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Abstract

Exploring the selection of Catholic primary school Principals in the Republic of Ireland

It is becoming increasingly difficult to find suitable candidates to take on the role of Primary school Principal in Ireland. For Catholic schools, which use the same selection process as all others, the problem is exacerbated by the need to appoint candidates who can lead a faith community as well as an educational community.

Given the responsibility and importance of the faith leadership and educational leadership roles, it would be expected that the Church would seek a person with very specific skills and characteristics to lead a Catholic primary school. It is however, difficult to ascertain how an appropriate Catholic school Principal is distinguished from other candidates during the selection process. Although there is a great deal of literature on Catholic schools, teaching in Catholic schools and religious education, it is more difficult to find research on Catholic school leadership in Ireland. There is scope for much more research into the area.

Using an interpretivist mixed methods approach, this study set out to ascertain if the perceptions of Patron/Assessors/Principals about the Principal selection process in Irish Catholic primary schools align with each other and with the reality of the process? A questionnaire was sent to every Catholic primary school in the Republic of Ireland, in an attempt to develop an overview of the type of person in the Principal role. Qualitative interviews were undertaken with three cohorts, Principals (n=13), Independent Assessors (n=9) and a Diocesan Secretary for Education. Very quickly it became obvious that there is an urgent need for clarity from the Catholic Church about her expectations and requirements for those taking on the role of Principal.

Independent Assessor, who are charged with selection on behalf of the Patron, were unable to articulate a clear 'person specification' for the type of Principal their Diocese sought to lead its schools. Similarly, Principals were also unaware of what the Patron was looking for. The message the Church thought it was communicating to Assessors and Principals was not being received.

The study also found that there is a need for greater transparency around the selection and training of Independent Assessors. It was noted, too, that their training should extend beyond the legalities of the recruitment process. The evidence from this and other research indicates that there is some basis to the Principals perception that both male candidates who are involved with the GAA and internal candidates are more likely to be appointed.

The final finding of this study is that the selection process requires improvement at every stage.

Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Acknowledgments

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Dedication

For my grandparents Naoise, Tom, Lucy and Phil.

They gave me the greatest gifts, my parents.

Author's Declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

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Signature:

Abbreviations and Definitions

ASD	Autistic Spectrum Diagnosis
AMCSS	Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools
BOM	Board of Management
Celtic Tiger	The period between 2000-2007 during which Ireland experienced an unprecedented economic boom.
CES	Catholic Education Partnership
CRE	Certificate in Catholic Religious Education
CCRS	Certificate in Catholic Religious Studies
Circular	Issued by a government department, it is a written statement providing guidance on laws and procedures
CNS	Community National School
CPSMA	Catholic Primary School Management Association
CSL	Centre for School Leadership, now part of Oide
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CSP	Catholic Schools Partnership
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills or Department of Education and Science (depending on year of publication)
DoE	Department of Education
EPSEN	Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ET	Educate Together
ETB	Education and Training Board [similar to an LEA]
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
Gaelic Games	Gaelic football, Hurling, Camogie, Handball and Rounders
GPA	Gaelic Players Association

HSCL	Home School Community Liaison officer
INTO	Irish National Teachers Organisation
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals Network
JC	Junior Cycle, the first 3 years of post – primary education
JNS	Junior National School
LAOS	*Looking at Our Schools* – Department of Education Guidance for School Self-evaluation.
MSGR	Monsignor, also Mons.
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers, now part of Oide
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
Oide	National support service for teachers and school leaders
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers, now part of Oide
PIS	Participant Information Sheet
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SAF	Standard Application Form
SNS	Senior National School
TC	Teaching Council – national registration body
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
Walking Principal	Alternative term for Administrative Principal

TRANSLATION OF IRISH TERMS USED	
Bunreacht na hÉireann	The Constitution of the Republic of Ireland
Curaclam na Bunscoile	Primary School Curriculum
An Roinn Oideachais	Department of Education
Gaeltacht	A region of Ireland where the population use the Irish language as their mother tongue
Gaelscoil	Alternative term for a school where all instruction is through the medium of Irish
Gaeilge	The name used for the Irish language in the language
Scoil lán Gaeilge	Alternative term for Gaelscoil
Scoil sa Ghaeltacht	A school located in a Gaeltacht area

Chapter 1   Introduction

1.1   Background

89.6% of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. Principal selection for these schools utilises the same process that is used for all primary schools, irrespective of patronage. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find suitable candidates to take on the role of Principal. For Catholic primary schools that difficulty "is compounded by the simultaneous responsibility of the Principal as spiritual leader and as educational, instructional and managerial leader" (Boyle, Haller &Hunt, 2016).

Given the responsibility and importance of the faith leadership and educational leadership roles, it would be expected that the Church would seek a person with very specific skills and characteristics to lead a Catholic primary school. It is however, difficult to ascertain how an appropriate Catholic school Principal is distinguished from other candidates during the selection process.

1.2   Context

Ireland has undergone a great deal of change in the first two decades of the 21st century. It has gone from being a conservative religious country in which the Catholic Church held great sway to an increasingly secularised culture with faith and religious practice declining. According to Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2011), between 1991 and 2011 there was a four-fold increase in the proportion of the population who identify as having no religion, being atheists or agnostics. Census 2022 results show that 69% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic, a decrease from 79% in 2016 and 84.2% in 2011(CSO, 2022).

With regard to the terminology around secularism and secularisation, it is important to differentiate what is meant by each, as the terms can be used erroneously. Secularism is a philosophical viewpoint which seeks to separate religion and the mechanisms of state. Secularism maintains that religious beliefs and practices are not public matters yet all citizens should be free to practice any religion or none. Secularisation is the process by which a society moves to being secular. It sees a decrease in the power held by religions in social, political, educational and cultural matters. This occurs in conjunction with a decline

in the influence of religious beliefs and institutions and in the practices associated with them (Arthur, 2009; Iqtidor, 2012; McKinney, 2021).

In tandem with this move toward secularism, education systems globally and here in Ireland are seen by governments as essential tools in ensuring national economic success in the face of aggressive global competition. This renewed interest in education has led to a focus on the results of international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and TALIS. Any slip in the rankings in these assessments leads to parliamentary panic and a flurry of new policies and initiatives geared at remedying the perceived problem. Among those charged with primary responsibility for implementing the resulting changes to how schools operate and teach are, of course, school Principals. Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) (2022) analysed the 162 Departmental documents sent to schools for action in the six-year period from 2016 and discovered that 100% of these increased Principals' workload in the area of managing the organisation (p.2). These administrative tasks, including in health and safety, resource management human resource management and budgeting, all divert Principals away from the most important part of their role, leading teaching and learning.

Davis & Franchi (2013) observed a second trend arising from this new secularisation agenda. They pointed out that

> In a number of Western democracies, the rise of secular elites has been accompanied by an aggressive campaign against religious schooling, as if the mere presence of such schools somehow represented the unfinished business of the Enlightenment.

(p.37)

This has certainly been the case in Ireland. It seems as though almost every week brings a new media attack on Catholic schooling, specifically from a small but vocal group of journalist. At conferences and in professional development sessions Catholic Principals are wary of expressing opinions that might support the Catholic view on an issue, as doing so can result in vocal criticism for colleagues who believe religion has no place in education.

Considering the increasing workload drawing Principals away from the core activity of teaching and learning and a sense of being under siege from those with anti-faith schooling views, it is hardly surprising that there has been a high number of early retirements from Principal roles. The Irish Primary Principals Network (2022) member survey found that in the previous five years 39% of the respondent schools had a change in principalship and that 60% of those retiring had not reached retirement age. They were stepping away from

the role early or leaving to take up a different role. The survey also showed that 16% of principalship vacancies in 21/22 had to re-advertised before being filled. It is against this backdrop of increasingly high numbers of Principals leaving the profession and difficulty in replacing them that I decided to undertake this research.

1.3   Research Question

Clearly, much research has already taken place into some of the reasons why Principals are leaving the profession in large numbers. I found it interesting that I could not find any literature investigating the effect, if any, that the recruitment and selection process may have on the decision to apply for principalship. I chose to look at the process for Catholic Principals specifically because, as well as the responsibilities outlined above, they also have the added responsibility of leading a faith community. Boyle et al. (2016) observe that the multiplicity of a Catholic school Principal's roles may be one of the causes of the difficulty in finding appropriate candidates.

While the people at the centre of the principalship process are the candidates, they are not the only group who experience the selection process. The same process looks very different to the Independent Assessor doing the interviewing than it does to the candidate on the other side of the table. The interpretivist paradigm concentrates on the meanings people bring to situations or behaviour and the ways they use this to interpret the world. Interpretivists believe that reality and the individual who perceives it are inseparable because a person's view of the world is inextricably linked to their experience. In order to ascertain a view of the selection process that might provide useful information to help improve Principal recruitment, it is essential to hear the realities as perceived by those who experienced the process. It is for this reason that I determined it would be appropriate to carry out research with Principals, Independent Assessors and a representative of a Catholic Church Diocese. All of these had direct experience of the process, albeit from different perspectives, the Principals as candidates, the Independent Assessors as members of selection panels, and the Diocesan representative as the Patron's manager of education matters. Thus the research question below was formed.

How do the perceptions of Patron/Assessors/Principals about the Principal selection process in Irish Catholic primary schools align with each other and with the reality of the process?

1.4   Methodology

Finding answers to my research question involved two phases of data collection. Using mixed methods to gather the data, I designed an online questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative questions for Phase 1 and two semi-structured interview schedules for Phase 2, qualitative interviews.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to help to establish an overview of the people currently leading Catholic primary schools as Principal. The interview schedules were used to conduct interviews with three cohorts, Principals and Aspiring Principals, Independent Assessors and a Diocesan Secretary for Education.

The quantitative questions in the questionnaire provided basic demographic details on each respondent and were categorised for elements such as gender, age, length of time in role, size and type of school.

 The qualitative questions from the questionnaire and all data from the interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

The finding and analysis are found in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

1.5   What to expect – the chapters of my dissertation

For the reader's convenience I have outlined below a summary of the topics you can expect to read about in this dissertation.

1.5.1   Chapter Two – Context – Catholic Primary Schools in Ireland

In order to assist the reader in fully understanding some of the nuances of this study, this chapter will provide the reader with information about;

- The historical context in which the current school system was established and developed.

- The idiosyncratic system of school governance of primary schools in Ireland.

- The selection process for Principals

- The process of school divestment

- The Catholic school and education both nationally and globally.

1.5.2   Chapter Three – Literature Review

Chapter three provides a review of the literature across several areas that relate to the matters being investigated in this study. Firstly, the literature in the area of Catholic School leadership will be reviewed. This area can be broken down into the sub-themes;

- Catholic school leadership

- Catholic school leadership preparation, formation and selection processes

- Applying for the principalship

Much of the literature reviewed relates to other countries. There is much rich data on Catholic school leadership and the selection processes for Principals, Catholic or otherwise, internationally. Much of the literature reviewed here on formation focuses on teacher formation. I have generalised it to apply to Principals as in the Irish context at least, all Principals taught in school for at least five years. Teacher formation is Principal formation, as teachers take that spiritual formation with them on promotion. The two are not mutually exclusive.

There is a gap in the literature on *Catholic primary* school leadership in the Irish context. There is a growing body of work on leadership in Catholic secondary schools, much of which is being carried out by religious educational trusts such as CEIST (Catholic Education – An Irish Schools Trust and ERST (Edmund Rice Schools Trust).

It is my hope that this study will go some way to filling this gap.

1.5.3 Chapter Four – Methodology

This chapter outlines the research approach taken in this study. It examines my researcher positionality and the reasons for choosing to use an interpretivist mixed methods approach. It offers justification for the selection of a questionnaire and interviews as methods of data collection. This chapter provides background information about the participant groups I worked with and the reasons they were chosen. The methodology chapter also provides a description of the data collection and analysis process for both the questionnaire and the interviews. Importantly, it is in this chapter that ethical concerns and considerations are presented. Finally, the limitations of this study are highlighted and discussed.

1.5.4 Chapter Five – Online questionnaire responses and analysis

This chapter addresses the responses and findings from the online questionnaire. Analysis is provided for the responses of 112 respondents and much of the data arising from the questionnaire is presented in charts or graphs. Each question is analysed individually and the data presented for all respondents to the question and then by gender. This is quite a long chapter, as the questionnaire produced a great deal of very interesting information. This data allows the reader to form a demographic picture of the group, 112 Catholic primary school Principals. Such is the quantity and richness of the data that the dataset could be used for further research with this cohort.

1.5.5 Chapter Six – Interviews with Principals, Aspirant Principal and a Diocesan Secretary for education.

This chapter outlines the findings from the interviews conducted with Principals, the aspirant Principal and a Diocesan Secretary. Profiles of participants, which have been anonymised, are presented for context. The data was analysed thematically and is presented under the themes that arose from the analysis.

- Theme 1 – Candidates with a perceived advantage
  Internal candidates and certain male candidates
- Theme 2 – School leadership

  Motivations to lead and personal definitions of leadership

- Theme 3 – Standard Application Form (SAF)

  Referees, non-professional activities, the Catholic Church, selection criteria

- Theme 4 – Selection interviews

- Theme 5 – Candidate Suitability

What do Principals think panels look for?

Theme 6 – The Selection Process

1.5.6 Chapter Seven – Interviews with Independent Assessors and Diocesan Secretary

This chapter outlines the findings from the interviews conducted with Independent Assessor and the Diocesan secretary. Profiles of participants, which have been anonymised are presented for context. The data was analysed thematically and is presented under the themes that arose from the analysis.

- Theme 1 – Becoming an Independent Assessor
- Theme 2 – The application process

Standard application form, references, selection criteria and short-listing

- Theme 3 – Interviews

Effective principalship, candidates with perceived advantage

- Theme 4 – Improving the process

1.5.7 Chapter Eight - Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter will bring the findings from the previous three chapters together and provide recommendations in answer to the findings. The chapter is structured as follows:

- Research question

- Key findings from the questionnaire

- Key findings from the interviews

- Recommendations

- Limitations

- Future research

- Concluding remarks

Chapter 2:   Context – Catholic Primary Schools in Ireland

2.1   Introduction

Currently 89.6% of primary schools in Ireland are under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Dept. of Education, 2021). Having such a high percentage of schools under the patronage of faith communities puts Ireland in a unique position amongst developed countries. A natural and essential starting point for research relating to schooling in Ireland is to examine its historical and cultural background. In addition to outlining the historical context, I will highlight the idiosyncratic system of governance in Irish Catholic schools. Finally, it is important to examine the status of Catholic education within the wider system of schooling in Ireland. An effective way to do this is by reference to the divestment and reconfiguration processes currently under way in primary schooling.

2.2   Historical Context

In 1831, three years after Catholic Emancipation and against a backdrop of increasing segregation in education, Lord Stanley, the Chief Secretary of Ireland, established the National School System (Coolahan, 2005, p.12). The system was designed to unite children of different denominations in one school. They would receive literary and moral instruction together, but segregated religious instruction given by clergy of their own denomination. Churches and religious orders who ran schools were invited to join the system and share control. Initially this system worked but, eventually, the Churches began to object to the multi-denominational setting. In an effort to address their concerns the 'Conscience Clause' was introduced. This ensured the right of parents to withdraw their child/ren from religious instruction of which they disapproved (O'Connell 2000).

Despite this, however, by the 1860s the system had become, *de facto,* fully denominational, as the Churches began to oppose the official system and focus on denominational schooling. Each Church owned its own schools, but still enjoyed State funding (Coolahan, 2017). A key issue for all denominations was the separation of religious education from secular education. Each regarded the spiritual education of the child as integral to their education. By the turn of the century the system had become so denominational that the National Board of Education insisted that schools ensure that religious instruction take place at a fixed time each day to ensure that children of different denominations were not excluded from large parts of the school day.

As the Nation was poised for Independence in 1922, the Churches became even more protectionist of their position as the main educators of the children of their faith. Indicative of this is the 1921 statement by the Catholic Clerical Managers Association:

> In view of the pending changes in Irish education, we wish to assert the great fundamental principle that the only satisfactory system of education for Catholics is one where children are taught in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers under Catholic control.
>
> (Times Educational Supplement, 29 October 1921)

In fact, they had little to be concerned about, as the handover from the British Administration to the new Free State Government brought little change to the national school system.

Upon Independence, the focus of the new government was on nation-building and on forming a national identity. It is hardly surprising that after 800 years of rule by a foreign power the desired national identity was one that was the very opposite of that of the colonial master. The new national vision was that of a Gaelic-Catholic identity (Coolahan, 2017, p.29). So, when established in 1924 the focus of the new Ministry of Education was more on the development of a curriculum to fit this vision than on the patronage and governance of the schools. In 1925 the Minister for Education convened the National Programme Conference to provide guidance on the subjects to be taught and on issues such as the heretofore subordinated status of the Irish language. Interestingly, the Conference report revisited the issue of the isolation of religious education from the secular that had been such a bone of contention for all the major denominations. It stated that

> Of all of the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most   important ....the teacher should constantly inculcate, in connection with secular subjects, the practice of charity and other moral virtues.
>
> (National Programme Conference, 1926, in Coolahan, 2012)

In 1929, in his Encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri (On Christian Education of Youth),* Pope Pius XI highlights the view of the Catholic Church that the family is the primary educator of the child. He states that:

> The family therefore holds directly from the Creator the mission and hence the right to educate the offspring, a right ...... inviolable on the part of any power on earth.

> (*Divini Illius Magistr*i, Article 32, 1929)

This view would later form a key section of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland, highlighting the significant influence of Catholic doctrine and social policy on the architects of the new State.

Pope Pius' Encyclical clarified the beliefs of the Catholic Church on several issues that were highly relevant to the national school system in Ireland. He reiterated the right and duty of the Church to supervise the education of the faithful:

> It is the inalienable right as well as the indispensable duty of the Church, to watch over the entire education of her children, in all institutions, public or private, not merely in regard to religious instruction there given, but in regard to every other branch of learning and every regulation in so far as religion and morality are concerned.

> (D*ivini Illius Magistri*, Article 23)

The Encyclical also provided clarity on the Church's position on mixed denominational education. Echoing the statement made by the Catholic Clerical Managers Association eight years earlier, it states

> .... the frequenting of non-Catholic schools, whether neutral or mixed, those namely which are open to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, is forbidden for Catholic children.

> (*Divini Illius Magistri*, Article 79)

This statement effectively barred Catholic parents from sending their children to schools that were not under Church patronage and killed any hope that the system of primary education envisaged in the Stanley Letter might succeed. Pope Pius articulated the Catholic vision of education saying:

> To use the words of Leo XIII: It is necessary not only that religious instruction be given to the young at certain fixed times, but also that every other subject taught, be permeated with Christian piety.

> (*Divini Illius Magistri,* Article 80)

In 1937 the Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) was enacted. It was largely the brainchild of the leader of the ruling Fianna Fáil party, Eamon De Valera, a staunch Republican and a devout Catholic. These two influences are evident throughout the Constitution. The vision of the Irish citizen who would be an idealised Gaelic-Catholic is clearly reflected. The 1937 Constitution is the keystone to Irish law and Articles 42 (Education) and 44 (Religion) remain the seminal provisions regarding rights to education.

Article 42 recognises the place of the family as the primary educator of the child and commits the State to respecting the rights and duties of parents to educate their children. Article 42.3.1, known as the Conscience Clause, states

> The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

> (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, p. 16

This presents a difficulty in areas where there are what are known as Stand Alone schools. These are schools that are the only provider of primary education in the area, so parents have no option but to send their children to the school, irrespective of its patronage or the family's religious beliefs. Owing to the lack of alternative provision, some families are, in effect, being denied their constitutional rights.One of the key determinants of the primary education system remaining denominational right up to the 1970s is the phrasing of Article 42.4, "*The State shall provide for free primary education…*" (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, p.169). The key word here is 'for'. The State has no obligation to provide *schools*. It is simply required to ensure that where they are established they have the necessary resources to provide a free education. This highlights what was seen at the time as the subsidiary role of the State in education (Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012). Up to 2002 all schools in the primary sector were established by the various patronage bodies and supported financially by the State. Since then the State has established 30 primary schools (Foley (2023).In 1965, the State, for the first time, formally acknowledged the denominational character of national schools. In *Rules for National Schools* (An Roinn Oideachais) the Constitutional Articles 42 and 44 are outlined and followed by the statement:

> In pursuance of the provisions of these Articles the State provides for free education for children in national schools, and gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools.

Education (1965)

In 1971 the Department of Education, taking account of educational changes internationally, moved away from programmes for national schools and introduced a national Primary School Curriculum/Curaclam na Bunscoile. The curriculum moved even closer to the system that the Churches had sought for more than a century, finally recognising the difficulty in separating religious and secular education. The Introduction to the new curriculum stated that the separation of religion and secular instruction into differentiated subject compartments serves only to throw the whole educational function out of focus.and that the integration of the curriculum should be seen "in the religious and civic spirit which animates all its parts" (Department of Education, 1971, Vol. 1, p.19). The 'conscience clause' was still in place and children had the rights that had been enshrined in the Constitution, so parents could, in theory, withdraw their children from religious instruction in school. However, the characteristic spirit of a school permeated all aspects of the school day and this made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for the 'conscience clause' to be implemented in practice.

When the curriculum was revised in 1999 the 'religious and civic spirit' provision was maintained. This time it stipulated that schools were responsible for making alternative arrangements for pupils not engaging with the religious education programme offered:

> It is the responsibility of the school to provide a religious education that is consistent with its ethos and at the same time to be flexible in making alternative organisational arrangements of those who do not wish to avail themselves of the particular religious' education it offers.

(*Revised Primary School Curriculum,*1999, p.58)

In March 2023 a new Primary Curriculum Framework was launched and it marks a major shift away from the previous iterations in that it does not have the focus on the religious spirit of schools. Religious education is no longer a subject, having been replaced by 'The Patron's Programme'. This is to allow for the programme's used in multi and non-denominational schools. Denominational schools can continue to use their religious education programmes, but the interconnectedness of the religious and secular education in schools has been eroded by this new framework.

2.3 School Governance in the Republic of Ireland

The governance and management of primary schools in Ireland is a complex system resulting from the religious, political and social vagaries of the national school system over

more than a century of existence. We have a system of 'private', but State-funded, schools. The State owns just 30 primary schools, with all others in the ownership of the various patronage bodies. These bodies include the main churches, groups focused on education through the medium of the Irish language, and groups supporting multi-denominational education. They own the school buildings and land, but the Department of Education funds the upkeep and maintenance of the schools, as well as paying the wages of all school staff

D.E.S (2004). To add another layer of complexity, whilst the Department pays school staff salaries, they are not their employer. School Boards of Management (BOM) are responsible for recruiting and employing all school staff at a local level and are the legal employer. School Principals find themselves responsible to three different bodies, each controlling different aspects of school business. Figure 1 below shows the complexity of this situation for school leaders.

Figure 1 Bodies Principals are responsible to
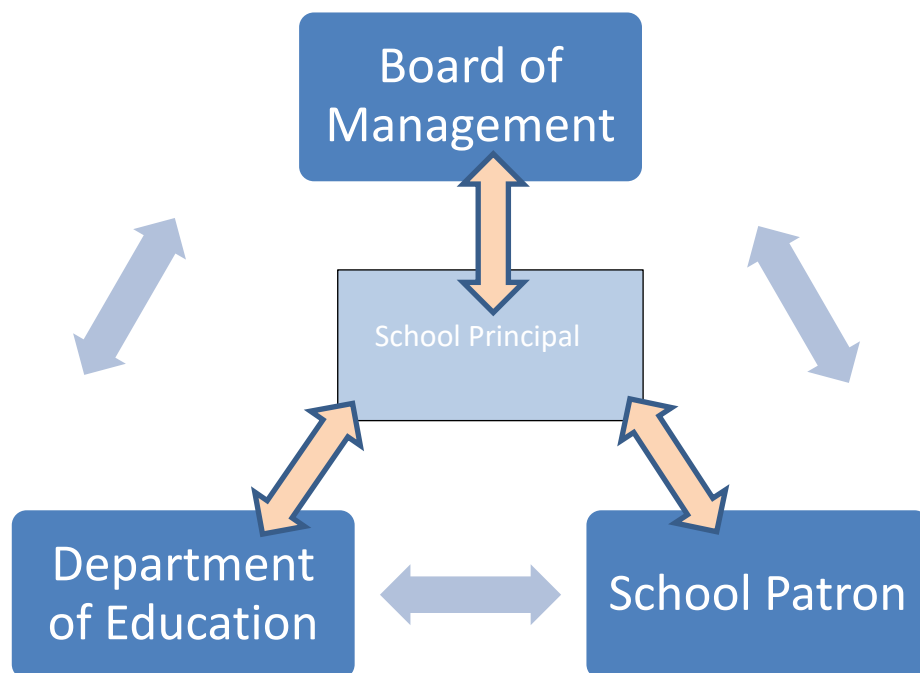
The Education Act 1998 outlines the roles and responsibilities of each of these bodies. Section 7 (1) defines the overarching role and functions of the Minister for Education. These include ensuring appropriate education for all residents, policy determination and overall planning and coordination of education.

The Minister also has a role in funding recognised schools and maintaining salary and other pay and conditions for staff, in addition to ensuring the preservation of the Irish language and assessment of the quality of education provided in recognised schools.

The Patron is the person or group who sought recognition for the school and who has responsibility for the maintenance of its characteristic spirit. According to '*A Guide for the Chairpersons of Boards of Management of Catholic Schools*' (CPSMA, 2019):

> The Education Act 1998 places responsibility on the Patron to ensure (amongst other obligations) that
>
> - The school provides the national curriculum (Section 30)
>
> - The school permits and co-operates with regular inspection and evaluation by the Inspectorate (Section 10)
>
> - The school operates in accordance with regulations made by the Minister.
>
> (CPSMA, 2019, p.3)

Section 14 (4) of the Education Act allows the Patron to appoint a BOM for a school (subject to agreed protocols). The Patron is also required to appoint the Chairperson of the BOM. In the case of Catholic schools, the Patron is usually the Bishop of the local diocese. In some cases, it may be a trustee body representing a religious order or orders. For example, The Edmund Rice Schools Trust acts as Patron for schools formerly under the trusteeship of the Christian Brothers. The land and buildings in which the school is housed are vested in the Patron. The Patron must also approve all staff appointments made by the BOM. Finally, each Patron is responsible for the redeployment of surplus teachers to other schools under their patronage. The Patron delegates responsibility for the day-to-day maintenance of the characteristic spirit to the BOM (CPSMA, 2019, p.6) but supports them by organising activities and events to celebrate that spirit.

Boards of Management are reflective of the partnership model widely used in education policy development and planning in Ireland. Management Boards, the precursor of BOMs were introduced in 1975 to give teachers and parents a voice in the management of the school, but initially the Patron's representatives held the majority. These were developed over time until the current BOM structures were included in the Education Act 1998. The restructured boards have a more equitable structure, with parents, staff, the community and the Patron represented. The Principal acts as Secretary to the BOM. The Patron must approve all appointments, with the exception of the Principal whose membership is ex officio, and also selects the Chairperson. Section 16 of the Education Act, 1998 provides

that the Patron may, with the consent of the Minister remove a member or dissolve the BOM and Section 17 authorises the Minister to require the Patron to do either.

Section 15 of the Act describes the core roles and responsibilities of the BOM:

> It shall be the duty of a board to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents and to provide or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student......

> (Section 15 (1), Education Act 1998)

The Act also, outlines the responsibilities of the BOM regarding the characteristic spirit of the school:

> In carrying out its functions the board shall – uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions.

> (Section 15 (2 b), Education Act 1998)

While the Education Act defines the overarching role of the BOM, it does not refer to the practical realities that the board must consider. *The Governance Manual for Primary Schools - 2019 –2023 Education (2018)* encapsulates the wide scope of the BOM's functions on its first page:

> The Board should adopt a child-centred approach to all its work. It must also have regard to the efficient use of resources (particularly the grants provided by the State), the public interest in the affairs of the school and accountability to students, parents and the community.

