior knowledge and beliefs, shaped by the social contexts in which they operate (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016). Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as “the making of sense” (p. 4), while it has also been characterised as a process through which the complexity of the world is rendered into “a situation that is comprehended in words and serves as a springboard into action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Sensemaking theory is particularly valuable as it “structures the unknown” (Waterman, 1990, p. 41) when seeking to understand how individuals interpret their work within organisations (Murphy & Devine, 2023).

Concepts from sensemaking are therefore drawn upon to inform the analysis of school leadership and the challenges that arise in practice (Steilen et al., 2024). Prior experiences, beliefs, and individuals’ perceptions of reality shape the sensemaking process and help to explain leaders’ actions (Holtrop et al., 2021). During periods of tension, events may become highly charged and politicized, as stakeholders seek to advance their interests, influencing organisational learning and the ways in which situations are interpreted (Broekema et al., 2017). Within BOMs, such interpretations may become statements of value through which new realities are constructed, asserted, and validated by members (Hubbard et al., 2023).

### ***3.8.1 Sensemaking and the Developing Role of School Leadership.***

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing demand placed on schools and its leaders to undertake school improvement (Ganon-Shilon et al., 2022). This has resulted in their role becoming more complex (Fullan, 2014). School leaders and management are now burdened with more responsibilities due to the strict direct accountability measures placed on them (Ganon-Shilon et al., 2022). Today, there is clear tension between school specific objectives and external pressures enforced on schools (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). Such tensions require that school leaders make sense of their role (Saltrick, 2010) and how they deal with the pressures of internal goals and external demands.

Using sensemaking as a key element of leadership, all school leaders and managers can transform schools into effective educational environments (Fullan, 2014). This is important for this research as the objective of a BOM according to the Minister for Education Norma Foley “is to ensure that the school is managed in a manner that provides all of its pupils with the best possible education” (Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023 – 2027, p iv). It is therefore imperative that every leader can make sense of what they are doing (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Through the sensemaking process, school leaders and managers can learn and understand educational challenges (Shilon, 2016).

A complex dynamic of sensemaking is created by the interplay between the participants of the study and factors such as school culture, beliefs and values. This reveals how leadership can both influence and be influenced by these factors (Steilen et al., 2024). In the context of education and schooling, enacted change needs to be understood as a phenomenon that happens between individuals both internally and externally and is a process that includes sensemaking and sensegiving. This study aims to explore the perceptions the participants had of their roles on the BOM. Sensemaking theory is used to investigate how the participants made sense of decisions during moments of tension. The analysis examines how the participants account for their decisions to gain an insight into the politics of organisational sensemaking on a BOM.

### **3.9 Defining Sense-Making: A Framework for Evaluating Reality**

Among management and organisational experts concerned with how individuals appraise and perform their 'realities', sensemaking is an exceptionally prominent approach with a considerable following (Brown et al., 2015). Sensemaking has been described as “the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it and using it to determine actions and behaviours in a way that manages meaning for individuals” (Evans, 2007, p. 161). Sensemaking is the process that allows participants to turn the ongoing complexity of their world into a “situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants aims to collect rich data regarding how they made sense of their roles on the BOM. Weick (1995) reaffirmed this when he stated that “Sensemaking never starts. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops. People are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those people focus on the past from some point of view” (p. 43). Referring to sensemaking, Boden (1994) notes that “overwhelmingly this work focuses on analysing the practical activities of real people engaged in concrete situations” (p. 10). Furthermore, Brown et al. (2015) inform us that ‘sensemaking’ is an extraordinarily influential perspective with a substantial following. School culture, routines, and structure are the consequence of how school leaders observe or choose information in the environment, interpret that information, and then act on their interpretations to construct culture and routines over time (Coburn, 2005).

Shilon and Schechter (2016) locate sensemaking in various places. It can be regarded as a cognitive process that takes place within the individual’s head, while others perceive it as a shared process of social construction which can be carried out in interactions with others. The theoretical approach of sensemaking calls for a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews to obtain rich informative data from these individuals (Shilon & Schechter 2016).

### **3.10 Sensegiving**

The capabilities of educational leaders to sense give may make or break the success of school change (Norris, 2020). Sensegiving is defined as “attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning of construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). This term was created to understand the role of management in the sensemaking process (Catasus et al., 2009). It produces an ‘orderly, material, social construction that is subject to multiple interpretations’ (Weick, 1988. p.307). If sensemaking is explaining and justifying, then sensegiving is the act of diffusing such explanations and justifications within the organisations (Green Jr, 2004). Sensegiving while normalising and legitimising certain realities and delegitimising others (Gioia & Thomas, 1996), also constrains other interpretive meanings of reality (Voronov, 2008). In relation to others’ sensemaking, sensegiving is the attempt to affect the sensemaking of others within the same environment (Kraft, Sparr, & Peus, 2018).

Within an educational setting, school leaders and board members may use positive emotions to highlight and communicate their commitment to new processes (Steilen et al., 2023). This show of emotion can act as a sensegiving resource (Maitlis & Sonenshein 2010, p.568) that leaders / participants use to influence others and trigger a beneficial contagion. For the principal and chairperson, sensegiving is an obligation stemming from their responsibilities (Norris, 2020).

### **3.11 The Four Phases of Sensemaking and Sensegiving**

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) conceptualise the relationship between sensemaking and sensegiving as comprising four phases. The first is the envisioning phase, during which leaders seek to make sense of an event. The second, the signaling phase, involves the translation of leaders’ theories or schemas into communicative acts, commonly referred to as sensegiving (Norris, 2020). These acts, as described by Neumann (1995), are diverse and may include storytelling and analogies drawn from past events. At this stage, previously stable contexts may

become unsettled, as sensegiving activities can introduce ambiguity, requiring participants to interpret the nature and implications of the proposed change (Norris, 2020).

The third phase, re-visioning, encompasses a range of sensemaking possibilities including the development of narratives and processes of identity fusion. These interpretations provide material for further sensegiving as leaders and participants move into the fourth phase energising which, like the signaling phase, functions as an influencing activity (Norris, 2020). During this phase influence may be more pronounced as sensegiving efforts are increasingly aligned with the audience's sensemaking processes (Neumann, 1995).

Successful sensegiving acts result in a shared interpretation of an event (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014) that is organised in a continuous cycle between sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Within an educational context, those such as the principal and chairperson of the BOM can perceive that they are obligated to give sense to others because of their responsibilities (Norris, 2020).

### **3.12 Choosing a Methodology**

Methodology provides the instructions for how to conduct the research and, through the interpretation of the data, helps create new knowledge (Whiffin, 2021). The choice of methodology is based on convictions and interests (Goulding, 2002) and should consider the aims of the research and epistemological concerns (Buchanan and Bryman, 2007).

A qualitative case study afforded the opportunity to explore the complex nature of school governance in the Republic of Ireland. This approach allowed for a deep examination of how board members explore their social world and make sense of their roles (Bryman, 2014, p.40; Merriman, 1998, p.6). Furthermore, it also allowed for “different and even contradictory views of what is happening” to emerge (Stake, 1995, p.12). This research is timely and vital as it will show the real-life experiences of people making decisions within a context where the policies and procedures are changing on a constant basis.

Bryman (2012) considers the research design as a “framework for the collection and analysis of data” (p.46). Creswell (2013) suggests that research designs are comprehensive plans and procedures that cover decisions made during this process, ranging from broad assumptions to the detailed methods of data collection and analysis. Within qualitative research the research design is fundamentally flexible, open and determines the orientation of the study (Flick, 2018).

### **3.13 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research involves a commitment to understanding the social circumstances of participants, including their experiences and perspectives of their social worlds (Snape & Spencer, 2003). It is typically characterised by small-scale purposive sampling and flexible approaches to data generation, which can yield rich, in-depth data. This approach is well suited to examining how board members convey their understandings and experiences of their roles (Mertens, 2015). Using semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to generate nuanced accounts, with reflexivity employed to support analytical rigour and accountability (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

#### ***3.13.1 Research Approach: A Case Study.***

A case study is defined as:

a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007, p.73).

The methodology is widely adopted in educational research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) as it facilitates a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the triad of actors on the BOM made sense of and perceived their roles within a detailed exploration of context (Yin, 2003).

### ***3.13.2 Defining the case***

The “case” is framed by the research question(s) that informed the design of the study, data generation instruments and analytical approach (Yin, 2014). Merriam (1998) brings us on a step further as she notes that the defining characteristic of a case study is the delimitation of the case. She draws on Smith’s (1978) view that the case is a bounded system which can be a person, a program, a group, a specific policy and so on. I am confining my case to the Diocese of Meath as it provides a broad and diverse representative sample of primary schools that has both urban and rural schools, large and small schools and DEIS and non-DEIS school settings. This diversity allows for a comprehensive exploration of how the roles of the participants vary across the different schools in the diocese and what perceptions the participants had of their roles.

Being able to identify the specific phenomenon under study becomes clearer using the words of Budiyanto et al. (2019), who define the case as "the central focus of interest" (p.4). Moreover, this study enjoys an advantage due to the educational environment's conducive nature, facilitating the replicability of selecting the case for each of the four BOMs studied within the diocese.

Creswell (2003) has previously outlined some defining features of case study research that are important to mention. Firstly, it is imperative that the researcher outlines the specifics of the case involved. Thomas (2011) explicates the concept of a case comprising of two integral components, wherein one element encompasses the subject, individual, or location under examination, while the other element constitutes the analytical framework or object employed in the study. In relation to this study, the first element is the specific members of BOMs of primary schools within the Diocese of Meath whereas the second element is how they perceived and made sense of their role within that board.

Yin (2014) describes case definition as a two-stage process involving the initial identification of the case and its subsequent bounding. Bounding the case typically requires the specification

of temporal parameters, including clear start and end points. This case is bounded temporally through data collection conducted via semi-structured interviews, focusing on a defined four-year term of a BOMs spanning from 2019 to 2023.

During this research, a transition occurred within BOMs in the Republic of Ireland. Terms ended and new boards were established in November 2023. Recognising this, a temporal boundary was set in place for participant interviews, specifically communicating to the gatekeeper to target individuals who had completed at least one full term on a BOM between 2019 and 2023. This approach allowed for the gathering of data from participants with a minimum tenure of one full term, ensuring a more thorough dataset to analyse.

There existed a distinct patronage boundary to this research, delineated by the selection of Catholic patronage schools. In the Republic of Ireland, the educational landscape comprises 3,100 state-funded schools, with approximately 90% under Catholic Church control, as highlighted by (Connolly et al., 2023). Given their dominant presence in Ireland's educational system, I anticipated better accessibility to participants within these schools. Moreover, with such a significant percentage of Catholic patronage schools, the research findings would hold more relevance and wield a stronger influence on future policymaking within the educational sphere in Ireland.

The rationale behind selecting a particular subject for this case study may stem from various considerations. In this study, the cases were chosen through a gatekeeper. Preserving impartiality was paramount, prompting the engagement of a gatekeeper tasked with identifying subjects who were unfamiliar to me but possessed the requisite knowledge and experience crucial for meaningful and insightful contributions to this study.

Debates surrounding the use of case studies in research have been extensive and enduring, particularly in relation to issues of definition, rigour, and generalisability. These debates have prompted proponents of the case study approach to justify its legitimacy within academic and

scientific research. One persistent area of discussion concerns the absence of a single, conventional definition of what constitutes a case study (Eno & Dammak, 2014), a difficulty also acknowledged by Punch (2005). Similarly, Merriam (1998) notes continuing confusion regarding the meaning and boundaries of the case study as a research approach.

Mitchell (1983) has previously defended the use of the case study by emphasising their rigor and credibility as a fundamental tool for social analysis. He refuted criticisms directed at their reliability and validity. This opinion is supported by Flyvbjerg (2004) who offers a comprehensive analysis challenging common misunderstandings regarding case study research. He disputes the belief that general, context-independent knowledge is more valuable than specific, context-dependent knowledge, highlighting the importance of context-specific insights in social research. He also addresses the challenge of generalisation from individual cases, arguing that the choice of the case and its thorough examination play pivotal roles in overcoming this limitation.

Despite efforts to defend and highlight the strengths of case study research, challengers persist. Hammersley and Gomm (2000) articulate strategies for drawing general conclusions but, acknowledge that not all case studies possess intrinsic relevance to escape the problem of generalisation. They discuss the importance of theory in case study research, presenting various rationales for integrating theory within case studies. However, they also recognise practical and fundamental challenges, such as the assumption of deterministic laws of human behaviour.

In contrast, George and Bennett (2005) offer a robust defence of the case study highlighting its strengths in testing hypotheses and theory development. It underscores its advantages while acknowledging inherent trade-offs and limitations including selection and balancing internal validity with broader generalisations.

While critics raise concerns about generalisation (Eno & Dammak, 2014), the case study approach is robustly defended for its rigor and credibility as a tool for social analysis (Mitchell,

1983). The strength of this design lies in its ability to generate context-specific, in-depth knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2004) and test theoretical propositions (George & Bennett, 2005) simultaneously. For this study, the choice of a case study acknowledges the tension between particularisation and theoretical generalisation, prioritising the former to yield rich, detailed data.

### **3.14 Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews**

Stake (1995, p.64) contends that the “main road to multiple realities” is by conducting interviews to gather data. In qualitative research, conducting interviews as a form of data gathering has broad benefits. It is a flexible approach that does not place such onerous demands on the time of a researcher (Bryman, 2004). A qualitative research interview is an effort to comprehend the world from the perspective of the research subjects (Kvale, 1996). The discussion aims to reveal the significance of their experiences and their lived reality (Sewell, 2009).

It was essential for this study that participants express their experiences and viewpoints as clearly as possible, and semi-structured interviews gives them an opportunity more so than other approaches like a questionnaire (Delamont, 1993). The use of semi-structured interviews enabled me to probe deeper into the participants responses in a flexible manner (Bell & Waters, 2014). The study acknowledges the pivotal role played by the participants' experiences and perceptions in its exploration. Semi-structured interviews are said to yield a "deeper" understanding of social processes than pure quantitative techniques like questionnaires (Silverman, 2013). By providing a thorough account of certain social situations, social processes, or connections, participants in qualitative semi-structured interviews can describe features of the social world (King and Horrocks, 2012).

A semi-structured interview features a loosely defined interview schedule or guide that contains the subjects that will be covered during the interview. The interview guide is designed with the

research questions in mind and gathers information on an indication that may be utilised to address the research questions (Newby, 2010). With this style of interview, there is some structure to the processes, but, if necessary, there is still room to develop a participant's response.

To gain the most from this process Stake (1995) advises that the participants are provided with a broad background note prior to the interview taking place. This note outlined in plain English what the study was about and what was expected of them in contributing to the study. This allowed them to prepare for the interview and provided meaningful, thought-out data. I forwarded each participant a brief document seven days before their interview. This ensured they were aware of the questions that were to arise, and they also had time to reflect on their experiences, minimising the possibility of feeling put on the spot during the interview.

I employed the use of semi-structured interviews as they afforded the greatest level of flexibility to ask deeper more probing questions of the school leaders (Bell & Waters, 2014). A great deal of time was spent drafting and preparing the interview schedules and it was during this time that I anticipated what probing questions may be needed to elicit richer responses (Stake, 1995). During this period, I was also very aware of Rubin and Rubin's (2012) warning that qualitative interviews can be extensions of normal everyday conversations, each interview is new every time one begins. This warning meant that it was important for me as the interviewer not to be frequently asking questions that did not relate to the specific answers provided by the participants.

Aware of some of the difficulties and drawbacks, I strove to minimise their negative effects on the research process. This technique must be approached with care and good planning and scheduling must be always present. (Stake, 1995).

Critics argue that since the interviewer is a co-producer of knowledge, interviews can be unreliable in gathering data (Hartas, 2010). Since "interviewers and interviewees alike bring

their own, often unconscious experimental and biographical baggage with them into the interview situation” (Cohen et al., 2000, p.121) this raises the issue of validity. Hartas (2000) notes that most researchers accept that this is the case and that it can be ameliorated if the researcher enters a process of reflexivity.

Adams (2018) notes that semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming and labour-intensive, requiring a high degree of interviewer skill. The processes of preparation, conduct, and analysis are methodologically demanding, often involving the management and interpretation of extensive field notes and interview transcripts. Careful planning and scheduling were therefore employed to mitigate these challenges. Furthermore, Denscombe (2014) has raised concerns regarding the validity of the information gained from semi-structured interviews. Actions, preferences and responses may not correspond completely with the participant’s deeply held views (Denscombe, 2014). Dingwall (1997) warns that the extent to which the participants are likely to give accurate accounts can be influenced by several factors. These factors include “differences or similarities in class, ethnic origin, gender, age and status” (Robson, 1993, p.237).

### **3.15 Data Collection: Sampling**

I employed a non-probability sampling strategy using purposive sampling. This qualitative approach is an essential strategy that enables researchers to pick participants most likely to give pertinent and meaningful data about the topic being examined (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). This afforded me the opportunity to provide a gatekeeper with specific criteria, maximising the usage of existing resources (Patton, 2002).

The study focused specifically on experienced school leaders namely chairpersons, principals and teacher nominees serving as members of Boards of Management because of their direct involvement in governance, leadership, and organisational decision-making within primary schools. These participants were well positioned to provide rich insights into how governance

responsibilities are understood, interpreted, and enacted in practice, which aligned closely with the study's research questions. They are viewed as key informants (Marshall, 1996) due to their expertise or experience in relation to an issue. As Kumar (1989) argues, key informants are selected because they possess information or ideas that can be solicited by the investigator. Similarly, Marshall (1996) describes key informants as knowledgeable individuals capable of providing "more information and deeper insight" because of their position, experience and understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

While parent nominees constitute an important stakeholder group, they were not included in this study. This decision was made to maintain a focused participant group with substantial experience of both school leadership and board governance enabling a deeper exploration of the phenomena under investigation. The purpose of this study was not to investigate stakeholder representation or parental participation in governance. Rather, the study examined how role perceptions translate into interpreting and enacting these roles. Participants were selected because they had sustained involvement in school management, policy implementation, educational leadership or governance decision-making. While parent nominees may possess significant professional expertise and valuable stakeholder perspectives, their appointment to the Board is primarily representative rather than leadership based. The focus of this study was on participants whose board membership was directly connected to formal educational leadership and school governance responsibilities. The exclusion of parent nominee does not diminish their contribution to democratic school governance; rather, it reflects a deliberate methodological choice to examine perceptions of role in the governance of schools.

Insiders, defined as individuals with direct responsibility for and active involvement in the governance of primary schools possess contextual knowledge. Their experiences and expertise inform the study's examination of how board members perceive their role and make sense of it. To include such participants, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was employed.

With purposive sampling Robson (2002) argues that the researcher builds a sample considering the “the researcher’s judgement as to typicality or interest” (p.265). Purposive sampling allowed me to collect relevant and suitable data from a specified population with relevant information, ideas, and viewpoints about their roles as members of BOMs in primary schools.