> (Department of Education, 2018, p.1)

Other expectations of the BOM include ensuring the production of the school plan, publication of the school admissions policy, annual updating of the child safeguarding policy, and managing the school accounts. Importantly, the members of Boards of Management, other than the Principal and staff representative, are unpaid volunteers and are not required to have a background in the education sector. Providing the necessary support for BOMs, which serve for a four-year term, results in considerable additional work for the Principal. (IPPN, 2022, p. 78)

An interesting quirk of the school governance system is that while Boards of Management, as employers, have considerable legal responsibilities, they actually have relatively little autonomy or authority. In recent years we have seen the Department of Education overrule individual BOM in areas that had previously been regarded as within the remit of the BOM.

For example, in October 2021, the BOM of a school in Wexford, in exercising its duty of care to the school community, decided to close and switch to online teaching and learning due to the overwhelming number of Covid cases in the school. Rule 62 of *Rules for National Schools* (1965) allows for exceptional school closure in the interest of public health and states clearly that "the responsibility for closing the school rests with the manager" (Rule 62, p. 32). However, within 24 hours they were ordered by the Department of Education to reopen.

Cases such as this call into question just how much real autonomy Boards of Management have. There is clearly a power imbalance when the Department of Education holds the purse strings and where the Minister has the power to require the Patron to dissolve a BOM. Incidents such as this point to a definite need to provide all the parties with greater clarity about the delineation of responsibilities and authority between them.

2.4   Selecting Principals

The selection process, including eligibility criteria, for Principals in all Irish primary schools is set out in Circular Letter 0044/2019 issued by the Department of Education. For schools with more than 80 pupils, candidates must be registered with the Teaching Council under Route 1 (fully qualified primary school teacher) and have a minimum of five years' service, of which two must have been in the State. For schools with less than 80 pupils there is no minimum service requirement. The Circular does not give any requirements for academic or professional development qualifications beyond those required to meet Teaching Council registration criteria.

The Circular provides that all applications for Principalship roles must be submitted using the Standard Application Form for Principal Appointments (SAF), a copy of which is available in Appendix A. The form gathers information from candidates under the following headings,

Personal/Contact details

Teaching and other Academic qualifications

Teaching Council Registration details

Teaching experience

Leadership and Management experience

Other relevant work experience

Additional non-accredited courses/qualifications

Areas of special interest

Leading Teaching and Learning

Managing the Organisation

Leading School Development

Developing Leadership Capacity

Personal Statement

Referees x 3

The selection panel, or interview board, is comprised of the Chairperson of the school and two Independent Assessors. In the case of Catholic primary schools, these must be drawn from the list of the Assessors approved by both the Diocese concerned and the Irish National Teachers Association (INTO), the trade union for primary teachers. The

candidate selected by the interview board must be approved by the Patron before she/he can be appointed.

The Circular, at Section 4.10, refers to the "Quality Framework for Leadership and Management in Irish schools" which is outlined in *Looking at Our Schools 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (LAOS) (Education (2016, 2022). It is from this framework that the four domains of leadership and management are drawn. Each of the four is broken down into standards (see Table 1 below) that assist schools in their self-evaluation processes and Principal applicants in completing the SAF. The Circular stipulates that these four domains are also to be used as the equally weighted criteria for Principal selection. Table 1 below shows the four domains and the standards for practice contained within them.

Table 1 Domains and Standards of leadership and management

Domain 1	Leading learning and teaching
Standards	• Promote a culture of reflection, improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment. • Foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each pupil • Manage the planning and implementation of the curriculum • Foster teacher professional learning that enriches teachers' and pupils' learning.
Domain 2	**Managing the organisation**
Standards	• Create and maintain a positive school culture and a safe, healthy and purposeful learning environment, and sustain it through effective communication. • Manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation. • Manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice. • Develop and implement a system to promote professional responsibility and accountability
Domain 3	**Leading school development**
Standards	• Communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation. • Lead the school's engagement in a continuous process of self-evaluation. • Build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and the wider community. • Manage, lead and mediate change to respond to the evolving needs of the school and to changes in education.
Domain 4	**Developing leadership capacity**

	• Critique their practice as leaders and develop their understanding of effective and sustainable leadership.
	• Empower staff to take on and carry out leadership roles
Standards	• Promote and facilitate the development of pupil participation, pupil leadership and parent participation.
	• Build professional networks with other school leaders.

from Looking at Our Schools 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools. (DES Inspectorate, 2016, pp.22-29)

In the case of Catholic schools, the *Schedule of a Catholic School* is also intended to be used by the interview boards to guide their decisions. This is the official vision of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference for Catholic primary schools. The document states

> A Roman Catholic school (which is established in connection with the Minister) aims at promoting the full and harmonious development of all aspects of the person of the pupil: intellectual, physical, cultural, moral and spiritual, including a living relationship with God and with other people.

> The school models and promotes a philosophy of life inspired by belief in God and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

> The Catholic school provides religious education for the pupils in accordance with the doctrines, practices and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and promotes the formation of the pupils in the Catholic Faith.

> Irish Catholic Bishops Conference (2020)

2.5   Divestment and Re-configuration of Primary Schools

As early as the 1970's calls for multi-denominational or non-denominational options in education were growing (Coolahan, 2012, p.16). Politically and socially Ireland was beginning to come out from under the shadow of dominance cast by the Catholic Church since Independence (Fanning, 2014, p.49). The changes instituted by Vatican II (The Second Vatican Council,1962-1965) had been embedded by the mid-70s and a great deal of the mystique surrounding the Church and her rites and rituals had disappeared. With an increased focus on social justice issues and sectarianism as a result of the 'Troubles' playing out in Northern Ireland, the population in the Republic of Ireland was starting to

see that inter-denominational cooperation would be crucial in the future. Against this backdrop groups of parents began to campaign to open multi-denominational schools for their local communities. The first such school was founded in 1978 and six years later joined with two others to form a Patronage Group called "Educate Together". This provided those wishing to educate their children in schools other than denominational ones with a recognised partner in education to lobby on their behalf. Initially, Educate Together made slow progress in adding to the number of schools under their patronage, but this has accelerated in recent years and they now have 96 primary schools nationwide. However, given that there are over 3,000 primary schools in Ireland, this still means that only a tiny proportion of primary school age children are being educated in multi-denominational schools.

The Celtic Tiger years (2000 – 2007) saw a steep decline in religious affiliation and practice in Ireland. Much of this was to do with the economic boom and the move towards a more secularised and market driven society. It cannot be ignored, though, that the many scandals with the Catholic Church in Ireland that were uncovered from the 1990's onward also contributed to the swing away from the Church and organised religion more generally. The population lost trust in the institutional Church that had covered up abuse of some of the most vulnerable members of society. The movement away from the Church continued throughout the Celtic Tiger years, which also saw a large increase in inward migration due to the booming economy. Within the first decade of this century Ireland went from being a largely white, Christian country, to the diverse melting pot of cultures, races and religions we see today. This increased diversity brought with it increased calls for more diversity in school patronage.

During 2007 and 2008 the Catholic Bishop's Conference produced two documents outlining their vision for Catholic Education in the future. Both '*Catholic Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision in the Future' (2007)* and '*Vision '08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland' (2008)* reference an openness to a diversity of patronage and the creation of new patronage arrangements. In 2008, addressing the National Conference on Education, the then Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, declared that the Church was open to exploring divestment of some of its schools in light of the need for greater choice of patronage for families. He acknowledged that the delay in diversification of patronage had made for difficult choices for parents and went on to state that

> ways can be found to expand the role of other patronage models, where such demands exist, through a form of structured divestment by Catholic patrons, which recognises the rights and interests of all parties.

(Martin, D. 2008 in Coolahan, J. 2014, p.482)

Perhaps encouraged by this statement, in 2011 the Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, convened the *Forum for Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector,* under the direction of Prof. John Coolahan, to advise him on the issue of providing diversity in education.

The Forum's most significant recommendations related to the process of divestment by existing patrons and the growth of the new school model, Community National Schools (CNS). It recommended a three-stage process for divestment, including evidence gathering, consultation, and proposals to and decision by the Minister.

The recommendation was accepted in principle by all parties and in November 2012 a pilot scheme was launched in five areas identified as having potential for divestment.

Consultations were held with parents and only a minority, albeit a sizeable one, were in favour of divestment. Since 2012 progress has been slow, with only 13 schools divested to new patrons. There has been regular criticism of this in the media, with much of the blame being, unfairly, laid on the Catholic Church. In reality, however, the greatest resistance to divestment has come from parents (McGarry 2023)

In 2022 the Department and the Catholic Church began a new pilot scheme to discuss divesting in four provincial towns and several areas in four cities. In March 2023 the pilot scheme reached an area in North Dublin, where it was suggested that three co-located schools would reconfigure and the buildings of one would be divested to a new Patron.

However, when parents voted, only 17% were in favour. There have been suggestions, both from the process facilitator and the media, that the process was poorly administered and that a lack of information about what they were voting for made parents conservative in their decision-making McGuire (2023). However, it may also be the case that the vast majority of the parents are satisfied with their children's schools and see no need to make a change.

The Forum also recommended that the CNS should be considered as a model for patronage in areas requiring new schools (Coolahan et.al, 2012). After a pilot, the model was adopted in 2017 and the patronage divested to Education and Training Boards. CNS' key feature is that they are multi-denominational, yet offer denominational faith formation. They cater for children who subscribe to a particular faith and to none. All pupils engage in a multi-belief programme called *Goodness Me! Goodness You!* in a block of four to six weeks each year. This programme also includes voluntary denominational faith formation. This

model is currently in use in 30 such schools nationwide, many of them new schools in developing areas.

It is likely that pressure will continue to be applied to the Department of Education for greater levels of divestment. The multi-denominational lobby is vocal and appears to have considerable media backing. However, it may be the case that the majority are satisfied with the current patronage situation but remain silent, perhaps embarrassed to talk about their faith. In 2019, the Catholic Education Partnership, Catholic Primary School Management Association and the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools commissioned a report called '*Articulating a new positioning for Catholic Education in Ireland'*. Carried out by market research company Genesis, a key finding was that Catholics were no longer confident in expressing their religiosity. Many mentioned feeling embarrassed or ashamed to admit to being a practising Catholic. Several respondents highlighted that they avoid talking about their faith in social or work environments.

2.6   The Catholic School

So, what makes a Catholic primary school different to other schools? The arguably simple answer is – its ethos. No two Catholic primary schools are exactly the same, but they all share the same ethos. This is described in the BOM Chair Handbook as follows:

> "It insists that the full human development of each child (intellectual, physical, cultural, moral and spiritual) includes not only a healthy relationship with themselves, other people and the rest of creation but is centred on a living relationship with God. God is not seen as an optional extra in the child's life. The view of education is not secular but values a religious and faith dimension. It promotes not only the good of the individual but the good of local, national and global society as a whole. Other people are made in God's image too

> It is inspired by teachings, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Getting to know Him means getting to know what it means to be human and what God is like. The school does not only talk about this – the pupils experience this philosophy every day especially in the quality of relationships and in the school environment."

> CPSMA (2019, p.7)

Vatican II brought about many changes to the way in which the institutional Church related to the faithful, not least in relation to education and schooling. Previously the Church did

not share with the public its understanding of the purpose of Catholic schools. This changed in 1965 with the publication of the Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis,* in which Pope Paul VI elucidated the role of Catholic schools in the salvific mission of the Church. In 1977, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education released a document titled '*The Catholic School',* which provided the Catholic community with substantial guidance on the purposes of Catholic schooling. Three sections, 1, 3 and 4, in particular, provide Catholic educators with a greater understanding of the functions of Catholic schooling.

Section 1 describes the centrality of the Catholic school to the "saving mission of the Church" (Section 1.9). That mission is Evangelisation, to spread the message of Christ and lead people to salvation. Schools have a key role in this, especially in terms of education in the faith. Schools are also seen as a place for transmission of a Catholic worldview.

Section 1.8 gives the reason for establishing Catholic schools:

> She (the Church) considers them as privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole man, since the school is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history is developed and conveyed.
>
> (The Catholic School, 1977)

Section 3 focuses on the school as a centre for human formation. The holistic nature of education for the development of rounded humans is characteristic of Catholic schools. The document highlights the importance of a community in which children can build relationships and, through them, learn the values that are central to being a Catholic. It is through community that children develop into self-directed individuals capable of making decisions in line with their own values and conscience. Section 3.26 highlights the important role played by schools in this human formation:

> A school is, therefore, a privileged place in which, through a living encounter with a cultural inheritance, integral formation occurs.
>
> (*The Catholic School,* 1977)

Section 4 describes some of the ways in which the Catholic school supports this Christian human formation, the goal of which is to live a life centred on Jesus Christ (4.33). By embedding the Gospel values into the everyday life of the school (4.34) Catholic schools instil the virtues that help pupils to lead a Christian life (4.35/36). They also have a role in helping pupils with the integration of their faith with both their culture and daily life (4.37). Section 4.47 reminds us that Baptism alone does not make one a Christian - living

the Gospel values is a key component. Section 4.47 explores the role of the Catholic school in this:

> The Catholic school tries to create within its walls a climate in which the pupil's faith will gradually mature and enable him to assume the responsibility placed on him by Baptism.

(The Catholic School, 1977)

Sections 4.53-59 examine the ways in which a Catholic school should behave as a community. Key amongst these is the provision of dignity to all members of the school community and a focus on those in greatest need, either within the school community or outside. This is known as the Preferential Option for the Poor and is one of the key tenets of Catholic education today. Section 4.55 sums up the role of the Catholic school well.

Regarding the Preferential Option, it outlines the very core of the principle as follows:

> In this setting the pupil experiences his dignity as a person before he knows its definition.

(*The Catholic School*, 1977)

The Preferential Option is at the core of Catholic social justice teaching. It has played a role in the foundation of Catholic schools across the world to cater for those who might otherwise not receive an education. It also guides much of the charity and outreach work done by Catholic schools. As McKinney (2022) states;

> the word preference stresses that the poor are the first, not the only persons, to receive the love of God, and it is this preference that Christians are called to follow by Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:5; Luke 4: 16–22; Gutiérrez, 1983, 2009).

(p.94).

In 2022, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education issued an instruction entitled *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue.* This arose from concerns about the need for greater awareness and consistency of the Catholic identity in educational institutions globally. It re-iterated much of the content of *The Catholic School,* emphasising the role of Catholic schools in the mission of the Church. Sections 11 to 37 outline the "fundamental principles" of Christian education in schools. These can be summarised as follows:

- Education is a Human Right

- A Catholic Education should be "an integral education" - covering spiritual, moral, academic, social and cultural formation of pupils/students

- In Catholic schools faith formation is intertwined with all decisions and lessons. As the instruction states, "there is no separation between time for learning and time for formation".

- Catholic education is primarily aimed at Catholic families, but pupils of other faiths and none are welcomed. A respect for their beliefs is always demonstrated, but there is no compromise in the Catholic formation of Catholic students.

- The primary responsibility for the provision of a Catholic education rests with the parents - schools offer a means and support in this.

- All school community members have an "obligation to recognize, respect, and bear witness to the Catholic identity of the school".

- The instruction clarifies that the work of Catholic educators "is in the real sense of the word an apostolate". As such, the formation of teachers should ensure that they are equipped with enough "secular and religious knowledge" to engage in faith formation of pupils alongside their academic lessons.

- Catholic teachers in Catholic schools are expected to live a life centred on Christ, not just to teach about it.

The figure below shows the key aspects of Catholic schools as defined by the Catholic Schools Partnership in Ireland.

Figure 2   The Catholic Schools Partnership: Key Aspects of a Catholic School characteristic spirit

The school is a Catholic Community

The schools is an agent of personal growth and social transformation

Religious Education is an intergral part of the life of the school

We are called to be followers of Christ

The school is founded on a Catholic understanding of education

Key aspects of a Catholic school characteristic spirit

From '*Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School: A Process Centred on Conversations'*. (CSP, 2015)

Table 2 shows the characteristics of Catholic schools as defined by Catholic Education bodies or Bishops Conferences in Scotland, England & Wales, USA and New Zealand. This table highlights both the similarities and differences in the way Catholic Education is defined by the hierarchy and educational bodies in different countries.

Table 2   *Comparison of the key characteristics of Catholic schools as outlined by national Catholic Education agencies*

Scotland[1]	Catholic schools • Offer a vision based upon the central teachings and values of the Catholic Church. • Aim to help all students to develop their fullest potential, preparing them for life, informing their minds and forming their characters so that they can contribute with others to the transformation of the world – building God's Kingdom. • Are communities that are open, welcoming and inclusive, seeking to prepare pupils to find happiness and to lead lives of goodness built upon Christian values, personal integrity and moral courage. • Promote genuine human growth, not only for Catholic pupils, but for those of other faith traditions and those with stances for living that may be independent of religious belief. • Are challenged to provide their students with structured opportunities of encounter with Jesus.
England & Wales[2]	Catholic Schools • Place Christ at the centre of all that they do. • Ensure that a child's journey into adulthood should also be a journey of faith. Endeavour to offer "to all, and especially the poor and marginalized, the opportunity of an education, of training for ajob, of human and Christian formation".
USA[3]	Catholic Schools are • Centred in the Person of Jesus Christ.Contributing to the Evangelizing Mission of the Church. • Distinguished by Excellence.Committed to Educate the Whole Child.Steeped in the Catholic worldview.Sustained by Gospel Witness.Shaped by Communion and Community.Accessible to all students. • Established by the express authority of the Bishop.
New Zealand[4]	Catholic Schools • provide Catholic Education – Christ is the foundation of everything that happens in the school • strive for educational excellence. • contribute to the Church's mission. • contribute to society.

[1] From Scottish Catholic Education Service website, www.sces.org.uk downloaded on 29/03/23
[2] From *'Christ at the Centre'* by Marcus Stock (2013) Catholic Education Service of England and Wales.
[3] From '*National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*' National Catholic Education Association, 2021
[4] From '*The Declaration of the Proprietors of Catholic Schools in New Zealand on the essential characteristics of authentic Catholic school education*' downloaded from www.nzceo.org on 05/4/23

All of the Principals who engaged with the current research lead Catholic schools and are responsible for ensuring that these key aspects are enacted in those schools. As with school leaders in other faith-schools globally, this puts Catholic school Principals in the unusual situation of being responsible both for maintaining teaching and learning standards and leading a faith community.

Chapter 3:   Literature Review

3.1   Introduction

The field of Catholic Education is a vast research area, with large amounts of literature covering various aspects. However, in order to ensure specific relevance, rather than attempting to review many centuries worth of material on the broad subject of Catholic Education, I will confine my review to material specifically related to:

- Catholic school leadership

- Catholic school leadership preparation, formation and selection process

- Applying for the principalship

3.2   Catholic School leadership

Prior to reviewing the literature on Catholic school leadership, it is important to provide a brief context about what makes a school a Catholic school and how this makes leading one unique.

Groome (2004) in his piece "What makes a school Catholic?" gives a description of the distinctive nature of Catholic education. To Groome, the distinctive elements of a Catholic education are attributed to the characteristics that make Catholicism distinct from other faiths (p.106). In elucidating the nature of this distinctiveness, Groome refers to the work of Gilkey (1975), who suggested that there are four basic features that distinguish Catholicism from other faiths and Catholic education from other forms. Gilkey called these tradition, anthropology, sacramentality and rationality. Groome (2004) builds on these, outlining five that he titles the theological characteristics. These are: a positive anthropology, the sacramentality of life, a communal emphasis, commitment to tradition and an appreciation of rationality.

Positive anthropology refers to the Catholic belief that we are all made in the image and likeness of God and that, although we may sometimes be inclined to sin, we are all at our very essence more good than evil. It is also sometimes known as 'realistic optimism'.

Sacramentality refers to the idea that we see God in all things. We encounter His presence and grace in the ordinary of life, through nature and the created order. This grace helps us

to see the beauty in all things. The word Catholic is often translated to mean 'universal'. However, the etymology of the word leads to the more accurate translation 'embracing the whole' and expresses the belief in the importance of community. There is an understanding that we cannot come to understand ourselves without knowing others. It is in our relationships with others that we gain self-awareness (Groome, 2004, pp.111-113).Tradition, according to Groome, is an "encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ and His 'good news of salvation', which is mediated through Christian story and vision" (p.117). Catholicism has a long-held commitment to rationality - one need only look to the history of great scientists who were also Catholic clergy, from Copernicus through to Georges Lemaitre. In spite of the commonly held belief that science and faith cannot co-exist, the very opposite is true in the Catholic faith. Reason and revelation are bedfellows for the faith. Catholic education has always encouraged students to think for themselves, to critically reflect and to value their own discernment about knowledge and theory. Groome (2014) calls rationality, faith-seeking understanding.

Due to the distinct nature of Catholic schools, leading them has an additional layer of responsibility above and beyond that of non-faith schools. Catholic school leaders "are tasked with fostering an awareness of the sacred alongside the pursuit of academic excellence" Hallman (2022, p.24). They must maintain high standards of teaching and learning, as well as guiding the school community in faith development. Martin (2015) sums up what should be the aim of every Catholic school leader and highlights the duality of the role

> A good Catholic school leader ensures that young people are given opportunities to integrate their thoughts, feelings and actions so that they leave school fully rounded and developed individuals, not only with good grades, but also with Christian attitudes and values.

Catholic school leaders, as Grace (2009) points out, serve both "God and Caesar" (p.490) and this can lead to tensions.

In Ireland, leading a Catholic school, or any faith-school, has become increasingly challenging in light of the increasing secularism in Irish society. Post Celtic Tiger Ireland has seen a "shift in the balance of institutional-cultural power away from the Catholic Church towards the State, the media and the market" Inglis (2017). This has been accompanied by a rapid decline in religious practice. According to CSO (2011) between 1991 and 2011 there was a four-fold increase in the proportion of the population who

identify as having no religion, being atheists or agnostics. Census 2022 results show that 69% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic, a decrease from 79% in 2016 and 84.2% in 2011 (CSO, 2022). Miller (2005) highlights the difficulty this situation presents for Catholic schools and leaders;

> The rapidity with which the religious practice in Ireland has declined is a great challenge to Catholic schools today, adding a new evangelisation to their mission, which reaches out to Catholic children whose contact with the Church is tenuous or even non-existent.
>
> (Miller, 2005, p. 65)

Tuohy (2007) concurs, observing that schools are now having to introduce children to Catholic values, often for the first time and with little support from home. In the past it would have been assumed that children were already well versed in Catholic values before even starting school. Catholic educators now often find themselves *in loco parentis* in introducing Catholic children to prayer, liturgy and the traditions and rituals of the Church. An additional concern in this respect is that as time passes and today's children become tomorrow's teachers and school leaders, they will not have the theological and spiritual knowledge needed to lead a faith community. The concern here is that, as religious practice has declined, "recent generations of Catholic teachers may not have a rich range of life and professional histories in the Catholic tradition to draw from" (Harvie and Kerrigan ,2022). Tuohy (2007) addresses the challenge of leadership succession, expressing concerns about the faith formation of lay Principals. He points out that the first generation of lay Principals in Irish schools had taught alongside religious and would have absorbed the charism and values of the religious communities. Tuohy continues to express concern about the second and subsequent generations of lay Principals, who he refers to as being brought up in the aftermath of Vatican II, fearing that they do not have sufficient grounding in Catholic education. The concern about finding suitably qualified Principals who can take on the dual role of spiritual and educational leader is shared by several other authors, including Harvie and Kerrigan (2022), Friel (2018), Boyle et al. (2016) and Schuttloffel (2013).

Schuttloffel (2013) also notes that faith formation may be taken for granted in Catholic schools, because their Catholic identity seems obvious. She cautions that this would be a precarious situation for those seeking to pass the Catholic identity to the next generation. Care must be taken with the faith formation of not just the pupils but also of the teachers and Principal. (CCE,2022) also asserts the importance of faith formation for teachers and school leaders because

The Catholic School depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programmes. They should, therefore, be very carefully prepared so that both in secular and religious knowledge they are equipped with suitable qualifications and also pedagogical skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world.

(Section 14)

This statement echoes one made in 2006 by Archbishop Miller, a former Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, who stated that "lay persons who teach in Catholic schools need a religious formation equal to their professional formation" (5). Lavery (2012) perhaps describes the roles of Catholic school leaders most clearly:

The role, responsibilities and duties of Catholic School Principals are extensive. They have the task of leading and developing their school as a community of faith. They are responsible for the school's effectiveness as a community of evangelisation. As school leaders they are called to embody the values and vision of the Catholic school through personal witness.

(Lavery, 2012, p. 37)

Belmonte and Cranston (2009) highlight the all-encompassing role of Principal in a Catholic school (p.304). The expectations placed on Principals go far beyond being an educational and faith community leader:

Equally as important as managing the religious aspects of the school, Catholic school Principals must be models to the community so that their attitude and actions transmit the Gospel message and values and beliefs of the Catholic school.

There is considerable pressure on Catholic school leaders to act in the example of Christ. With expectations like these it is hardly surprising that it can sometimes be difficult to find appropriate candidates for principalship.

Another area of research in this field is the description of the types of Catholic School Leaders. Earl (2005) suggests that Catholic Principals need to be managerial, relational and educational leaders. Schafer (2005) agrees with the educational and managerial roles, but differs from Earl in suggesting that there is a need for spiritual leadership too. Tuohy (2005) outlines that scripture presents three archetypes of leadership, the King, the Priest and the Prophet and that these can be applied to education leadership.

Madero (2021) describes five types of Catholic School Leader. These are the listeners, the martyrs, the embedders, the builders and the chosen ones. The listeners were called to teaching and school leadership because of the examples they saw in their own teachers who seemed to enjoy their role and the sense of community within the school. The martyrs entered the profession as a job, but over time they became immersed in the role and it became a calling. The embedder refers to those with a calling both to religious life and teaching. Initially, the calling to teach was embedded in their calling to religious life, but after some time it develops into a calling to teach separate to their religious calling. The builders' calling developed over the course of their career. From troubled beginnings with some resistance to their calling, they become more comfortable with it and see it as their calling to challenge students to understand their responsibility to society. The chosen ones' calling is experienced as a feeling of being chosen to be a teacher as a result of having certain skills or gifts. Nsiah and Walker (2013) refer to Catholic school leaders as exhibiting shepherd leadership. The Catholic Principal cares for their students both physically and spiritually, as in Jesus' saying, "I know my sheep and they know me" (John 10:15). This type of leadership is characterised by a mutual trust between the Principal and the school community.

This biblical reference to leadership is reflected throughout the literature on servant leadership. Unlike much of the business literature on servant leadership, the research on servant leadership in Catholic schools' credits Jesus Christ with the inventing it rather than Robert Greenleaf. Whilst Greenleaf's theory has become the *theory du jour* in secular businesses and organisations in recent decades, since he coined the term in 1970, Christian servant leadership goes back two millennia to Christ Himself. However, there is a vast difference between Greenleaf's servant leadership and that exhibited by Christ. The ultimate goal for business organisations utilising Greenleaf's theory is to increase productivity and profits. Tenney (n.d.) writing for *Business Leadership Today* highlights the benefits of servant leadership for organisations;

> The benefits of servant leadership are higher levels of trust, a positive work environment, improved collaborative efforts, and sustainable growth and success. These benefits help organisations improve productivity, performance, and profits while supporting the growth and wellbeing of employees.

When we examine this form of servant leadership further it becomes obvious that the ultimate end goal of service to others is not their growth and improvement. It is, as always with businesses, increased profits. Duby (2009) points out that for Christian servant leaders the initial call is not to serve others, but to serve God first and then others. Duby (2009)

also highlights that scripture also provides Christians with an order of service by which to work. For example, Matthew 22:37-39 shows the order of human service:

> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Ramirez and Santander (2018) also highlight the order of human service, pointing out that Jesus was clear that love, obedience, and service to God should come first and that service to others is secondary to that. Black (2010) observes that the life and teachings of Christ are an example of perfect servant leadership. She points out that Christ's leadership was characterised not by power and control but by love, care and submission. Black also reminds us that Christ undertook possibly the greatest act of service, in deciding to die for his people. Several authors note that servant leadership is the most appropriate form of leadership in Catholic schools (Punnachet, 2009; Black, 2010; Nsiah & Walker, 2013; Striepe & O'Donoghue, 2014). Punnachet's study of servant leadership in practice in Catholic schools in Thailand looked at it from a religious perspective. She contends that true servant leadership consists of three components; servanthood, suffering and self-denial. She points to John 13:1-17, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, as an example of Christ practising what he preached. Nsiah and Walker (2013) provide several other examples of Christ's servant leadership in scripture. These include 1 Kings 12:7, Luke 4:18- 30, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:26, Mark 9:35. Punnachet points to the servant leadership of Christ as being aspirational for the leaders of Catholic organisations. She focuses on Jesus' use of love and kindness in his leadership, which could well be described as 'agape'. Agape love is the highest form of love; it is the love God showed to humans by allowing His son to be sacrificed for their salvation. It is an unselfish love that we exhibit in our love for God and for other human beings. Cuddihy (2018) contends that agape can be used to characterise Catholic school leadership and that the person specification for a Catholic school leader is contained in 1 Corinthians 13. Cuddihy also explains that 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 describes agape love succinctly:

> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant [5]or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [6]it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. [7]It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Both Lavin (2018) and Cuddihy (2018), looking at Catholic school servant leadership in the Ignatian tradition, describe it as love driven leadership, or leading with love. Striepe

and O'Donoghue (2014) found that the teachers and school leaders in their case study school believed that servant leadership is the most closely linked to their Catholic faith "since both hold that one is called to serve others and make society better for all" (p.141).

Servant leadership is not the only model of leadership exhibited in Catholic schools. Catholic school leaders should be inclined toward forms of sacramental leadership. In Catholic belief sacramentality means seeing God in all things and all people, this way of thinking leads to a lot of empathy and compassion in Catholic schools. It also means that all pupils and their families are welcomed equally into our schools. Aside from servant leadership there are other models of sacramental leadership that may be used. Two examples of these will be briefly outlined below, using Catholic Social Teaching as a guide for the school community and invitational leadership.

Many schools look to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) as a framework for how their school community should operate. CST has it foundations in the 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* in which Pope Leo XIII outlined the Church's moral right and duty to promote justice in public life and to suggest genuine solutions to problems being faced. CST is founded on three principles: Human Dignity, Solidarity and Subsidiarity and within these into themes. However, the respect for and preservation of human dignity should always be foremost. The seven themes of CST were outlined in clear terms for the laity by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in the 2011 document *'Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions'* as follows:

1. ***Life and Dignity of the Human Person*** – all human life is sacred and the dignity of the human person is the foundation of the moral vision of society.

2. ***Call to Family, Community and Participation*** – the person is not only sacred but social. People have a right and duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good.

3. ***Rights and Responsibilities*** – human dignity can be protected and healthy community achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities met.

4. ***Option for the poor and vulnerable*** – the needs of the poor and vulnerable in a society must be put first.

5. ***The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers*** – the economy must serve people, not the other way around. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then workers' rights must be respected.

6. ***Solidarity*** – We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. We are our brothers and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. The gospel calls us to be peacemakers.

7. ***Care for God's Creation*** – We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is a requirement of our faith

USCCB (2011)

The themes of CST can be used very effectively to guide all aspects of teaching and learning, community building and holistic development of pupils in Catholic schools. CST offers a roadmap to fulfilling the salvific mission of Catholic education. The themes can be used as themes right across the curriculum, to inspire the children at assemblies and liturgies and to guide school policies and processes. Indeed, the 2014 Instrumentum laboris *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A renewing passion* highlights the duty of the Catholic school to challenge our school community to work for the common good,

> The education in a Catholic school must be imbued with an ethical dimension and dare young people to change both society and the world and to serve the community.

<div align="right">Congregation for Catholic Education (2014, para III).</div>

An invitational leadership style can be used "to fully integrate CST into the life and witness of the school to the values of Christ" (McKinney, 2019). Invitational education was first theorized by Purkey and Novak (1988) who prescribed that schools should be *intentionally* inviting rather than unintentionally inviting, disinviting or inviting by chance. It is their contention that an inviting school climate/culture is key to student learning. By being intentionally inviting school leadership set out in a purposive manner to create a climate where staff feel supported and valued. Pupils feel safe and at ease and therefore comfortable to learn. Parents are engaged in their children school life and participate in various aspects of daily school life. Members of the wider school community are also welcomed in. Purkey and Stanley (1991) and Purkey and Novak (2016) developed a framework called the '5 P relay' which features the 5 areas they believe need to be intentionally inviting in a school. These are People, Places, Programs, Policies and Processes. People-oriented schools are those where there is a general atmosphere of warmth and respect between staff and pupils and within each of those groups. Places are perhaps the easiest to make intentionally inviting as it is easy to see what requires altering. Programs although well-intentioned can unintentionally be harmful to certain individuals or groups within a school because they are perhaps not suited to the context. Staff and school leaders in particular must take care to monitor this. Policies can communicate strong messages to the school and community about what is really valued by the school. Processes similarly to programs can be unintentionally uninviting to individuals or groups, so schools must make conscious efforts to ensure fairness, transparency and equity around various processes.

Invitational theory relies on five key assumptions which are helpful to schools in maintaining an inviting, inclusive and open school culture. These are intentionality, care, optimism, respect and trust. When taken alongside the 5 Ps and the themes of CST these lay out a roadmap for school communities to follow if they wish to be inviting and successful Catholic schools.

Nsiah and Walker (2013) assert that Catholic school leaders should consider themselves as leading on behalf of Christ rather than on their own behalf. Nsiah and Walker also posit that Catholic school Principals' practice of servant leadership in their professional context is "a fundamental, foundational and essential expression of their vocation within the faith community". The idea of school leadership as vocation is not unique to Nsiah and Walker.

Across the literature on Catholic schooling there is widespread acceptance that both teaching in and leading a Catholic school is more than just a profession, but rather a "calling" or vocation. Although much of the literature deals with teaching as a vocation, it applies to school leadership just as strongly, as the mission of a Catholic school leader is the same as that of a Catholic teacher, that is to educate "for the integral formation of the human person" (CCE, 1982, 24) and to develop the whole person in all their capacities.

The term vocation arises from the Latin *vocare* meaning to call. In scripture to be called generally meant to be called by God to undertake an important task. We also see Jesus calling his disciples to follow him. Vocation in the Catholic tradition has largely been associated with entering religious life either taking Holy Orders or entering a vowed religious order. This view of vocation still persists within the Catholic community despite the fact that there are other vocations just as valuable "such as the vocation to the single state, marriage or work" (Elias, 2003, p.299). In fact, since the time of the 2nd Vatican Council a clear definition of vocation has existed. According to Elias (2003) this definition shows that vocation is something all individuals can be called to. Quoting Rahner and Vorgrimler (1965) he writes

> [Vocation is] the recognition by an individual that a particular career (mode of life) corresponds to God's permissive or jussive will for him and is the life work in which he can gain his eternal salvation.

(1965, 483-4)

A second type of calling that is spoken about often within Catholic organisations is discipleship. Discipleship has come into sharper focus within the church since His Holiness Pope Francis spoke about missionary discipleship and the new evangelisation in his 2013 Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium.* Whilst both vocation and discipleship are forms of calling from God, they should not be considered to be the same. The call to discipleship is a universal call which is open to all those willing to respond to it. Disciples are called to be witnesses of Christ to the world. They are to share the love and word of Christ with others, they are to evangelise. Unlike the call to discipleship only some are called to vocation. However, in responding to the vocational call and living out their vocation, those who are called also act as disciples. On comparing the characteristics of a disciple and those of an excellent Catholic teacher (Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta, 2014) it becomes apparent exactly the level of discipleship shown by those following their vocational call to teach (or lead) in Catholic schools. Table 3 below outlines the similarities in the characteristics of discipleship and the spiritual commitments of those with vocations to teach.

Table 3 *The 12 Characteristics of Catholic Discipleship compared with the 12 Spiritual Commitments of an excellent Catholic teacher*

12 Characteristics of Catholic Discipleship *Adapted from Le Jeune accessed 03/08/24*	An Excellent Catholic Teacher's Spiritual Commitments *Adapted from CCSSA 2014*
1. **Disciples are called** - God always acts first! Jesus has called each of us. The next step is...	1. Testifies to a relationship with Jesus Christ by his or her life
2. **Disciples intentionally respond to Jesus' call** - After we are called, then a disciple must respond positively to the call! if you don't make a choice. Discipleship is never inherited or accidental!	2. Participates fully as a member of the Church and its evangelizing mission

3. **Disciples love** - This is a primary mark of a disciple. Love of God and love of others..

4. **Disciples are fruitful** - In fact, Jesus says that being fruitful PROVES that you are his disciple.

5. **Disciples are obedient** - We can't be intimate with Jesus and be disobedient. It is a non-starter.

6. **Disciples are taught** - In Scripture, we constantly find the disciples of Jesus learning from Him. The life of a Christian disciple is one of lifelong learning.

7. **Disciples follow** - The word, "disciple", means "follower". All of our life of discipleship starts with following Jesus. We must do as He did. Love as He loved. Choose what He chose.

8. **Disciples keep an eye on Heaven** - The life we live now is not our final home. The prize of heaven is a gift we must keep our eyes on, so that we don't lose the eternal perspective of God.

9. **Disciples carry crosses** - Discipleship isn't easy. We should never forget that suffering is a part of discipleship.

10. **Disciples spend time with Jesus in prayer** - If we do what Jesus did, then we need to live in intimate relationship with God.

11. **Disciples love and serve God (and others)** - Think of the many times the disciples were called to serve. The life of a disciple isn't about you!

3. Nurtures a meaningful personal prayer life

4. Employs reflective practices in both personal and professional life

5. Seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the Gospel through personal learning and faith formation opportunities

6. Endorses Catholic education in words and actions

7. Shares authentically his or her journey of faith

8. Lives a passionate and joyful life nourished by hope

9. Works collegially in a spirit of respect and cooperation

10. Seeks reconciliation and responds to situations with charity

12. **Disciples make other disciples** - Ultimately, we need to do what Jesus did, which means to "make disciples". This was His final command and the one we cannot avoid personally.

11. Employs personal strengths and talents for the good of others and the community

12. Commits to creating a more just society through works of charity and social justice

While not all those who are called to discipleship are called to a vocation, all those who have a vocation are also disciples. As I will demonstrate below, teaching/leading a Catholic school is a vocation which plays an incredibly important role in the salvific mission of the Catholic Church.

As is pointed out in *Gravissimum educationis* Section 8 Council (1965) with regard to the importance of teachers:

> The Catholic school depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programmes......... their work is in the real sense of the word an apostolate.

The notion of teaching as an apostolate places it in the realm of vocation, as an apostolate is committed to the salvific mission of the Church, the evangelisation of the world. Harvie and Kerrigan (2022) refer to teaching as "a personal vocation, which requires professionalism and spiritual capital" (p.94).

Spiritual capital is a concept that arose from the influence of Bourdieu and his theory on 'forms of capital'. Bourdieu described four types of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic, he defined capital as "the set of actually useable resources and powers" (1984, 114). This capital helps to determine a person's fate as they exist in society, those with richer levels of the various capitals are most likely to succeed. Since Bourdieu's initial theory was published other theorists have developed the concept and highlighted other forms of capital. One such example is Spiritual Capital. Vide and Wroblewski (2022) outline that much of the literature on the concept of spiritual capital describes it as a

'super capital' A type of capital that connects all the capitals: human, social, religious, psychological and cultural capital

(p.7)

Lydon (2022) credits Grace (2002) as being the first author to provide a formal definition of spiritual capital. Grace (2002) describes spiritual capital thus:

… resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition

and as :

… a source of empowerment because it provides a transcendent impulse which can guide judgement and action in the mundane world.

(2002, p.236)

In 2010 Grace revisited this definition in order to provide a "theoretical elaboration" (p.117) of the concept. Grace highlights that spiritual capital "encompasses personal witness to faith in practice, action and relationships" (2010, p117). Grace's elaboration ends with a summary of the ways in which one might describe spiritual capital. He presents spiritual capital as a form of spirituality that:

- Views all human life in terms of the relationship with the Holy Trinity and the saints

- Has been an animating, empowering and inspiring spirit for Catholic Education particularly through the work of religious congregations

- Is in urgent need of renewal in the face of growing secularisation, global marketization and the decline in religious congregations

- Needs to be reconstituted in lay school leaders and teachers through formation programmes.

Grace (2010, p.125)

 It is the contention of both Grace (2010) and Lydon (2022) that Catholic school leaders rely on their own spiritual capital in leading schools. Much of this spiritual capital arises from their own schooling in Catholic schools and the presence of members of religious orders or teachers who taught alongside them and carry forward the particular charism of the order. This is something which draws Catholic schools apart from other schools but is

something that needs to be focussed on by those of us in Catholic education. As numbers of these gate-keepers of the charism dwindle so too does the spiritual capital available to school leaders and teachers. Grace (2010) is keen to point out the necessity for formation programmes for Catholic educators.

Harvie and Kerrigan (2022)also highlight that the Catholic Church views teaching and, by extension, school leadership, as a vocation because of which "teachers are called to personal holiness and to an apostolic mission to develop, inspire and empower others in the faith" (p.94). Jamison (2013) speaks to the universality of vocation, in that all those who are baptised have a calling to holiness and some have an additional calling to religious life. Jamison contends that without the universal vocation the religious vocation cannot exist and vice versa. He believes that Catholic school culture should nurture a culture of vocation and that Catholic school leaders have an important role to play in doing so. Hallman (2022) acknowledges that teaching in faith-based schools has traditionally been viewed not just as a profession, but as a vocation or calling. Writing in an American context, Hallman believes that this traditional view of teaching is being replaced by a "neoliberal view". This, Hallman believes, is a transactional view, where the teacher is seen as nothing more than a provider of educational services to the customer i.e. the child and family. This erosion of the vocational view of teaching may lead faith-based schooling to becoming no different than secular schooling and teaching.
Buijs (2005) has much to say on the topic of teaching and school leadership as vocation, observing that a vocation is about being of service to others and is a truly altruistic pursuit, reiterating the CCE (1982) point about the responsibility of Catholic educators to help their pupils to integrate faith and culture for the good of society. Buijs (2005, p.336) provides the reader with a clear and simple explanation of what vocation really is;

> Vocation can be understood – theologically and non-theologically- as an inner call, and offered gift, that originates beyond ourselves, that demands an intentional response, that solicits fidelity and trust towards whoever imposes the call or offers the gift, and for which we assume responsibility once accepted.

Buijis does point out that whilst a vocation to teach is usually grounded in a religious worldview, it could also be grounded in a humanistic worldview, so that rather than feeling impelled to follow God's plan a person might feel impelled to teach in order to serve those in need of education. Bollan (2007) contends that as the view of teaching as a vocation is enshrined in Catholic education, it can be overlooked or taken for granted. Bollan describes the vocation of a Catholic teacher as;

It is a calling which

- Begins with Christ and develops in conversation with him
- Often goes unheard and unacknowledged, buried under layers of our personal history
- Persists in spite of (and sometimes through) the messy relationships and poor choices we enter into
- Once heard, echoes throughout our lives

(Bollan, 2007, p.36)

Bollan continues to describe the ways in which people receive their calling or vocation, stating that a vocation may be with us from the very start, may be something that we grow into, or be something that we need to be metaphorically dragged kicking and screaming into. For those who receive their calling from the start, they have always wanted to teach since they first encountered school as small children. Those who grow into the vocation, may have entered what they saw as a good professional job, but developed their love and vocation for teaching gradually the longer they spent in the role. Those Bollan describes as accepting their vocation kicking and screaming are those who struggle with it. They are the people for whom the idea of teaching came into their mind unbidden and they may have done other jobs in order to try and ignore their calling, but the calling would not go unanswered and so the individual acquiesced and became a teacher. Madero (2021) outlines four types of calling, the origin of each and the response of individuals to each. I have recreated Madero's table 1 below in order to present their ideas succinctly.

Table 4   Madero's table of calling types

Type	Origin	Individual action
Classical	God/ The Divine	Receive and Accept
Modern-social	Beyond self/non-transcendent	Search
Modern-individualistic	Within the self	Self-awareness
Neo-classical	Beyond the self/transcendent	Receive, accept, search

Adapted from Madero, 2021, p.2.

The research literature presented here is by no means exhaustive, but it is representative of the main themes arising in the area of Catholic school leadership.

3.3   Catholic school leadership preparation, formation and selection

In Ireland there is currently no additional formal qualification required by a teacher to be Principal of a primary school under any Patronage body. For Catholic schools there is a requirement to hold a Certificate in Religious Education (CRE) for all teaching positions including the Principal. Candidates proposed for appointment must also be approved by the Bishop of the diocese. One of the key issues for Principals is that once they have completed the CRE, which runs concurrently with initial teacher education courses, they receive no further formal formation or preparation to lead a Catholic school. There are a number of postgraduate qualifications that can be undertaken, but this is done at an individual's own discretion. There is no professional development in Catholic education offered to teachers or school leaders by individual dioceses, the CPSMA or any other organisation. When it comes to strengthening and supporting the Principal's role as leader of a faith community, they are left to their own devices and must use their own resources.

This section will examine the research around preparation, formation and selection of leaders for Catholic school leaders. It is important to clarify the way in which these terms are being interpreted for the purpose of this review of the literature. Preparation refers to the professional educational experience, qualifications and knowledge that school leaders gather whilst aspiring to school leadership roles. Preparation covers the mandatory requirements aspiring Catholic leaders need to fulfil in order to meet legal and professional obligations. For example, a Scottish Catholic school leader needs to attain the Headship Standard to meet General Teaching Council of Scotland's (GTCS) requirements for those employed in permanent positions as Head teacher.

Formation includes the spiritual preparation that Catholic educators undergo in order to prepare them for the faith leadership role they assume with school leadership. However, formation is much more than this, as highlighted in *Leading Formation for Mission – A Practical Guide* (NCEC, 2022);

> Formation invites people to use their gifts to further God's mission for a particular time, place and purpose. Recognising that everyone is on a faith journey, formation engages people in discerning their place in the call to bring Gospel values to the service of others.

Foreword (NCEC, 2022)

Formation can be known as Faith formation or Spiritual formation and should be a lifelong process for all baptised Catholics, but is especially important for those with a mission to educate. CCE (1982) states:

> For the Catholic educator, religious formation does not come to an end with the completion of basic education; it must be a part of and a complement to one's professional formation, and so be proportionate to adult faith, human culture, and the specific lay vocation. This means that religious formation must be oriented toward both personal sanctification and apostolic mission, for these are two inseparable elements in a Christian vocation.
>
> *Lay Catholics in School,* Section 65

All Magisterial documents on education, from *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) up to and including *Instrumentum Laboris, educating today and tomorrow* (2014), discuss the importance of faith formation for educators and pupils alike.

Selection here simply refers to the recruitment and hiring procedures used in employing individuals for senior Catholic school leadership positions.

Globally there are many different education systems that all have different leadership preparation criteria. In some countries there is a requirement to have an academic qualification or some type of licensure/accreditation before even applying for a leadership role in a school. Other countries have no such requirement, but will provide induction training on appointment to school leadership and many countries expect their school leaders to engage in professional learning once in service as a school leader (see Pont et al., 2008). Currently, in Ireland newly appointed Principals are offered induction training on a programme called Misneach (Courage), which sees them cover six modules. These are conducted during two 2 day residential sessions and a one-day concluding session. The five days are spread over the first two years in the role.

 Ummanel et al. (2016) found that the Principals in their study reported being ill-prepared taking on the role of Principal, in no small part due to the lack of pre-service training. In his study of the life histories of Principals, Sugrue (2015) also found that there was a need for a higher degree of preparation, both formal and informal. Murphy (2023) also found that the novice Principals he interviewed believed that there was scope for more pre-service preparation such as university led courses and also for more on the job learning.

Montecinos et al. (2022) highlight a system that has been in place in Singapore for a number of years, whereby aspiring Principals are mentored by practising Principals. Part of their mentee experience includes an eight-week internship at the school led by the mentor.

Another form of preparation for principalship is the attainment of national standards of practice for school leaders. In some countries these lead to accreditation and in others they are aspirational, but considered good practice. Scotland has the Standard for Headship, which is mandatory for all Head teachers GTCS (2021). Wales has the Head Teachers Qualification, which leads to a National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and is mandatory (Waters,2023). Both England and Northern Ireland have Head Teacher Standards and in both countries it is possible and considered good practice to gain the NPQH UK (2020). In Ireland we have no mandatory qualification for principalship, nor do we have professional standards, other than those that apply to all teachers. We do, however, have a document entitled '*Looking at Our Schools'*, (Inspectorate and D.E.S 2022). Known as LAOS, this "is a framework that provides a shared understanding of what effective and highly effective learning, teaching, leadership and management practices look like in the Irish school system" (p.5). Originally designed as self-reflection tool for schools to support them with school self-evaluation, it then became the basis for inspections carried out by the Inspectorate. The four domains from the leadership and management section of LAOS are now also used as the criteria against which Principal candidates are assessed at interview. These four domains; leading learning and teaching, managing the organisation, leading school development and developing leadership capacity, are also used in the Standard Application Form (SAF) for principalship. They are referred to as competencies and candidates are asked to "describe some of your personal achievements that demonstrate the necessary skills and qualities required for the position". From the point of view of an aspiring Principal the LAOS document is useful in preparing for principalship as it allows them to assess their own skills and competency deficits and remedy the situation before applying for roles.

Preparation for the role of Principal is important, but for aspirant Catholic school Principals formation is just as important in preparing for the faith leadership role that is so central to the Principal's role in a Catholic school. In Ireland, once educators, including school leaders, have completed either the Certificate in Catholic Religious Education or the Certificate in Religious Studies (required to work in a Catholic school), there is no further formal faith formation offered. Whilst some dioceses may arrange a retreat for school leaders occasionally, this is not something that is done in every diocese or that forms any sort of policy from the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference (ICBC). Catholic school leaders

in Ireland are very much reliant on their own spiritual and religious capital in fulfilling their duty of leading a faith community. This is despite the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) repeatedly calling for particular attention to be paid to lay educators and their spiritual formation. In the 1988 document *The Religious Dimension in a Catholic School,* the CCE called upon the wider Church

> to look to the future and promote the establishment of formation centres for these teachers; ecclesiastical universities and faculties should do what they can to develop appropriate programs so that the teachers of tomorrow will be
>
> able to carry out their task with the competence and efficacy that is expected of them.

(CCE, 1988, Section 96)

Similarly, in 2014 in the document *Instrumentum Laboris, Educating Today and Tomorrow* the CCE encouraged national Bishops' Conferences and diocesan education offices to think about ways to develop faith formation programmes for those with ecclesial responsibilities. *Educating Today and Tomorrow* also highlights the particular importance that should be given to the "formation and selection of school heads" (III, 1b). However, no instruction was given on how this might actually be done or on the content of such programmes.

Traditionally in Catholic schools run by religious orders one of the most important ways in which teachers and school leaders were formed was by transmission of the charism of the order. The word charism comes from a Greek word meaning gift and within Catholic vocabulary it refers to a gift, grace or talent specifically bestowed by God (Lydon, 2009). In the case of religious orders, the charism usually arises in large part from the founder/s original gift and subsequent formation of a community with a mission. The charism becomes the animating force within the community and it drives not just what they do in their ministry but also how and why they do it. The charism will deepen and change to respond to the signs of the times, but at its core will remain true to the original ideals. Different religious orders will have different charisms,even when it seems as though they have similar ministries. McLaughlin (2006) writes about the charism of the Christian Brothers, who work in education. Founded by Blessed Edmund Rice ,the Brothers have

always worked with poor and marginalised communities. Their charism, according to McLaughlin, is Presence, Compassion, Liberation (p.24) -Presence in their relationship with God, Compassion for those who are poor and marginalized and Liberation from the tyranny of poverty and oppression. Lydon and Briody (2023) outline the five elements of the Salesian charism. These are; amorevolezza (loving kindness), presence in the lives of the young people, family spirit which fosters mutual confidence, self-sacrifice and temperance, holistic formation.

The Salesian founder Don Bosco and the Christian Brothers founder Edmund Rice laid their vision of their charism out clearly for their compatriots and successive generations. These charisms have survived because they are part of the living legacy of their founders represented in the communities they founded. With the serious decline in the numbers of people taking religious vows in many countries there is concern within the literature about the transmission of charism and as a result the suitability of lay school leaders (Schuttloffel, 2013; Boyle, Haller and Hunt, 2016 and Harvie and Kerrigan, 2022). Lydon (2009) highlights the fact that charism was modelled by members of the religious orders for lay staff and pupils alike. However as the numbers of religious decrease so to do the numbers of lay staff who worked alongside them. Increasingly in such schools there are less and less staff with the intimate knowledge of the charism to carry it on. For this reason, it is important that such schools create formation programmes for their staff, programmes that assist staff to embed these charisms in their own lives and support them in their vocation of teaching. In Ireland, as a result of the decline in religious direct involvement in schools, three schools trust have been formed that focus on the transmission of charism through formation programmes for staff and students. The trusts also act as patronage bodies for the schools. ERST is responsible for continuing the educational charism of Christian Brothers Schools, Lé Cheile looks after the schools of fifteen congregations including the Patrician Brothers and the Ursuline Sisters and CEIST helps ensure the continuation of the charism of five congregations including the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters. Unfortunately, individual diocesan schools have nowhere to turn for the provision of formation programmes and support around the ethos and values of the school.

There are several international examples that ICBC could look to for inspiration. Catholic Head teachers in England and Wales can avail of the National Retreat for Catholic Head

teachers and the services of the National School for Formation. Through the National School for Formation they can request the accompaniment of a trained spiritual guide.

Arising from the Nottingham Colloquium in 2010, the National Retreat and the National School for Formation were established in answer to the call from Heads at the event for spiritual resources to support them in their work Friel (2018). The first National Retreat took place in 2011 and according to Friel (2018, p.85) has grown in attendance year on year. While the National Retreat was met with a positive response from Heads, it was not enough to fulfil their need for support and guidance in their role as faith leaders. As a result, Heads who attended the National Retreat were offered the opportunity to engage with a spiritual guide through the Emmanus programme. The use of spiritual guides has been a common practice within the Church, but traditionally in the formation and subsequent lives of religious. It has now become more common for the laity to access this guidance, but, as Friel points out, there can still be some reluctance from Heads to engage. Friel (2018, p.91) suggests that this may arise from a fear of being seen as not up to par, or because the practice is relatively new for the laity, there was some fear of the unknown. In addition to the retreat and spiritual guidance a third resource was added. The National School for Formation established a year-long programme of spiritual development for Heads. The focus is very much on Head teachers understanding themselves in their role of faith leader and enriching their individual formation. Each of these programmes was developed from concepts such as retreat, spiritual guidance and higher education, all concepts that the Catholic Church in Ireland has considerable experience with. The example of our British colleagues might be one that the ICBC could consider.

Alternatively, they can look west to the USA, which has established a set of national standards for effective Catholic schooling. The National Standards & Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (NSBECS) were introduced in 2012 and serve a similar purpose to the Irish LAOS document, in terms of assessing school effectiveness. However, the NSBECS can be used at all levels of Catholic education and, as such, can assist in leadership formation in two ways. Firstly, Catholic school leaders can utilise the standards with their school communities to reflect on the school's practice across the four domains laid out in the NSBECS. As with the LAOS documents, the 20 standards of the NSBECS are categorised into domains - mission and Catholic identity, governance and leadership, academic excellence and operational vitality. Catholic schools throughout the US can utilise the NSBECS for school improvement purposes, both in terms of the school as academic institution and as faith community. Secondly, Catholic universities across the US have been able to use NSBECS to design and develop courses for potential school leaders

that not only help them gain State licensure required to take up a principalship, but also focuses on their faith formation and how they can support their schools spiritually. Sullivan and Pena (2019) describe the development of one such course, the Catholic Principal Preparation Program (CPPP) offered by Loyola University in Chicago. Utilising the 20 NSBECS competencies alongside the national Professional Standards for Educational leaders, the CPPP uses faith-based action research projects to allow participants gain a deeper understanding of their school as a faith community. The CPPP helps to develop self-reflective practice in participants which helps them to evaluate the success of their action research. A four semester internship working alongside a practicing Principal is a requirement and participants are assigned administrative duties. Participants are assigned a coach who visits them at school weekly and who helps them focus on developing themselves as Catholic school leaders. Much of this is done by using questioning to help participants discern solutions to problems.