At this point an issue arose as I needed to remain impartial and deal with participants unknown to myself whilst at the same time being assured that the experience and quality of the participants was not diluted. Therefore, to overcome this problem the expertise of a gatekeeper (Dempster & Hanna, 2016) was employed. Through a network that I had built up through my work as a school principal I requested the help of an experienced diocesan official from within the Diocese of Meath. I met that person several times and explained in detail the nature of my research to them. I inquired if they could source four schools with experienced school leaders who serve on the BOM of their respective schools. The support of this experienced and well-connected gatekeeper was of great importance to the study as it correlated with the opinion of how gatekeepers “safely facilitate access” (Carey & Griffiths 2017, p. 204) and “ensure that ethical standards have been met” (Taua et al., 2014, p. 521). Furthermore, I was also conscious that as a well-respected professional this gatekeeper would make the recruitment process a lot smoother as they would be able to allay any fears that potential participants would have by ensuring that this research was trusted with the endorsement (Earle et al., 2020, p. 166) of the patron body. Following these discussions, the gatekeeper identified four schools that met the sampling criteria and contacted the principals, chairpersons and teacher nominees of those schools to determine whether they would be willing to receive information about the study. Once permission had been granted, the gatekeeper provided potential participants with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the ethical safeguards in place. Interested participants were then invited to contact me directly. Once participants established direct contact with me requesting further information regarding the aims, scope and procedures of the study and this was provided. At this stage,

participants were reminded that participation was entirely voluntary and that they were under no obligation to participate or continue their involvement in the study. Given the gatekeeper's professional standing within the patron structure, particular care was taken to ensure that participation remained entirely voluntary. Potential participants were informed that their decision to participate or decline would not be disclosed to the gatekeeper and would have no bearing on their professional relationships within the Diocese. This process ensured that the gatekeeper's role was limited to facilitating initial access and identifying suitable participants, while the decision to participate remained entirely voluntary. Once participants made direct contact with me, all subsequent communication, including the provision of consent forms, interview arrangements, and data collection procedures, was conducted independently of the gatekeeper. Since leadership is a relational activity (Brooks & Normore, 2015), it was essential to have a thorough understanding of the numerous connections involved in the research. I was mindful of a warning voiced by Brooks and Normore (2015, p. 6) when they stated that “in many qualitative studies of educational leadership, the gatekeepers of the contexts are not made clear”. They indicate that this can be problematic as it can be a significant detail whether the researcher is introduced to the participants by either a peer or a superior. During this study I made a conscious effort to inform the reader of the gatekeeper and their relationship to other participants.

**Table 2: Participant Details**

| <b>Role</b>              | <b>School Context</b>              | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Educational Experience</b>    |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Chairperson A</b>     | Urban DEIS Band 1 Large school     | F             | 25 plus years as school leader   |
| <b>Chairperson B</b>     | Urban Non DEIS Large School        | F             | 25 plus years as school leader   |
| <b>Chairperson C</b>     | Non DEIS rural school              | M             | No formal educational experience |
| <b>Chairperson D</b>     | Non DEIS Rural medium sized school | F             | No formal experience             |
| <b>Principal A</b>       | Urban DEIS Band 1 Large school     | F             | 15 years plus as school leader   |
| <b>Principal B</b>       | Urban Non DEIS Large School        | F             | 5 years as a school leader       |
| <b>Principal C</b>       | Non DEIS rural school              | M             | 15 plus years                    |
| <b>Principal D</b>       | Non DEIS Rural medium sized school | M             | 15 plus years                    |
| <b>Teacher Nominee A</b> | Urban DEIS Band 1 Large school     | F             | 5 plus years as teacher          |
| <b>Teacher Nominee B</b> | Urban Non DEIS Large School        | F             | 10 plus years as teacher         |
| <b>Teacher Nominee C</b> | Non DEIS rural school              | M             | 5 plus years as teacher          |

|                          |                                    |   |                          |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| <b>Teacher Nominee D</b> | Non DEIS Rural medium sized school | M | 10 plus years as teacher |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---|--------------------------|

### 3.16 Data Analysis and Synthesis

This section outlines the rationale for using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyse the data. Before deciding on RTA, I researched other forms of TA such as ‘codebook’ and ‘coding reliability’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.333). RTA’s theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) proved compatible with my relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology.

#### 3.16.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis. (RTA)

RTA was chosen to help explain the intricate layers of the participants’ narratives, as it is positioned within the qualitative research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and acknowledges that the researcher’s lived experiences can influence and contribute to the process of data analysis. I was mindful of the cautionary advice by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2019, 2020) to adhere to the contemporary approach to RTA, which was developed in response to misconceptions about the original 2006 publication (Byrne, 2021). The choice of RTA explicitly acknowledges my subjective contribution and ‘insider’ position, which is critical for studies of educational governance where access and rapport are crucial for rich data.

This study adopted a data-driven approach to addressing the research questions, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach supports the development of themes grounded in participants’ accounts. Reflexive thematic analysis is positioned across several analytic continua (Braun & Clarke, 2022); in this study, it was underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, a critical orientation, and a hybrid inductive–deductive analytic approach.

### ***3.16.2 The Six Phase Analytical Process***

Braun and Clarke (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020) provided a six-phase process to assist in the analysis (Byrne 2021). Although sequential, the process is recursive, with movement back and forth between phases (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I treated the six phases as flexible guidelines rather than a set of rules (Byrne, 2021).

I soon came to identify with Braun and Clarke's (2022) warning of RTA being iterative and, thus time-consuming, and often found myself having to navigate back through different phases. I was always aware of the fact that the six-phase process should be treated as a set of guidelines rather than a set of rules and should be applied in a flexible manner to fit the data and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

**Table 3 Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

| Analytic Phase                     | Description                                                                                                                        | Actions                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Data familiarisation</b>        | Immersing oneself in the data to understand the depth and breadth of the content.<br><br>Searching for patterns and meaning begins | Transcribing audio data<br><br>Reading and re-reading data sets.<br><br>Note Taking                                                      |
| <b>Initial code generation</b>     | Generating of initial codes to organize the data, with full and equal attention given to each data item                            | Labelling and organising data items into meaningful groups.                                                                              |
| <b>Generating (initial) themes</b> | Sorting codes into initial themes.<br><br>Identifying the meaning of relationships between initial codes.                          | Diagramming or mapping<br><br>Writing themes and defining properties.                                                                    |
| <b>Theme review</b>                | Identifying coherent patterns at the level of the coded data.<br><br>Reviewing the entire data set as a whole.                     | Ensuring there is enough data to support a theme.<br><br>Collapsing overlapping themes.<br><br>Re-working and refining codes and themes. |

|                                  |                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Theme defining and naming</b> | Identifying the story of each of the identified themes.<br><br>Fitting the broader story of the data set to respond to the research questions. | Cycling between the data and the identified themes to organize the story.                                                   |
| <b>Report production</b>         | Presenting of a concise and interesting account of the story told by the data, both within and across themes                                   | Writing a compelling argument that addresses research questions.<br><br>Writing beyond the simple description of the themes |

(Campbell et al., 2021 p. 6)

### 3.17 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are manifest and imperative from conceptualisation to the empirical and analytic phases of qualitative research (Flick, 2007). This is also why I, always, kept in mind the ethical issues involved in this study as “ethical issues cannot be ignored, as they relate directly to the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved” (Byram, 2012, p.301).

In July 2023, I began the ethical approval process. I obtained approval through the Research Ethics Application Management System (REAMs) at Trinity College. In conjunction with this application, I was mandated by the college to undertake General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) training and complete a Research Integrity module. Participating in these components proved invaluable to me. They highlighted my responsibility as a researcher not only to Trinity College Dublin but to the participants and the data that would be collected. Full ethical approval was granted on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2023.

Cohen et al. (2013) suggest that there are many dilemmas within the educational research sphere. I was aware that I was undertaking the dual role of education practitioners and researchers. To ensure ethical practices were upheld, I conducted a thorough review of existing literature to gather insights and observations on ethical considerations and issues encountered by other scholars. By using the knowledge of others, I was able to guarantee that my own study was done ethically and in accordance with recognised norms. This section describes the efforts used to sustain ethical practices in school governance research. These steps include recognising my own bias, gaining informed consent from participants, and maintaining confidentiality and privacy during the duration of the research. This part aims to illustrate the commitment to ethical issues in the research effort by providing a comprehensive description of these methods.

#### ***3.17.1 Research Bias***

My prior experiences of serving on a BOM had the potential to influence data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Bell & Waters, 2014). Ongoing reflexivity was therefore central to maintaining research integrity, acknowledging that bias is inherent in all research (Creswell, 2009; Smith & Noble, 2014). I sought regular feedback from my supervisor throughout the research process. During interviews, I listened attentively, avoided leading questions and sought clarification when participants' accounts did not align with my assumptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

#### ***3.17.2 Informed Consent***

Typically, research requires informed permission from the participants. It has been defined by Diener and Crandall (1978) as "...the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions' (p.58). Informed consent guarantees that participants have sufficient knowledge of the research to make informed decisions about their involvement. Denscombe (2014) suggests obtaining written consent whenever possible to properly document informed consent.

I addressed this issue with each of the participants by asking them in an email if they were happy to proceed with the interviews. Each of the participants emailed back confirming so, which enabled me to proceed to the next stage.

### ***3.17.3 Confidentiality***

The issues regarding identifiability, confidentiality, and privacy are raised because qualitative data analysis typically focuses on individual cases and unique occurrences and may entail personal and sensitive subjects (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The guarantee of confidentiality for the semi-structured interviews meant that participants details were not shared. Confidentiality refers to the handling of information supplied by participants in a relationship of trust with the researcher and that this information should in no way reveal their identity (Cohen et al., 2011).

The gathered data was password-protected and kept on a computer with all participants being assigned codes. Also, whenever possible, all identifiable participant characteristics were deleted. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) asserts that “confidentiality in research implies that private data identifying the participants will not be disclosed (p. 72).” I had the responsibility to ensure that the data gathered was stored appropriately and used until such time until the research was completed (Denscombe, 2014).

## **3.18 Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is widely regarded as a critical component of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The capacity of researchers to engage in critical self-reflection and examine their role in the research process is considered an essential aspect of qualitative inquiry (Tracy, 2010; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Throughout this study, it was important to critically examine my own reflexivity and consider how my personal and professional experiences, assumptions, and values influenced the research process. I regularly reflected upon my worldview and how it shaped both my interpretations of the data and my

sensitivity to the perspectives of participants (Choudhuri, 2020). As Guba and Lincoln (2005) note, qualitative research frequently involves critical reflection on the role of the researcher in the construction of knowledge. Similarly, Bryant and Charmaz (2007) define reflexivity as a stance that informs how researchers conduct their research, interact with participants, and represent findings. Elliott (2005) further suggests that reflexivity involves a heightened awareness of the self-acting within the social world.

As an educational practitioner conducting research with fellow educational stakeholders, I was particularly conscious of the potential influence of my professional position on the research process. My experience as a school leader provided valuable contextual understanding of the educational setting and enabled me to engage meaningfully with participants' experiences and perspectives. However, I was equally aware that this insider status could shape the questions I asked, the interpretations I developed, and the meanings I attributed to participants' accounts. Consequently, I recognised the importance of remaining critically aware of how my positionality might influence the study.

As a researcher and educator, I acknowledge that I brought my own assumptions, values, beliefs, and understandings to the research and that these inevitably informed aspects of the study. Reflexivity was therefore approached as an ongoing and systematic process rather than a one-time acknowledgement of researcher bias. Throughout the study, I maintained reflective notes following interviews and during the data analysis process, documenting my methodological decisions, and emerging interpretations. These reflections provided opportunities to critically examine how my experiences as an educational practitioner might be influencing my understanding of participants' accounts. During analysis, I regularly revisited the research questions, interview transcripts, and coding decisions to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than being shaped primarily by my own professional experiences or expectations. This process enabled me to identify and challenge assumptions that might otherwise have remained implicit.

The importance of reflexivity is particularly evident in insider research. Clegg and Stevenson (2013) identify reflexive practice as an important, albeit challenging, aspect of conducting research within one's own professional context. However, the value of reflexivity has not gone unquestioned. Pillow (2010) notes that some scholars have criticised reflexive accounts as being "self-indulgent, narcissistic and tiresome" (p. 272), arguing that such accounts do not necessarily improve the quality of research. In response, Pillow (2010) advocates for a more critical and uncomfortable form of reflexivity that moves beyond simple confessions of bias and instead interrogates how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and represented. Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2014) caution against approaches to reflexivity that merely acknowledge researcher subjectivity without critically examining issues of power, representation, and the researcher's role in the construction of knowledge.

Guided by these perspectives, reflexivity in this study was not viewed as an exercise in self-disclosure but as a methodological strategy for critically examining the relationship between my positionality and the research process. Through ongoing reflection, interrogation of emerging interpretations, and continual reference to the research questions, I sought to remain attentive to the influence of my professional background while ensuring that participants' perspectives remained central to the analysis. This approach enhanced the credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness of the study and supported a more nuanced understanding of how knowledge was co-constructed within the research process.

This position reflects Denscombe's (2014) observation that "no research is ever free from the influence of those who conduct it" (p. 300). Rather than attempting to eliminate this influence, the aim of reflexive practice in this study was to acknowledge, critically examine, and transparently account for its potential impact on the generation, analysis, and interpretation of data.

### **3.19 Trustworthiness and Reliability of the Data**

In qualitative research, rigor is established through criteria that differ from the conventional notions of reliability and validity typically associated with quantitative designs. In studies of educational leadership, scholars have highlighted the need to attend carefully to issues of rigor that are specific to qualitative inquiry.

The concept of trustworthiness was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in relation to qualitative research and provides a framework through which the rigor, systematic nature, and credibility of qualitative studies may be assessed. Trustworthiness has been widely adopted within constructivist and critical research paradigms as an alternative to positivist criteria of validity and reliability.

In alignment with the constructivist paradigm, the rigor of this study is evaluated not through traditional measures of reliability and validity, but through the criteria of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria are addressed through five components: credibility, respondent validation, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility is garnered through a rich description of the phenomenon being studied (Given & Saumure, 2012). Presentation of the accurate data is imperative, for this study the research findings will be presented and discussed in detail with the addition of accurate quotes from the participants. Ensuring confidence in the truth-value of the findings, demonstrating that the interpretation accurately reflects participant reality.

In relation to dependability, it is important that the researcher lays out in a clear and direct manner the procedure used so that any attempt to gather data in a similar study is possible. Givern and Saumure (2012) note that if the same conditions are applied, a similar explanation of the phenomenon should be found. Plummer (1983, p.101) states that “reliability is primarily concerned with technique and consistency – with ensuring that if the study was conducted by someone else similar findings would be obtained”. This high level of reliability was to ensure

that the research instrument will produce the same data on each occasion it is used (Denscombe, 2002). The process by which the data was collected, managed, coded and analysed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) was very important to me. I was conscious of the need to be consistent in my approach to the semi-structured interviews which were recorded, transcribed and audited to ensure quality. I asked the same questions to each set of participants because as noted by Morse et al. (2002) having an adequate sample, which may have repeated data “means that sufficient data to account for all aspects of the phenomenon have been obtained” (p.12).

‘Confirmability’ within qualitative research is linked to ‘objectivity’ in quantitative research (Mertens, 2015). To achieve conformability, it is vital that the findings match the data and that the research does not make any claims that do not correspond with the data. Furthermore, it is recognised that complete objectivity is not achievable, however, it is important that the research is seen to have acted in good faith at all stages of the research process (Bryman, 2016). During the data collection and analysis stages I continually reflected on my position, values and background and how these may influence the process. All personal opinions values and web of commitments should not have influenced the research process or the findings that have been presented. Within this research and audit trail of direct quotes are provided to ensure conformability.

It is argued by Fleming (2018) that while it is not unique to the insider researcher the possibility of reaching conclusions prematurely is a sustained possibility which can impact the conformability of the study. This issue was addressed in several ways. Firstly, I used Braun and Clarke’s ‘Reflexive Thematic Analysis’ (2022) as opposed to other analysis strategies. This ensured that the themes were not generated until the last stage of the data analysis process. Secondly, another strategy that was used to prevent the reaching of premature conclusions based on my prior experiences as insider research was the use of my supervisor (Fleming, 2018, p. 316) whom I continually engaged with throughout the data collection and analysis period.

Brooks and Normore (2015) feel strongly that transferability is a vital approach to establishing trustworthiness and that this bears greater consideration in qualitative studies of educational leadership research. During this study I was cognisant of the potential to connect to a broader group of cases (Mertens, 2015). By eliciting quality in depth descriptions of the experiences of the participants, I am enabling other researchers to engage with the study and to come to their own conclusions based on their pre-existing knowledge of the topic (Slevitch, 2011). This approach has been described as a naturalistic generalisation where the study can provoke” new insights, understandings connections and explanations, which the reader may apply to their past experiences” (Coe, 2017a, p. 52).

### ***3.19.1 Validity***

The extent to which the instrument measures what it has been designed to measure is called validity, (Kassarjian, 1977). Coe (2017a) opines that validity in qualitative research is understood in terms of how credible the interpretations of the data are. For this research several steps were taken to ensure that the research was credible. Firstly, through snowball sampling and the use of an experienced gatekeeper I ensured that the participants were able to contribute to this study in a meaningful way. After each interview was transcribed, I listened back to each interview correcting any mistakes that were made by the transcription package. I then emailed each participant asking them to reread it to see if they were happy with the accuracy of it and allowing them to re-consider any responses that they gave during the interview (Stake, 1995).

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter sets out a comprehensive record of the data analysis and presents the findings of the study. Using reflexive thematic analysis key themes emerged that reflect participants' perceptions of their roles and traced how they made sense of these roles. The findings are organised thematically, with each theme illustrated through participants' accounts and interpreted by the researcher according to the study's conceptual framework.

### **4.2 Deductive Analysis**

For this study, a dual analytical approach was employed to generate initial codes and themes, ensuring a systematic and theoretically grounded foundation for subsequent analysis. Drawing extensively from the comprehensive literature review, particularly seminal and contemporary global academic works on school governance, board roles and educational leadership, key concepts and established theoretical frameworks were identified a priori. This involved meticulously extracting existing typologies of responsibilities, power dynamics, ethical considerations, and collaborative practices from the scholarly discourse. These predetermined conceptual categories then served as the initial coding framework, allowing for the systematic organisation and categorisation of data gleaned from the literature. This top-down strategy enabled a focused analysis, validating or challenging existing theoretical propositions concerning the roles of these key stakeholders within a BOM, and providing a robust conceptual lens through which to interpret the empirical data.

### **4.3 Inductive Analysis**

Inductive analysis helped to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This enabled the identified themes to develop from the data directly and ensured that the voice of all the participants was central to the analysis. The use of inductive analysis is one of the principles

that supports the validity of qualitative analysis (Cohen et al., 2018). I applied thematic analysis to the data to extract the relevant themes which addressed the research questions (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). This approach facilitated coding the data without having to identify any other themes that could be constructed. The themes that were produced captured the relevant data. I found this aspect of the research illuminating and at times overwhelming due to the vast amount of data generated from 14 hours of interviews. This yielded a comprehensive and in-depth data set.

Initially, I employed Atlas TI for data analysis, but I found its user experience challenging and complex which lead me to seek advice from colleagues who recommended MAXQDA. MAXQDA assisted my thematic analysis from the transcripts of the interviews. This tool is widely used for qualitative research and according to Verbi Software, it is an effective, user friendly and innovative software tool. I used it to visualise the data, making it a lot easier to sort and generate codes.

#### **4.4 Framing the Data**

Before settling on using reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the data I spent a significant amount of time researching other forms of thematic analysis such as ‘codebook’ and ‘coding reliability’ (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.333). Given my ontological and epistemological stance of relativism and constructivism, Reflexive TA’s theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78) was most appealing and compatible. Furthermore, the reflexive aspect of this approach appealed greatly to me due to my position as an ‘insider research’ (Richards, 2022. P.149).

I had numerous critical decisions to make prior to analysing the data. Firstly, I had to decide whether to use an ‘inductive’ (data-centric) or ‘deductive’ (theory-centric) form of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 84-85). As I was interested in understanding both the data generated by my research participants and the themes generated by previous research on the topic. Data analysis was in a hybrid way (Swain, 2018) both inductive and deductive. It incorporated the data-driven

inductive approach of Boyatzis (1998) and the deductive priori template of a codes approach outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999). I felt that this hybrid approach suited the research questions by “allowing the tenets of social phenomenology to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis” (Fereday et al., 2006, p.4). It also allowed for themes to be generated through and from the data using inductive coding.

‘Deduction owes much to positivism and induction to interpretivism’ (Saunders et al., 2009, p.124). Within the natural sciences, deduction is the dominant research approach. It involves the testing of theory as in this case role theory. However, with sensemaking as a conceptual framework this needed for an inductive approach.

## **4.5 Braun and Clarke’s Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

### ***4.5.1 Phase One – Familiarising Yourself with your Data***

The data for this study was gathered during February and March 2024. Conducting the interviews and collecting the data myself was an important step in ensuring that I was familiar with the data from the outset. All interviews were conducted through Zoom. The premium subscription provided automated transcripts of each interview which I meticulously reviewed against each audio recording to ensure reliability and accuracy. Furthermore, over a period of 5 weeks I listened back to each interview to re-enforce my familiarity with the data. All corrected transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA and categorised according to participant group i.e., ‘Chairperson’, ‘Principal ’and ‘Teacher Nominee’.

### ***4.5.2 Phase Two – Generating Initial Codes***

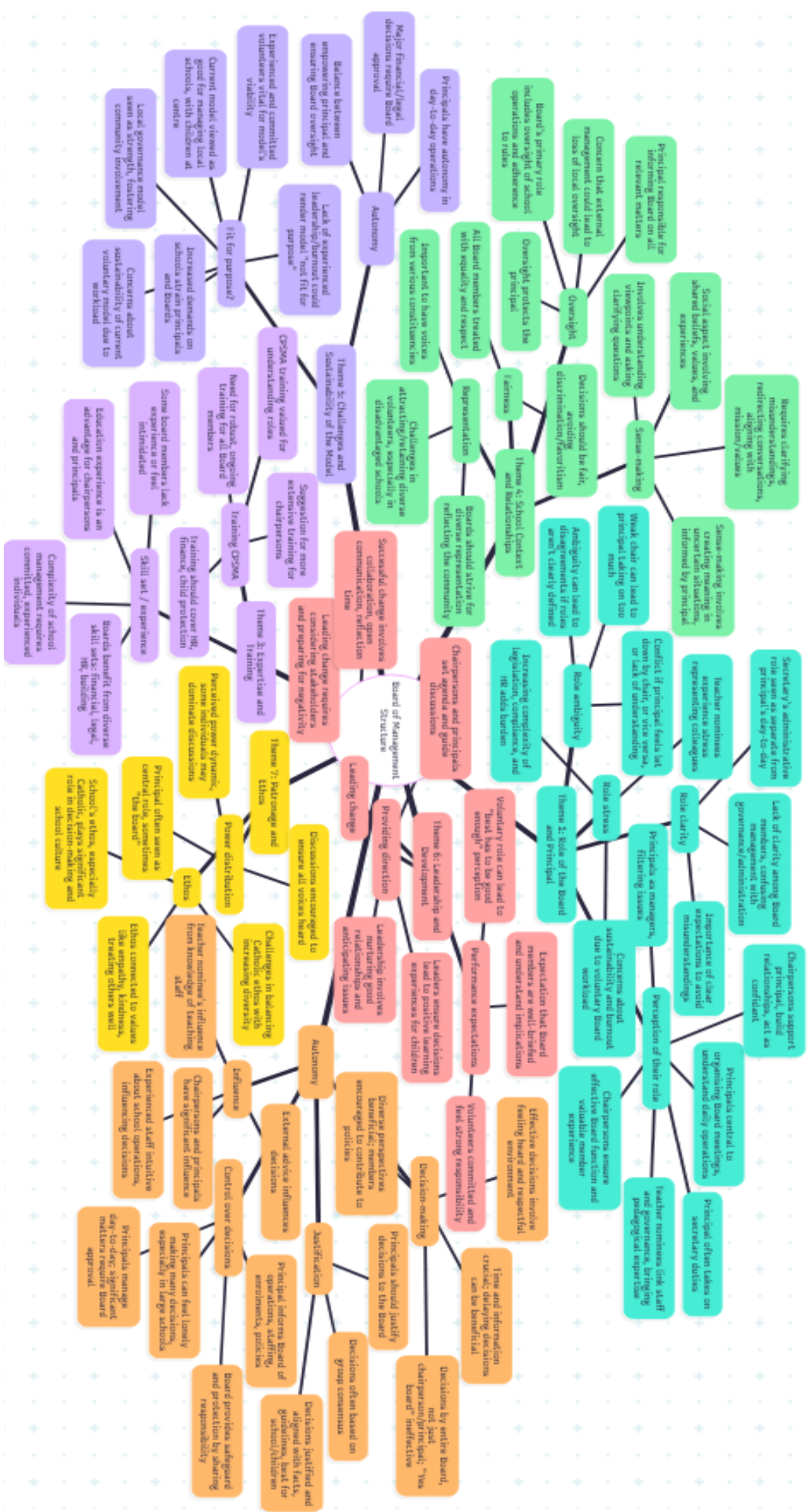
I invested a significant amount of time and effort on this phase as coding is at the heart of the data analysis process (Richards, 2022). I went through each interview line by line, assigning initial codes. Some of the data were assigned to numerous initial codes that I generated from initial readings of the interviews. Every code was then defined when the code was clearly identified to set parameters around which data would be assigned to which code.

**Fig 4.4 Initial Codes**

| Code System                | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| Initial Code System        | 859       |
| not fit for purpose        | 4         |
| lack of experience chair   | 12        |
| Training CPSMA             | 16        |
| Financial issues           | 7         |
| Sense-making               | 84        |
| Ethos                      | 20        |
| Role stress                | 31        |
| Skill set / experience     | 73        |
| Role ambiguity             | 19        |
| Oversight                  | 14        |
| Yes fit for Purpose        | 6         |
| Not fit for purpose        | 1         |
| Managing resources         | 12        |
| View of their role         | 34        |
| Role clarity               | 68        |
| support principal          | 12        |
| Freedom to act             | 14        |
| Independence               | 5         |
| control over decisions     | 25        |
| managing resources         | 14        |
| self governance            | 11        |
| Power distribution         | 17        |
| collective decision making | 27        |
| representation             | 43        |
| Fairness                   | 14        |
| Voice                      | 41        |
| Participation              | 14        |
| Performance expectations   | 12        |
| Oversight                  | 43        |
| justification              | 11        |
| Human Resource Decisions   | 1         |
| answerability              | 19        |
| Responsibility             | 36        |
| influence                  | 31        |
| managing conflict          | 20        |
| providing direction        | 14        |
| decision-making            | 27        |
| Leading change             | 7         |
| Consequences               | 0         |

#### ***4.5.3 Phase Three – Generating Initial Themes***

During Phase Three, I spent time considering how the initial codes could be developed in “patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.342). This was facilitated through mind maps developed on mermaidchart.com. This phase was not as time consuming as the previous phases and quickly led on to Phase Four.



#### ***4.5.4 Reading Infographic 1: From Codes to Themes***

Infographic 1 provides a visual representation of the analytical pathway used in this study. The diagram is intended to demonstrate how the final themes emerged through an iterative process of engagement with the data. At the base of the infographic are the interview transcripts, which formed the primary dataset. Through repeated reading and familiarisation, meaningful segments of text were identified and assigned initial codes. These codes captured actions, perceptions, tensions and experiences described by participants.

As coding progressed, overlapping and conceptually related codes were grouped together into broader categories. For example, codes relating to support, validation, collective responsibility and shared decision-making were clustered together because they reflected a common concern with accountability relationships within Boards of Management. Similar clustering occurred across the entire dataset. These broader categories formed the basis of candidate themes, which were continually reviewed against both the coded extracts and the complete dataset.

The final stage involved refining, naming and defining themes so that each theme captured a distinct aspect of participants' experiences while contributing to the overall narrative of the study. This process ultimately resulted in five interconnected themes: Accountability, Democracy, Leadership, Autonomy and Sustainability. Together, these themes provide an interpretive explanation of how chairpersons, principals and teacher nominees understand, negotiate and enact their governance roles within Irish primary schools.

#### ***4.5.5 Phase Four – Reviewing Themes***

This phase involved the refinement, discarding and collapsing of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During this period the categories became more conceptual than descriptive which is in line with Richard's (2022, p.157) argument that "at each step of analysis, concepts become more abstract". Fig. 2 pictorially represents the themes that were generated at this phase of the analysis

#### ***4.5.6 Phase Five – Defining and Naming Themes***

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) view that writing is an ongoing part of analysis rather than just the final step, I started to draft my observations and insights from the data. With the assistance of MAXQDA I was able to develop "preparatory memos," (Keane, 2022). Quotations from each of the participants was organised for each initial theme. This helped me define them whilst also identify their main aspects and connect them to my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

#### ***4.5.7 Phase Six – Producing the Report***

This final stage of Braun and Clarke's (2021b; 2021c; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework refers to the presentation of the research. It is at this phase according to Freeman and Sullivan (2019) that "this is where you bring the analysis to life for the reader" (p.180). It is now at this point that the main themes have been constructed and the story that is being presented can be discussed in greater detail. Braun and Clarke (2021; 2019) note that themes can still be reworked during the writing process, with this in mind the final stage of this process will form the next part of this chapter.

Throughout the steps I continually checked my positionality and reflexivity on a regular basis. I understood that my own positionality in relation to codes could influence the research (Holmes, 2020) and was mindful to be honest and open about how this could impact my research and what influence this could possibly have on the analysis. There was a genuine attempt on my behalf to be neutral when conducting the analysis but understood that it is difficult for any research to be totally neutral and objective (Holmes, 2020) during the process. Next, I moved on up the conceptual ladder (Mihas, 2022) to a more analytical aspect of the phase I order to develop a deep understanding of the data. I created what was akin to Keane's (2022) conceptual memo, enabling myself to ask what was going on here and why?

#### ***4.5.8 Worked Example of Theme Development***

While Appendices 3 and 4 provide a comprehensive list of the initial and refined codes generated during analysis, it is also important to illustrate how the analytic process moved from individual data extracts to the final themes reported in this chapter. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, this process was not linear but iterative, involving repeated movement between the interview transcripts, codes, developing thematic ideas and the conceptual frameworks of Role Theory and Sensemaking.

The analysis began with detailed engagement with the interview transcripts. During this phase, segments of data that appeared meaningful in relation to the research questions were assigned descriptive codes. These initial codes remained close to participants' language and experiences. As coding progressed across all twelve interviews, patterns of similarity and difference began to emerge. Related codes were subsequently grouped together and refined into broader conceptual categories. Through further engagement with the dataset, these categories evolved into candidate themes, which were then reviewed, revised and refined to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Table 4 provides an example of this analytical progression.

**Table 4: Worked Example of the Development of Themes**

| Participant Extract                                                                      | Initial Code                      | Refined Code               | Candidate Theme                               | Final Theme                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “often than not, genuinely wants to be informed or wants to understand something better. | Oversight / justification         | Accountability             | Negotiating the Accountability Term           | Reporting Up and Down: Role Conflict and the Sensemaking of Accountability |
| “clear understanding of how we were going to work together in leading the school”        | View of their role / role clarity | Decision making            | Governance effectiveness                      | Leadership as Boundary Work: Making Sense of Authority and Responsibility  |
| “embedded in the community are best placed to control the day-to-day governance”         | Yes, fit for purpose              | Freedom to act             | The promise and Fragility of Local Governance | Sustainability Narratives: Community as Ideal, Practice as Challenge       |
| "Questioning would be a rarity".                                                         | Oversight / answerability         | Negotiating autonomy       | Board's Strategic Oversight                   | Balancing Autonomy and Constraint: Role Ambiguity Across Governance Levels |
| "Everyone gets a chance to speak at meetings."                                           | participation                     | Collective decision making | Collective Voice                              | Democracy in Practice: Role Expectations and the Negotiation of Voice      |

This example demonstrates how individual data extracts were initially coded and then progressively interpreted through multiple stages of analysis. The movement from data extract to theme should be understood as recursive rather than sequential. Throughout the analysis, codes were repeatedly reviewed, merged, refined and occasionally discarded. The development of themes involved continual movement between the dataset, individual participant accounts and the conceptual frameworks of Role Theory and Sensemaking. Consequently, the final thematic structure reflects both patterns evident across participants' accounts and the interpretive work of the researcher in constructing a coherent explanation of governance practice.

#### **4.6 Themes and Subthemes**

The themes developed through the analysis broadly align with those identified in the literature review, while also extending existing understandings in important ways. In particular, the analysis generated an additional theme that was less visible in the literature but is significant in understanding participants' experiences. The findings are organised around the identified themes to present a coherent and cumulative narrative, beginning with role expectations, moving through role conflict and ambiguity, examining sensemaking processes, and concluding with implications for role identity and sustainability. Collectively, the findings provide insight into how different actors understand and enact their roles in governance and decision-making as members of BOMs in primary schools.

#### **4.7 Reporting Up and Down: Role Conflict and the Sensemaking of**

##### **Accountability**

This section explores how principals and other members make sense of accountability in their roles. Tensions are revealed between internal justification (answering down) and external compliance (answering up). The findings highlight how accountability is interpreted differently based on experience and is used as a tool for role protection.

#### ***4.7.1. Principals: Negotiating the Accountability Term***

Principals demonstrated varied sensemaking regarding the concept of accountability. A principal with over fifteen years leadership experience found 'accountable' to be "too strong a word," preferring to frame her role in which it was "very important that I keep the board informed". This is a conscious reframing on her behalf to manage the weight of the role expectation, replacing it with a more reciprocal one of communication to the board. Her long tenure as principal and experience she believed provided her with "credit in the bank" and the confidence to "navigate any issues," reducing the perceived personal risk of being 'held accountable'. She noted that she never felt that she was put on the spot and that she feels that if a board member has a question that "it is raised in a supportive way." She acknowledged that the board member more "often than not, genuinely wants to be informed or wants to understand something better." She could not recall a time when she felt questioned in a confrontational manner by any board member.

In contrast, a less experienced Principal felt more directly "answerable to the Board of Management". principal B's inexperience led to a heightened perception of scrutiny from both the chair and the board with a greater need to justify "nearly everything that had happened in the school" which in turn provides us with a more direct and distinct sensemaking of her accountability role to the BOM. She developed this point further by acknowledging that with the "background of the chairperson and her experience in education I really need to be on my game when discussing things as they have been and done it all before." Similarly, the least experienced principal went so far as to seek the board's sign-off on things they "probably don't need to," noting that, "Year 1 and 2 of my principalship I was getting the board to sign off on everything from coaches coming into the school to school tours, It seems a bit over the top now but I wanted to make sure that I was covered in case something went wrong". She went on to

explain that this was probably down to a “lack of experience and confidence” on her behalf and that if something did go wrong, she could have the fall back of the board signing off on it. This is a clear sign of her using the board as a structural form of role protection.

This use of the board as a 'buffer' was also employed strategically by an experienced principal to manage "kickback from some parents" regarding class splits. By having the decision signed off by the board, they could "just inform the parents that this had been signed off at BOM level and that it was out of my hands, case closed". This points to a key finding that accountability for principals is not just about compliance, but an active sensemaking process where the board is strategically leveraged for role protection and to provide a layer of collective responsibility. The goal is to avoid being "exposed" if things go wrong.

#### ***4.7.2 Role Conflict and Subtleties in Member Accountability***

Chairpersons acknowledged a twofold role expectation in relation to accountability: namely, the school community (delivering "a first-class education") and to the principal (being supportive to foster a healthy relationship). However, one chairperson admitted she had not thought about who she felt accountable to, seeing the quality of teaching and learning purely as the principal's job. This indicates a lack of full internalisation of the board's strategic role responsibility.

Teacher nominees experienced a more subtle form of accountability. While they did not believe they were individually "accountable" to any stakeholder, they felt a subconscious accountability to their teaching colleagues, thinking "what other staff members would want me to do" in certain situations as Teacher Nominee C recounted. This led to a clear role conflict in one situation when staff members' expectations of the nominee's advocacy differed from the reality of the nominee's defined role on the board (employer). One nominee reported "stress in the role early on" and had to remind a few colleagues of the boundaries of her position. This sensemaking process of clarifying their role to colleagues was "difficult" but "necessary," highlighting a

personal burden in managing the discrepancy between the staff's role expectations and the formal board role.

Accountability is a complex role conflict managed through highly contextual sensemaking. Experienced principals view accountability as 'informing' and in certain situations use the board as a strategic 'buffer' for role protection. The teacher nominee can experience a subtle role conflict between their board duty and their identity as a staff advocate, leading to significant personal role strain.

## **4.8 Democracy in Practice: Role Expectations and the Negotiation of Voice**

This section examines the practical application of democratic principles within school boards. It will focus on how board members interpret and negotiate democratic participation in school governance. Analysis reveals the tension between the ideal of inclusive representation and the practical challenges of achieving it, highlighting the negotiation of voice among diverse board members.

### ***4.8.1 Inclusive Representation: Tensions Between Expectations and Practice***

The expected democratic function of the board, to represent the entire school community was often challenged by the practical reality of recruitment and socio-cultural barriers. Two chairpersons (A & B) noted their boards were "not a fair representation of the school community".

Chairperson A from a DEIS Band 1 school, where "over 60% of our school community are non-national or new Irish," admitted that there was difficulty in achieving diversity, stating, "all of our board members are Irish". This demographic imbalance creates a certain level of role strain, as board members feel a certain level of responsibility with regards to the decisions that they make which impact a community with "different cultural values". The chairperson acknowledged that despite their best efforts, they "undoubtedly do get some things wrong".

In contrast, a Chairperson D from a middle-class rural school reported that gaining community representation on the board was "probably easy to come by" due to a "close community where generally everyone pulls together." This indicates that role expectations for representation are highly contingent on the school context. There was a certain value placed on education and the role of the school within this community that enticed past pupils and parents back to serve as a volunteer member of the school board.

Principals and teacher nominees were identified as critical resources in navigating this lack of formal representation. Chairperson A describing them as "excellent at navigating us through unclear situations because they are on the ground". Leading on from this, one chairperson noted that having the people on the ground who are interacting with the children and parents' daily was "vital" for the board especially when decisions are being made as it is the principal and teacher nominee who can guard against any pitfalls along the way. This points to the sensemaking process where formal board roles are supplemented by informal reliance on professional expertise to bridge representational gaps.