Loyola University is not the only American Catholic institution to offer Catholic school leadership preparation programmes. Notre Dame University has, through its Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE), offered faith formation courses to Catholic school leaders and

teachers. Two of the most note-worthy programmes are the Mary Ann Remick Leadership (MARL) programme and the Center for Transformational Educational Leadership (CTEL). The MARL programme is a 25-month course leading to an MA in Educational Leadership and is available to both aspiring and practising Principals. The CTEL, on the other hand, is only available to those practising Principals who feel that their school would benefit from them having a deeper formation (Kowalski et al.2020). The CTEL is a two-year course, but it does not lead to a degree. Like all of the ACE programs, the MARL and CTEL are designed around three pillars; professional education, community and spirituality. The focus of all programmes leans heavily toward faith formation. All participants on ACE programmes are provided with regular spiritual guidance while they discern their path to effective Catholic school leadership.

In respect of selection of Catholic school leaders and school leaders more generally a great deal of literature exists in relation to effective or successful school leadership. There is much discussion in the literature about what effective school leaders do that differentiates them from ineffective leaders. Some studies examine the characteristics of an effective Principal, some discuss the dimensions and others write about the key practices.

In Tables 5, 6 and 7 below I have outlined the characteristics/elements of effective principalship as described by several authors. The model outlined in Table 5 as discussed by Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins (2020) presents perhaps the best amalgamation of all of the elements outlined in the literature below. The elements laid out in Tables 6 and 7 essentially assist in fleshing out the model provided by Leithwood et al.

Table 5   Characteristics of effective Principals 1

Wallace Foundation Report (2012) in Spiro (2013) *Five Key Practices of Effective Principals*	Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins (2020) *What do successful school leaders do?*
- Shaping a vision of success for all students - Creating a climate hospitable to education - Cultivating leadership in others - Improving instruction - Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement	**Set Directions** Build a shared vision - Identify specific, shared, short-term goal - Create high-performance expectations - Communicate the vision and goals **Build Relationships and Develop People.** - Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff - Provide support and demonstrate consideration for individual staff members - Model the school's values and practices - Build trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents - Establish productive working relationships with teacher federation representatives **Develop the Organization to Support Desired Practices** - Build collaborative culture and distribute leadership - Structure the organization to facilitate collaboration - Build productive relationships with families and communities - Connect the school to its wider environment - Maintain a safe and healthy school environment - Allocate resources in support of the school's vision and goals **Improve the Instructional Program** - Staff the instructional program - Provide instructional support - Monitor student learning and school improvement progress - Buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work.

Adapted from Spiro (2013),Leithwood et al. (2020)

Table 6   Characteristics of effective Principals 2

Day, Sammons & Gorgen (2021) *Key dimensions of successful school leadership*	Parylo & Zepeda (2014) *Categories of characteristics of effective Principals*
- Improving conditions for teaching and learning - Redesigning the organisation - Enhancing effective teaching & learning - Redesigning & enriching the curriculum - Enhancing teacher quality - Building relationships in and out of the school community - Modelling common values - Ensuring student well-being and equitable access to supports.	**<u>Documented Characteristics</u>** e.g. having a solid track record and being a good manager. **<u>Instructional Skills</u>** e.g. instructional leadership and data leadership **<u>Interpersonal Skills</u>** e.g. being a team player and a community leader **<u>Perceptual Characteristics</u>** e.g. being a perfect fit for the school, being a passionate leader.

Adapted from Day et al. (2021),Parylo and Zepeda (2014)

Table 7 Characteristics of effective Principals 3

Boyle, Morten & Guerin (2013) in Sullivan & Pena (2019) *Loyola's Catholic School Principal Competencies*	Garza, Drysdale et al (2014) *Seven attributes and five dispositions of effective Principals*
Mission & Catholic identity • Build & maintain Catholic culture • Leads in worship, prayer and service • Provides high quality RE program • Collaborates with parents, the primary educators **Governance & Leadership** • Promotes innovation, collaboration and change • Understands school governance structure • Strategic Planning • Recruits, selects, supervises and evaluates personnel • Policy development **Academic Excellence** • Inspires & leads toward academic excellence • Infuses Catholic teachings/values in curriculum • Monitor & alter programs if required • Cater to unique learning needs • Develop a Professional Learning Community **Operational vitality** • Stewardship of financial and other resources • Development plan • Enrolment management • Marketing • Co-ordinate with external groups • Ensure safety of school/facilities	**Attributes** • Principals should articulate views on education and set school in appropriate direction • Concerned with PD for teachers and tries to build leadership capacity • Instructional leaders who influence teaching and learning • Resilient • Motivator and motivated • Community builder (school) • Community involvement (outside of school) *The authors noted that successful Principals studied by them showed excellent affective and personal dispositions.* **Dispositions** • Driven by a philosophy of Social Justice • Ascribed to a strong notion of care • Highly ethical and morally responsible • High degree of resiliency and persistence • They were courageous

Adapted from Sullivan and Pena (2019) & Garza et al. (2014)

It is important to ascertain what effective Principalship consists of before selecting people for the role. As mentioned above, the LAOS (2022& 2024) document is used for the selection of Principals in Ireland. Comparing that document to the literature in the tables above, it can be seen that it is very comprehensive with regard to outlining the characteristics and skills required for Principalship.

3.4   Applying for the principalship

Rahimi and Arnold (2022) surveyed 405 Irish primary Principals and Deputy Principals as part of a Health and Well-being study commissioned by the IPPN. The results painted a less than attractive picture of the effects of principalship on the health of those in the role. The rate of burnout in those surveyed was almost double that of the general population (66.1% v 34.1%). Levels of stress in the general population were considerably lower than the school leaders surveyed (26.7% v 51.5%). The results for sleep problems were just as bad, 51.3% of those surveyed and just 21% of the general population. With such a damning account of the effects on an individual's health, it is not difficult to see why the role may be seen as unattractive.

Fortunately, there is a large body of research on what motivates teachers to apply for the role of Principal. Nakitende (2019) looked at female leaders in higher education in the US. She found that their motivations fell into two broad categories, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivators included passion for the work, a sense of achievement, and institutional values that aligned with their own. Extrinsic motivators included gaining promotion and status, increased salary, advice from mentors and the ability to be a role model for other women. Barton (2011) also found that motivations to take on a school leadership position were either internal or external. Barton noted that internal motivations included the need for a change or new challenge, a desire for more responsibility and financial benefits. The external motivations noted by Barton were more altruistic and included the desire to make a greater impact in education and to make a difference to students. Cranston (2007) surveyed 146 Australian aspirant Principals on their reasons for wanting to become a Principal. The most popular reason was the desire to have a positive influence on the lives and learning of students. This was followed by wishing to work with a more diverse range of people both in school and the wider community. Like Barton's respondents, the aspiring Principals were driven by a desire to have an influence on education both locally and beyond. Finally, aspirants were motivated by feeling it was time for a promotion, after being in the classroom for some time.

Hancock and Müller (2009) and Muller et al. (2022) undertook two comparative studies investigating the factors motivating German and US teachers to seek school leadership roles. Interestingly, the factors were similar across both studies. The key motivators for participants were; an opportunity to have a positive impact on students and teachers, the ability to shape pupils' learning opportunities, a chance to bring about change in their school and, finally, for a personal or professional challenge. One difference between the

two studies was that in the 2009 study re-location to a more desirable area was a motivator, but it did not arise in the 2022 study. IPPN (2022) outlines that there is some evidence that Irish teachers may be motivated to apply for Principal positions in order to relocate to a different area, but may have little real interest in school leadership (p.11). This is potentially damaging to the schools they move to. Halsey and Dummond (2014) examined the motivations that caused school leaders in rural, regional and remote areas of Australia to apply for the position originally. They split the motivating factors into three groups; personal reasons, professional reasons and place reasons. The single biggest motivator for these school leaders was having a preference for living and working in a rural or remote area. For some this was a lifestyle decision, for others it was returning to their home place and for others it was that they saw the opportunity for promotion. Overall, across the literature on motivations we see similar patterns irrespective of location.

Research on motivations to lead in Catholic schools or, indeed, in any faith schools is limited. All of the motivators mentioned above are likely to apply to Catholic school leaders too, but there is a dearth of research specific to Catholic school leadership and motivation. With that said, Kerins and Spaulding (2022) article on the job experiences of early career Catholic Principals does provide us with some material to work with. They found that early career Catholic elementary Principals are motivated by "a calling to a vocation in Catholic school leadership" (p.84). This calling to lead was a strong motivator in keeping them in their positions during challenging periods. Some of the Principals were also motivated to lead Catholic schools because they felt an allegiance to and comfort in the Catholic school system. Similarly, others in the group felt compelled to take on the role in order to make a difference in the lives of their pupils and school communities. They had vision and were committed to the mission of Catholic education. Convey (2014) investigated the motivations of teachers to teach in Catholic schools. Convey categorised the teachers' motivations into four groups; ministry, Catholic, school and teaching.

Ministry motivations are those that relate to the role of Catholic educators in the evangelical mission of the Church. These included being called/having a vocation to teach

and the chance to share their values with children and to assist in their spiritual development. Catholic motivations relate to the teachers' commitment to Catholic education and desire to work in a Catholic environment. It can also be that a teacher is motivated due to the religious philosophy of the school. School and teaching motivations relate to the academic environment of the school or to the individual's love of teaching.

Although Convey's study examined teacher motivations, it is not unreasonable to suggest that his findings may also be relevant to Catholic Principals – after all, they were once Catholic school teachers too and may still actively teach. Shehav et al. (2021) focused on the factors encouraging and discouraging religious teachers from seeking school leadership roles in religious schools in Israel. The cohort they worked with were religiously observant Jews working in Jewish schools. With regard to their motivations for thinking about taking a school leadership role many of the participants described having a 'shlichut' meaning a calling or task from God. Others were keen to promote Torah values and ensure the next generation were 'righteous'. This is a very interesting parallel with what we know about Catholic school leadership being a vocation.

There is, of course, a body of research on the factors that discourage teachers from seeking principalship and all of the articles referred in this section of the literature review contain sections on those factors. However, as will be seen in chapters five, six and seven, the focus of this study's participants' was on wanting to become Principals, so the discouraging factors are not relevant to this work.

This literature review has given an overview of the relevant research on Catholic school leadership; preparation, formation and selection of Catholic Principals and motivations for applying for the role of Principal. This will provide context for the chapters to follow.

Chapter 4:   Methodology

4.1   Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology and methods used in this study. I will begin by outlining my positionality, to provide the reader with additional context. I will follow this by detailing the methodology and my rationale for its selection. This will be followed by a description of participants, along with the criteria for selection and how they were recruited. Next, I will recount my process of data collection and analysis. Finally, I will discuss the methods I used and the ethical considerations that had to be taken into account

4.2   Research Questions

How do the perceptions of Patron/Assessors/Principals about the Principal selection process in Irish Catholic primary schools align with each other and with the reality of the process?

4.3   Researcher Positionality

Positionality, according to Holmes (2020), reveals where the researcher is coming from, their worldview and their resulting interpretation of the research. Positionality influences how research is designed and conducted and how results are interpreted. It is important for the researcher's credibility that their reader has belief in the truthfulness of the data presented. Holmes (2020) suggests that, by being open and honest about their positionality, researchers can show their audience how they may have influenced their own research. In an effort to ensure that both the reader and I are aware of my possible influence on the research I will present my positionality.

I have been professionally involved in education in Ireland for 20 years and have held a number of positions in that time. I have been a classroom teacher and a special education teacher. I have been seconded to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and I have lectured in two ITE colleges. I am very much an 'insider' in education in Ireland. For the last 12 years I have been the Principal of a mid-size Catholic all-boys school in South Dublin. The school I worked at prior to taking on my current role was also a Catholic all-boys school. Both my primary and secondary education were received at all-girls convent schools. In both schools the Principals were religious sisters. Being educated in Catholic schools in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Catholic Church still had

considerable power in Ireland, the Church and religion were integral to our schooling. In primary school it was not unusual to be asked what the Gospel reading at Sunday Mass had

been and the school day started and finished with prayer. Throughout my schooling we were exposed to social justice issues from around the world and in secondary school, in particular, encouraged to engage with Catholic charities such as the Society of St Vincent De Paul.

With the most formative years of my own education having taken place surrounded by Catholicism, it is not surprising that I ended up working in the sector when I qualified as a teacher. Since taking up my current role, I have become much more engaged with the Church and my role as a faith leader. I trained as a Eucharistic Minister so that I could play a visible role at school Masses or sacramental celebrations. I am a keen proponent of Catholic and faith-based education.

My school is located in a heavily populated area of Dublin and as a result there are seven other Catholic primary schools within a 3km radius. I have gone from being the youngest and least experienced Principal in the area to the most experienced. I am now the go-to person for questions that arise for local colleagues in the early years of their principalship, when situations arise that they are unaccustomed with and they are unsure of how to deal with them. The eight of us try hard to meet up every six weeks or so for what we call 'Tea and Sympathy' sessions. It was at one of those sessions that the kernel of an idea that became this research hit me. When I started in my current role 12 years ago, there were five females and three male Principals at our gatherings. Over time that has gradually switched around and now there are three female Principals and five males. What also struck me was how the age profile of the men had changed dramatically over the period. When I started, the three male Principals were all within five to seven years of retirement age and now four of the five are under 40. I wondered what the reason for the sudden upturn in male Principal numbers was, given that teaching in Ireland is female dominated and the number of male teachers in the profession has dropped over the period I have been Principal. Also, at the time many of my own friends, women who were highly educated and very experienced educators, were being turned down for Principal roles or having to apply for multiple positions before being successful. Yet the new male Principals in my area were all successful at their first or second interview. The only difference I could see was gender, as all of the new male Principals were also well educated and experienced.

Around the same time as that 'Tea and Sympathy' session I had been involved with teacher recruitment for schools in the Diocese for a while. I am on the list of Independent Assessor for positions up to Assistant Principal 1 and so am regularly asked to sit on interview panels for teaching positions in other schools. As an Independent Assessor I have heard of

colleagues being encouraged to see the benefits of a particular candidate. This is anecdotal of course. However, I began to wonder if my colleagues on the list of Independent Assessor for Principal and Deputy Principal roles were having a similar experience. I had heard so many different experiences from friends and colleagues that it seemed as though no two Principal recruitment processes were the same. This led me to this study and the consideration of the perceptions of representatives of all the parties involved in the process.

4.4   Research Paradigm

I selected an interpretivist mixed methods approach using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to gather information. I elected to use a mixed methods approach as, having switched from natural sciences at undergraduate level to social sciences at postgraduate level, I am comfortable with the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. I felt that the quantitative sections of the questionnaire were necessary in order to gather an accurate profile of the demographics of the group.

 Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed, subjective and multiple. In other words, different people experience the same situation in different ways. This is due to individuals creating their own meaning in each situation. Each individual's experience of an event or behaviour is shaped by their own life experience, history, family background, race, gender and a plethora of other factors (Denscombe, 2017). Just as individuals are producing and reproducing meaning constantly, the researcher must also constantly examine and re- examine their interpretations. As individuals all experience reality through the lens of their own experience and life story, there is no one reality to a situation but multiple realities constructed by different individuals.

The multitude of realities is one of the reasons interpretivist researchers will seek to engage with multiple parties about a situation or event. By gathering the interpretations of all parties to a situation we can start to form a picture of reality as the researcher interprets it. This is one of the reasons I selected the interpretivist paradigm in which to situate this study. The other reasons include the depth of understanding that can be achieved, as the researcher can really interrogate meanings individuals attach to various experience and the recognition of the importance of context and life experience in shaping individuals' beliefs, interactions and behaviour in different scenarios. Finally, the interpretivist approach gives participants a voice and input into how their experiences are shared with others. There is a richness in the data that arises when the participants feel included.

Having said that, interpretivism is by no means without its flaws. Critics of this paradigm express concerns that research findings are highly subjective and may be open to research bias in that the researcher's interpretations are developed from their beliefs and experiences and may influence the findings. Another criticism is that research findings lack generalisability because they are so specific to a particular context, they cannot be generalised to wider populations. This criticism misses the point of the interpretivist approach somewhat. This approach is used to learn more about particular groups, or specific events or activities, and it is not meant to be generalisable.

The approach is convergent mixed methods, (Creswell, 2023) as I used both qualitative and quantitative methods, a questionnaire and qualitative interviews. Data collection for both the questionnaire and the interviews started at the same time, but the interviews took much longer to complete. The questionnaire contained both qualitative and quantitative questions. This was done in order to a) obtain as much demographic information about Principals of Catholic schools as possible (quantitative questions) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and b) to gain information on Principals' reasoning for various career decisions they may have made. The questionnaire was the first phase of this study and provided me with a clear picture of the types of people who are leading Catholic primary schools in Ireland currently. No data was available elsewhere specific to Principals of Catholic schools. The questionnaire was followed by semi-structured interviews with three cohorts, Principals and Aspiring Principals, Independent Assessors who sit on Principal selection boards and a Diocesan Secretary for Education (representing the Patron). Here again I must highlight my positionality. Being a fellow Principal helped to form a mutually respectful relationship with the Principal cohort. Similarly, the fact that I am also an Independent Assessor, albeit for less senior roles, helped enormously with the assessor group. Each of these groups viewed me as one of their own.

4.5 Ethics

As I was proposing to work with adults only and they were not a vulnerable group, the ethics process was fairly straightforward. Along with my ethics form I submitted:

- Consent forms for questionnaire and interviews

- Participant information sheets for questionnaires and interviews

- A list of questions which would form the questionnaire

- An interview schedule for the Principal interviews and the assessor interviews

- A data management plan

- Privacy notice

This application was approved by the College of Social Sciences Ethics committee subject to my submission of a plan to for minimising the risk of exposure to Covid-19 for my participants and myself.

I subsequently completed and lodged an ethics amendment form. The first amendment was to add a participant. Whilst interviewing the Principals I had realised that I really needed to seek the views of the Patron (Catholic Church) on the selection process. Mons. Murphy, as outlined above, was the person I believed it would be best to interview and so I sought approval for this. The second amendment requested was to be allowed to use online conferencing technology to conduct some interviews. The reason for this request was that in the middle of the period I was conducting interviews, there was an upturn in Covid 19 cases in schools in Ireland and, whilst all participants were happy to be interviewed, a significant number were uncomfortable doing so face-to-face. This application for amendments was approved.

With regard to ethical risk, the only one foreseen was related to the small size of the population from which I could sample. Due to the small professional population of approximately 3,000 primary school Principals in Ireland (Catholic and other), there was a risk that interview participants could be identified by their descriptions of their school/school location in transcripts. To counter this risk, every individual was given a pseudonym and every school and locality also had its name changed.

4.6   Methods

4.6.1 Questionnaire - Participants and Data Collection

I decided to use interviews to ascertain the perceptions of three groups, Principals, aspiring Principals and selection panel members, about the leadership selection process. It was considered necessary to gather information that would give an indicative picture of the type of individual actually being chosen to lead Catholic primary schools in Ireland. This would be helpful in gauging if the perceptions of the groups aligned with the reality in schools. For this reason, Principals were surveyed. In order to reach the widest possible

variety of individuals to form an accurate snapshot, an online questionnaire (available at Appendix B) was selected as the most appropriate method of data collection.

In order to obtain a realistic sample of the 2,766 Catholic primary school Principal population (DES, 2021) it was necessary to get responses from as many as possible. For this reason, purposive sampling was considered to be the most appropriate method. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants who might provide insight into your research question (Creswell, 2014). In the case of the current study, the only criterion for selection of Principals was that they were leading Catholic schools. The first issue was how to get the questionnaire disseminated widely amongst Catholic primary school Principals. I contacted the IPPN, the professional association for primary Principals and Deputy Principals. They send a weekly newsletter to all members via email and included a piece outlining my request for participants in the online survey, as well as the link to the survey. On the day that Principals received the newsletter I also used my personal networks to raise awareness of the link in the newsletter. The initial response rate was slow, with just 11 respondents. Five days later I re-sent the message to my personal networks and this resulted in another 10 respondents.

It quickly became apparent that a more direct approach to contacting Principals would be required. Initially, I used a snow-balling technique by contacting the various professional networks and professional learning communities I am engaged with and asking all those Principals to complete the questionnaire and to ask three others to do the same. Contact was made both by email and via various WhatsApp groups. This approach generated a further 12 responses.

The Department of Education and Skills publishes the contact details for all primary schools nationally on its website each year. Using this I found the contact email addresses for all 2,766 Catholic primary schools. I composed an email containing the PIS for the questionnaire, along with an introductory paragraph stating that I was a fellow Principal, that I understood how busy they were, but that their help would be very much appreciated. At the same time that I was conducting the questionnaire Principals had been asked to complete an international survey on our working conditions that took over an hour to complete. This had led to considerable disgruntlement amongst Principals in my professional networks. In order that this did not impact on my questionnaire, I stated very clearly that the questionnaire would take 10 minutes or less to complete. Keeping the time requirement low is consistent with best practice to increase response rate. Fan & Yan (2010) found that keeping the time below 13 minutes seems to lead to higher response rates. The link to the questionnaire was placed at the bottom of each email, which I titled, 'Please help a fellow Principal'. The email was then sent out to every Catholic primary

school. This process was repeated on two further occasions, two and four weeks after the original email was sent. Each posting brought a substantial increase in responses, the first to 63, the second to 81 and at the point that my online questionnaire was closed for further responses, the total number of respondents was 112. Of these, 70 were female and 42 were male.

The questions were formulated to gather as much information about each Principal as possible. Of particular interest was their involvement in sporting, religious, community and voluntary organisations. For this reason, six of the 19 questions related to these areas. The remaining 13 questions focused on the collection of demographic information about the group. The collection of such information is important in order to "reflect on the relationship between your results and your sample" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.98). In the case of this study, although working with what appears initially to be a homogenous group of middle-aged, religious, mid to late career educators, the collection of the demographic information allowed the level of heterogeneity within the group to be established.

In an effort to ensure that the questions asked were understood as intended, the questionnaire was piloted by three experienced Principal colleagues. In response to their feedback, changes were made to the wording of a number of questions. Sampson (2004) highlights the usefulness of piloting in terms of refining research instruments such as questionnaires and interview schedules. Once the changes were made, the questionnaire was sent back to the pilot respondents, who confirmed that they clarified the questions.

Following receipt of ethical approval from the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences, I gained access to the University's online survey tool, JISC. The questions were uploaded onto this survey tool and a unique link to the questionnaire was created that would allow for widespread dissemination via email.

Although my response rate equates to just 4.45% of the targeted population, it is a good representative sample and gives an accurate overview of the target population. Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey & Mc Evoy (2021) observed that the richness of the data received and its relation to the questions asked is actually more important in a qualitative survey than reaching a specific number of respondents. They highlight three studies with respondent numbers of 87, 98 and 134, that provided ample data to address their research questions (2021, p. 649).

4.6.2   Semi-structured Interviews – Participants and Data Collection

4.6.2.1   Principals and Aspiring Principals

As I am a Principal myself one might assume it would simple for me to find others to interview, but it is precisely because of my role that this was more difficult than expected.

It would have been inappropriate to interview any of my local colleagues or my friends in other areas who are Principals. As a result, the method of sampling for these interviews was random sampling. I was able to use my networks of Principals and teachers to find interviewees. I asked all the staff in my school and my friends in other schools if they knew anyone who would be happy to be interviewed. In this way I established contact with 13 practising Principals and one aspirant. Once the mutual contact had passed on contact information I sent each person an email with information about the project and the PIS attached. Once they had agreed to take part, they were sent a consent form and asked if they wished to be interviewed face-to-face or over Zoom. Some interviews were carried out face-to-face, but the majority were via Zoom, some because the interviewee was in a different part of Ireland. Seven participants were male and seven were female. The one aspirant is included in the seven females. As with the Assessors, all interviews were audio recorded and extensive field notes taken.

4.6.2.2   Independent Assessors

A request was made to an Archdiocese, through the Episcopal Vicar for Education, to access and contact the Independent Assessors on the diocesan list of Assessors for Principal and Deputy Principal appointments. The Archdiocese was selected because it is the largest Diocese on the island of Ireland and, as such, has the largest number of schools under its patronage. This request was approved, and an email sent by the researcher to all 104 Assessors, asking to interview them about their experiences with the selection process. 16 contacted me to say they would like to get involved. However, due to diary clashes and some technical issues, I managed to interview only nine. Participants were offered the choice between being interviewed face-to-face or over Zoom. Seven opted for Zoom due to time constraints, while one took this option as he was recuperating from surgery. The single face-to-face interview was conducted at my school, as the participant in question lives in the locality and was happy to do it there.All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the interviewee. I also took field notes during each interview. These notes were taken on a template version of my semi-structured interview schedule. I used the questions I had written as topics and wrote key words and phrases down during the interview. On occasions I noted down an observation about the participant's body language or non-verbal communication. These field notes act as somewhat as an aide memoire and once each interview ended I added as much detail as I could to them.

The interviews with Principals and Assessors were semi-structured in that I had four topics I wanted to ask about but was not fixed about the questions I used. Although I did have a schedule of questions to help me keep on track (Appendix C). Aside from the initial questions to obtain background information, all four of the topics were introduced naturally into the conversation. The fact that the interviews were not structured allowed me to be guided by the interviewees' responses and ask them to elaborate on anything I found interesting or anything I felt they want to talk more about.

The flexibility provided by the use of semi-structured interviews also meant that as I progressed through the interviews and participants highlighted interesting or surprising topics I was able to ensure that these were discussed in subsequent interviews. This was particularly useful in the case of the Principals. In the initial interviews I had been surprised by how much the idea of leadership as service/calling/vocation arose. During subsequent interviews if the idea was even mentioned in passing I was quick to interrogate the idea further. This led to some very interesting findings around motivations to take on school leadership and the role of Principals in leadership of schools as faith communities.

Similarly, it quickly became apparent that despite mostly being external hires themselves, Principal participants held the misapprehension that internal candidates were much more likely to be appointed to Principalship. Using a semi-structured schedule meant that I could introduce the data from my questionnaire (see Chapter 5), which indicated the majority of respondents had in fact been external appointees. This became particularly interesting because even with the evidence laid before them, the Principals struggled to dissuade themselves of the misconception they held. As a result, one of the themes I discuss in Chapter 6 is candidates with a perceived advantage and specifically internal candidates.

Although these interviews with the independent assessors yielded some very rich data I would, in future, be inclined to use focus groups with this cohort. The disparity in the experiences shared leads me to conclude that several participants may have been uncomfortable in critiquing the selection process. Many of the participants shared their experiences of the process not being adhered to, in a very open and frank manner. Several of the cohort though exhibited almost an aversion to showing the selection process to be anything less than perfect. Whilst it is possible that this was indeed their experience, it seems less likely, given the experiences of the other participants, that this group would

never have experienced any non-compliance with the process. I feel that the use of two focus groups would have yielded more consistent data.

Focus groups allow for a greater level of discussion about the topics being researched. The answers provided by one participant can, by means of association of ideas, inspire others to offer information that they might not have during a one-to-one interview. Acocella (2010) highlights the fact that

> If the interaction among participants develops smoothly…..the group synergy can favour the production of a plurality of positions and stimulate participants to remember forgotten or unconsidered details.

(2010, p. 1132)

She does, however, also warn about the risks of participants feeling the pressure of social convention and providing answers which might be considered desirable to the group (Acocella, 2010, p.1134). Whilst this is a possibility, there are techniques that the group moderator can use to stop this from happening. Having conducted focus groups with both adults and children in the past, I am confident that I have the skills necessary to moderate focus groups effectively.