The findings highlight a gap between the democratic role expectation of inclusive representation in the governance of the school and the day-to-day reality that exists. This gap is particularly prominent in urban socially diverse contexts. This role strain is managed through an informal sensemaking process where the professional voices of the principal and teacher nominee are relied upon to stand in for missing community perspectives.

#### ***4.8.2 Collective Voice and Deliberative Decision-Making***

Chairperson A expressed a clear role expectation to ensure that "all the participants should you know be afforded the opportunity to speak". The chairpersons saw their function as a leader facilitating this voice, believing that consensus and different perspectives "all add to the strength of the collective". As noted by Chairperson D who, coming from a business background, understood the value of all voices being heard. This was an experience that was supported by

Chairperson A who noted that “I have a parent nominee, and he is a real practical person. He would have no formal qualifications, but he gets things done or would have a contact to sort a problem out for us”

One teacher nominee affirmed the importance of their voice on school boards. Teacher nominee B believed it was an "essential component of governance" because they are "implementing a lot of the policies and the vision of the school on the ground". This is an example of role negotiation, where the teacher nominee's formal presence on the board is leveraged by their professional expertise to impact operational decisions, such as allocating extra time for the Hot School Meals programme.

However, the idea of a fully deliberative democratic board was often tempered by demands for being efficient and the need to act in a time sensitive manner. This has led to tensions. For example, Chairperson B from a large urban school admitted that bringing "every decision past the board" was "unsustainable," leading them and the principal to "set the agenda". Certain decisions within their school were time sensitive and at certain points they have taken it upon themselves to go ahead and decide certain things and report back to the board later. This sentiment was also shared by Chairperson A who admitted that if every decision was to be “talked about and discussed” then board meeting would go on for “3 – 4 hours”. Neither chairperson considered this approach undemocratic but rather as Chairperson A noted it was a case of “being more efficient in our approach”.

Chairperson B provided a clear example of this tension at play when she and the principal were faced with an incident involving an abusive parent. She acknowledged that she prioritised "decisive action" and made the decision in consultation with the school principal. The chairperson was conscious of the need to set aside full consensus because her experience had taught her that a swift and clear resolution to this situation was what was required. She also

concluded that her acting in this manner was a form of leadership and it demonstrated the sensegiving of the chair's role as a senior authoritative figure.

In contrast, Chairperson D preferred to achieve a consensus for all major decisions. She found comfort in being guided by the school's Catholic ethos, stating, "as a board we should be united in how we move forward". This clearly highlights how school ethos acts as a crucial interpretive lens for board members, providing a "rational for the decisions we make" and a shared starting point for collective deliberation. Using their ethos as a guiding path Chairperson D reported that she believed that it was due to the Catholic ethos of the school that "board members were never too far apart" in their mindset. This was very evident when she told of a scenario of whereby a decision was to be made regarding the opening of a special class in the school. It was flagged by the principal initially that there may be some voices of concern raised as had happened in other communities, mainly due to a lack of awareness. Chairperson D acknowledged that at this important point it was vital that all board members voices were heard. It was at this stage were "our Catholic ethos guided us as a board" reporting that "all members had given their opinion, and we were all in agreement that it should be opened". Chairperson D admitted that this was a decision that she was "most proud of" as the whole board "was united in the decision" and "true to our Catholic ethos of being an inclusive school".

Teacher Nominee D acknowledged that he felt that the Catholic ethos was a "good mechanism by which decisions are made, especially tough decisions". He believed that this is particularly driven by the chairperson of the school as "everything we do as a board is supposed to be through the lens of our Catholic ethos". Teacher Nominee D noted that this provided direction for the board, "She (the chairperson) would always at each meeting mention that decisions are for the best of the children... He went on to state that, "that always focuses us as a board I think and it is probably a good starting point you know because we are coming from the same starting point of empathy, justice, love etc... and this give us a rational for the decisions we make and that is important I feel".

Principal A acknowledged that not every decision could feasibly be put through the BOM and when asked how she makes that choice, she noted that “through experience, you can see what needs to be run by them”. She went on to clarify that, “Obviously the big issues like finance, capital projects, complaints etc... it is important to keep them aware cos those are the thing that can cause issues further on down the line, but I am at a stage now that I can judge that for myself”.

Principal A went on to clarify that herself and the chairperson meet weekly, and she would always keep her informed of what’s happening but that it is her job to manage the school and make decisions so “me running to the board every 5 minutes would be counterproductive and to a point me neglecting my duties”.

Tension does exist between democracy and the need for operational efficiency particularly within the larger schools. The data shows that decisions sometimes need to be made by the chairperson and principal that are only reported to other board members after the fact. This is when the judgement / autonomy of both the principal and chairperson is needed. Other school leaders can afford to provide a forum for all to have a voice relying on the school ethos to guide and affirm the decisions that are being made.

#### **4.9 Leadership as Boundary Work: Making Sense of Authority and Responsibility**

This section focuses on how the principal, chairperson, and teacher nominee define and enact their leadership roles, particularly in relation to providing direction and managing change within the school context. The findings demonstrate that leadership is understood as boundary work: navigating the demands of the principal as manager versus the chairperson as strategic guide.

#### ***4.9.1 Leadership Role Identity and Expectations***

Data from the interviews revealed a variety of leadership role identities. Some adopted a "hands-on Chair" identity, seeing themselves as a co-leader and "another resource" to the principal. This approach required a clear negotiation of expectations and setting boundaries from the outset, with Chairperson A commenting that "I was conscious that our first meeting would be our most important," resulting in a "clear understanding of how we were going to work together in leading the school".

In contrast, other chairpersons adopted a "hands-off" approach, relying "heavily on the principal to keep me informed". One admitted he "knew his place", to the extent that he felt that it was for the principal to organise the activities of the board and inform him of when the meetings were to take place. This difference suggests an essential difference in role expectations as some chairpersons clearly interpreted their role as active co-leadership, while others see it as passive by taking a back seat.

Some principals perceived their role in terms of managing a dual identity: that of school manager, and that of acting as secretary to the board. Some expressed the view that the manager role "swallows up the secretary's role," with Principal C admitting that he rarely saw himself as secretary to the board even though the duties are those that he carried out. Another principal noted that this dual approach led them to "take control of meetings" and be the "dominant voice". This is an example of sensemaking where the principal's professional expertise and daily presence override their formal role as secretary, asserting their status as the "senior leader" within the school community.

None of the teacher nominees considered themselves as a 'leader', instead they all viewed their role as the "voice of the teacher and colleagues". This is a clear negotiation of role identity, where they view themselves as advocates rather than formal leaders within the school. When discussing the formal leadership roles within a board Teacher Nominee D, admitted that the

process of witnessing the burden of responsibility on the principal caused them to put the brakes on their own career progression. They noted that they have had serious reservations regarding career progression into a more formal leadership role due to the accountability that is now placed on school leaders commenting that: "it all comes back to the school leader, the principal, they are the ones accountable to everyone".

Leadership is a fluid and negotiated concept in school governance. Role identity is strongly influenced by the context of the school and the personal experience and expertise of the chairperson. Principals use sensemaking to assert a clear leadership position based on their daily management role, while teacher nominees define themselves as strategic advocates, opting out of a formal leadership role expectation due to the realisation of the accountability involved in school leadership roles.

#### ***4.9.2 Leading Change and the Trio of Educational Expertise***

Providing direction and leading change in school was often tied to the educational experience and expertise of the school leaders. Chairpersons with an educational background actively led change in curriculum and planning. One chairperson argued that it is in "black and white that the board who I am chair of, works along with the school leaders". Chairperson B noted their experience helped in allocating resources for the new maths curriculum, adding weight to the request so it didn't look like the principal and teacher nominee "were looking for more money". Due to her educational background, she was particularly aware of the need for buy in from staff to implement the new curriculum and providing them with the correct resources would go a long way. This is a powerful illustration of the chairperson's role as a mediator and sense-giver who leverages their status and experience to legitimise operational change requests.

Chairpersons without educational experience, however, were more comfortable leading "from behind" from "afar" or delegating curriculum-based change to the principal, feeling at a "disadvantage" in those areas. Chairperson C admitted to knowing about the School

Improvement Plan (SIP) and that it had “something to do with spellings” but he could not delve any deeper into the subject. He went on to acknowledge that he didn’t “want to step on the principal’s toes” as he viewed this as the principal’s job and not his.

Principals, while accepting the responsibility for change, expressed role strain because discussions around core issues like the School Improvement Plan (SIP) or School Self Evaluation (SSE) "only get a small proportion of our time" and the "discussion element of the board seemed to dry up". This suggests a certain level of role ambiguity where the board's formal mandate for strategic oversight clashes with its practical engagement in core educational matters.

The most effective change was achieved when the trio of educational professionals (Principal, experienced Chairperson, and Teacher Nominee) were aligned. One principal (Principal A) ensured her chairperson was "on the same page" for a library project, acknowledging that with the teacher nominee's support, it was three "experienced teaching professionals saying look this needs to get done," which led to "little, if any opposition". This highlights the power of role alignment to influence collective decision-making. In concluding, she remarked that the project could have met with resistance from some quarters but “once everyone saw that “the professionals” for want of a better word were pushing it, it was all straightforward.” Principal A contended that the trio of the chairperson, principal and teacher nominee can be very influential in leading change due to their experience and expertise in education.

Leading change requires boundary work that leverages expertise. When the educational trio are aligned, they form a powerful influence arc that can guide the board as required. However, the board's limited engagement in strategic educational discussions such as curriculum development can create a certain level of role strain for principals, who are left to sense-make their way through leading change with minimal input from the wider board.

## **4.10 Balancing Autonomy and Constraint: Role Ambiguity Across Governance Levels**

This section analyses the role ambiguity experienced by school leaders at the boundary of their operational freedom and the strategic oversight of the board. Findings show that the resolution of this ambiguity is highly dependent on interpersonal trust, context (school size), and the Chair's experience.

### ***4.10.1 Principals: Autonomy within Constraint***

All principals reported a significant amount of autonomy in the day-to-day management of the school. For many, this autonomy was only possible because over time they had developed a strong sense of trust with their chairperson, who according to Principal C the chairperson of his school "lets me at it".

However, this autonomy exists within a structural constraint, leading to a constant sensemaking effort regarding the boundary of their authority. For example, Principal C who reports that he has a high degree of autonomy admitted that he knows when to go to "a certain point... and then I know that right it's times for the BOM or the chair to get involved," indicating an internalised, experiential boundary in which to operate.

According to Principal A, the role of the principal was often viewed as "poorly defined". To manage the resulting role ambiguity, one experienced Principal used a cover strategy, stating, "to cover myself I bounce a lot off the chair so there are no surprises for anyone". Adding to this, Principal A noted that it was the experience she has built up over time that enabled her to "have a feel for what I can work on myself" and what was needed to be brought to the board. Principal A didn't think in any way that this lack of role clarity hampered her in her day-to-day management of the school. She felt quite free to use her judgement in making decisions, but that backup from the board is quite reassuring". She continued by acknowledging that with this

poorly defined role can come conflict “as some boards or chairs may feel that a principal is working beyond their brief”.

For Principal C, the very presence of Teacher Nominee C on the board provided the necessary checks and balances approach in relation to the extent of their autonomy. He contended that if he "was to go off on a solo run... the teacher nominee is there and could call me out on it". This clearly shows the importance of having a member of the board who is skilled / experienced in relation to education and the working of a school.

Some chairpersons, conversely, felt a core role expectation to provide oversight due to their legal responsibility as the employer. They expressed an active sensemaking of the principal's role, with Chairperson B asserting that giving a principal "all the autonomy in the world" while the board acts as a "passenger" would lead to "chaos", for example, if the principal needed extended leave. The knowledge gap that would be left behind would be detrimental to the school. The solution was seen as engaging in transparent governance that "builds trust and a certain level of transparency," rather than engaging in a "got ya" culture.

Role ambiguity in relation to the principal's authority is a clear finding. It is continually managed through an active, relational sensemaking process based on trust the experience of the principal and regular communication with the chairperson. Principals who were interviewed willingly accepted that oversight which came in various forms can be advantageous to them as a way of providing "security" and "protection".

#### ***4.10.2 Board's Strategic Oversight and Role-Specific Dynamics***

The degree to which the board scrutinised the management of the school varied by principal experiences and school contexts. Less experienced principals acknowledged that there should be a degree of scrutiny but perceived it as "inquisitive rather than looking to catch me out". Principal B stated that the chairperson of their school “is very informed and will ask me questions that will provide me with the opportunity to explain an issue further thus opening a

debate”. Principal B felt that this level of questioning was undertaken to provide the other board members with the adequate information and to “explain a bit more what happens in the school, as the majority of people don’t really realise how busy schools actually are”. Principal B was quick to mention that they did not feel the questioning was in anyway designed to “catch me out” in fact “the opposite”. This questioning was viewed as a "safeguard" to ensure they had "laid out all the facts and answered questions truthfully," offering a sense of security.

In contrast, more experienced Principals (C & D) from smaller schools reported that "questioning would be a rarity". They viewed themselves as "empowered" and saw micromanagement as "tying one hand behind my back". This suggests that context and experience are key interpretive lenses determining how deeply the Principal and BOM engage in oversight. Principal D pointed out that if he was to be “constantly going around and justifying himself” to the chair and always looking for the BOM to approve things then that could possible impact the “running of the school” and “how quickly things get done”. There was an acknowledgement from Principal C that detailed reporting is required and that he provides the BOM and the chair with providing detailed principal reports frequently. There was also an emphasis on the context in which they were operating and that some schools with large pupil numbers are like “businesses and need to be run accordingly” but that “it is not the case here”.

The teacher nominee role presented a particular dynamic regarding oversight. Teacher Nominee A felt "involved in the decision making," and this was mainly due to the active role of the chairperson who encourages conversations. Teacher nominee justified their stance on providing a certain level of oversight as the decisions taken at that level will ultimately “filter down to the classroom”. However, Teacher Nominee D admitted feeling difficulty in questioning his manager (the principal) openly in a BOM meeting, suggesting he would handle issues "in private" and that it would take a strong personality to do this. Teacher Nominee D went on to highlight the nature of the relationship between the teacher nominee and the principal. He highlighted that it is the “teacher nominee and the principal who have to work together” other

members may feel that they can question the principal but “in reality they don’t have to work alongside each other” and “don’t have the same rapport built up that we would have, so the dynamic doesn’t really lend itself for me to be overly critical”. This highlights a role conflict for the teacher nominee between their duty as a BOM member (oversight), their identity as an employee (subordinate to the principal) and their personal relationship with the principal built up from years working together. The teacher nominee managed this tension by relying on their "presence in the capacity of teacher nominee" to provide a certain level of oversight without direct confrontation.

Chairpersons ultimately took on the core role expectation of strategic oversight, especially concerning high-stakes areas like finance and child protection. However, the data shows that some chairpersons were more involved than others. Chairperson B was very clear when it came to oversight her role was critical, due to the gravity of financial, child protection or capital decisions to “the reputation of the school”. She believed that it was her role as chairperson to:

make sure that the board and all the members where fully informed of impact of our decision. Sometimes I play devil’s advocate just to stress test our stance on something Michael, you know if there was something in relation to admissions or special education especially in today’s society a wrong move and the school could be front page on the local or national news.

Just going through the motions was not an option for Chairperson B who through her experience of serving on BOM understood how important it was to be “on top” of these issues within a school because if “we are not” things can “unravel very quickly”.

This oversight was interpreted through the lens of the school's Catholic ethos. This was viewed as a guiding policy. Chairperson B admitted that the Catholic ethos of the school was very influential in relation to oversight and governance within a school as “upholding our values and Catholic ethos was something that can help guide us along with certain polices and we probably

can't go too far wrong". The part ethos plays in the overall governance and oversight of the school was something that Chairperson C alluded too. "I may not have all the legal or educational jargon but fundamentally as long as I feel that we are abiding to our values and the Catholic ethos I don't see how we can fail." He acknowledged that the principal guides the BOM to a certain degree on the nitty gritty things "but I think anyone can stand back and question if we are being true to our values which I feel guides us as well". Chairperson C further elaborated on this by suggesting that there was a "good balance on the board to provide oversight, the principal helps out with the detailed stuff, and I keep the ethos in check."

The oversight function of the BOM is defined by role-specific sensemaking, context and the background of the chairperson. Many of the principals interpret the current level of oversight as supportive protection, whilst cautioning against "micromanagement" or a level of surveillance that would detract from their "day to day work". The Teacher Nominee experiences a certain level of role conflict between their duty of oversight on the BOM and their employee status in relation to them being a subordinate to the principal and their personal relationship with the school principal. These tensions are resolved by many chairpersons by interpreting their oversight role through the structural and moral guide of the school's ethos.

#### **4.11 Sustainability Narratives: Community as Ideal, Practice as Challenge**

This final section explores the new theme that was constructed from the data. It highlights role strain associated with maintaining the voluntary local governance model, focusing on the tension between the ideal of community oversight and the practical challenges of member engagement and time commitment.

##### ***4.11.1 The Promise and Fragility of Local Governance***

All participants concurred that the local voluntary model should be preserved, arguing that local input "keeps me on my toes" and that people "embedded in the community are best placed to control the day-to-day governance". The local model was celebrated as being "nimble and more

flexible," allowing for quick decision-making on operational matters like procurement or staff training. The fundamental aspect of this model is that decisions are made with the "interests of the children first and foremost," rather than being purely driven by "finances and balance sheets". A scenario put forward by Principal C who recalled a situation whereby local level governance is meaningful and impactful. He provided the example of a new child who "came to the school last September." The child had a "specific medical condition, that could possibly require the administration of medication." He made the point that the principal and the chairperson were able

"To arrange training for the staff less than a week into September" and that this put the child, parents and all the staff at ease. The board signed off on the payment for it no issues whatsoever. I'd say that there was about four phone calls made, and it was done, we didn't have to arrange a board meeting or anything like that, it was all very quick and responsive, and all signed off on and paid for"

He remarked that in another context "the number of hoops that would have to be jumped through would be unreal, and even at that, it was something done at local level that an external body may have not approved". The impact of student outcomes from localised school governance was mentioned by various participants. Teacher nominee A argued that once the BOM is "influential at a local level then decisions are made to impact our students positively". Developing this point, she remarked that "as a board we can help provide the best environment for our children to learn", arguing that "we know what works best here Michael and we can plan accordingly with the principal and other staff".

Echoing this thought, both Chairpersons A, B and D commented that they believed the local aspect of school governance provided improved outcomes for their students. Chairperson A decreed that "we know our community and kids and we can provide the direction to bring them on their journey", Chairperson A's point which aligned with Chairperson D who remarked that

he felt that “providing strategic direction for the school surely should be done by the people closest to the school ... because what works here for us may not necessarily work down the road”. Adding to this, Chairperson B acknowledged that the BOM in her school was “best placed to provide the vision of where we want to be as a school”, and that they should be the ones making the decisions that “impact the children of our community and that is something that I would be adamant about”. Going further, she noted that when “our board makes a decision, we have the interests of the children first and foremost”, she remarked that if that was taken away and they were governed “from afar” she believed that all decisions “would probably come down to finances and balance sheets and that’s not how schools should be run”.

This local governance also fosters a powerful sensemaking of community involvement and role protection. The BOM, made up of parents, community members, and teachers, is "presented with an array of data" allowing for transparency and "scrutiny". The principal’s role expectation to justify things to the community on the BOM makes it "very hard for me to pull the wool over their eyes".