4.6.2.3 Diocesan Secretary

The Diocesan Secretary for Education has a range of responsibilities, including administration of all the primary schools under the patronage of the Bishop, support for and communication with the post-primary schools for which the Bishop is either a trustee or co-trustee and the provision of chaplains (lay and religious) to the universities within the diocese. The Monsignor has held this position twice. He has also been the General Secretary of a national Catholic education body. In addition, he is a Council Member with the Catholic Schools Partnership, which aims to foster coherence in Catholic Education at the national level. He is highly regarded nationally as an authority on Catholic education and, so, is well placed to represent the Church position accurately. Monsignor Murphy (pseudonym) was interviewed because I considered it important to have the official view of a diocese on the selection process for school leaders and also on the selection and training of Independent Assessors. It was also important to hear what the Catholic Church (at least in one large diocese) looks for in its school leaders. As Diocesan Secretary for Education the Monsignor is well placed to provide this perspective.

The interview was conducted via Zoom and audio recorded. The recording was then transcribed. Small sections of the transcription were redacted at the request of the participant as there were specific areas, schools, or names mentioned.

4.7 Data Analysis

4.7.1 Approach

In analysing the qualitative responses from the questionnaire and the transcripts of all interviews I used what Braun and Clarke (2019) refer to as reflexive thematic analysis (TA). Braun & Clarke suggest that the researcher is generating themes, not discovering them hidden amongst the data forest. As they make clear,

> what is (most) distinctive about our approach, compared to other versions of TA.
> The researcher's role in knowledge production is at the heart of our approach!
>
> (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594)

Braun & Clarke's (2019) conceptualisation that "themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data" (ibid) that are developed when the researcher's assumptions, analysis and the data are brought together. The reflexive tag here seems to imply what all good interpretative researcher should do, reflect upon the themes they generate, constantly question their own assumptions and interpretations and be fearless when this reflection means they need to change how they have been thinking about the data.

4.7.2 Data Analysis - Questionnaire

I began my analysis of the responses by utilising the in-built analysis ability of the JISC software. This allowed me to produce charts for the more straightforward questions - those with check box answers. For the questions that had multiple parts, or text-based answers, I used a more complicated process of exporting the data to Excel spreadsheets and then filtering for different answers. These were then coded using a thematic approach. The first step in this process was to read through all of the responses for the question being coded, noting words or phrases that arose more than once. I then generated themes arising with the most frequency, based on the initial trawl through the data. The next step was to search the data, using a filter to extract the words and phrases associated with the themes. In order to ensure that response had been placed in appropriate themes, I engaged with an independent

judge, a critical friend. The independent judge, whilst not an education professional, is involved with Catholic school management in a voluntary capacity and has a background in research in another social science. He was given the data for the text responses only, as these were the only ones coded using a thematic approach. We agreed on the themes arising, but differed with respect to which sub-themes some of responses fell into.

However, after some discussion and reorganisation we reached agreement on all themes and sub-themes. This process was useful in helping me to clarify some of the themes and also to identify sub-themes that I had not initially seen as being as significant as the independent judge considered them.

Once each individual question had been coded, or had been used to create a chart, I cross-referenced the answers to different questions to establish if there were any other significant patterns or themes arising. The results of this exercise are presented in Chapter 5.

4.7.3   Data Analysis – Interviews

Each of the 24 interviews conducted for this research ran between 30 and 70 minutes, depending on the participants. As one might expect, the transcriptions of these interviews were substantial and contained a very large body of data to work through. I used the same process for each of the three participant groups and I will outline this below.

For each group, I gathered all of the transcripts and did an initial read through of each. Using the four overarching topics that had made up the schedule for the interviews, I marked passages I felt fitted into each topic, each in a different colour. Next, I took one topic and read through the marked passages in the transcripts and wrote down phrases or ideas that were coming up with some frequency. When this exercise was completed for all transcripts and all four topics, I was able to generate some initial themes. I placed these into a mind map and next to each theme had examples of what each respondent had said that fitted that theme. At that point, being able to see all the relevant data at once, I was able to start to make connections between themes and amalgamate some, but also generate some new ones. I found that each time I returned to the mind map I interpreted some of the data differently. This led to a lot of reflection and trial and error before settling on the final themes that I felt best represented my interpretations of the data at the time. The Principal and Aspirant Principal interviews produced six themes, each of which consisted of what I am calling sub-themes; these will be discussed in Chapter 6. The Independent Assessor interviews created four main themes, each consisting of several sub-themes; these will be reviewed in Chapter 7. Mons. Murphy's interview actually had elements of themes from the other two groups, so his views will be represented in both Chapters 6 and 7 as relevant.

Chapter 5 will explore in greater detail the findings from the Principal questionnaire.

Chapter 5:   Online Questionnaire - Responses and Analysis

In presenting the data from the questionnaire, I have chosen to look at each question individually initially and then move on to the relationships between different questions. The aim is to provide the reader with the greatest level of clarity in working through the various datasets. It is important to note that not every respondent answered every question.

Q1.   <u>Do you consent to take part in this research study?</u>

The first page of the questionnaire consisted of the PIS and a consent form. The latter was set to mandatory answer and allowed only those who consented to move forward with the survey. n = 112

Q2.   <u>Please select all relevant answers to describe the school of which you are Principal</u>

This question presented respondents with several different options to describe their school and they could check as many boxes as required. The options were the same as those provided in the annual School Data Returns used by the Department of Education to collect data on schools. Although only one question was asked, such was the amount of data produced that for clarity of analysis I have represented it below in four separate categories.

Figure 3 School Type - DEIS Status

SCHOOL TYPE - DEIS STATUS (N - 79)

DEIS Band 1   DEIS Band 2   DEIS Rural   Non DEIS

DEIS Band 1
9%

DEIS Band 2
6%

DEIS Rural
17%

Non DEIS
68%
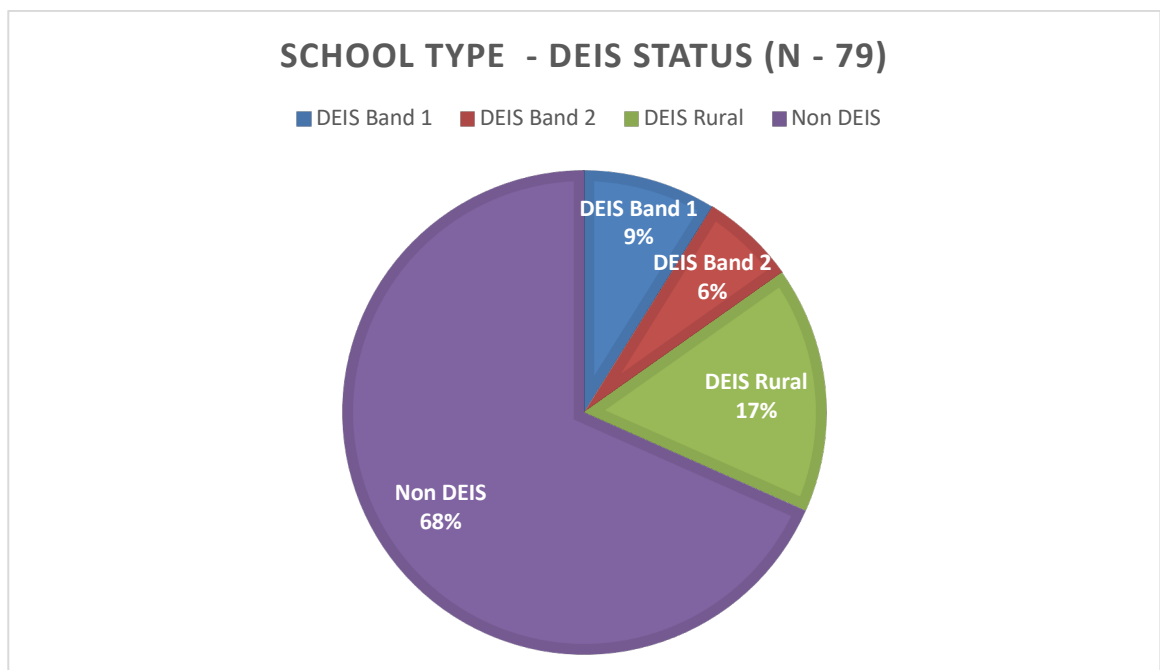
Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is a national scheme to combat educational disadvantage and is targeted at schools in areas classed as socio-economically disadvantaged. At primary school level, schools in the scheme are designated as Urban

Band 1, Urban Band 2, or Rural. DEIS schools get a higher capitation fee per pupil than other schools, they have a lower pupil-teacher ratio, Home School Community Liaison teachers, free school meals, School Completion Programmes and greater access to supports such as counselling, educational psychological assessments and a higher level of funding for resources. Schools in Urban Band 1 are provided with the greatest level of support.

In the school year 2021/2022 there were 687 primary schools within the DEIS scheme; 227 Urban Band 1, 104 Urban Band 2 and 356 Rural schools (DES, 2022). The school types of our sample, illustrated in figure 3 above, mirror the national landscape closely. While nationally 77% of schools do not have DEIS status, 68% of the sample are non-DEIS. As can be seen from the national figures above, of schools with DEIS status the majority are designated as Rural, the second largest category is Urban 1 and then Urban 2. The numbers represented in the sample reflect these national figures.

Figure 4 DEIS Status by Principal Gender

n=79
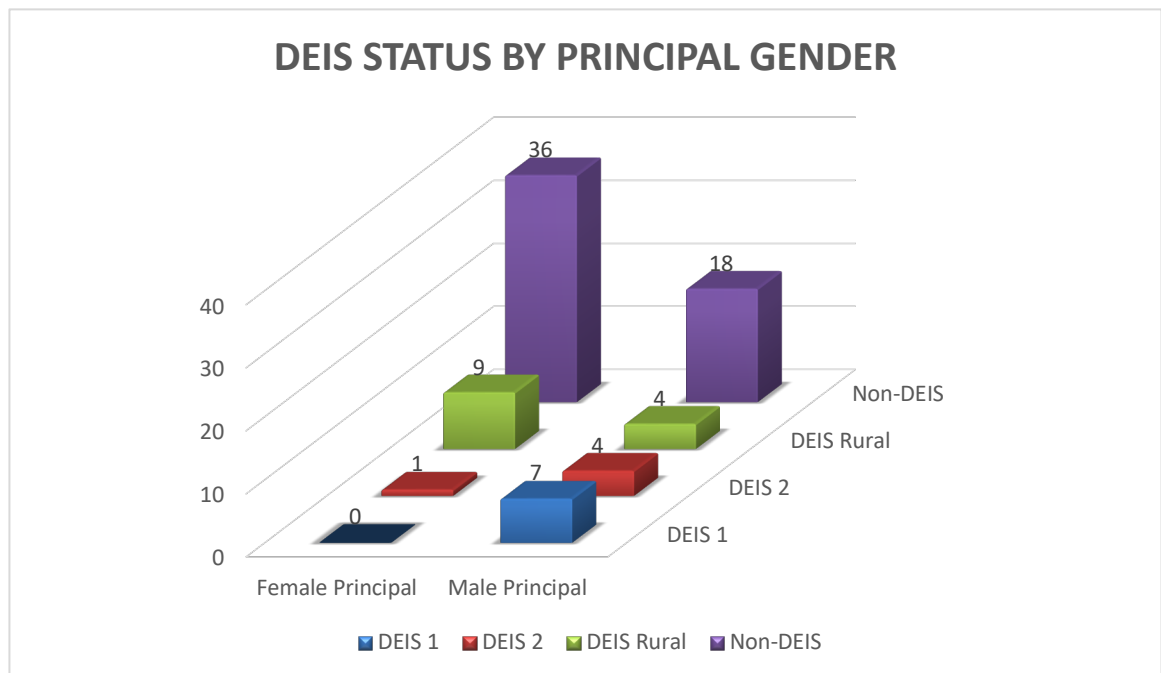
There is a noticeable disparity in the numbers of male and female Principals working in DEIS schools. Interestingly, no female was working in a DEIS 1 school and the highest number work in DEIS Rural schools. DEIS status is calculated using the Pobal HP

Deprivation Index which measures the relative affluence or disadvantage of a particular geographical area using data provided by the Central Statistics Office. DEIS 1 status is given to those schools in areas of the greatest level of socio-economic deprivation, areas where there is intergenerational unemployment, high levels of incarceration, prevalent drugs problems and, in the case of some areas in Dublin, gangland crime. DEIS 2 schools are in areas considered to be suffering from a lower level of socio-economic disadvantage and DEIS Rural schools tend to be in areas where there is a high level of poverty due to the preponderance of small farms or poor land. DEIS Rural schools do not tend to have the same types of social problems as DEIS 1 and 2 schools. DEIS 1 schools may have a higher number of male Principals because they are in areas which would be considered rough/dangerous and perhaps not suited to female Principals. Females may be reluctant to apply for positions in these areas. The disparity may also be contributed to by the fact that, due to the areas they are located in, DEIS 1 schools' pupils tend to have experienced a higher level of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and display a greater range of behaviour issues as a result. Male educators are often considered better disciplinarians, so this may cause them to be more likely to be appointed as school leaders in such areas. Hasse (2010) refers to this phenomenon in his article *Fearfully powerful* stating:

> It is evidenced that male teacher bodies, when distanced from social interactions with children, can produce a fear which then becomes commodified as 'respect'. This respect provides an increased capacity to discipline, which then allows (some) men greater capacity to manage student (mis)behaviours.

> (Hasse, 2010, p. 182)

Figure 5   School type - Gender
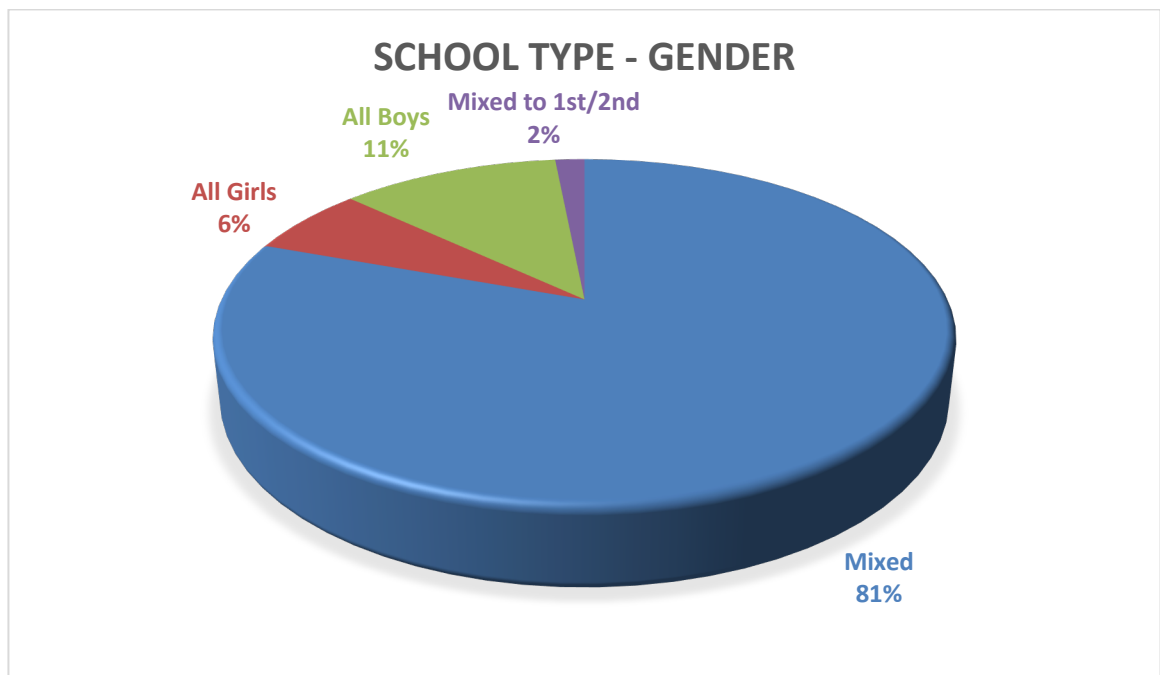
Ireland still has a large number of single-sex schools at both primary and secondary level. The majority of those at primary level are Catholic schools. Nationally there are 2,766 Catholic schools, of which 2,534 are mixed. There are 133 Catholic all-boys schools and 99 Catholic all-girls schools (DES Statistical Report, 2021). There are also 71 schools that are mixed for the infant grades and then single-sex from either first or second class. These are mostly in urban areas (CSO, 2019). This sample has a slight over-representation of all-boys schools. This may in part be due to the fact that I am the Principal of an all-boys school and the contact emails were sent from my school email address (to prevent them being blocked by spam filters). There is a level of collegiality between Principals of similar type schools and this may account for proportionally more Principals of all-boys schools answering the questionnaire. Research on survey response rates, such as the leverage saliency theory of participation (Groves, 2000) and the social exchange theory of participation (Dillman, 2009), highlight that familiarity with or reciprocity toward the researcher influences respondents' co-operation in positive way. There is an element of familiarity and identification with the researcher that leads to a sense of trust.

Figure 6   School Gender by Principal Gender

Figure 6   School Gender by Principal Gender
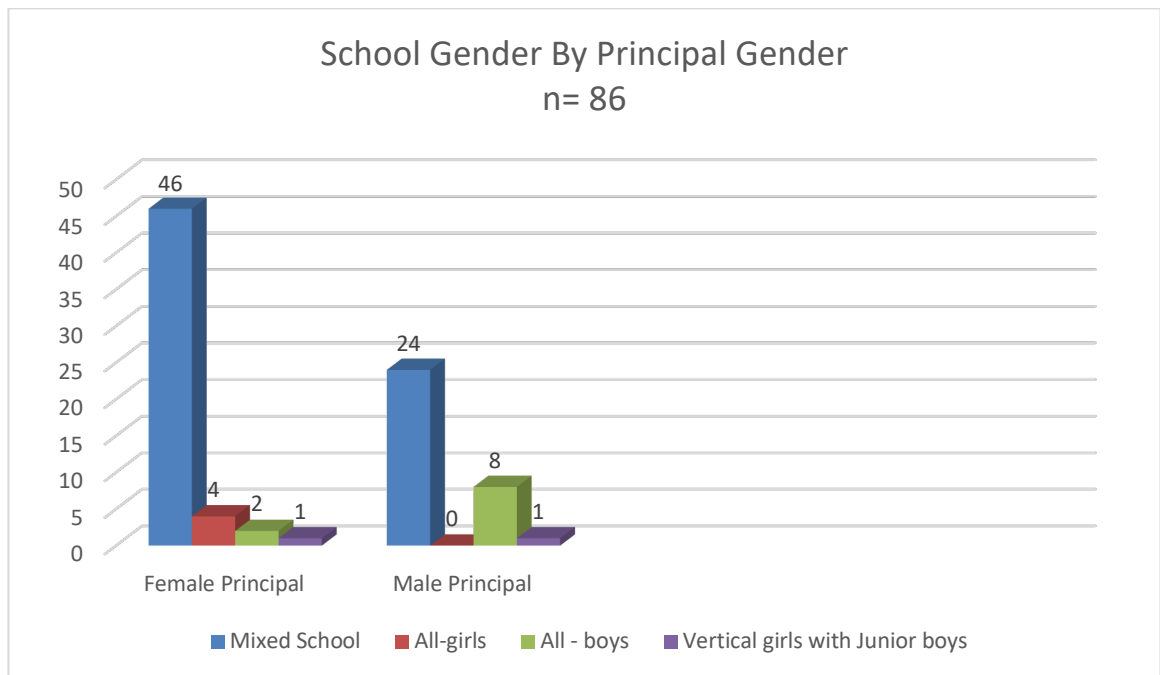
Of note in the graph above is the gender division of principalships of single sex schools. The number of female Principals of all-girls schools is four times greater than the number of males, while the number of male Principals of all-boys schools is four times greater than the number of females. There are two reasons that this might be the case. Firstly, many primary schools in Ireland, particularly single-sex schools, were founded and traditionally run by religious orders - religious sisters in the case of girls schools and religious brothers or priests in the case of boys schools. Traditionally these schools tended to employ teachers of the same gender as the pupils, the exception being in the infant grades, which were always staffed by women. This was in line with the Catholic view of the nurturing role of the female as mother. Although these traditions have changed, there is still a tendency for teachers, particularly males, to apply to schools of their own gender and for BOMs to employ Principals of the same gender. Secondly, Oideachais (1965) *Rules for National Schools* entrenched the gendered division in primary education. Rule 76 relates to staffing of schools and states:

The following conditions apply to the appointment and recognition of principal teachers-

(a) In a mixed school, where there is an average daily enrolment of 80 pupils or more the principal teacher should be a master.

(b) In a mixed school, where the average daily enrolment is less than 36 the principal teacher shall, as a rule, be a mistress.

(c) A master is not recognised in any capacity in a girls' school.

(d) A mistress in not recognised as principal of a boys' school unless the school is an infants' school.

(p.41)

Although this rule has been revoked, the tradition is harder to dislodge and has resulted in a societal expectation that men lead boys' schools and women lead infants and girls' schools. It is still quite unusual to come across a female Principal of an all-boys school or a male Principal of an all-girls school.

Figure 7   School type - Age

n = 71
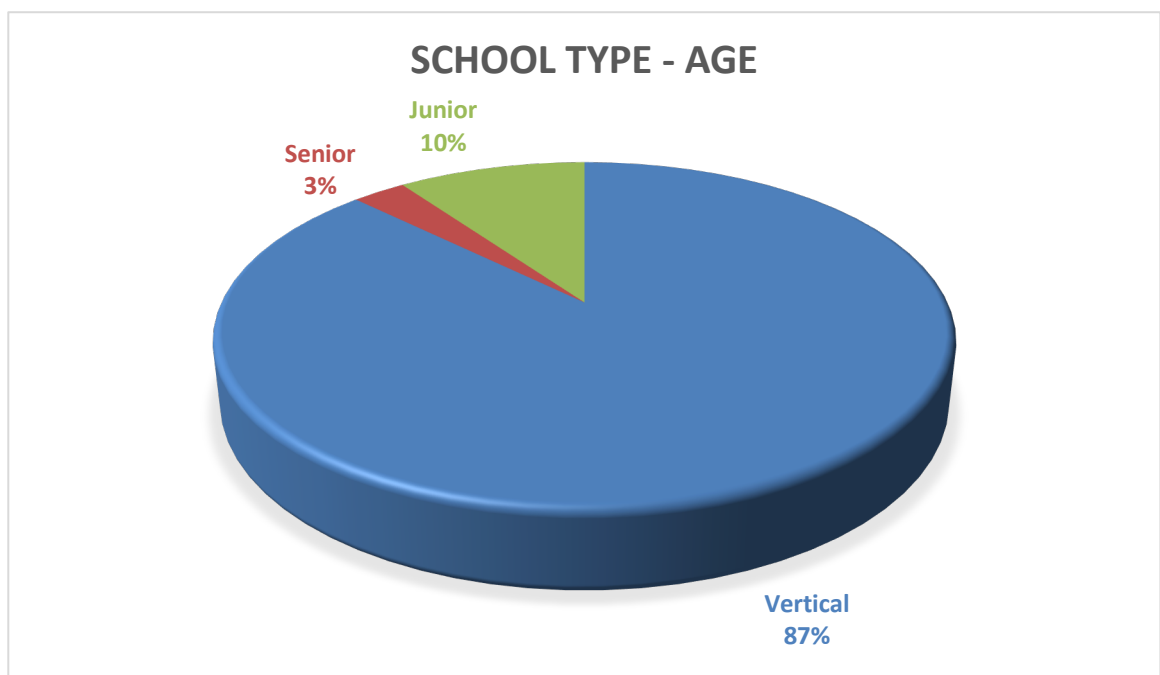
Historically, in Ireland there has been a view that it was preferable that infant grade children of both genders be taught by women. Rule 64, subsection 9 of *Rules for National Schools* typifies this attitude stating

Boys enrolled in an infants' class should, as a rule, be taught by a mistress. If boys are enrolled in an infants' class in a boys' school in which there is not a mistress on

staff, an assistant mistress should be appointed to the school at the earliest available opportunity

Education (1965 Chapter 8, p. 34)

As a result, a tradition evolved of children in the infant and/or junior grades being educated together in schools that after either the first two or four grades became single-sex girls' schools. After this initial period the boys would move to all-boys schools to be taught, for the most part, by men. This was not a uniquely Irish idea; Catholic schools in Scotland also adhered to this Church led thinking (Mc Dermid, 2019, 106). However, the legacy still exists in Ireland, particularly in areas with larger populations.

Currently, there are 179 Senior National Schools (SNS) nationally and just 95 Junior National Schools (JNS). The vast majority of Catholic primary schools are classed as vertical schools, meaning they admit children to all eight of the primary grades. The response to this questionnaire appears to be disproportionate with regard to the number of Junior School Principals.

Figure 8 School Age by Principal Gender

n = 71
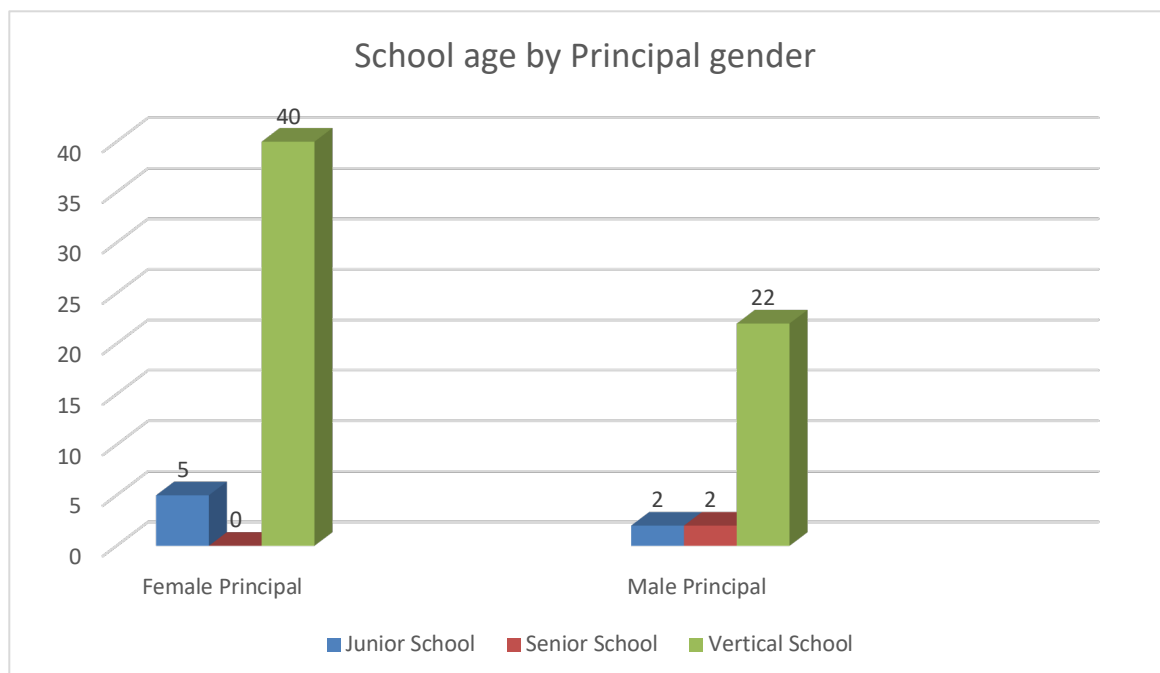
As shown in the graph above, vertical schools are the most common type in Ireland. It is interesting that when it comes to the gender division between senior and junior schools,

female Principals are more likely to lead junior schools than their male colleagues. This may well reflect back to Rule 76 of *Rules for National Schools* (1965) where women could only be Principals of very small mixed schools or infant boys' schools. Significant numbers of Irish teachers trained using Froebelian theory. Froebel believed that children learn first at their mother's knee and that there was, therefore, a place for women as educators, particularly in the early years, where they could provide care and nurture as well as educational guidance. Froebel's theories were particularly adopted by the training colleges run by religious sisters as they fitted well with the Catholic Church doctrine on women's role as mothers. Traditionally the early years were the domain of female teachers and this may explain the higher prevalence of female Principals in Junior schools.

Figure 9   School Type - Special Education

SCHOOL TYPE - SPECIAL EDUCATION N-112

Special Classes 17%

No Special Classes 83%
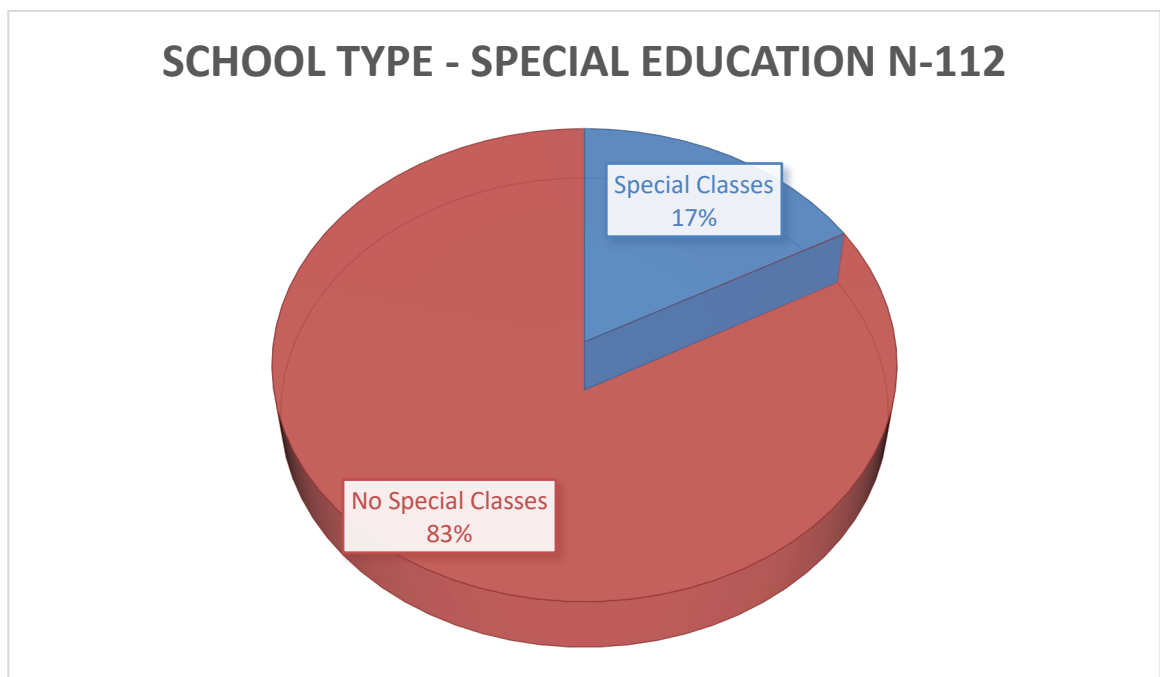
Prior to 2004 children with additional/special educational needs were educated in specialised schools (Shevlin et al. (2008). In 2004 the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) was enacted (partially) and this changed the landscape of educational provision for children with additional needs in Ireland. Section 2 of the Act states that

> A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with—

(a) the best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or

(b) the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

<div align="right">(EPSEN Act, 2004)</div>

From 2004 onwards, mainstream primary schools across the country began to establish special classes to cater for children with additional needs who would previously have had to go to special schools. The purpose of these classes is to provide children with additional supports to help them to cope in a mainstream classroom. Currently, 903 primary schools have at least one special class and there are still 135 special schools across the country.

It is unfortunate that the sample did not include any Principals working in special schools, but all 103 working in Catholic special schools were invited to participate. The additional demands on these Principals, as identified by O'Mahony (2011), may explain why none responded.

29% of primary schools have at least one special class, so a response rate of 17%, while not quite representative, gives a good approximation of the views of these Principals.

Figure 10   Special education by Principal Gender

n=18
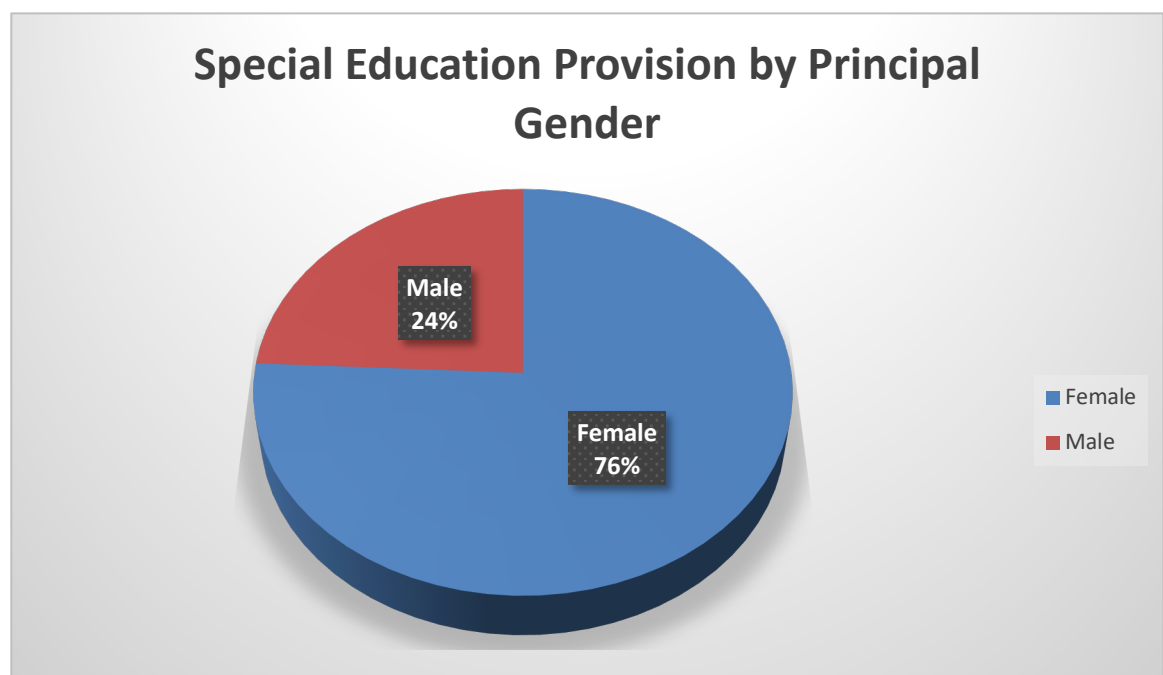
The numbers presented here are in line with trends within the profession. There are more female Principals than male Principals, so it stands to reason that there would be more

females whose schools have special classes. At the time of data collection numbers of schools with special classes were low nationwide. This changed significantly in 2022 when the Minister for Special Education threatened to use legislative powers to force schools to open special classes. Rather than be forced to do so, approximately 200 schools took the initiative and opened a special class voluntarily.

Q.3   Please indicate if you are a Teaching Principal or an Administrative Principal

Figure 11   Type of Principalship
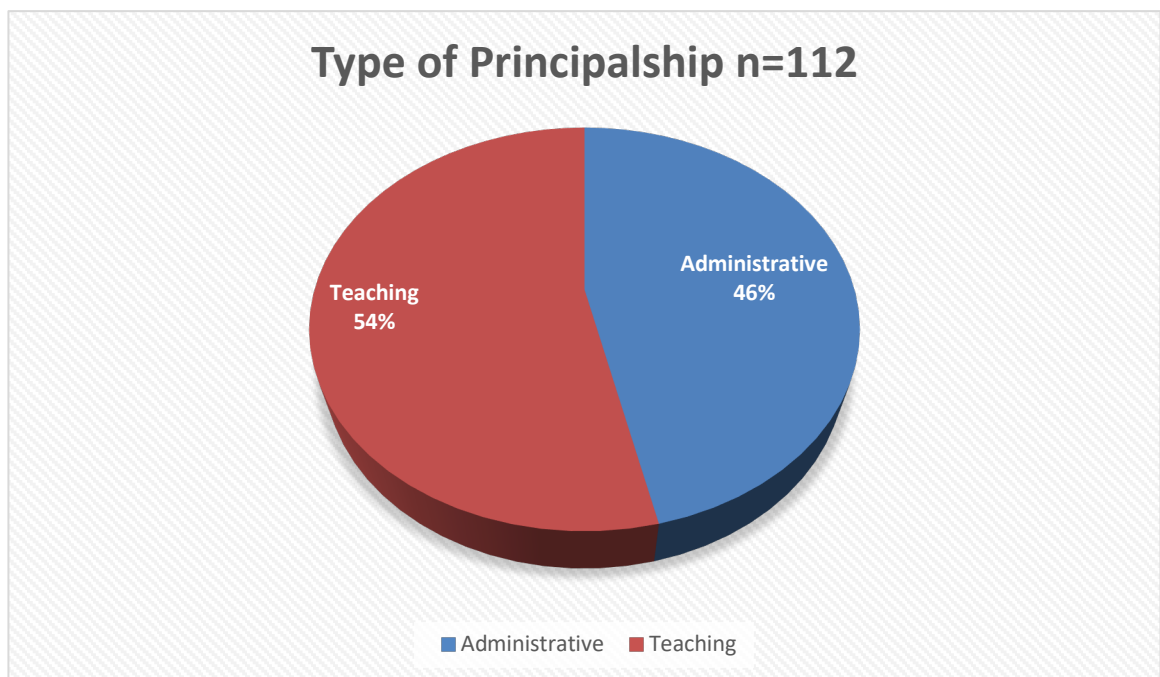
In Ireland, a school with more than 174 pupils is entitled to have a Principal who is full-time engaged in administrative duties. The Principals of schools with fewer pupils have teaching duties in addition to their administrative role. Currently 40% of Principals are administrative only, with the remaining 60% having teaching duties in addition.

The balance of Teaching and Administrative Principals who responded to the questionnaire is reassuring in terms of the relatability of the sample to the actual Principal population.

Figure 12   *Principal Type by Principal Gender*

n=112
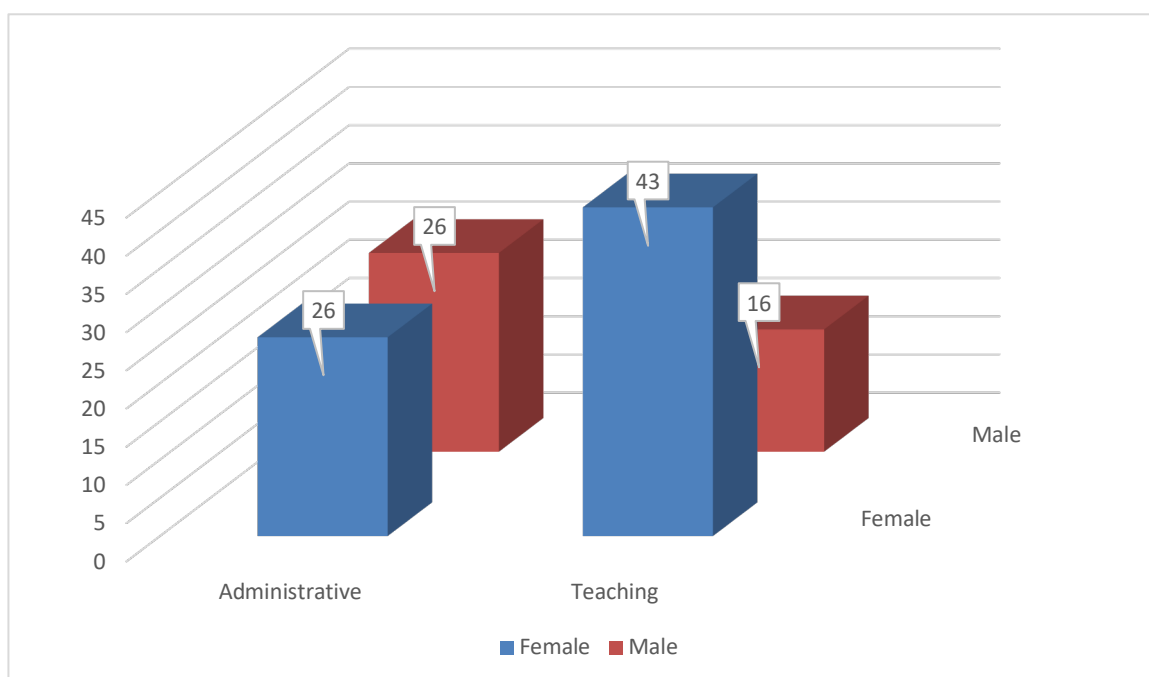
The proportion of males who are Administrative Principals is substantially higher than females, 57% of males in comparison to 37% of females. Teaching Principals are expected to conduct all the administrative duties of the role on top of a full teaching load, essentially doing two jobs instead of one. Principals are paid their basic teaching salary (based on number of years teaching) and an allowance based on the number of teachers they lead. Teacher numbers are based on number of pupils enrolled, so Administrative Principals always have higher numbers of teachers. Consequently, their Principal's allowance is higher than that of teaching Principals. In Ireland men were traditionally seen as the main

breadwinner and, while this is changing rapidly, it would still be seen as unusual for a woman to earn more than her husband/partner. This may be a reason that men have been drawn more towards Principal roles in the larger schools.

Q.4   In terms of the language of instruction, my school is

Figure 13   Language of Instruction
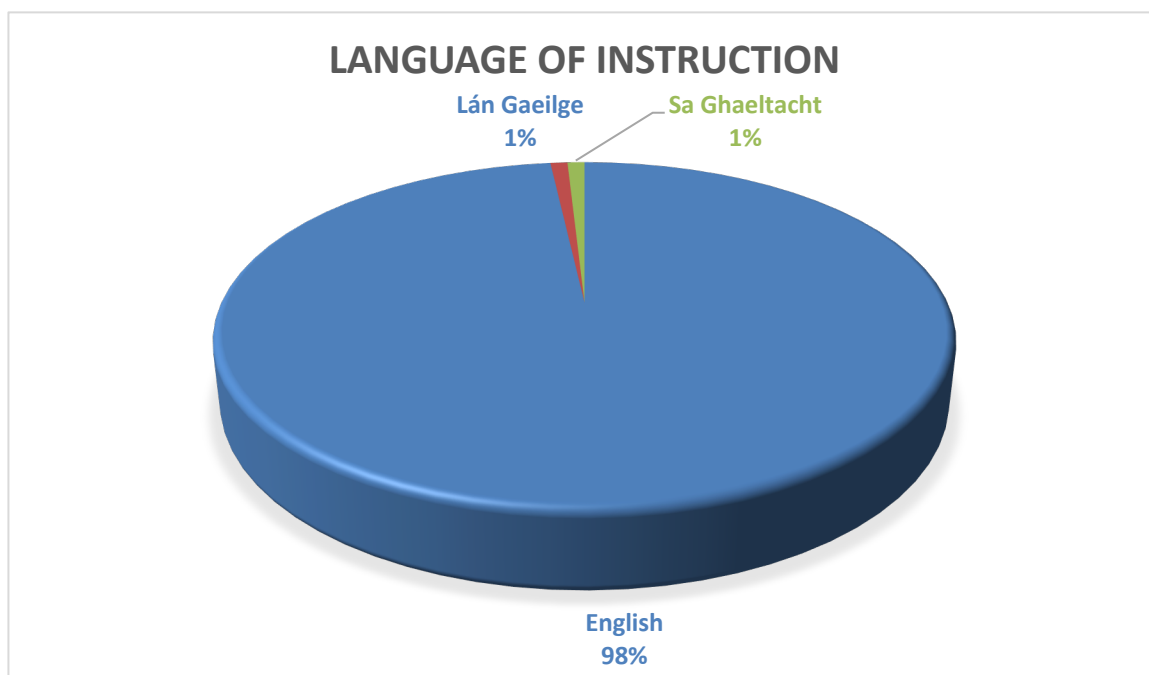
Having two official national languages means that schools can choose either to use as the main language of instruction. Schools are categorised, based on their language of instruction as either English medium, Scoil lán Gaeilge or Scoil sa Ghaeltacht. The DES Statistical Report for 2021/2022 shows that there are 251 schools using Irish as the medium of instruction. Of these, 132 are in Gaeltacht regions (where Irish is the language spoken by the community) and 119 are in non-Gaeltacht regions.

Schools that use Irish as the language of instruction are more responsive to correspondence in Irish, but the questionnaire invitation sent was in English only. This might account, to some extent, for the low uptake from these Principals. It should also be noted that the 251 Irish language schools make up just 8% of all primary schools. So, it is to be expected that there would be a comparatively lower response from these Principals.

Figure 14   Language of Instruction by Principal Gender

n=112
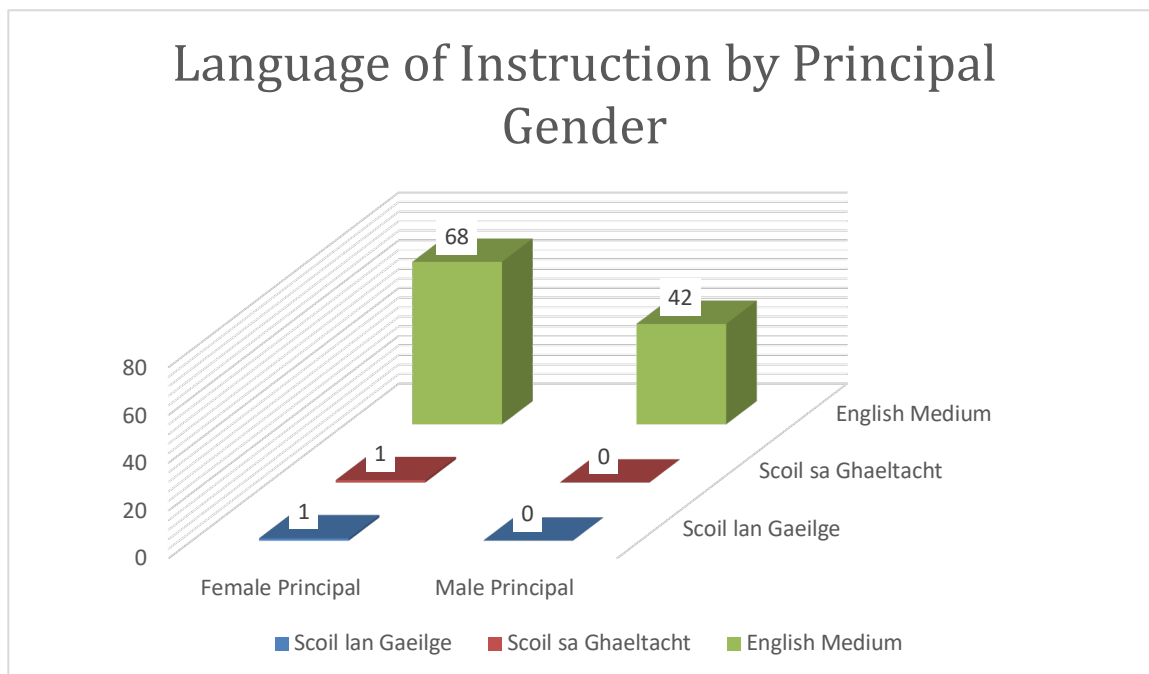
As can be seen above, the vast majority of participants were leading English-medium schools. There was no difference in respect to gender and the figures are in line with national figures for medium of instruction. The majority of primary schools in Ireland are English-medium schools.

Q.5   <u>My school is located</u>

Figure 15   School Location
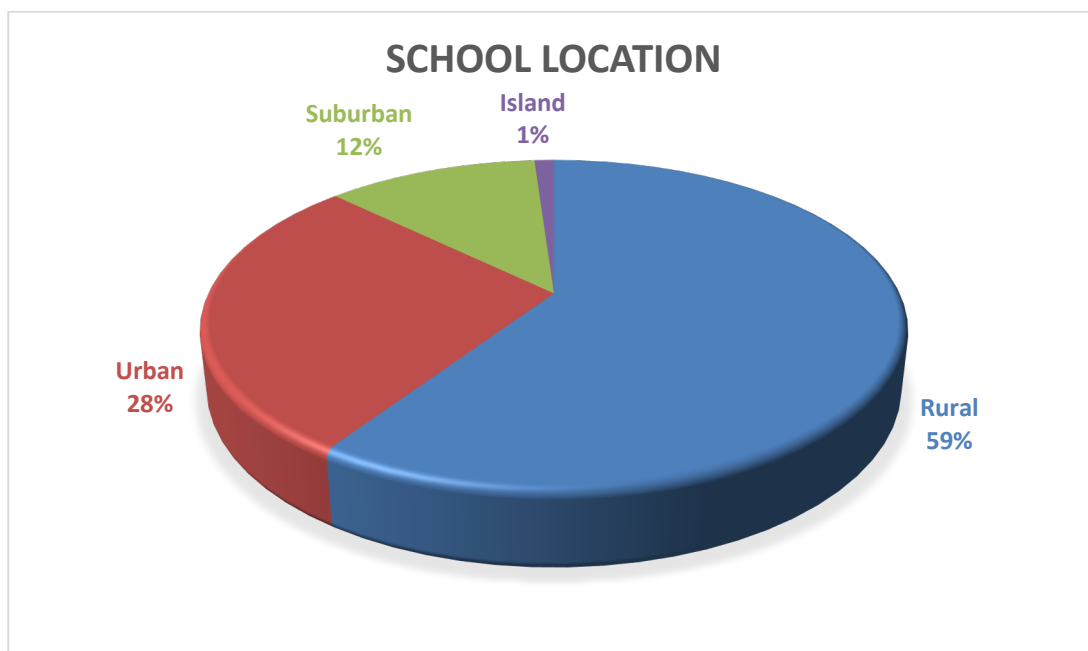
Clear statistics on the actual number of schools in suburban areas are not available, but details of the numbers of schools by local authority area are. The four Dublin local authority areas have the largest number, with 459 primary schools. Within this number are schools that would be classed as suburban. The number of schools in the remaining four city local authority areas (Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford) combined is just 119.

We do know that 60% of schools are classed as 'small schools' of four or fewer teachers and according to the Department of Education (2021) *Statistical Bulletin*

> Small schools comprise the majority of primary schools in many parts of the west of Ireland while they are relatively rare in Dublin and its surrounding areas.

(p.11)

It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the majority of primary schools in Ireland are in rural areas and that our sample is representative.

Figure 16   School Location by Principal Gender

n=112
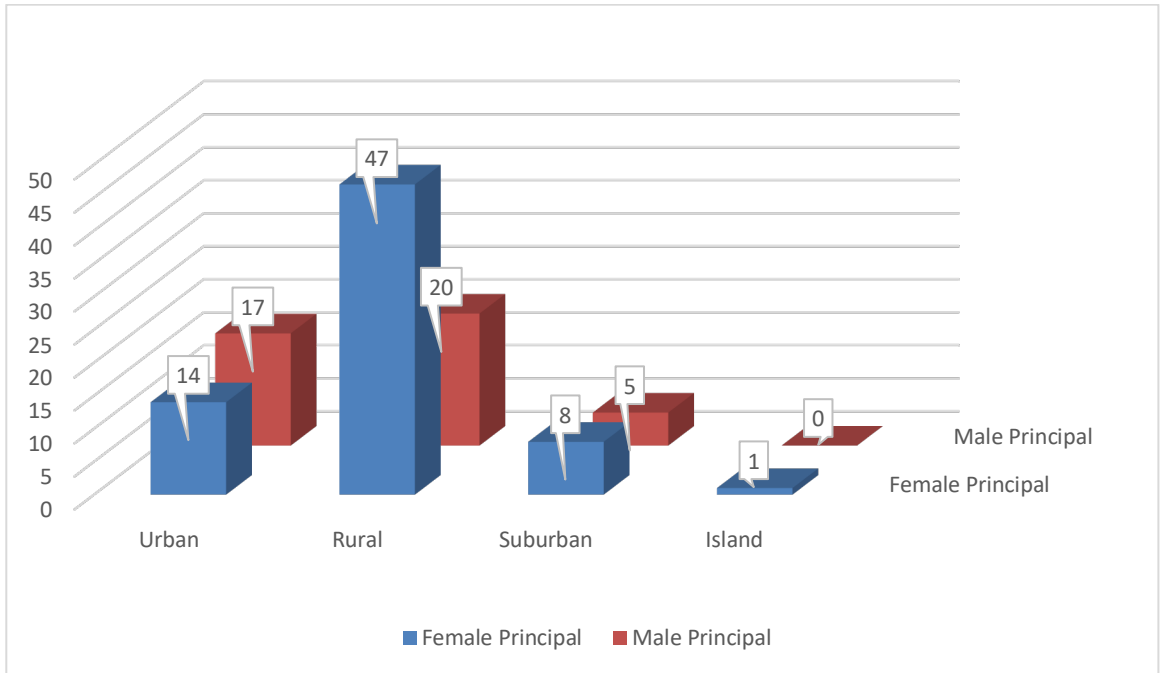
As we saw in question three above, the larger the school the more likely it is to have an Administrative Principal. The vast majority of Administrative Principal positions are in urban and suburban areas. According to Department of Education statistics for 2021 there were 1,250 schools with Administrative Principals and just 398 of these were in rural areas. As we saw in question three, male Principals are more likely to be Administrative Principals, and these roles are mainly in urban/suburban areas. This may explain why 54.7% of male participants work in urban/suburban areas in comparison to 31.4% of female participants. It is also very striking that 67% of female participants work in rural schools, the vast majority of which are led by Teaching Principals.

Q.6   Please indicate the number of schools you have held the Principalship of and the

       patronage of each

Figure 17   Number of Principal positions held
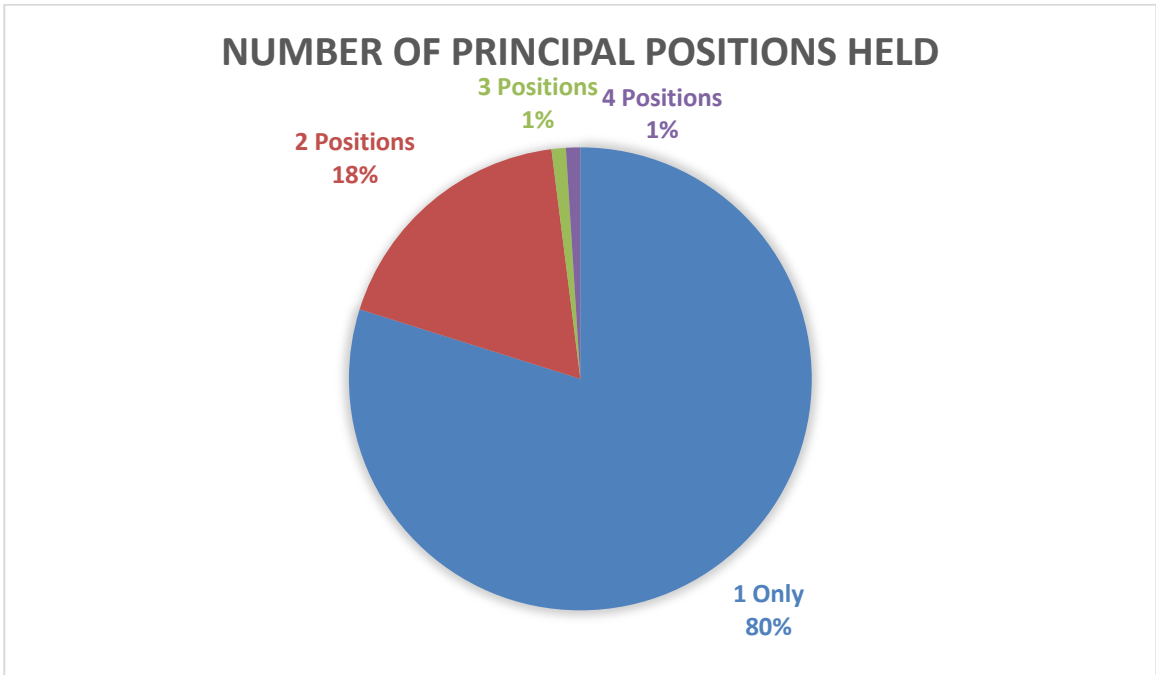
Data from 1 respondent was omitted as they answered that they had held 10 principalships but had only been a Principal for five to 10 years.