However, this ideal of local governance is offset by the fragility of the voluntary model, which places significant strain on those occupying governance roles. Chairpersons described the heightened financial oversight associated with larger schools as a source of stress, while also highlighting challenges in managing performance expectations. Participants pointed to the “blurry line” between the roles of chairperson and principal as a persistent source of tension

#### ***4.11.2. Performance Expectations and Voluntary Role Strain***

A major source of role strain relates to the low level of preparation among board members for board meetings. Some teacher nominees expressed frustration that the principal and chairperson were often "on top of the policy," but "the others were not even though it would have been shared with them a week before," which "slowed things down a lot". This led to a belief that

less than half the members "probably understand" the significant policies they are signing off on.

Principals, making sense of this lack of preparation, had to take on the additional, unacknowledged role responsibility of condensing lengthy documents, arguing that it was their job to ensure members are "fully and truthfully informed".

For teacher nominees, their professional role strain in the classroom directly competed with their voluntary BOM duties. Teacher Nominee C admitted to prioritising classwork over BOM preparation: "I just don't have the time," and wondered if they should be allocated hours to prepare. Teacher Nominee B confessed to using silence during meetings to "hide" her "lack of preparation", illustrating a personal sensemaking strategy to manage the conflict between professional and voluntary role expectations.

The sustainability narrative is defined by a tension between the powerful local ideal and the high role strain of the voluntary commitment. The lack of preparation among voluntary members challenges the efficacy of governance. Teacher nominees experience pronounced role conflict and strain forcing them to choose between classroom professional duty and uncompensated BOM preparation. This inevitably forces them into using sensemaking strategies like silence or prioritising workloads to manage these competing demands.

## **4.12 Conclusion**

This chapter has applied the conceptual lenses of Role Theory and Sensemaking to re-analyse the themes in a cumulative narrative arc. The most significant finding is the pervasive nature of role ambiguity and role conflict across all three key roles. Resolution of these tensions is achieved through active sensemaking processes which are highly dependent on context, professional expertise and experience, and having mutual trust. The central function of the BOM has emerged as a body for collective role protection for the principal, strategically leveraged to manage external accountability and internal conflict. The sustainability of the

governance model, while strongly supported as a local ideal, is perpetually challenged by the high personal role strain placed on its voluntary members, particularly in relation to their uncompensated preparation time.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter interprets the findings from the semi-structured interviews through the established conceptual frameworks of role theory and sensemaking. It synthesises participant's lived experiences of primary school governance highlighting the interplay between formally defined roles and interpreting how these roles are enacted within a broader system context. The discussion is organised around the themes of accountability, democracy, leadership, autonomy, and the sustainability of the current governance model in Ireland. These themes are examined within the Irish context as the literature has identified them as central to school governance yet often treated in a fragmented and insufficiently integrated manner, thereby constituting a key research gap (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Firstly, democracy is investigated where the findings reveal a tension between the democratic ideals of representation and their enactment. Analysis of how the interviewees engage in sensemaking to solve the challenges of having true stakeholder representation and governance theory especially within urban settings. This section concludes by highlighting how both the personal experiences and leadership styles of the chairperson impact the practice of democracy.

Secondly, the discussion moves to autonomy where the principals' views on the subject is that of a negotiated space. Within this section the discussion moves to how role ambiguity can be used by leaders to achieve highly flexible specific responses to fulfil the needs of the school community in which they operate. Examples of a controlled autonomy are put forward compared to instances of broad independence for school leaders utilising role theory to explain how informal safeguards such as the presence of fellow colleagues such as the teacher nominee guard against over autonomic leadership.

Thirdly, this chapter examines accountability as a web of obligations. The data that has been presented will challenge the traditional notion of hierarchical governance and will bring into focus the role of network governance and how horizontal governance structures are at play. The critical role of local accountability also presents itself with many chairpersons voicing how they feel accountable to their communities and how they make sense of this accountability.

Fourthly, the topic of leadership was addressed where the formal roles of the chairperson and the principal versus their actual roles were examined. Using the role theory framework, we examine how role conflict and role ambiguity present themselves in practice though the blurring of lines such as the role of the principal consuming that of the role of the secretary and how these tensions play out in the relationship between both the principal and the chairperson.

Finally, the discussion turns to the sustainability of the current governance model in Ireland through the voice of the interviewees. This section explores role identity and how the volunteer members enact their roles. Furthermore, the issue of role strain presented itself and how the organisations were required to be flexible in order to keep resilient. Ultimately the central argument is that the localised aspect of governance provides for spontaneous feedback to those in charge and can be viewed as a credible accountability mechanism. This mechanism promotes consistent reflection which in turn ensures that the school remains adaptable and flexible.

## **5.2 Accountability**

The findings from the research reveal a multifaceted and intense web of accountability for each of the participants. Firstly, the principals are all aware of their obligations to be accountable to the BOM of the school. However, there were varying degrees to which this extended. Hansen et al. (2022) conceptualise accountability as extending beyond central government to encompass multiple societal stakeholders. Chairperson C's account offers an empirical illustration of this shift, as he consistently framed accountability in relation to the local community rather than formal hierarchical structures. His observation that "people don't be

long telling you what's going on in the school" demonstrates how accountability was made sense of through everyday interactions and community scrutiny.

For Chairperson C, network governance played a central role in how the school was governed, with hierarchical forms of governance taking a secondary position. He viewed the capacity to recognise and manage relationships with local stakeholders as a valuable governance skill. This emphasis resonates with Norris's (2022) analysis of how school leaders make sense of accountability in relation to their organisational environments and draw on that sensemaking to inform decision-making. Norris (2022) further conceptualises school leadership as a social enterprise, arguing that effective sensegiving is central to a leader's capacity to influence members of the school community.

Furthermore, Principal B who has only been appointed principal within the last five years believed that she was under scrutiny early on in her tenure and felt that she had to justify all her decisions to the members of the BOM. She believed that once a decision was justified to the BOM members then that provided a certain level of protection from both the school community and hierarchical bodies. She commented that once she had proven to the BOM that she had adhered to the guidelines and the BOM had signed off on a decision she was "covered". She acknowledged that she had a heightened awareness of accountability and that this accountability involved numerous stakeholders.

How principals made sense of their role in relation to accountability was greatly impacted by their experience. Principal A, a well-established principal, acknowledged that even though she was accountable to the BOM she felt that maybe accountable was "too strong a word". Role ambiguity was evident here because she believed that it was her role as principal to keep the BOM informed. This unique insight reframes accountability from her perspective as being important to inform rather than to be held accountable. This is an important insight from

Principal A as it goes towards answering Brummel (2025) who admitted that it was unclear how school managers / leaders construct a sense of accountability towards the stake holder groups.

Issues of legitimacy and accountability emerged implicitly within participants' accounts, even where governance tensions were not articulated directly. Consistent with Connolly et al. (2017), the data highlight challenges related to the authority to enforce accountability. This is illustrated in Principal A's sensemaking of her role, as she described having "enough credit in the bank" and being "too experienced to feel that she was accountable to the board". This perception is vital as it suggests that the principal's self-perception of their professional expertise may override the authority of the BOM. Rather than the BOM legitimacy holding her to account, her own perceived competence becomes the self-imposed standard, effectively downplaying the perceived need for external oversight by those whose expertise she may deem inferior to her own. This dynamic can complicate the operational effectiveness of the governance of the school which can directly feed into the concerns raised by Connolly et al. (2017) regarding the legitimacy of governing participants

Principals differed in how they understood and experienced accountability. Principal B's relative inexperience led her to feel "under scrutiny" and this prompted a perceived need to justify her decisions. In contrast, Principal A's experience shaped a more procedural understanding of accountability, in which she viewed her role as informing the BOM rather than being held to account by it. Sensemaking provides a useful lens for understanding these divergent perspectives, illustrating how differences in professional experience informed whether the BOM was interpreted as a source of scrutiny or as a procedural audience. Principal A by making sense of accountability as a form of trust building between her and the BOM used this when she brought bad news to the BOM when the drop in assessment data occurred. This may have been to gain a certain level of trust and have an open and transparent relationship between her and the BOM. This approach aligns well with the literature's discussion on the horizontal form of accountability (Brummel, 2025). This reframing of her role by Principal A

represents a deep insight into the 'audit society' (Power, 1999), where being transparent can be used as a form of protection to secure support from the BOM.

In contrast, Principal D lacking the relevant experience made sense of accountability to 'cover myself'. Initially, her detailed reporting to the BOM and requesting sign off from the BOM on trivial matters presents as a more defensive sensemaking approach. Her perception of her role was to ensure compliance to guard against future professional exposure. This has great similarities to the bureaucratic approach to accountability taken by American Charter Schools (Stecher & Kirby, 2004).

Teacher nominees provided a unique insight into how they make sense of accountability. Teacher Nominee C made sense of his accountability as an obligation to his colleagues that was subtly there in the back of his mind. This deviates from the formal aspect of the role and presents an informal approach to accountability influenced by social dynamics. This example from Teacher Nominee C provides a clear instance of how members can construct a sense of accountability towards other stakeholders within the school community (Brummel, 2025) even when it is not clearly defined or part of a framework. This moral accountability is a main feature of the stakeholder model of governance.

Evidence of role conflict (Biddle, 1986) was apparent in the expectations surrounding the teacher nominee role. Teacher Nominee A described feeling caught between the formal responsibilities of her position and the expectations held by some colleagues regarding how she should represent them. The literature similarly highlights tensions in school governance between the formal responsibilities of BOM members and the expectations of stakeholders (Connolly & James, 2011). Teacher Nominee A's experiences of informal staffroom conversations illustrate how these tensions are enacted in practice, revealing a clear trigger for sensemaking. While some colleagues expected her to act as their direct representative on the BOM, her formal role required her to act in the best interests of the school. This misalignment

generated significant stress for her and demonstrated how informal environments can negatively shape the enactment of formal governance roles. Such identity threat prompted the teacher nominee to engage in sensemaking in order to interpret the source of the tension and restore her professional identity, a process identified by Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2016).

Furthermore, role strain and role conflict were present when various teacher nominees voiced concerns regarding taking on the responsibility of sitting on a BOM and trying to juggle the workload whilst maintaining their high standards in the classroom. These concerns coincide with the opinion put forward by (Barth, 2001) who notes that role conflict occurs in teacher leadership when teachers take on more responsibilities but are not provided with the extra resources to carry out the extra responsibilities, along with their regular teaching duties. Beyond differences associated with specific roles, the findings suggest that school context and professional experience are central to how accountability is interpreted. Participants' experience in education shaped their sensemaking of accountability, with this influence particularly pronounced among chairpersons and principals.

While stakeholder involvement in governance is often presented as a mechanism of accountability, Brummel (2025) highlights a lack of clarity regarding how school leaders and managers construct a sense of accountability. The data from this study contribute to this discussion by examining how chairpersons, principals, and teacher nominees interpret accountability within their roles.

Principals had varying interpretations of accountability. The more experienced principals indicating that rather than being 'accountable' they felt it was important to keep the BOM informed of what was happening in the school. Similarly to Jenlinks' (2017) understanding of accountability they felt an internal responsibility to keep the BOM informed of all decisions. Some experienced principals felt that they were never going to be put on the spot by their BOM in relation to a decision that they had made. They felt that because the other BOM members

viewed them as the “principal” of the school and not the secretary that this fed into this. This horizontal approach to governance according to Brummel (2025) is far removed from the more top-down hierarchical approach. This lack of experience on behalf of the other BOM members is a symptom of the stakeholder approach to governance and often impacts on a board’s ability to hold formal leaders to account something that has been warned against by Taylor and O’Sullivan (2009) whereas a skills-based model of governance would ensure a more secure governance.

Chairpersons who had experience in education presented significant role clarity regarding to whom the BOM is accountable to and who the BOM should be holding accountable. This clarity was drawn from many years of experience and from them sitting on BOMs and viewing both good practice and poor practice in relation to governance. The experienced chairpersons had significant role clarity in relation to accountability. For example, one such chairperson with over forty years’ experience in education was able to quote from the Looking at Our School (2022) Quality Framework in relation to highly effective practice in relation to the BOMs statutory obligation in being compliant with all legislative and policy requirements. There was an acknowledgment that understanding this framework provided her with the direction and parameters to operate. She believed that the framework was provided by the department to provide direction and at the same time protect her if an inspection was to take place.

Another of the experienced chairpersons acknowledged the presence of role stress. She felt her experience has given her an insight into the enormity of the role and that she has acquired a full understanding of how the BOM and her as chairperson were accountable for child protection and health and safety matters. She acknowledged that a lot of chairpersons may be blind to this responsibility and do not understand how accountable they are for such things. She affirmed that she could make sense of how accountable she was due to her experience of serving on BOMs previously and seeing how things can go wrong. While the experienced principals recognised the need for them to hold the principal to account it is not something that they tended

to do. Being a support and having constant communication with the school principal tended to be the way in which all chairpersons viewed their role

Some accounts reflected the Hansen et al. (2022) argument that accountability extends beyond central authorities to encompass the school community. At the same time, their sensemaking of accountability varied with interpretations shaped by differences in professional experience and school context.

There was a sense of role ambiguity amongst some chairperson as to what they were accountable for. Chairperson with little or no educational experience felt that as chairpersons they were not accountable for the teaching and learning in the school. Whereas the chairpersons with experience in education considered that they were accountable

Furthermore, role ambiguity was evident with the less experienced chairperson when it came to clarifying the level of accountability to which they should hold the principal. They acknowledged that their role was to support the school and principal in whatever way they could.

### 5.3 Democracy

This section analyses how democratic practices are understood and enacted within BOMs. While the formal design of BOM roles is intended to promote democratic practice and stakeholder participation, the findings present a more nuanced reality. The discussion begins by examining how chairpersons and teacher nominees in urban school contexts seek to achieve diverse representation within an increasingly multicultural society. It then explores how participants engage in sensemaking to interpret and respond to the gap between democratic ideals articulated in the literature and the lived realities of school governance. The section concludes by considering how leadership styles, professional experience, and school context shape democratic processes in practice. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that although stakeholder voice and democratic participation are embedded within the theoretical design of school BOMs, democracy in practice is negotiated dynamically, shaped by role expectations, individual sensemaking, and contextual factors. This negotiation gives rise to both democratic strengths and vulnerabilities.

The data revealed that there are clear democratic strengths evident in the commitment of the participants to facilitate stakeholder voice, deliberation and active role interpretation. It was noticeable that the chairpersons all sought to hear the voice of the BOM members and that their opinions were valued. This was particularly evident with Chairperson D who has no education background and is chair of a smaller rural school. She noted that she liked for the BOM to reach a consensus with regards to making decisions. This approach contrasts with the literature's discussion which gives preference to expertise over broad participation which was highlighted by Wilkins (2018). She did admit that this can lead to drawn out meetings but made sense of this approach by stating that the BOM members were never too far apart in their thought process. She believed it was the catholic ethos and values that brought the likeminded members together. She provided a clear example of a decision that was made where she believed that to make sense of the situation the catholic ethos would provide both her and the BOM a good

foundation. Within this complex and ambiguous situation, the members of the BOM came to agree that to follow their catholic ethos that a special class would be opened in the school. Chairperson D and the BOM members engaged in sensemaking to navigate a governance dilemma within a complex school environment. This approach aligns with established accounts of sensemaking in the literature (Constantinides, 2023) and reflects the Klein et al. (2010) description of team sensemaking as “the process by which a team manages and coordinates its efforts to explain the current situation and to anticipate future situations, typically under uncertain or ambiguous conditions” (p. 304). While both chairpersons acted with democratic intent, differences in how they made sense of what democratic practice required in context resulted in divergent approaches. This illustrates that democracy in governance is not fixed but is actively shaped through sensemaking in response to contextual conditions.

Even though voices and opinion were sought, it was noticeable that during a time of crisis regarding a disciplinary matter one experienced chairperson had decided on a course of action and provided sensegiving as to how the situation should be resolved. A certain level of exclusion took place during this time, as the principal and chairperson together decided upon a particular course of action. The tension between oversight and efficiency was evident with Chairperson B. She made sense of her role in the disciplinary issue as one requiring unilateral, swift action based on experience. Her sensemaking was completed in isolation, resulting in a hierarchical process that prioritised efficiency over the collective oversight of the BOM members. This leads to the question of what significance was it to provide the opportunity for members to contribute when the decision was made? This is a clear example of the vulnerability of the democratic nature of the current system.

There was significant awareness amongst BOM members that the decisions of the BOM do impact a lot of people. This was evident with decisions impacting teaching and learning and the day to day running of the school. This is where the teacher nominee was able to provide valuable input into discussions as to how a decision may positively or negatively impact the school and

children. Chairperson B specifically acknowledged the importance of the stakeholder voice in relation to school governance, echoing the viewpoint on giving opportunity to those who participate in a service to influence it. Furthermore, Chairperson B noted that "thinking outside the box" was vital. Highlighting the importance of people with various experiences acknowledges that a more democratic approach to governance harnesses the capacities of the local community.

From the perspective of role theory, the participants' roles are in place to encourage democratic practices and facilitate representation and voice of stakeholders. The findings present an acknowledgement of a lack of representation from diverse communities by both Chairperson A and B. It must be pointed out that both Chairperson A and B are chairpersons of large urban schools where the demographic has seen considerable changes over the past fifteen years. Even though it is acknowledged that there was great effort on the part of school leadership to encourage representation of diverse communities onto the BOM, they ultimately failed. The data from this research aligns directly with the international literature which informs us that governing bodies often underrepresent their communities, and that white, middle-class men are the dominant representation (Wilkins, 2015).

During the interviews it was clear that both Chairperson A and B were trying to make sense of democracy and representation. Chairperson B had thought very deeply about the fact that the BOM was making decisions that would be impacting on people who have different culture values and social norms. This is in line with how Weick (1995) describes it, when a person attempts to understand one's present situation and attempt to make sense of the new reality. This new reality in both School A and B is the increasing diversity in Ireland and in Irish schools (CSL, 2023). Both Chairperson A and B engaged in sensemaking to interpret the new reality of increasing diversity. Chairperson B thought deeply about the fact that the BOM was making decisions impacting people with different culture values and social norms. Chairperson A also engaged in sensemaking, specifically to negate the effects of diversity on the BOM by seeing

the teacher nominee and principal as providing an advocacy voice for the underrepresented in the local community.

Sensemaking was also evident in Chairperson A's account. She emphasised the role of the teacher nominee and the school principal in mitigating the effects of limited diversity on the BOM. She considered them to be providing a voice for underrepresented groups within the school community. This reflects an ongoing effort to interpret and respond to an evolving organisational environment, a process characteristic of sensemaking as described by Balogun and Johnson (2005). Chairperson A's account further illustrates sensemaking as a continuous process of interpreting local conditions in relation to broader environmental cues, consistent with Maitlis and Christianson's (2014) conceptualisation.

It is important to note that Teacher Nominee A also expressed views on how challenging it was to get diversity onto the BOM but also acknowledged that tensions exist between reality and what is laid out in theory. Teacher Nominee A proceeded to note that there was a general awareness among the members of the BOM regarding the lack of diversity. She referred to the school's Catholic ethos and how that was the anchor of the decision-making process. This process according to Teacher Nominee A was always child centred and that was something she was proud of. This clearly demonstrates how both Chairperson A and Teacher Nominee A both make sense of their role as leaders of democracy by being active and thoughtful of the situation rather than being passive bystanders. The data at this point does not correspond with the literature that highlights democratic participation in governance as performative and compliance based (Gerrard & Savage, 2021). Even when the formal processes are not in line with the experiences on the ground, Chairperson A and Teacher Nominee A show a commitment to democratic practices on the ground.

Some accounts revealed a strong emphasis on democratic participation within BOMs, particularly through deliberate efforts to ensure that members' voices were heard. Consistent

with Golby (1993), these practices were viewed as central to effective school functioning. BOM members also recognised the wider consequences of governance decisions, reinforcing the importance of inclusive and participatory decision-making. Chairperson B acknowledged the importance of the stakeholder voice in relation to school governance. Being aware of the importance of the stakeholder involvement in education, Chairperson B echoes the viewpoint expressed by Connolly et al. (2017) who discuss the importance of giving opportunity to those who take part in the service to influence the service. Chairperson B noted how having people thinking outside the box was vital and noted that this is usually done by people with various experiences.

In relation to collective decision making by the BOM and its members the data showed that several factors influenced democratic processes here, namely school size and the educational qualifications and skillset of the chairperson.

Chairpersons A and B, who chair BOMs of large urban schools, admitted that not every decision can be brought to the BOM. Some decisions were described as time sensitive and needed to be signed off on with the school principal before a BOM meeting could be called. This is an area where tensions or role conflict could possibly arise. Chairperson A noted that due to the size of the school and the array of decisions that need to be taken on a weekly basis, that it is usually the chair and the principal who would make these and then relay them to the BOM at the next meeting. This lack of stakeholder engagement according to Allen and Gann (2022) can be viewed as undemocratic. However, it must be noted that both Chairperson A and B did not view it as undemocratic.

Chairperson B proceeded to describe how she made sense of her role when a difficult decision was made. They made sense of democracy as a process of swift deliberate action in certain scenarios. It was in relation to a disciplinary issue with a parent. Chairperson B admitted that she already knew what outcome she wanted from the BOM meeting regarding the matter as her

experience had taught her how to deal with the situation. She described how she believed that the situation in her eyes did not warrant a vote or a consensus but action from her and the principal. However, she did feel the need to hear all voices at the BOM meeting and let all members contribute to the discussion. This was futile as the decision of how to proceed had already been made. It was the experience and skill set of Chairperson B that led them to acting this way and reaffirms Rhodes (2000) contribution that the skills-based approach to governance has a democratic deficit as Chairperson B thought that the other members were not skilled or experienced enough to deal with her situation appropriately. Within this situation it was clear that the sensemaking by the chairperson was completed in isolation (Shilon & Schechter, 2016) with little consultation afforded to the other BOM members. This also highlights the tension between the capacity of the other members as individuals and the involvement of the stakeholders in the governance of schools as Connolly & James (2011) noted in their literature. This approach also reflects the Klein et al. (2010) typology of team sensemaking. In this instance, the chairperson's actions align with what Klein et al. (2010) describe as hierarchical sensemaking. The leader functions as the focal point for receiving, interpreting, and communicating information to other members. Haddad (2019) notes that such forms of sensemaking are often enabled where other members lack specific skills or expertise. In this situation, Chairperson A engaged in sensegiving by dominating the meeting and providing contextual framing for others, consistent with Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) description of sensegiving as "the process of attempting to influence how other people construct meaning toward a preferred redefinition of organisational reality" (p. 442). This illustrates how a skills-based model of governance may risk becoming undemocratic when those perceived to possess the requisite expertise exert disproportionate influence, potentially limiting consultation with those most affected by decisions.

In relation to Principal D, it was clear from his interview that he made sense of his role as to effectively "direct the board" by himself and this opinion presented itself by him noting that the

other members saw him as the school principal to the BOM and not in the position of secretary. Having this perception of his role allowed him make sense of his position and this played out in numerous undemocratic ways, for example, drawing up the agenda for BOM meeting independently without the chairperson's assistance. His dynamic highlights a tension where the principal's perceived executive authority, his internal advocacy conflicts with the board's democratic oversight function. Furthermore, it was clear from the data that the chairperson and principal were fully aware of their responsibilities in executing their responsibilities. It was left up to Principal D to keep the other members aware of governance procedures and what needed BOM approval and. Such a scenario is detrimental to school performance according to Goodman and Zimmermann (2000) and in stark contrast to how Backman & Woods (2007) view democratic governance. They note that an issue that can arise from undemocratic governance is conflict. However, within School D there was no evidence presented of conflict. The interviewees maintained that "it works for them." This lack of conflict could be because of a lack of expertise and skills of the other BOM members who are unaware that the principal may be overstepping his authority in relation to school governance. Furthermore, Backman and Woods (2007) also note that successful governance by BOM members is present when the members bring a wealth of experience and expertise to their roles and have a clear and shared understanding of their responsibilities and duties. It was Doherty and Hoye (2011) who noted that board members are likely to experience role ambiguity due to conflicting role expectations about governance tasks but this did not present itself in the data. It was very clear that there was no role conflict present in relation to role expectation from either the principal or chairperson.

The tensions and vulnerabilities identified were; the lack of diverse representation, the dominance of hierarchical sensemaking, and the conflict between oversight and executive efficiency. These illuminate critical areas for democratic renewal and reform. The findings suggest that democracy in governance is not a fixed construct but is actively shaped by context and individual interpretation.

For renewal to occur, governing bodies must address the practical failures in achieving diversity as demonstrated by Chairpersons A and B. Furthermore, the overreliance on experienced individuals, such as in Chairperson B's isolated decision-making, necessitates some governance reform to ensure that participatory opportunities are not merely performative but result in genuine deliberation and collective decision-making. The model of team sensemaking adopted by Chairperson D offers one path for renewal. It can demonstrate how shared values provide a foundation for inclusive decision-making, even amid complexity.

Finally, the dynamic in School D, where Principal D directed the BOM to make a particular decision and in doing so demonstrated an overstep of his role authority notwithstanding the lack of expertise of the other members of the board, points to the need for role clarity and capacity building for all BOM members. It highlights that the democratic oversight function of the board will remain vulnerable to executive dominance. This can lead to a situation whereby the flawed arrangement "works for them" in the short term but fundamentally compromises democratic principles.

## 5.4 Leadership

Role theory posits the view that roles can be defined by the expectations placed upon them. The findings from the data reveal a clear distinction between the role of the principal as outlined in official documents and the one that is enacted. For example, many of the principals who participated revealed that some role conflict and role ambiguity due to was the result of their having to act as secretary to the board. This shows the direct role strain experienced by school leaders whose managerial tasks are constantly encroaching upon their strategic function. Principal D described her clarity regarding her role as “somewhat paradoxical,” reflecting ongoing tensions identified in the literature concerning the unclear delimitation of tasks among professional school leaders (Hangartner & Svaton, 2014; Leechman et al., 2019). She noted that this ambiguity could at times be interpreted by others as overstepping role boundaries. While this study draws on international literature to frame such boundary issues, the way these tensions are enacted at local level highlights a critical consideration regarding support structures. In particular, the findings raise questions about the extent to which targeted training or professional support might mitigate role ambiguity and the associated role strain.

Principal D provided a clear example of role ambiguity on behalf of the chairperson when he noted that there were times when he would need to step in and inform the chairperson that it was their role to do “such and such”. This lack of clarity, as perceived by the chairperson, is to be cautioned against. Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) highlighted the need for role clarity in relation to executing responsibilities for effective school governance and effective performance. This form of role ambiguity is explained by Doherty and Hoye (2011) who note that board members experience role ambiguity because they face conflicting role expectations about their governance tasks. This tension presents as an example of boundary conflict, where the lack of clarity regarding the chairperson's role often forces the principal to overstep the mark. This was evident from the data when Principal D had to instruct the chairperson on their basic role responsibilities.

This conflict is exemplified by the actions of Chairperson C. When leading curriculum change became an issue to be addressed, he didn't want to step on the principal's toes and get involved in the curriculum aspect of leading. On this occasion little or no leadership was taking place from the chairperson in relation to curriculum. He admitted that his lack of educational background knowledge hampered him in this aspect of decision making. However, he robustly defended his approach and acknowledged that the principal was well experienced in leading this change.

Sensemaking is vital at this juncture in understanding how these school leaders navigate this ambiguity: sensemaking is triggered by ambiguous events or situation where uncertainty exists Weick and Sutcliffe (2007). Principal C made sense of his role as the dominant voice on the BOM mainly due to his experience and credit built up as being an experienced principal. This aligns with the literature on the values drift put forward by Wilkins and Gobby (2020) with Principal C modelling his role on the Chief Executive Officer role (Gobby, 2013). This behaviour presented can be viewed as a sensemaking response to the situation and in turn presented him with the opportunity to sensegive to the BOM members over time. However, this singular dominant approach contrasts sharply with the relational model of shared leadership observed in School A.

Good school governance requires strong leadership from two main actors namely the chairperson and the school principal (Leechman et al., 2019). This relationship approach put forward by Leechman (2019) was not seen in every school selected for this study, but did come to the fore in School A. Chairperson A described himself as a hands-on leader within the school and "yes, as a possible leader". He was clear in his role that it would not be good enough for him to "just show up" to meetings. This clear hands-on leadership approach taken by Chairperson A has a lot to do with the size and context of the school. In order for the chairperson and principal of School A, to function as leaders, constant communication was required between them. This sense of leadership from Chairperson A has come from his educational background

and from serving on various BOMs over many years. He noted that he was acutely aware that the relationship that is cultivated between both the principal and the chairperson is vital in providing both excellent teaching and learning and good governance. This opinion aligns with the assertion that the relationship between both the chairperson and the principal is by far the most important relationship within the governance structure of the school (Leechmans, 2019).

Developing this point further, Chairperson A described himself as “proactive” and “another resource” for the principal. This view of himself as a resource is critical. Even though he is well experienced, he still does not view himself as a “critical friend”, willing to hold the principal to account. This position does not resonate with Leachman’s (2019) view of the role of the chairperson and principal. Chairperson A’s account provides an empirical illustration of the sensemaking processes, described by Murphy and Devine (2023) in how prior experience and context inform leadership practice. It was important for Chairperson A that all stakeholders within the school viewed her as a proactive leader - someone who was always on top of things. She did, however, attempt to make sense of the role. She often considered the burden of accountability placed upon her and the growing pressures and responsibilities that she as leader. Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2016) note that this is an example of the intersection of the internal goals and the external demands that are placed on school leaders. Furthermore, it can challenge common practices and challenge the status quo according to (Knapp & Feldman, 2012). Saltrick (2010) would note that being effective in the role requires school leaders to make sense of their leadership. It is clear from Chairperson A’s responses that she is aligning her thought processes to attempt create a more holistic picture of this ambiguity that she finds herself in (Weick, 1995).

In a different context, Chairperson C expressed confidence in the teaching principal’s leadership, noting that she, the principal, had a “good handle on things” and that he, the chairperson, did not feel the need to “interfere.” While he was not involved in the day-to-day operational decision making, his account conveyed a strong personal commitment to the school.

This commitment was closely tied in to his longstanding connection to the local community – he attended the school, himself, and later sent his own children there. Such embeddedness within the school community reflects a core premise of the stakeholder model of governance, which emphasises governance by those with a direct and sustained interest in the institution (Connolly et al., 2017).

## **5.5 Autonomy**

The findings of the study indicate that some principals experienced autonomy as a negotiated space rather than as a fixed position. All principals described some degree of role ambiguity regarding where their influence ended, and the authority of the BOM began. This reflects the view of the wider literature which highlights the complexity of autonomy in practice and the ways in which school culture and modes of control shape how it is enacted (Cheng et al., 2016). Consistent with Salokangas and Wermke (2020), the data also suggest that autonomy varies according to school context.

While the literature associates increased autonomy for school leaders with potential tensions and the erosion of democratic values (Boyask, 2018), such tensions were not evident in the data. Instead, greater autonomy was more prominent in smaller school settings, where shared understandings and trust had developed over time. This was particularly evident in the relationship between Principal C and Chairperson C, where there was a clear mutual understanding regarding the extent of the principal's autonomy. Principal C described having full autonomy in relation to in-school decision-making alongside the in-school management team. This interpretation reflects sensemaking processes in which autonomy is constructed through available interpretive resources and social interaction (Coburn, 2001), supported by ongoing dialogue and trust between board members and the chairperson, as also noted by Hill (2001).

However, Principal A admitted that she was aware of the checks and balances in place and how this can curtail her autonomy. She did not have free reign to act as she liked with significant safeguards in place. This view of autonomy suggests that in this situation the principal is working with “controlled autonomy” as described by (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017, p. 335) rather than having complete autonomy as in the case of Principal C.

One such safeguard highlighted by Principal A was the role of the teacher nominee on the BOM. Principal A noted that the presence of a fellow colleague reminds her of her role and place, and she feels that this is excellent in safeguarding a school against malpractice from an over autonomic leadership. This point is critical. Within the stakeholder model of governance, the teacher nominee may be the only other member of the BOM who has the appropriate skills / expertise to hold the principal to account. How the principal regarded their role is important. This is a point that Connolly et al. (2017) highlight when they put forward the notion that some bodies constructed under the stakeholder model struggle to fulfil their responsibilities such as calling the headteacher to account. This finding raises a key discussion point through the lens of role theory. The principal’s statement that the teacher nominee “reminds me of my role and place” suggests that the presence of the teacher nominee on the BOM provides significant role clarity to the principal to maintain an accountable leadership style within the constraints of the structure of the BOM.

Furthermore, this interaction can be viewed as also using the framework of sensemaking. The principal's choice to interpret the teacher nominee's presence as a "safeguard" against malpractice, is an act of retrospective sensemaking. This interpretation of the nominee's enactment of the role shapes how the principal defines and structures their own actions and authority, thus the principal makes sense of the role of the nominee not as a threat, but as a necessary check on his perception of his role. This situation may result in more accountable behaviour on the part of the principal and may also strengthen the legitimacy of their leadership.

Another safeguard against over autonomic practices within the School A is the experience and influence of the chairperson. Chairperson A has vast experience within the education sector and had served on numerous BOMs previously. Chairperson A had definite role clarity in relation to their role as chair and was keen to fulfil these duties. The educational experience and expertise of Chairperson A can directly influence the overall effectiveness of the school in question and holding school leaders to account. In encouraging school councils to become more effective in their work this can lead to them having a greater role in terms of oversight. This is something Blackmore et al. (2023) allude to in their literature. This study observed a direct relationship, evidenced by a key interview finding where Principal B noted that due to the expertise and experience Chairperson B had in education proposals and decisions made were interrogated much more rigorously. This finding is congruent with the assertions of Blackmore et al. (2023) with regards to the positive influence of educational expertise and experience on board efficacy. This further raises the discussion that role clarity, as presented by Chairperson A, may be a significant factor that allows the positive influence of prior knowledge to be fully leveraged. This suggests a need to focus on induction and training for board members in becoming more effective in their governance roles.

Principals' sensemaking of their autonomy within their role is a complex process. It is shaped by both external and internal factors. Principal A noted the "checks and balances" in their role, and this highlights a nuanced understanding of autonomy in leadership. Principal A acknowledged that they had significant autonomy in the day-to-day decision making in the school, but it was not absolute as certain safeguards guarded against this. This view put forward aligns with the literature on sensemaking which suggests that school leaders are undertaking a complex role and are having to deal with the pressures of their environment. Specifically Principal A referred to the teacher nominee on the BOM as a safeguard which demonstrates a strategic form of sensemaking. By framing the presence of a colleague as a reminder of his role as principal and a protection against "malpractice from over autonomic leadership" this shows

how Principal A is not only reacting to a structural constraint but is interpreting and giving meaning to it. In this instance of sensemaking the school leaders take in information and emphasise certain meanings over others.

It is clear from the data that Principal A is shaping their own understanding of the role, and that these safeguards are essential to the effective operation of the school. He does not view them as restrictive to his leadership practices. This interpretation by Principal A reinforces the notion that leaders' sensemaking is not just an individual process but can be viewed as a social process also, something that concurs with Koyama (2014). This process is thus influenced by the organisational context and culture.

This finding provides direct empirical support for the work proposed by Spillane and Anderson (2014) and Rigby (2015), who argue that leaders engage in their own sensemaking about what to do, and Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2017), who emphasise the leader's role in shaping opportunities for staff to come together to undertake collaborative sensemaking. The data that has been presented clearly shows that Principal A's experience serves as a powerful illustration of how leaders negotiate the complexities of their role by actively constructing and communicating a specific meaning of their autonomy within the school.

During the interviews Principal C, who is a teaching principal of a medium sized school, referred to the fact that issues that come across his desk tend to be minor and in that he was able to deal with "99% of them". He exhibited role clarity in the fact that he had full autonomy in the decision making as long as he informed the BOM of those decisions. Principal C argued against a tightening of his autonomy and felt that being "micro-managed" would be counterproductive to the school and his ability to manage it effectively. This view expressed by Principal C echoes that put forward by Klien (2017), and a point emphasised by Principal C, who felt that the greater autonomy afforded to him the ability to maintain high standards in the school. This point was reiterated by Principal A whose viewpoint echoes the consensus found

in Gobby (2013). This highlights the importance of reducing inefficiencies that can come from a more hierarchical approach to governance. Principal A noted how within the current system she had the autonomy to purchase certain items without the burden of procurement issues or seeking approval from BOM members. This approach she believed made her more flexible and adaptable thus providing a better standard of education to the pupils within his school. However, this lived experience does stand in tension with both Skerrit (2019) and Smyth (2011) having warned that there can still be a lack of evidence connecting greater autonomy and academic success, with Smyth (2011) referring to it as a “process of deception” (p.99).

The idea of the Goldilocks Dilemma in relation to autonomy for Principals (Peck & Lewis-Durham, 2021) came through at certain points also. Principal A acknowledged the importance of the relationship between herself and the chairperson in relation to a significant building project that was being undertaken. On the one hand, they were all for being autonomic, but when a significant project presented itself, they relied on the support of the chairperson and other BOM members to assist. She believed that she needed the support of the chairperson and the teacher nominee to sell the idea to the rest of the BOM members.

It is evident that Chairpersons B’s sensemaking of the autonomy afforded to a principal was heavily influenced by her previous experiences of BOMs. This has led her to believe that “far too much leeway” afforded to principals was to be guarded against. From a role theory perspective, her view highlights the importance of role clarity in relation to school governance. During the interview she noted that the ambiguous boundaries led to a situation where the principal overstepped the mark continually in relation to recruitment and staffing issues and regularly operated outside of their authority. This situation mentioned by Chairperson B aligns with the literature from Cobbold (2014) informing us that it is important to establish the correct conditions for school leaders to address the requirements of their schools at a local level, but Chairperson B knows where to draw the line. This personal insight aligns with the literatures

critical view of increased autonomy which has shown to promote toxic leadership (Craig, 2017) and a hegemonic culture (Keddie et al., 2020) something that the data show that Chairperson B is guarding against. This caution expressed by Chairperson B provides a lived illustration of concerns raised in the literature regarding contexts in which school leader autonomy operates with limited accountability to BOMs. Such “hands-off” approaches to governance - often framed as cultures of trust - can, in some circumstances, undermine effective governance and contribute to the erosion of democratic practice at board level.