Figure 18   Number of Principalships held by Gender

n=109
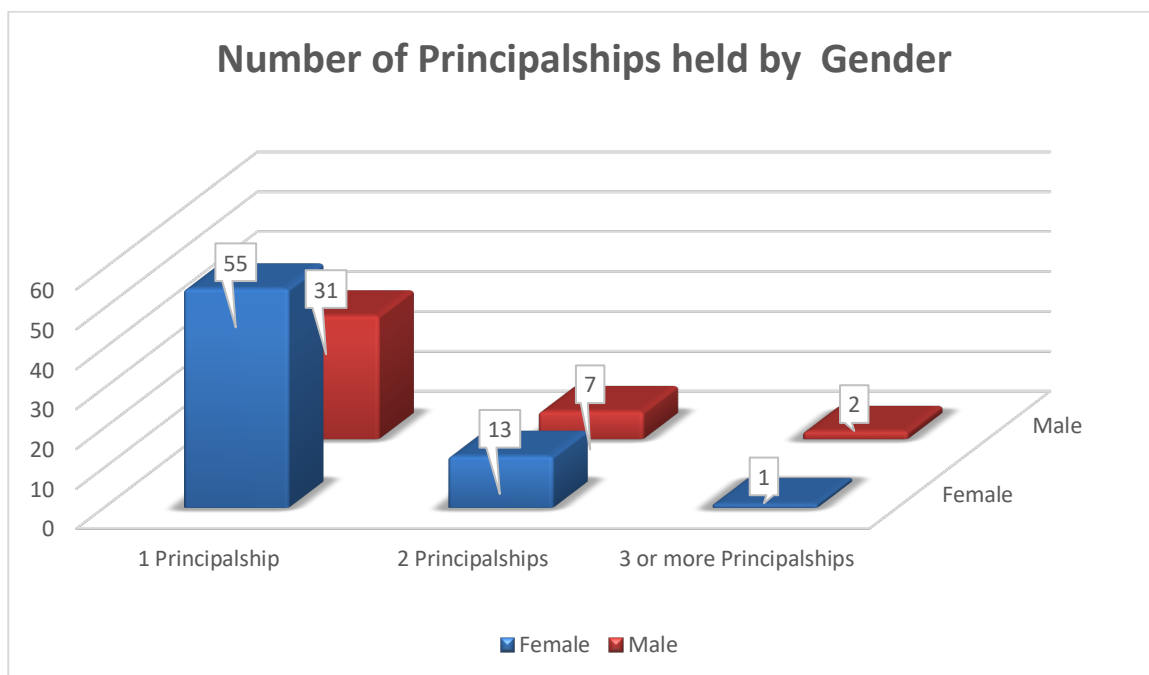
Females n=68, so 79% held 1 only, 19% held 2 and 1% held more than 2. This compares

with males - n=41, so 75.6% held 1 only, 19.5% held 2 and 4.8% held more than 2.

For both genders it appears that the majority take on just one principalship. 52% of respondents were over 50 years of age. The age group 50-55 years had the largest representation at 32% but, interestingly, this halves to just 16% for 55-60 year olds. Primary school teachers who entered service before 2004 can retire at age 55 with full benefits, if they have also completed between 33 and 35 years' service. This may explain the low number in the higher age category.

Figure 19 - Principalship by Patronage

PRINCIPALSHIP BY PATRONAGE

An Foras Pátrúachta 1%

Catholic & Irish speaking 1%
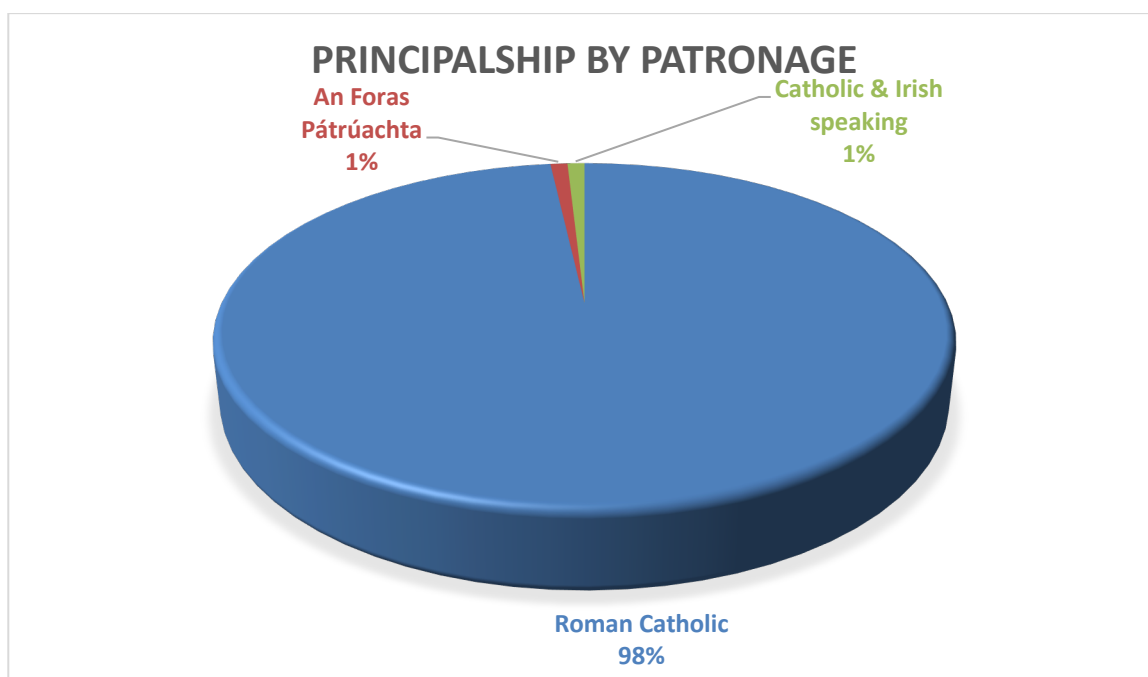
Roman Catholic 98%

Roman Catholic Patronage: either under the control of a Roman Catholic Diocese/Archdiocese or a religious order or trust e.g. ERST, La Chéile

An Foras Pátrúnachta: one of the Patronage bodies responsible for the management of Irish medium schools. These schools can choose one of 3 ethos; Catholic, interdenominational or multidenominational.

Catholic but Irish speaking: Many Catholic dioceses would have all-Irish speaking schools under their patronage, particularly in counties where there are Gaeltacht areas

It is interesting that all except one of the respondents had held principalships of Catholic schools only. The respondent who had held a Principal role under a different patronage may well have been leading a school with a Catholic ethos, as 53% of schools under the patronage of An Foras Pátrunachta have a Catholic ethos. This may be due, in part, to a degree of homosociability in that selection panels tend to select candidates who reproduce particular characteristics, traits, or beliefs (Steed, 2021; Harford, 2020; Grumell, Devine & Lynch, 2009 and Blackmore, Thomson & Barty, 2006). It is, therefore, less likely that someone who has been Principal of a Catholic school, or who identifies as Catholic, would be selected by selection panels in schools of differing ethos, or that someone coming from one of those schools would be selected to lead a Catholic school. By the same token, candidates may be less inclined to apply to schools of another ethos, as they may well perceive that they would not be seen as suitable candidates, or would stand little chance of success when pitted against 'insider' candidates. Kwan (2012) found that 'preference was given to candidates who belonged to the same religious affiliation' (p.343) in the selection process for Hong Kong schools. There is a legitimate concern amongst candidates that the

'unknown' or 'non-traditional' candidate is unlikely to be appointed to a leadership role and this may serve as an active barrier to application (Blackmore et al, 2006; Grummell et al, 2006).

Q.7   I have been a Principal for

Figure 20   Length of time in role
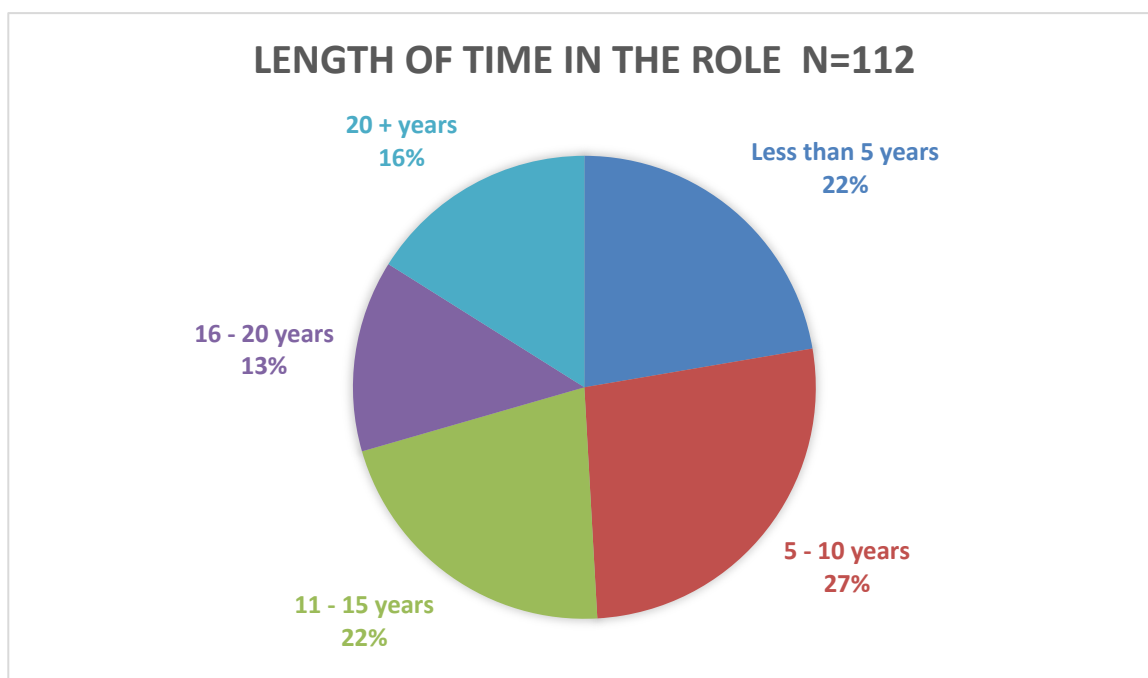
A slight majority of respondents (51%) had been in the role of Principal for more than 10 years. This tracks with the answers to question 18 which show that just 14% of respondents were under the age of 40. The majority of Principals being 40 plus means that they are generally mid or late career teachers. The Irish Principals & Deputy Principals Occupational Health, Safety & Wellbeing Survey (Rahimi and Arnold, 2022), the last major survey to investigate this population, found that 44% of those surveyed had been in leadership for more than 12 years, 46% having taught for 10 or more years prior to becoming school leaders (p.11).

Figure 21   Length of time in role by Gender

n=112
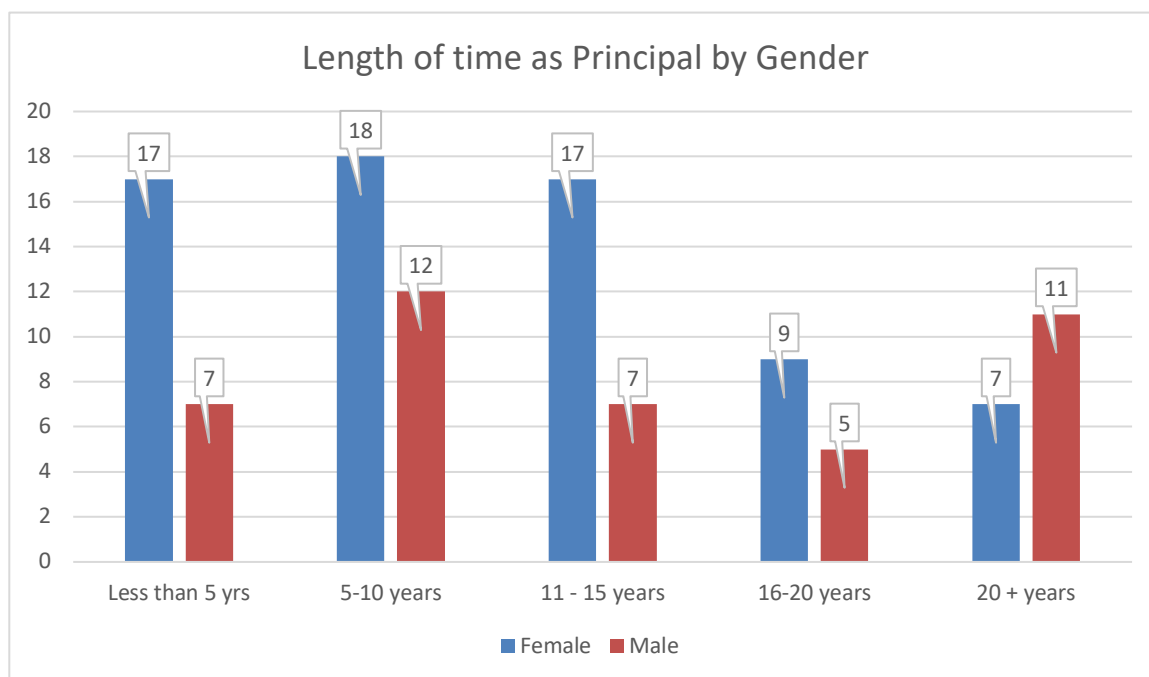
The substantial difference in the numbers in the 20+ years category is very interesting. Perhaps the prevalence of males among the cohort with greater service reflects the traditional expectation, prevalent 20 years ago, that school leaders would generally be male. Similarly, the higher number of women with less time as Principal might reflect societal chances generally. There is now increased equality in every area of society and, increasingly, more women are progressing to leadership positions at all levels in both the public and private sectors.

Questions 8, 9,10, 11 and 18

Due to the significant trends that became apparent when analysing the responses to these questions, it is considered important that the data be presented in such a way that the reader can view it all together. Consequently, I have presented the responses to these questions in two tables (below) and addressed the individual analysis by question, as well as some commentary about the overlaps in the data.

Q.8   How many years of teaching experience did you have prior to taking up your first appointment as Principal?

Q.9   How many principalships did you apply for/interview for before being appointed to the role for the first time?

Q.10   Please select all the awards you had achieved at the time of your first appointment as Principal

Q.11   Please indicate if you were and internal or external candidate for the 1st Principal role you were appointed to

Q.18. In terms of Gender, how do you identify?

Table 8   Responses to Qs 8,910,11,18 - 5 to 15 years' service

Years prior to 1st post as Principal	Gender		External/ Internal appointment		Highest Academic award at time of appointment		Number of Applications prior to appointment	
Question 8	**Question 18**		**Question 11**		**Question 10**		**Question 9**	
	F	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**
5 – 10 years	18	19	8 Ext 10 Int	17 Ext	EdD/ PhD 0 Masters 8 Postgrad Dip 7 Postgrad Cert 0 Primary Degree 3	EdD/ PhD 0 Masters 8 Postgrad Dip 7 Postgrad Cert 0 Primary Degree 4	Current Only 1 1 more 8 2 more 2 3 more 5 4 more 1 14 more 1	Current Only 10 1 more 3 2 more 1 3 more 3 4 more 1
11 – 15 years	18	12	10 Ext 6 Int	6 Ext 6 Int	EdD/ PhD 2 Masters 8 Postgrad Dip 3 Postgrad Cert 1 Primary Degree 4	EdD/ PhD 2 Masters 5 Postgrad Dip 3 Postgrad Cert 1 Primary Degree 2	Current Only 8 1 more 2 2 more 3 3 more 1 4 more 1 6+ more 1 8 more 1	Current Only 5 1 more 4 4 more 1 5 more 2

Table 9   Responses to Qs 8,9,10,11,18 - 16 to 20+ years' service

Years prior to 1st post as Principal	Gender		External/ Internal appointment		Highest Academic award at time of appointment		Number of Applications prior to appointment	
Question 8	Question 18		Question 11		Question 10		Question 9	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
16 – 20 years	19	6	11Ext 10 Int	6 Ext 0 Int	EdD/ PhD 1 Masters 11 Postgrad Dip 5 Postgrad Cert 0 Primary Degree 2	EdD/ PhD 0 Masters 1 Postgrad Dip 3 Postgrad Cert 0 Primary Degree 2	Current Only 3 1 more 4 2 more 7 3 more 3 4 more 1	Current Only 4 1 more 1 2 more 0 3 more 1
20+ years	12	5	8 Ext 4 Int	2 Ext 3 Int	EdD/ PhD 0 Masters 8 Postgrad Dip 2 Postgrad Cert 0 Primary Degree 2	EdD/ PhD 0 Masters 1 Postgrad Dip 1 Postgrad Cert 0 Primary Degree 3	Current Only 7 1 more 0 2 more 3 5 more 1 6 more 1 7 more 3	Current Only 4 1 more 1

One of the few requirements in the Rules for National Schools (DES, 1965) to become Principal of a primary school is 'not less than 5 years' service' (Rule 76.2, p. 41). This was made a legal requirement with the introduction of the Education Act 2008. For this reason, no category for five years or less was included in the questionnaire. However, of the 3% who answered 'Other', one wrote explaining that at the time of appointment as Principal she was a newly qualified teacher, although she had experience in other industries. Prior to 2008 a situation such as this, while uncommon, was not unheard of. As Sugrue (2015) points out in reference to one of his respondents

> It was not uncommon for males of Fred's generation to be appointed to
> principalship on their very first day in the classroom (Corcoran 2000). There was
> no interview; Fred became the 'anointed' principal.
>
> (p.50)

There are still a number of Principals in the system, appointed pre 2008, who had less than five years' experience when appointed.

The majority of respondents (62%) had only applied for their current job, or that plus one other. Despite references in the both the literature (Blackmore et al, 2006; Gronn & Lacey, 2006) and in the interviews carried out as part of this research, the majority (63%) of respondents were external appointments.

In considering the overlaps in the responses from questions eight, nine, 10 and 11, it becomes apparent that in only two cases are the numbers of internal appointments greater than external appointments. Females with five to 10 years' experience prior to appointment as Principal were more likely to have been internal candidates, as were males with 20+ years' experience.

What is striking is the proportion of males who were appointed to the role of Principal on either their first or second application versus the proportion of females appointed in the same circumstances, 32 of 41 males compared to 33 of 65 female respondents. Male respondents in the five to 10 years' experience group were twice as likely to have been an external appointment as their female colleagues.

53% of female and just 36.5% of male respondents held a Master's level degree when first appointed as Principal. However, it is significant that this is not the case for the 5 – 10 years' cohort where the number of Master's graduates is equal for both genders. This may reflect societal changes in attitudes toward higher education but more specifically the emphasis on lifelong learning within the education system.

The finding regarding male candidates' success on the first or second application may well contribute to the belief held by many within the profession and wider Irish society that male candidates, particularly those who play GAA, are almost guaranteed principalship roles. This idea was highlighted by several of the Principals interviewed.

Based on these findings it appears that women aspiring to primary principalship in Ireland have to work a lot harder than their male peers to reach their goal. They have to go through the 'time-consuming, demanding and traumatic' process of application/selection several

more times than male peers (Lacey, 2002) It would appear that (Williams, 1992, 2013) 'glass escalator' is indeed proving advantageous to male teachers seeking leadership roles. The findings of this research are reflected in the national figures. Male teachers make up just 15% of the primary teaching profession, but hold 33% of the Principal positions in the Republic of Ireland. These figures are similar to those in the UK, where males make up 35% of senior staff and just 15 % of the teaching profession generally (Cousins (2019). So, it would appear that the male advantage is not unique to Ireland.

Q.12   Do you believe that the Principal of a Catholic school must be a practising Catholic?

Figure 22   Importance of Principal being a practising Catholic

In response to this question a majority expressed the belief that Principals of such schools should be practising Catholics. However, I was surprised that the majority was so small. In reflecting on the question, it is clear that a definition of 'practising Catholic' should have been provided, as it is a subjective term. There are several definitions of the term. In the vernacular we tend to describe a 'practising Catholic' as someone who attends Mass on Sunday and other important days in the Church calendar, perhaps attends Confession occasionally and lives within the teachings of the Church. In the UK, Stock (2009) provides a more nuanced definition with respect to what the term means for those seeking leadership positions in Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Birmingham (and subsequently all diocese in England and Wales). He defines a 'practising Catholic' as

> someone who has been sacramentally initiated into the Catholic Church and who adheres to those substantive life choices which do not impair them from receiving the sacraments of the Church and which will not be in any way detrimental or prejudicial to the religious ethos and character of the school. Inspired by the Gospel and sustained by God's grace, a 'practising Catholic' will give sincere external expression to their interior faith through specific religious, moral and ethical behaviour which is in accordance with the teaching of Christ and the Catholic Church.
>
> (Stock, 2009, p.6)

The noted Canadian theologian Ron Rolheiser provides a similar, but possibly more all-encompassing definition. Writing in the context of faith generally, rather than for education specifically, he defines a 'practicing Catholic' as

> A fully initiated member of the community who participates regularly within the Sunday Eucharist and participates as well in the prayer life (both public and private), the social action, the ministry and leadership, and the missionary concerns of the church. As well, he or she should not be at variance in the public forum vis-á-vis major doctrinal or moral teaching of the church.
>
> Rolheiser (1996)

The context of Catholicism and being a 'practising Catholic' is vastly different in Ireland to that of other countries. Ireland is in the midst of a 'post-Catholic' age (Ganiel,2019). For most of the 20th Century, from the foundation of the State, and into the early years of the new millennium, Ireland operated not a system of Church-State separation but, rather, an intertwined one. The Catholic Church used its very considerable power and influence to ensure the fledgling State followed the guidance and ideals of 'Mother Church'. To be Irish was to be Catholic and to be Catholic in Catholic Ireland resembled Rolheiser's definition of a 'practising Catholic'. However, since the turn of the 21st Century the Church in Ireland has lost its foothold of power, with increasing secularism and the blows to its reputation following scandals that rocked the nation. Inglis (2014) outlines how Irish Catholics have responded to these scandals in terms of their faith identities. He identifies four types of Catholic in his book *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland*. These are Orthodox Catholics, Cultural Catholics, Creative Catholics and Disenchanted Catholics.

Whilst Orthodox Catholics are possibly those closest to the definitions of 'practising Catholics' outlined above, the reality of Catholicism in Ireland for the majority describing themselves as such is closer to Cultural Catholics. Inglis (2014) describes Orthodox Catholics as

> Those whose understanding and conception of God, and ways of relating to him, are closest to church teaching and practice. They use standard prayers, and engage

in traditional practices, particularly going to Mass. In this sense, they both believe and belong.

(2014, p.126)

Unlike Orthodox Catholics, Cultural Catholics exercise a more a lá carte approach to the faith. Whilst they are 'cradle Catholics', their practice of the faith is more due to tradition and family heritage than belief. As Inglis (2014) points out

> Being Catholic is often not so much about embracing all the institutional teachings of the church and adhering to its rules and regulations, but more about embracing a Catholic habitus—the open, flexible, adaptable, dynamic way of being Catholic— that adapts to changing cultural conditions. Members learn to adapt their Catholic beliefs and practices to meet their other needs and interests and the exigencies of their everyday lives.

(2014, p.140)

Cultural Catholics may still send their children to Catholic schools and ensure that they are initiated into the faith by participating in faith formation and sacramental preparation. They will, however, show little interest in more regular Mass attendance, or in church teachings.

It is likely that some teachers and school leaders in Catholic schools fall into the Cultural Catholic category in line with the wider population. However, it is also likely, given their career choice, that the proportion of teachers, particularly, school leaders, in this category is less than that in the overall population. Nevertheless, the lack of definition of 'practicing Catholics' poses a real problem, as there is no way of knowing how respondents to this survey defined the term.

With regard to the 46% of respondents who did not believe it was important for a Principal of a Catholic school to be a 'practising Catholic', this can possibly be explained by comparing the system of education in Ireland to the Catholic schooling systems in other countries. Although 89.6% of primary schools in Ireland are categorised as Roman Catholic in ethos, this is more of an accident of history than a conscious development of a network of faith schools. Many English-speaking countries have a secular state education system, but also a parallel system of faith schools. However, this has never been the case in Ireland. In fact, if it had not been for the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland, in particular, the national school system would have collapsed within a matter of years after the foundation of the State. The churches provided the land and properties in which schools were established and, up until the mid-1970s, they also provided 10% of the capitation per pupil from parish funds. Clergy also controlled the school finances (Sugrue (2015). The Catholic Church, in particular, was operating schools as the majority faith in the country and as a major player in all matters corporeal and spiritual nationally. Unlike

the UK, for example, where Catholics are in the minority and Catholic schools play a central role in the preservation of the faith community and in ensuring initiation into the faith, Catholic schools in Ireland, whilst having a similar role, have never been in the minority. The Catholic Church in Ireland has been able to take a laissez faire approach to evangelisation through education, as generations have been indoctrinated by national and local policies, legislation, societal expectation, family heritage and the association of the national identity with Catholicism.

46% of respondents may not feel it is necessary for Principals to be 'practising Catholics' because they make the assumption that anyone taking on the role has the 'spiritual capital', Grace (2010) to carry out the role whilst 'leading in the context of the school's characteristic spirit' (see question 14 below). Irish society has been so saturated with Catholic tradition and heritage that there is an expectation that most teachers/Principals have been initiated into the faith enough to pass on the doctrines and teaching of the Church.

Q.13   If you answered Yes to Question 12, please indicate below how important you believe it is that a Principals should attend Mass (or other religious services)

Figure 23   Importance of Mass attendance
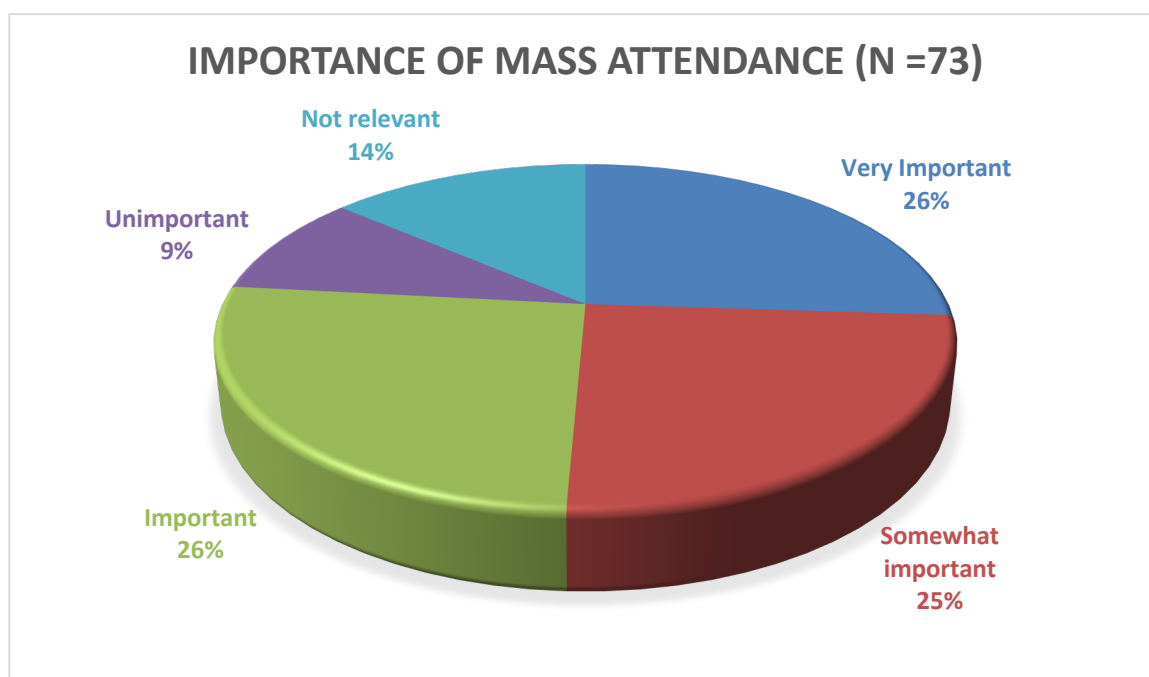
Those respondents who felt it was important that Catholic school Principals be 'practising Catholics' predominantly believed that regular Mass attendance was also important. 77% felt that regular attendance at Mass was important, somewhat important, or very important.