Conversely, Principal C made sense of his autonomy, by taking the view that within his smaller school context, being micromanaged would be counterproductive. His perception of autonomy is consistent with that of Gobby (2013) who voices the benefits of decentralisation and local decision making like that of Brennan (2011) who previously argued that through greater autonomy the stakeholders are freed from endless bureaucracy and can be more responsive to the local needs of the school. Principal C makes sense of his role in this manner as a direct enactment of the belief that the decision-making power should be with those who have the most knowledge of the school (Klein, 2017). The power dynamic between the professional school leader and the lay BOM chairperson is unbalanced and the type of strong leadership, proposed by Bush and Gamage (2001), is absent. However, Bush and Gamage (2001) contend that with this unbalanced hold on conflict can arise but in the context of School C it was not evident and the fact that the principal has a high degree of autonomy did not lead to role conflict or role stress.

The relationship between the dynamic of Principal A and Chairperson A and their sensemaking processes regarding autonomy strongly suggests a network governance typology. During the interviews they both highlighted the communication and meetings that they regularly have in order to prepare for meetings and make decisions. This brought with it, what Gilchrist (2009) would describe as, a sense of collective responsibility and a shared purpose: a dual sense of

empowerment. Principal A's perception that the role of the principal being unclear and poorly defined provides empirical grounding for the academic conversation regarding how unclear delimitations of tasks between professional school leaders and volunteers supervising bodies exists (Hangartner & Svaton, 2014; Leechman et al., 2019).

The various ways the principals make sense of this ambiguity and fulfil their role, and in some case role discretion, shows how complex autonomy can be in practice. The findings of this research add nuance to the more critical views of autonomy found in the literature. Skerrit (2019) noted that increased autonomy can lead to a more rigorous performativity regime. The context of this research shows that principals exercise a degree of role discretion, and this is often driven by a sense of caution and self-protection. Principal B, a less experienced principal, made sense of her autonomy by asking the BOM to sign off on issues that "they probably didn't need to" protecting herself against potential issues that may emerge in the future. This suggests that Principal B would align more with a skills-based model of governance as she would be willing to be guided more by the BOM.

Chairperson A did not feel that she had a sense of autonomy in relation to her role. She was continually referring to guidelines and the LAOS document and was clear in her mind that to protect the school and her position she was expected to follow the processes and procedures laid out by the department. This did provide her with a role clarity. She noted that it protected her against role conflict as she believed that her role was clearly defined. Furthermore, Chairperson A was quick to stress that in relation to a lot of the conversation about governance school context was important and, due to the size of her school, she believed that she and the BOM were duty bound to follow the guidelines laid out in the official circulars. She noted that in relation to HR and financial issues there was little scope for autonomy. She contended that her experience had shown her that these were the issues that can cause friction within a school. Concern was also voiced in relation to how HR issues are dealt with in Irish schools.

This contrasts with how organisations within the private sector have dedicated HR teams to deal with staffing issues.

## **5.6 Sustainability of the Current Governance Model**

To assess the sustainability of the Irish primary school governance model, it is essential to first contextualise the big-ticket issues currently debated at the national level. Questions regarding the sustainability of the current governance model as articulated by the Chief Inspector (DES, 2022), and from research findings from major education stakeholders such as the IPPN and INTO highlight challenges that place increasing administrative burdens on BOMs. This analysis points to a resulting difficulty in recruiting qualified members.

Analysis of the data indicates that there is a strong commitment to preserving local control of primary schools. Participants in the study emphasised that the current governance structure best supports direct accountability to the local community, enables context-specific curricular decision-making, and allows schools to respond to local needs. This is in tune with the arguments advanced by Brennan (2011). The data further contends that maintaining a local stakeholder model of governance helps to ensure that decisions remain by the board can be considered as child-centred rather than driven primarily by financial or other considerations.

The effectiveness of the current governance model hinges upon role identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) and a commitment to the role. Chairperson D noted that “I take pride in the fact that I serve on the board as chair... and I don’t underestimate the responsibility I have to the local community”. This undoubtedly displays a high internalisation of role identity in line with that of the opinion put forward by (Burke & Tully, 1977). Clearly, this form of role identity contributes to a deep personal motivation and commitment. It can be considered as a replacement to other forms of motivation. These motivations are usually financial or career progression which are generally associated with other types of governance models. It is also

clear from this admission by Chairperson D that there has been a significant amount of thought put into how they define and shape their role, one that Stryker (2007) highlights in the literature.

This strong identity is linked directly to the local accountability. Chairperson D highlighted that while the school can be accountable to both the patron and the Department of Education and Youth “it is the people here who we are interacting with everyday are looking at us”. This issue of local accountability was something that Chairperson B brought up also and it was in her role as chairperson that it was imperative that there was transparency. She did not wish for the local community to get the impression that the BOM was functioning in a non-transparent fashion. Furthermore, it shows how the current model, in the Irish context, displays the horizontal form of accountability that was voiced by Brennan (2011). She had role clarity in relation to her role of chairperson, and she noted that she was not there to undermine the principal, but to support them. Bush and Busch, (1981) have identified this role clarity when an individual has a certainty regarding the expectations surrounding their role. This perception that within the context of School D the Chairperson highlights the primary accountability mechanism is social and local first and foremost with systemic accountability second. This local aspect to governance drives a sense of continued engagement and ensures that decisions made at BOM level are validated regularly by local expectations. Additionally, the current structure promotes ownership among both school leaders and staff who may not have a formal leadership role. Teacher Nominee A spoke of “a sense of ownership of the school... with a seat at the table”. This presents a situation whereby the current governance structure facilitates and reinforces the professional identity of the teacher: it involves them in the strategic governance of the school. This perspective goes further than the view put forward by James et al. (2010) who noted that staff board members make a mixed contribution to the work of a BOM. Whilst James et al. (2010) noted that staff nominees can provide useful knowledge and insights.

Within the literature role ambiguity and a lack of role clarity is viewed as a negative consequence that leads to inefficiencies within schools. However, within certain contexts

explored for this research, this ambiguity was leveraged to provide for organisational flexibility through an expansion of roles of roles which in some case provided for a smoother more functional organisation. Within School C there did present a situation of role ambiguity and a lack of clarity in relation to the roles of the principal and the chairperson. Principal C admitted to opening correspondences that had been addressed to the chairperson and it was clear that the principal had a significant amount of control in relation to the running of the BOM. This was explained by Principal C as having autonomy however, it is an issue that has been clearly warned against by James et al. (2010) in the literature. Within School C the BOM were happy to place a significant amount of trust in the principal to keep them informed of any significant issues that were to arise with Chairperson C explaining that the principal had a good handle on things. This situation does contribute to the main debates around the stakeholder model of governance according to Connolly et al. (2017) who question whether this stakeholder approach to governance enables a governing body to govern effectively.

The strength of the current model is in that actors such as the principal can have the latitude to adapt and expand their roles and act as needed. Principal A highlighted the latitude that they were afforded in relation to procurement, "I can go and buy something that is needed... quickly enough". They did note that that they would inform the chairperson and the treasurer but would ultimately avoid the red tape and "procurement process and reams of forms" that other rigid governance models promote. Likewise Principal C outlined a situation where first aid training was required for staff and how after "about four phone calls ... it was done, didn't have to arrange a meeting or anything like that very quick and responsive." This in turn demonstrates that local sensemaking allows the school to be highly flexible and responsive to time sensitive situations which in turn directly contributes to positive student experiences. Such routines and structures are according to Coburn (2005) the result of how school leaders choose, interpret and act upon the information within the environment that they are in.

Organisational resilience and functionality depend on the capacity to improvise at local level, particularly in sustaining services, as noted by Dick (2011). Chairperson B characterised flexible stakeholder governance as the ability to “negotiate all of these” issues, highlighting how the current governance model prioritises context-specific problem-solving over strict procedural adherence. Such adaptability was understood as consequential for practice and, ultimately, for student outcomes.

Furthermore, the local stakeholder model according to Principal C enhances accountability in relation to the management of the school. They remarked that “because locals are around the table” it would be very hard for me to pull the wool over their eyes.” The frequent input from local people ensures that the expanded role of the principal is balanced by regular and transparent oversight, which is something that contradicts Connelly et al’s. (2017) opinion that a less localised and more skills-based model would ensure a more robust governance structure.

The sustainability of the Irish governance model is complicated by the need to navigate competing accountability demands. BOM members operate within a multilevel governance structure in which they are accountable to the local community, the patron, and the Department of Education, creating ongoing tensions and structural role conflict. Participants described operating within a web of competing expectations, reflecting the challenge of responding simultaneously to multiple accountability relationships.

The findings suggest that BOM members often resolve these tensions by prioritising school ethos as a guiding framework. Chairperson B reflected that if governance were exercised “from afar,” decisions would likely be driven primarily by financial considerations, whereas local governance enabled decisions to be made in the best interests of the child. This illustrates how ethos functions as a key sensemaking resource through which BOMs navigate systemic complexity, privileging horizontal accountability to the child and community over purely financial or procedural logics.

The issues of role strain arose during the interviews. Chairperson A admitted to having significant role stress due to the financial oversight placed on the BOM. This underscores that for the BOM to function in its current guise, there is the need to rely on volunteers to take on significant risk. Furthermore, these external pressures placed on school leaders (Knapp & Feldman, 2012) require the chairperson to make sense of their role (Saltrick, 2010).

Sensemaking provides people with the opportunity to create their own understanding of situations by joining new information with their past knowledge and beliefs that are developed from the social contexts they were in. (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016) The local stakeholder model of governance ensures that the BOM members are frequently exposed to cues from the social environment as Chairperson D noted “the people here who we are interacting with every day,” This means that the members are always monitoring the current situation and making sense of the social interactions. This constant exposure enables the BOM members to construct a reality that is aligned with the requirements of the immediate context. Chairperson D admitted that the “local input keeps me on my toes.” This community engagement acts as bottom-up accountability where the BOM members regularly review and try to make sense of how they are operating or “keeping the ship pointed in the right direction” as Chairperson D pointed out.

Operational transparency was highlighted by Principal C as a key advantage of the local stakeholder model of governance. In describing BOM processes, he remarked, “just look who sits around the board table,” emphasising the openness with which data were shared and discussed. Such practices reflect sensegiving, consistent with Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) conceptualisation of leaders shaping how others interpret organisational issues.

Principal A provided a further example of sensegiving in practice, describing BOM discussions concerning end-of-year spelling test results. During this period, the principal explained, within an open and collegial setting, the reasons why scores were lower than in previous years. This prompted a collective discussion about how the issue might be addressed. This illustrates what

Fullan (2014) describes as the use of sensemaking as a leadership practice to support school improvement.

This approach is also consistent with guidance outlined in the Governance Manual for Primary Schools (2023–2027), which emphasises the BOM’s responsibility to ensure that schools are managed in ways that serve the pupils’ best interests. The scenario further illustrates the distinction between sensemaking and sensegiving: while sensemaking involves interpreting and justifying situations, sensegiving refers to the communication and diffusion of those interpretations within the organisation (Green Jr, 2004). In this case, the principal engaged in sensemaking with the BOM, while BOM members subsequently undertook sensegiving. This resulted in what Balogun et al. (2014) describe as a successful sensegiving process

Ultimately, a complex notion of sustainability emerged from these multiple perspectives. The model's endurance is not found in the strength of its national structural compliance, but in the highly personal commitment and adaptive local sensemaking demonstrated by actors. Chairperson D and Principal C bypass those very structural flaws. The model remains viable only because the horizontal accountability fostered by local engagement provides the necessary motivational substitute for professional governance rewards, effectively sustaining the system despite the significant burdens on volunteerism and risk.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Revisiting the Research Question**

This study examined the lived experiences of governance in Irish primary schools, with particular attention to how BOM members perceive, understand, enact, and make sense of their roles. This concluding chapter synthesises the study's key findings and articulates its contribution to existing knowledge, drawing together the historical context, theoretical frameworks, and qualitative evidence presented across the thesis.

The central research question asked:

What are the perceptions, role enactments, and sensemaking processes of Chairpersons, Principals, and Teacher Nominees on Boards of Management within the Irish primary education system?

Situated within Ireland's distinctive governance tradition - shaped by ecclesiastical control, statutory patronage, and a highly centralised system - this study demonstrates how school governance is enacted within a contemporary context marked by increasing diversity, secularisation, and heightened accountability demands. While the Irish stakeholder model contrasts with more professionalised governance systems in other Anglophone contexts, its internal dynamics have remained under-examined despite ongoing debates about reform.

The central argument advanced is that Irish primary school governance cannot be understood solely through formal structures or policy frameworks. Rather, it operates as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process of negotiated practice. Governance roles are not simply enacted but are continuously interpreted, contested, and adapted through sensemaking as actors respond to role ambiguity, conflict, and strain.

The durability of the governance model lies less in its formal design than in the flexible and often informal ways volunteers work together to sustain it (James et al., 2010). This chapter

concludes by outlining the study's contributions to knowledge, considering implications for policy and practice, and identifying directions for future research.

## **6.2 Theorising Governance Through Role Theory and Sensemaking**

This study makes several distinct contributions to knowledge. By integrating role theory and sensemaking, it offers a novel conceptual lens for examining the roles of school BOM members. It also provides a contemporary account of the lived experiences of key governance actors in Ireland at a critical moment of potential change, alongside a methodological approach suited to capturing the realities of their work.

### ***6.2.1 Theoretical Contribution: A View of Local-Level Governance***

The existing literature on educational governance categorises systems into broad typologies. These typologies can be invaluable for making comparisons on a large scale, but often they can fail to provide insight into the relationships that play out within specific and localised BOMs. Furthermore, it also fails to draw on the voices of key actors within the system.

This research moves beyond these established typologies by employing a dual conceptual framework of role theory and sensemaking. This approach provides a new and rich way to investigate the realities and lived experiences of school governance in Ireland.

This framework shows how concepts like role ambiguity, role conflict, and role strain are played out as tangible, lived realities for BOM members. For example, the ongoing “fuzzy line” that exists between the strategic oversight of the BOM and the operational management of the school creates a state of role ambiguity that is constantly being negotiated by all parties. Furthermore, the clear struggle of the teacher nominee to negotiate their formal function as a BOM member and their informal role as a staff member is a clear example of role conflict that has been presented. The findings show that this conflict is negotiated using sensemaking methods, such as strategic silence in BOM meetings to disguise their lack of preparation for the

more formal aspect of their role. This provides them with the balance to undertake their voluntary role whilst also completing their job as a class teacher.

Crucially, sensemaking theory explains how these actors navigate the tensions that can arise. Instead of just being passive recipients of their roles, they are active agents. For example, experienced principals reframed the concept of accountability. They shifted it from a hierarchical to relational keeping their own BOM informed of what was happening in the school. This sensemaking approach enables them to keep a certain degree of professional autonomy. Consequently, this theoretical contribution shifts governance research away from structural to a dynamic role interpretation of BOM members.

The findings show that governance is enacted primarily through informal interactions, trust-building practices, and sensemaking dialogues rather than through formal rule adherence alone. This has relevance for volunteer-based governance systems, in which relational influence is central to how authority is exercised.

### ***6.2.2 Empirical Contribution: Voicing Lived Experiences***

This study is novel due to its in-depth, qualitative account of the perceptions and lived experiences of the chairperson, principal and teacher nominee triad in the contemporary Irish primary school context. By focusing the research on this group, the research highlights critical, real-life challenges and tensions that are often absent from high-level national policy discourse.

One of the most significant findings is the exposure of the democratic deficit in practice; despite the stakeholder model's intent. Chairpersons in diverse urban schools openly acknowledged that their BOMs were not a fair representation of the school community and highlights a systemic failure to achieve inclusive governance within the Irish system.

A significant finding emerged from the data regarding role ambiguity and subsequent role strain associated with this. This was particularly evident in the governance of smaller schools. This role strain was associated with the relative inexperience of the chairperson of the BOM. In

contexts where the chairperson lacked specific educational governance / leadership experience or expertise, the school principal reported assuming the duties that were assigned to the chair. This hand over of responsibility was justified by one chairperson as they viewed their role to help and support the principal. In some contexts, it was justified as “it works for us here” but in other cases it led to role strain as the extra responsibility often added to the workload of the principal. This dynamic was not universally perceived as negative with some principals reporting that the reduced oversight from the chairperson afforded a greater degree of professional responsibility. This allowed them to be more flexible in their decision-making.

It was identified that profound role strain experienced by teacher nominees. They are regularly having to negotiate an uncompensated workload of being a BOM member. They reported some the conflict between their role as employee and their governance role.

Another crucial empirical contribution is the revelation of the BOMs function as a mechanism for role protection. The study found that principals can use the BOM as a "buffer" to legitimise difficult or unpopular decisions. Examples such as class splits, disciplinary actions or human resource issues were all provided. By securing the BOM's formal sign-off on such decisions, the principal can present a decision made to be a collective one. This then dilutes any personal and professional risk and deflecting potential "kickback from some parents". There is now a reframing of the BOM not just as an oversight body, but as a vital tool for the principal in managing the complex relational and political environment of the school.

### ***6.2.3 Methodological Contribution: The Power of Qualitative Inquiry***

The qualitative case study design enabled an in-depth examination of the relational and interpretive dynamics of school governance in Irish primary schools. Through semi-structured interviews, the study captured how participants understood and justified their actions, providing insight into the reasoning and sensemaking processes that underpin governance practice. This approach was particularly effective in accessing complex and sometimes contradictory

accounts, such as participants' simultaneous commitment to the ideal of local governance alongside their frustration with its practical demands. In doing so, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry for illuminating how governance is experienced, negotiated, and enacted in practice. This methodological approach therefore offers a valuable template for future research seeking to examine governance as a lived and relational practice.

### **6.3 Significance and Implications for Practice and Reform**

This section considers the implications of the findings for practice and governance reform within the Irish primary education system. It translates the research into actionable insights for school leaders, patron bodies, and the Department of Education and Youth, particularly in the context of the forthcoming Convention on Education. The section challenges prevailing assumptions at system level and points towards a more informed and nuanced approach to governance reform in Ireland.

#### ***6.3.1 For School Leaders (Principals & Chairpersons): The Importance of Trust***

The most important implication for school leaders is that of the quality and effectiveness of the principal-chairperson relationship is the cornerstone of the entire governance model. Within the contexts of small rural school's role ambiguity can be used by school leaders as a source of organisational flexibility and responsiveness. This was evident in cases where principals and chairpersons could make time sensitive decisions on procurement or arrange urgent staff training without having to wait for BOM meetings to have it passed. They were confident in their shared understanding of what needed to be done to manage and govern their schools. This shared understanding was often arrived at, due to the inexperience of the chairperson who was willing to be guided by the school principal. On the other hand, where trust is lower or roles are more rigidly contested, the system is prone to inefficiency, friction, and heightened stress for all involved.

This suggests that the primary work of effective governance is relational rather than procedural. Time and effort invested in building a strong working relationship between the chairperson and the principal is vital. This is achieved through regular communication and the early clarification of roles and responsibilities. Establishing shared expectations from the outset is central to the effective functioning of a BOM. As one experienced chairperson noted, the initial meeting with the principal was their “most important”.

They explained that during this meeting they set out the working norms and their expectations. They noted that this set up an excellent relationship foundation, something that through their experience was imperative. This can change the focus of “good governance” from a set of policies and procedures to the creation of a professional and trusted relationship between the parties.

### ***6.3.2 For Patron Bodies and Management Associations: Addressing a Democratic Deficit.***

The findings will be of significant interest to patron bodies and management associations within the primary sector. There is clear evidence of the challenge between the core ideal of the stakeholder model being democratic, community based and representative and what is being played out in some contexts. This issue is most prominent in urban settings that are serving increasingly diverse communities. The challenge of recruiting representative BOM members from these diverse communities appears to be systemic.

The implication of this challenge is that a recruitment model for BOMs, which relies on existing school networks, appears incapable of achieving genuine democratic legitimacy. To address this challenge, patrons with system support can adopt a proactive stance. They can also develop specific strategies for outreach into underrepresented communities within their school catchment.

Furthermore, the study reveals critical experience and expertise gap among many volunteer members of BOMs. The finding that principals often must condense and pre-digest lengthy

policy documents and interpret them for the board in cases where other members of the board do not have a solid grounding in these matters. This highlights a fundamental weakness in the board's ability to perform its oversight function effectively. The significance of well-informed members who are competent and confident in their background in education policy and practice cannot be overstated. The BOM risks becoming a rubber stamp for the principal and this may undermine the very principle of distributed governance. Preventing this outcome, calls for a radical rethinking of induction and ongoing training, moving beyond procedural basics to equip members with the skills needed to analyse financial reports, critique policies, and contribute meaningfully to strategic discussion during BOM meetings.

### ***6.3.3 For the DEY: The Paradox of Flexibility and the Risk of Reform***

For the Department of Education and Youth and for policymakers more broadly, this study identifies a critical paradox. While the Irish education governance system relies heavily on volunteerism, Ó Beacháin (2019, p. 2) characterises the government of Ireland as “centralised to an extent almost unrivalled in a democracy”, with this concentration of power further “ringfenced by a weak legislature and feeble local government”. This degree of centralisation is evident in the central government's role in the governance of the school system in Ireland. However, in practice, central government has ‘little control over the management of national or secondary schools’ (Lee, 1989, p.129). The Irish governance system is heavily reliant on the clergy and volunteers. Both principals and chairpersons make sense of their roles in a way that allows them to be “nimble” and bypass perceived bureaucracy for the immediate advantage of their pupils and the school in general.

As a result, this presents a significant risk for top-down reform efforts. Internationally school governance has moved towards greater professionalisation, standardisation, with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities. However, the findings of this study suggest that imposing such reforms within the Irish context may prove to be counterproductive.

Any intention to impose standardised procedures other than those already in place may unintentionally erode the adaptable and flexible model that is currently in place. There is the risk that replacing a flexible, responsive local system with a more rigid and bureaucratic one would mean sacrificing the local responsiveness that all participants within this study noted that was the model's best feature.

Paradoxically, according to the participants, the system's strength is found in its anomalies rather than its functionalities. The role ambiguity and lack of rigid oversight are what enable the context-specific sensemaking and rapid decision-making to take place. This is what the participants view as important to its function and teaching and learning experience of the children. Any policy reform, therefore, must be balanced enough to enhance accountability and capacity without compromising local agency. This signals that an adoptive rather than a prescriptive system leadership is required.

## **6.4 A Change Agenda: Recommendations for a Sustainable Governance**

### **Model**

While the findings do not suggest the need for radical system reform, they highlight specific areas where targeted changes could strengthen the sustainability of Irish primary school governance. The recommendations that follow are intended to address identified challenges and support more effective governance practice.

#### ***6.4.1 For Patron Bodies: A Strategy for Diversity and Capacity Building***

It is recommended that patron bodies along with school management associations, develop and implement a proactive recruitment and induction strategy aimed at increasing the diversity and capacity of BOMs to reflect the communities they serve.

This recommendation emanates from the democratic deficit identified by participants in diverse urban schools. It was acknowledged that some BOMs were "not a fair representation of the

school community". The current reliance on passive recruitment through existing school networks is insufficient and does not help to overcome the socio-cultural and practical barriers that prevent wider participation in school governance. A proactive approach is vital for the BOM to maintain its legitimacy in an increasingly pluralistic Ireland.

This should include engagement with community groups that are not well represented on school BOMs. Furthermore, the ongoing training should be tailored to support all BOM members in the practicalities of school finances, understanding the importance of Circulars and policy implementation along with a clear outline of what the strategic supervision function of a BOM is. This should give all BOM members a clear understanding of the importance of their role in school governance. This approach should mitigate the role strain placed on some principals. This strain is often twofold: first, navigating the inherent demands of their own positions as school principal and secretary to the BOM. Second, bearing the de facto responsibility of guiding the BOM through its own decision making. By reinforcing the board's distinct governance functions, this intends to alleviate the significant pressures placed on principals such as managing the board's internal processes.

#### ***6.4.2 For the DEY: Recognising and Resourcing the Commitment of Volunteers***

It is recommended that the Department of Education formally recognise and resource the significant workload of voluntary BOM members, with a particular focus on the unique position of the Teacher Nominee.

This study has highlighted the role conflict and strain experienced by teacher nominees. It has been presented that they are often forced to balance their paid professional duties with their uncompensated governance role. The admission by one nominee, "I just don't have the time," is a clear warning about the sustainability of this position going forward. Failure to address this issue risks burnout that may contribute to a willingness of talented teachers to serve on a BOM. This undoubtedly will deprive BOMs going forward of essential professional insight.

One practical step would be to pilot a system of providing release time (i.e., substitute teacher cover) to allow Teacher Nominees dedicated hours to prepare for forthcoming BOM meetings. This would alleviate the pressure with preparing for BOM meetings. Furthermore, once the teacher nominee is allocated this time to prepare it will assist in the transition of passive observer to active participant, providing them with the power to contribute substantively thus increasing their sense of value.

#### ***6.4.3 For School Leadership Networks and Management Bodies: CPD in Relational Governance***

It is recommended that school leadership networks (such as the IPPN) and management bodies (such as the CPSMA) with support from the DEY design and deliver professional development programs focused specifically on navigating the principal-chairperson relationship.

The findings of this study demonstrate unequivocally that the success of school governance hinges on the quality of this relationship. The contrast between the "hands-on" and "hands-off" chairperson styles, and the principals' varying levels of comfort with autonomy, confirms that these critical leadership roles are actively negotiated. Such training should take place over numerous sessions.

This professional development should be experiential and collaborative. It should bring principals and chairpersons together for them to develop their relationship in a meaningful and productive way. Case studies drawn from real-world contexts such as those identified in this study's findings should be presented at workshops and discussed. This should be put in place to help participants develop practical strategies, such as negotiating role boundaries, building and maintaining trust, and managing the inherent ambiguity of their shared leadership. This would help equip them to more effectively identify and perform their roles, thus reducing the chances of role conflict or role strain.

## **6.5 Reflections and Future Horizons: Limitations and Avenues for New Research**

This final section outlines the limitations of the study and considers their implications for future research. In doing so, it clarifies the scope of the contribution and identifies areas where further investigation would be valuable.

### ***6.5.1 Acknowledgment of the Study's Boundaries***

It is imperative to highlight that the findings presented in this study are deeply embedded within their specific context. The scope of the study was intentionally bounded to a single patronage model (Catholic), within a defined geographical area (the Diocese of Meath). A qualitative methodology was employed to focus on the perspectives of a specific triad of actors. They were vital for achieving the study's aim of producing a rich, deep, and nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of governance within the Irish education system. These boundaries are therefore not weaknesses that undermine the findings. They are the very source of the study's depth and insight. The claims presented are not of universal truth or statistical generalisability. They do constitute a detailed, theoretically informed account of governance as it is practiced and made sense of in this context.

### ***6.5.2 Future Research Agenda: Exploring the "Blank Spots"***

The boundaries of this study naturally create "blind spots" that may provide the opportunity for future inquiry within this field. The following possibilities for new research would build directly upon the foundations laid by this thesis.

Given the complexity at a national level and its historical context of the approaches to governance that are evident in the work of Irish primary school BOMs outlined earlier in this study, and the international comparison studies of governance outlined by (Nguyen, 2025), there is a need for more school governance research particularly from a national perspective. Important aspects in such a comparative study to be addressed would be an in-depth

clarification of what perceptions are there of governance roles. Such a comparative study would be invaluable in understanding whether the dynamics of sensemaking, role theory, and relational trust identified here are unique to the traditional Catholic patronage model or are they a more universal feature of Irish school governance.

This qualitative study has identified role strain, particularly for teacher nominees and chairpersons in large schools, as a critical threat to the sustainability of the voluntary model. Given the findings presented in this thesis a national survey of BOM members should be conducted to quantify the extent to which this strain exists within the system. Such research could identify its key predictors (e.g. school size, DEIS status, years of experience, access to training) and assess its impact on the recruitment and retention of volunteers. This will undoubtedly provide the Department of Education and Youth along with patron bodies with robust data to inform policy on supporting BOMs going forward.

Interviews can offer a robust retrospective narrative of sensemaking; however, an ethnographic study that would include direct observation of BOM meetings would clearly document the process as it plays out in real-time. This would lend itself to a detailed examination of the subtle cues and power dynamics that play out during the moments of both consensus and conflict. Furthermore, specific moments of sensegiving by the leaders when they influence the board can be observed and recorded. This would change from figuring out how people see the role to seeing it in action.

## **6.6 Concluding Remarks: Negotiated Localism in Practice**

This study traced the evolution of Irish primary school governance from a system shaped by centralised ecclesiastical control to one characterised by local, stakeholder-led management. The findings suggest that despite persistent challenges associated with role strain, democratic tension, and systemic ambiguity, the sustainability of this governance model lies in its relational and locally enacted character. While many of the formal structures underpinning governance

were designed for a different historical context, the system continues to function through the everyday practices of those who inhabit it.

Rather than operating as a fixed or uniformly enacted structure, governance is sustained through ongoing processes of sensemaking, negotiation, and adaptation by chairpersons, principals, and teacher nominees. Through these processes, governance roles are interpreted and enacted in ways that respond to local conditions and perceived responsibilities to children and communities. The future of Irish primary school governance, therefore, is less likely to be secured through the adoption of externally derived structural models than through more deliberate support for the people who undertake this complex and contingent work of governance in practice.

# **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1: Interview Schedule**

### **Questions and Prompts**

#### **Introduction**

- **Welcome the participant.**
- **Explain the purpose of the interview.**
  - Governance
  - Role of BOM member
  - Their own experience & perspective
- **Explain the confidentiality of the interview.**

#### **Background**

- **In what capacity are you serving on the board of management?**
  - Principal?
  - Teacher?
  - Chairperson?
- **Ask participant to give brief overview of their experience within education and their connection to the school they serve.**
- **Why did you become involved in this role?**
- **How long have you been a member of the board of management?**

#### **Role of the participant**

- **What perceptions do you have in relation to your role as the chairperson / Principal / Teacher nominee of the board?**
- **Are you clear on what your role and responsibilities on a school board are? Can you elaborate?**

- Has conflict ever arisen due to members not having a clear understanding of their role?

Overstepping the mark?

Role ambiguity?

Skills?

- Who has informed you of what your specific responsibilities are?
- Do you feel comfortable in your role on the board of management?
- How do you navigate and balance the expectations and opinions of various board members? (Relationship with Principal, colleagues, parents, Patron)
- How do you approach conflicts within the board and facilitate consensus-building?

- In your role was there ever a time when you felt vulnerable or unsure of your role on the board? (Seek guidance?)

- Has this changed over time? How?

- Do you believe that as a board you represent your school community?

Ask back up question

Challenges associated

- What do you believe are the most important skills / qualifications needed to fulfil your role on a board of management?
- During a difficult time or time of turbulence within the school, how did you in your role as bring about stability and a resolution to a specific problem?

### **Sensemaking**

- How do you in your role on the board ensure that the decisions that are made are in the school's and children's best interest?

Prompts: Facts

Trust

Own skills

Intuition

Ethos of school

Experience

- How do you make sense of the diverse perspectives and opinions within the board when making strategic decisions?
- In what ways do you communicate with the other board members to align the board's vision with the school's objectives?  
Do you always feel involved in the decision process?  
Who do you believe is the decision maker on the board?
- Can you provide an example of a decision that was in your opinion a good decision and how do you make sense of how that decision was arrived at?  
Influence on board? Sense – giving  
Dominant role of member?
- Can you provide an example of a decision that in your opinion was bad decision and how do you make sense of how that decision was arrived at?  
Sense giving  
Reflection  
Could anything be done differently?
- How do you incorporate feedback and information from various stakeholders to inform your decisions regarding the school's direction?

### **Sustainability of Model**

- Do you think that the current governance structure in primary education is sustainable?
  - Why?
  - Why not?
- What works well in the current structure?
- What doesn't work well in the current structure?
- From your experience what improvements do you feel should be implemented to improve / sustain governance in primary school education?

## **Reflection**

- Reflecting your time on the board of management, what has been your biggest contribution to the governing of your school?
- On reflection, what would have done differently?
- What have you learned from your experience on the board of management?

Key Takeaway

## **Conclusion**

- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Thank the interviewee for their time and participation
- Explain the next steps of the research

## Appendix 2: Email correspondence with Diocesan Office

**Michael Buckley** <michaelbuckley1985@gmail.com>  
to education ▾

Dec 14, 2023, 12:04 PM ☆ 😊 ↩ ⋮

Dear Matt,

I hope this message finds you well. I wanted to express my gratitude for taking the time to speak with me during our recent call. Your willingness to engage in our conversation is greatly appreciated.

I am reaching out to inquire whether it would be feasible for you to assist in facilitating access to potential participants for my upcoming semi-structured interviews. My aim is to conduct research outside of my current diocese, specifically within the Diocese of Meath.

While I understand the approaching holiday season may demand your attention, I am not expecting immediate assistance. I am planning to conduct these interviews towards the end of January / early February. I can provide you with a comprehensive outline detailing the specific criteria of the candidates I am seeking. Furthermore, I am equipped to share a detailed summary outlining the nature of the research and what participants should anticipate during these interviews.

The individuals I am seeking to interview are those who have previously served on the board of a Catholic patronage school for at least one term. Specifically, I aim to engage with board members from four different schools, encompassing the roles of **Chairperson**, **Principal** (Secretary), and **Teacher Nominee**. This will entail interviewing a total of 12 participants.

Moreover, as I intend to conduct this research within the Diocese of Meath, I wish to ensure full compliance with any necessary protocols or guidelines that may be in place. Your guidance on this matter would be immensely valuable.

Thank you once again for considering my request. Your assistance in this endeavor would be invaluable to the progress of my research. Please let me know if there is any additional information or clarification I can provide. I hope you and your family have a peaceful Christmas

Kind regards,

Michael Buckley  
0877667152

**education** education@dioceseofmeath.ie [via](mailto:education@dioceseofmeath.ie) dioceseofmeath1.onmicrosoft.com  
to me ▾

Dec 14, 2023, 3:14 PM ☆ 😊 ↩ ⋮

Hi Michael,

Thank you for your message. I am happy to assist in any way I can. Please find attached a list of the 188 primary schools in the Diocese of Meath, stretching from Drogheda, Co. Louth to just outside Birr, Co. Offaly.

This might assist you in securing a representative rather than a convenient sample for the purpose of your research. This information might assist in the selection process of candidates for interview. I have more detailed information around the size of the schools but as a rule of thumb those in urban areas are large 12+ teachers and those in rural areas are 2-8 + teachers. I will support your access to the individuals you wish to approach by letter/ email or phone call.

As you know, I have an interest in this area and have just read a (fascinating) Mayo Historical Society article written in 1987 by a then novice researcher called Irene Whelan. It is about an evangelical preacher called Rev Edward Nangle (from Athboy) who set up a (famous) Protestant colony on Achill Island in the 1820's with a view to converting the natives. The article details how the attraction of philanthropic education (in the native tongue) was used by evangelicals (The Kildare Society) as means to convert families at this time. Apparently, this process was very successful on the estates of Lord Farnham and in the Kingscourt area!!! The article suggests that as a response to this the Catholic hierarchy became interested in controlling education and this is partly how our current Patronage and Governance system emerged. I can photocopy and send it to you if your wish. My mobile is 087 1324157. I will be working here in the Mullingar Office until next Thursday. I live in Navan and can meet with you there if it suits anytime. It might be no harm to have a selection made in advance of schools reopening on January 8<sup>th</sup>.

Best of luck and I hope you get to enjoy your Christmas holidays. ,

*Matt Melvin*  
*Secretary for Primary Education,*  
*Diocese of Meath.*

### Appendix 3: Initial Codes from MAXQDA

| Codes                      |  |     |
|----------------------------|--|-----|
| Codes                      |  | 859 |
| not fit for purpose        |  | 4   |
| lack of experience chair   |  | 12  |
| Training CPSMA             |  | 16  |
| Financial issues           |  | 7   |
| Sense-making               |  | 84  |
| Ethos                      |  | 20  |
| Role stress                |  | 31  |
| Skill set / experience     |  | 73  |
| Role ambiguity             |  | 19  |
| Oversight                  |  | 14  |
| Yes fit for Purpose        |  | 7   |
| Managing resources         |  | 12  |
| View of their role         |  | 34  |
| Role clarity               |  | 80  |
| Freedom to act             |  | 14  |
| Independence               |  | 5   |
| control over decisions     |  | 25  |
| managing resources         |  | 14  |
| self governance            |  | 11  |
| Power distribution         |  | 17  |
| collective decision making |  | 27  |
| representation             |  | 43  |
| Fairness                   |  | 14  |
| Voice                      |  | 41  |
| Participation              |  | 14  |
| Performance expectations   |  | 12  |
| Oversight                  |  | 43  |
| justification              |  | 12  |
| answerability              |  | 19  |
| Responsibility             |  | 36  |
| influence                  |  | 31  |
| managing conflict          |  | 20  |
| providing direction        |  | 14  |
| decision-making            |  | 27  |
| Leading change             |  | 7   |

## Appendix 4: Refined Codes from MAXQDA

|                                             |            |
|---------------------------------------------|------------|
| Leading change                              | 7          |
| <b>Sets</b>                                 | <b>597</b> |
| <b>Role</b>                                 | <b>152</b> |
| View of their role                          | 34         |
| View of their role > Role clarity           | 68         |
| Role ambiguity                              | 19         |
| Role stress                                 | 31         |
| <b>Democracy</b>                            | <b>142</b> |
| Power distribution                          | 17         |
| collective decision making                  | 27         |
| representation                              | 43         |
| Fairness                                    | 14         |
| Voice                                       | 41         |
| <b>Accountability</b>                       | <b>135</b> |
| Performance expectations                    | 12         |
| Participation                               | 14         |
| Oversight                                   | 43         |
| justification                               | 11         |
| answerability                               | 19         |
| Responsibility                              | 36         |
| <b>Autonomy</b>                             | <b>69</b>  |
| self governance                             | 11         |
| control over decisions                      | 25         |
| control over decisions > managing resources | 14         |
| Freedom to act                              | 14         |
| Independence                                | 5          |
| <b>Leadership</b>                           | <b>99</b>  |
| Leading change                              | 7          |
| decision-making                             | 27         |
| providing direction                         | 14         |
| managing conflict                           | 20         |
| influence                                   | 31         |

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