This would indicate a higher level of Mass attendance amongst Principals than amongst the general public. The European Values Study-4th Wave (2010) shows that just 36% of participants attend Mass on a weekly basis. This rises to 45% if we include those that attend more than once a week. Regular Mass attendance has dropped substantially over the last 40 years or so. In the 1970s it was between 88% and 95%. This dropped to below 80% in the 1980s and to 43% in the 1990's (O'Mahony, 2010). This trend is reflective of the infiltration of secularisation in Irish society and mirrors the timeline of the gradual disentanglement of Church and State in Irish social and political affairs. Roman Catholic Canon Law considers attendance at Mass to be an obligation for the faithful. Catholic Principals, who spend so much of their lives leading faith communities, may, understandably, be more observant, both through better knowledge of the expectations for the faithful and through the desire to lead by example.

Q.14   The Standard Application form for Leadership positions uses the four domains of leadership outlined in '*Looking in Our Schools'* (DES,2016) to allow candidates to show how they may fulfil the role criteria. Domain 3 (see below) highlights the need for school leaders to:

COMPETENCY/DOMAIN 3: Leading School Development

School leaders:

- Communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation in the context of the school's characteristic spirit.

If you first became a Principal after 2016 please answer Question A, if you first became a Principal before 2016 answer Question B.

a) What was your understanding of this when completing the Standard Application Form and what aspects of your own career/personal life did you focus on in completing this section?

b) When completing the Principal Application Form, how did you communicate your potential ability to lead in the context of the characteristic spirit of the school?

Table 10   Themes arising from answers to Q 14 (a) & (b)

Ethos (28)	References to upholding the ethos, the Catholic nature of the ethos and the importance of the ethos
Faith (30)	References to respondent's own Catholic/Christian faith, being a practising Catholic, engagement with Church or parish
Values/Morals (25)	References to modelling values/morals for school community, values of Jesus Christ/Gospels, particularly respect, kindness, compassion, fairness, tolerance and love.
Religious Education, Sacramental preparation, faith formation (21)	References to preparing the children to receive sacraments, teaching the Religious Education programme, leading faith formation within the school.
Community (School as) (16)	References to the school as a Catholic/faith community, the role of the school in the parish/wider Catholic community.

The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), the body responsible for Catholic Education at a national level, outlines what it considers to be the key characteristics of a Catholic school. CSP documents on understanding of the characteristic spirit outline five key characteristics as follows:

A. We are called to be followers of Christ

B. We have a Catholic understanding of education

C. The school is a Christian community

D. The school is an agent of personal growth and social transformation

E. Religious Education is an integral part of the life of the school

(Catholic School Partnership, 2015, p.9)

The respondents showed a good understanding of the factors contributing to the 'characteristic spirit'. Many of their answers reflected several of the key characteristics

noted above, but none included all five. Of note in their responses was how rarely Jesus Christ was explicitly mentioned. In fact, just four referred to Christ specifically. These four responses varied in terms of their focus. Two were about living the values exemplified by Christ. One took an almost historical approach to ensuring that pupils would know about the life of Christ and the impact of His time on earth. The final response, perhaps, showed the greatest understanding of Catholic education, referring to "the Catholic vision of education being rooted in the idea of life centred on Jesus Christ" (Respondent 93139275). While many respondents highlighted Catholic values and morals and faith formation, it was surprising that so few seemed to understand the 'characteristic spirit' in terms of the centrality of the life of Christ. Given that all teachers, including Principals, working in Catholic schools in Ireland must hold a qualification in Catholic Religious Education, including studies in both Religious Education and in Theology, it is surprising that respondents were less focussed on Christ than on institutional church teachings and doctrine.

Respondents had a good grasp of the factors contributing to the 'characteristic spirit', but it may be argued that there is a lack of understanding of the overall way in which these factors create a uniquely Catholic school.

Q.15   Are you involved with any sporting, community, or voluntary organisations?

Figure 24   Involvement in sporting/community/voluntary organisations
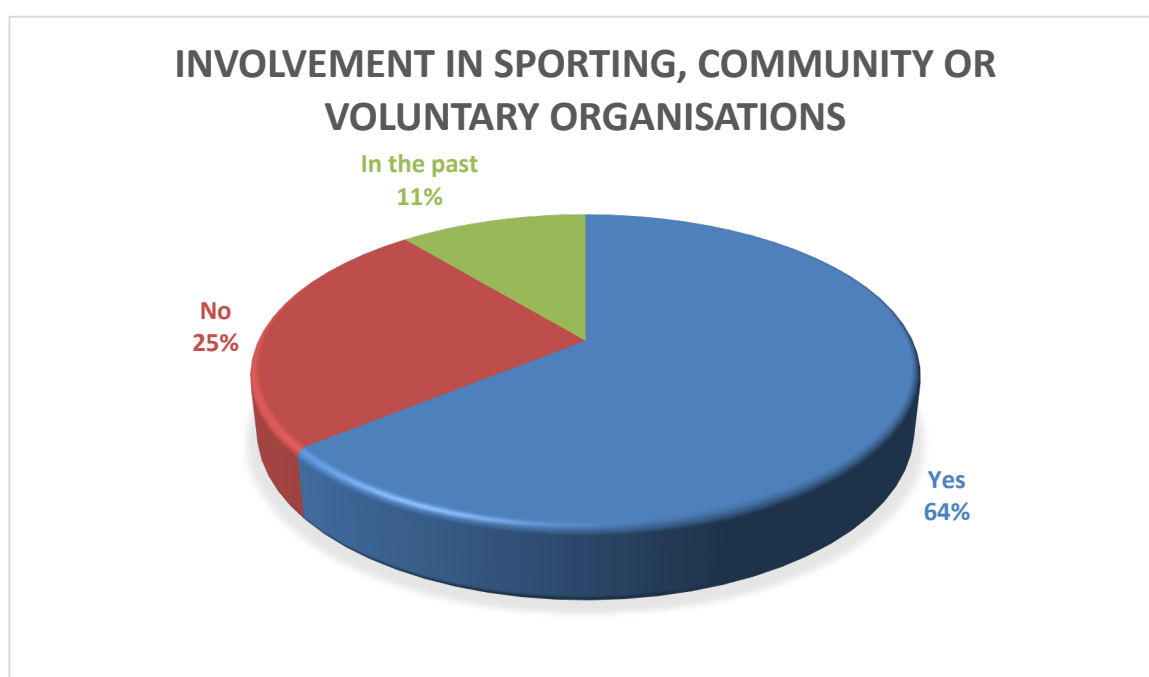
Figure 25   Involvement in sports/community/voluntary groups by Gender

n= 103   9 participants did not specify which group/s they were involved with
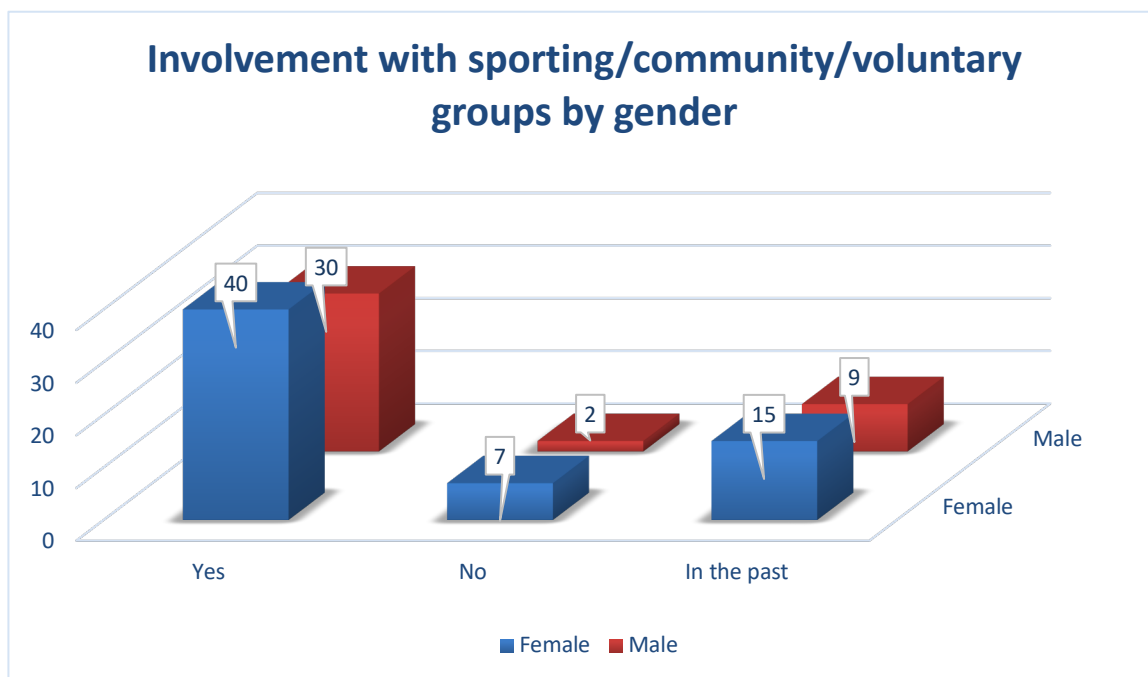
Females n= 62   Yes = 64.5% No= 11.2% and Past = 24.1%

Males n=41   Yes = 73.1%   No = 4.8% and Past = 21.9%

Overall, rates for both genders show a group of individuals highly involved in different aspects of the local community. Is this a 'type' that is selected for principalship, or is it as consequence of being a Principal? In many communities the local Principal gets 'roped in' for leadership roles with local organisations because of their knowledge of the community.

The number of females with no involvement is not surprising, particularly in regard to sport. Research conducted on behalf of Sport Ireland (2021) found that the participation in sports and physical activity amongst females "plummets during adolescence, with just 7% of girls age 14-15 years meeting recommended physical activity levels". The figure drops to just 5% for 16 to 20 year olds. (Sport Ireland, 2021, p.3)

Q.16   <u>If you answered Yes or Not currently, please indicate the organisation/s your involvement is/was with and the level of your involvement e.g. player, committee member, coach etc., and if that involvement was local/national/international</u>

Figure 26   Sports/community/voluntary groups respondents are involved with
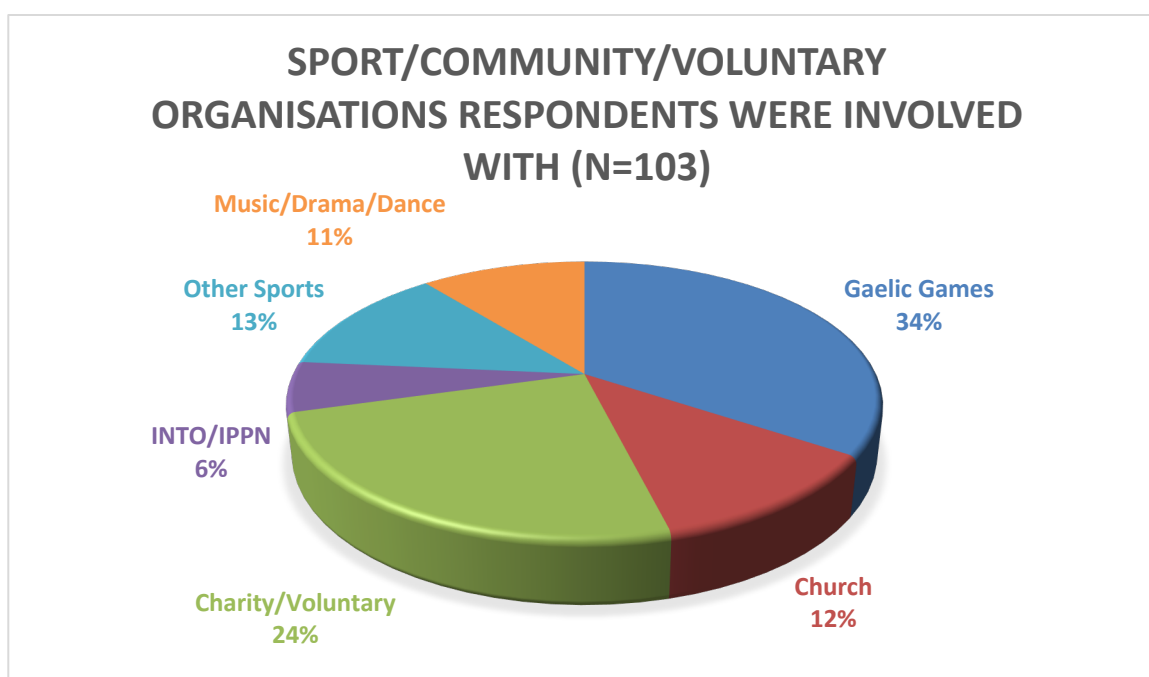
Respondents could select multiple answers

Figure 27   Involvement in Gaelic games by Gender

n=103

Involvement in Gaelic games by gender
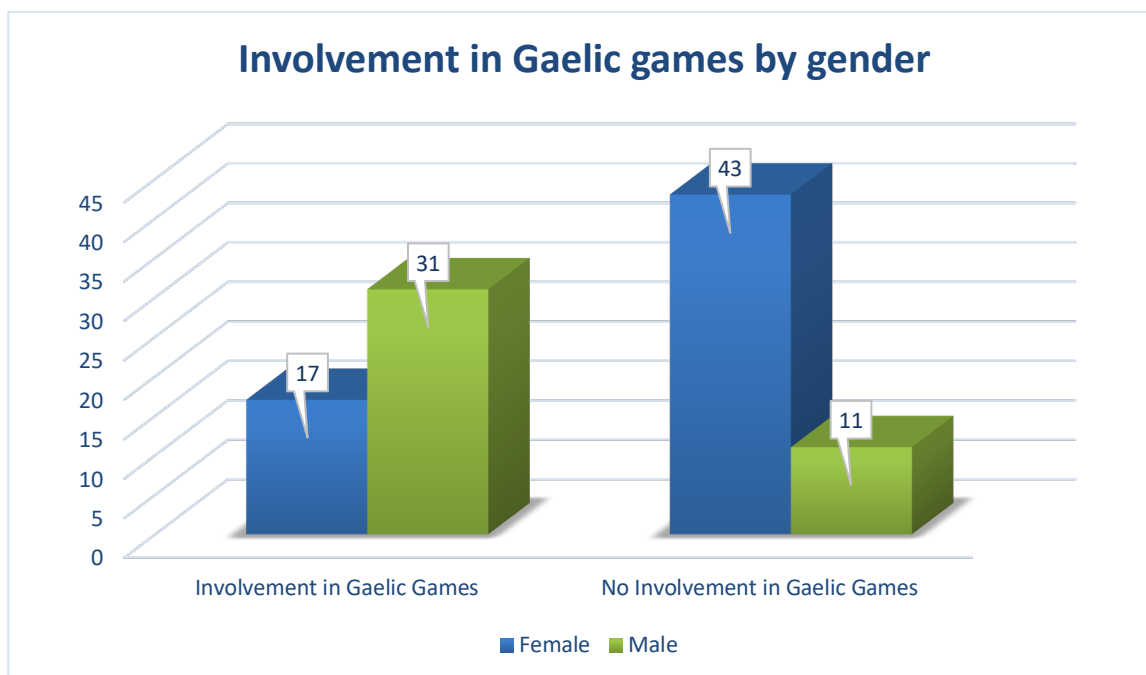
Females n=60   17 involved in Gaelic Games (28%)   43 not involved (72%)

Males = 42   31 involved in Gaelic Games (74 %) 11 not involved (26%)

The GAA is the largest sporting organisation on the island of Ireland, with 2,200 clubs across the 32 counties GAA (2023). All primary teachers are taught the rudiments of both Gaelic Football and Hurling/Camogie as part of their pre-service training. I decided to look in more detail at the involvement by gender with the GAA as this was the largest single area of involvement across the combined group. When involvement was broken down by gender, however, it was apparent that male Principals are far more involved with the GAA than female Principals. This again reflects the findings of the Sport Ireland report, that female participation in sports drops in adolescence.

Although all GAA sports are amateur, at county (elite) level male players are expected to train to the same standard as professional athletes. Kelly et al. (2019) conducted research on behalf of the GAA and the Gaelic Players Association (GPA) that investigated the educational and career choices of elite players. They discovered that 26% of the cohort they studied had undertaken 3rd level qualifications in Education in comparison with just 4% of the general male population of the same age group. Similarly, they found that 23% of the cohort work in Education by comparison to a number in the general male population of the same age group that was so small it could not be presented with any reliability.

These results indicate that there may be a tendency amongst these elite male players to choose teaching as a profession in order to allow them more time and flexibility for their

playing career. Of course, once their playing career at elite level comes to an end, in their mid to late 30's, they find themselves with a lot of unfilled time on their hands, at which point a move to more responsibility in their career may seem attractive. The work of Brown et al. (2019) with elite college athletes in the USA also found that there was an increased interest in careers in education amongst these athletes. Finally, Cruickshank (2019, Yang and McNair (2017) observe that in order to overcome the social isolation for working in majority female workplaces, male teachers often engage in traditional 'masculine hobbies'. Cruikshank, in particular, points out that such hobbies allow male teachers to interact with more men. This idea might explain the prevalence of involvement in GAA for male teachers - their hobby provides the man to man interaction lacking in their workplace.

Also interesting is the lack of variety of areas of involvement in males versus females. The 17 males not involved in the GAA were more limited in their activities than their female counterparts, with most being involved in other traditional sports, such as rugby, soccer and golf. Several were involved in Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Eireann (the organisation that promotes and teaches traditional Irish music and instruments). The activities that the females were involved in were far more varied. These included local and national politics, minority sports such as water polo and triathlon, community radio, charity groups, education related support groups, parish committees and music groups, scouting, drama groups and farmers' co-operatives.

Q.17   When completing the Standard Application Form for Principal roles, did you include reference to your involvement in sporting/community/voluntary groups? If you didn't refer to your involvement, can you provide a reason why?

Figure 28   Reference to sporting/community/voluntary groups in SAF

REFERENCE TO SPORTING/VOLUNTARY GROUPS IN SAF

No recollection
8%

Did not include
15%
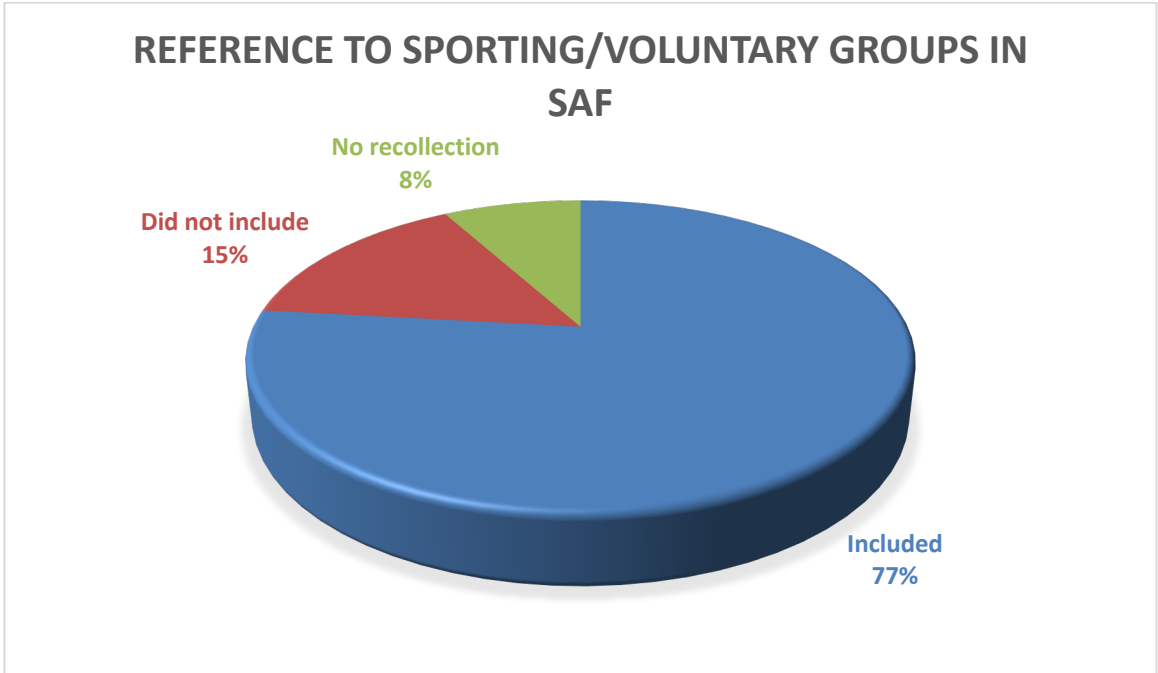
Included
77%

Figure 29   Reference to community/sports groups by Gender

n= 112

Reference to community/sporting group involvement by gender
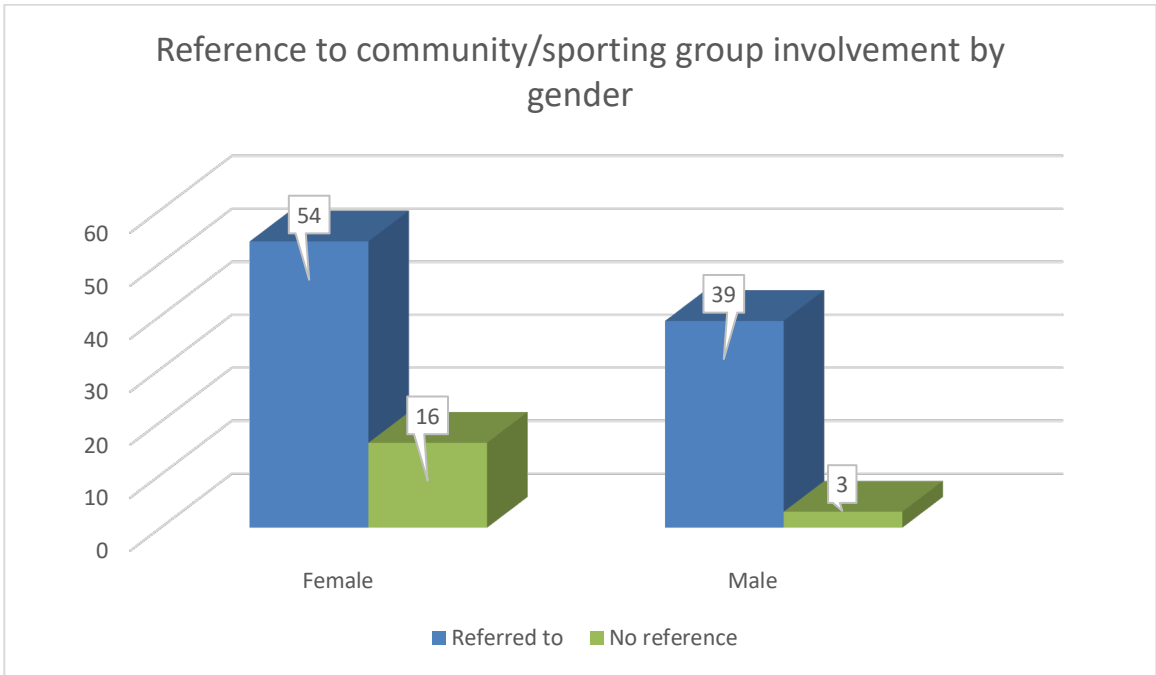
Females n=70   54 referred to their involvement (77.1%) 16 made no reference (22.8%)

Males n= 42   39 referred to their involvement (92.9%) 3 made no reference (7.1%)

Table 11   Reasons for including/not including reference to sport/community/voluntary activities on SAF

Included sport/community/voluntary activities	Did not include sport/community/voluntary activities	Could not recall or had not completed Standard Application Form
No reason given: 10 Felt that they had to: 2 Importance of such activities to school life: 15 To show leadership capacity/experience: 27 To show organisational skills: 7 Importance of community involvement: 20 Normal practice for job applications: 9 To demonstrate people skills: 2 To demonstrate a healthy work/life balance: 5	No reason given: 7 Felt it was irrelevant/inappropriate: 5 No involvement at time of application: 2 Perceived contentious nature of activity: 2	In an acting role so did not complete SAF: 1 Possibly mentioned but could not be certain: 4 CV not SAF and could not remember: 2 No recollection: 2

Respondents could give more than one reason.

What is clear from the data above is that the vast majority of respondents felt that it was important to refer to their sporting/voluntary/community activities when applying for principalship. The difference between the proportion of female respondents who referred to these activities in their applications versus the proportion of males who did is noteworthy. Over 90% of male respondents had referred to their sporting/voluntary/community activities in their applications. Given that 74% of these same respondents were involved with the GAA, one does wonder about the influence of the GAA 'network' in recruitment decisions. Bowles and O'Sullivan (2020) highlights the significant role that teachers have

played in supporting the dominance of Gaelic games in primary schools and indeed within the national PE curriculum. Given the link between GAA clubs and Roman Catholic parishes, it is not surprising that involvement in the GAA might be seen as advantageous to candidates applying for principalship. As the interview selection panel consists of a minimum of three people, it is likely that at least one will also have involvement with the GAA. The GAA (2003) has a stated 'The school has always been the foundation stone in the promotion of our games and Association' (2003, p. 9). It might, therefore, be of benefit to the organisation at local level if the Principal of the local primary school was to support the club's engagement with the school. The Principal, after all, is central to decisions about the involvement of external organisations in the delivery of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. As Houlihan (1997, in Bowles, 2020) points out, 'traditionally, primary teaching and Gaelic games have been strongly linked' (Bowles, p.251).

Q. 19   How old are you?

Figure 30   Principal Age Groups

n=111
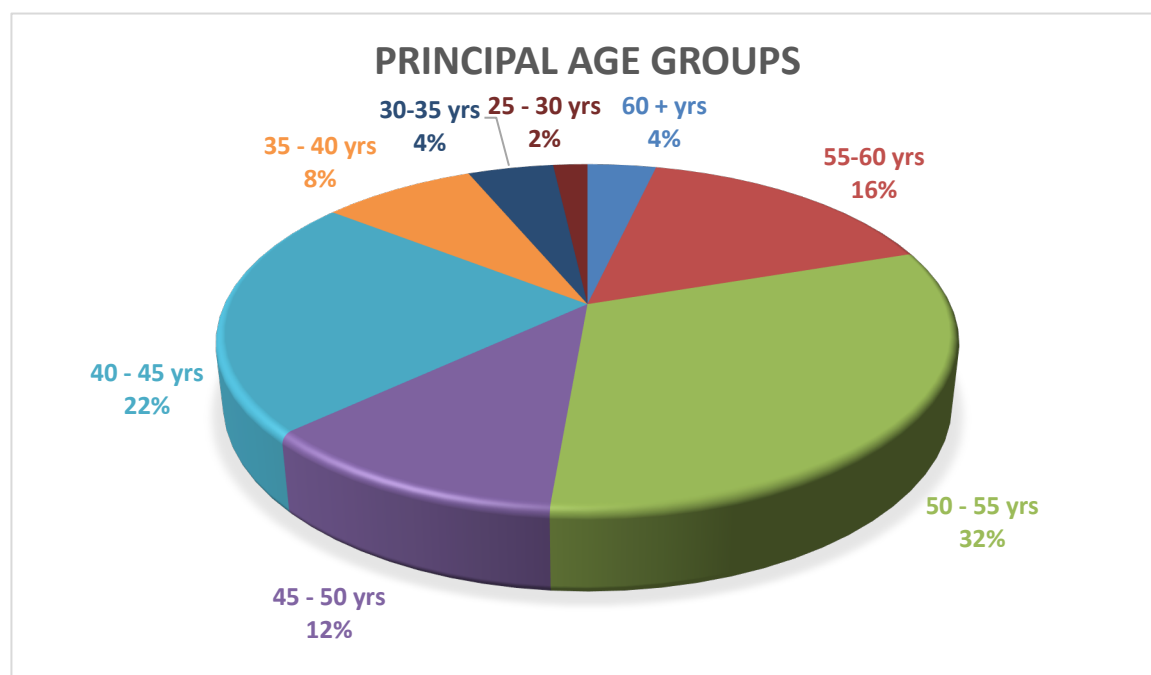
Figure 31   Principal Age by Gender

n=111
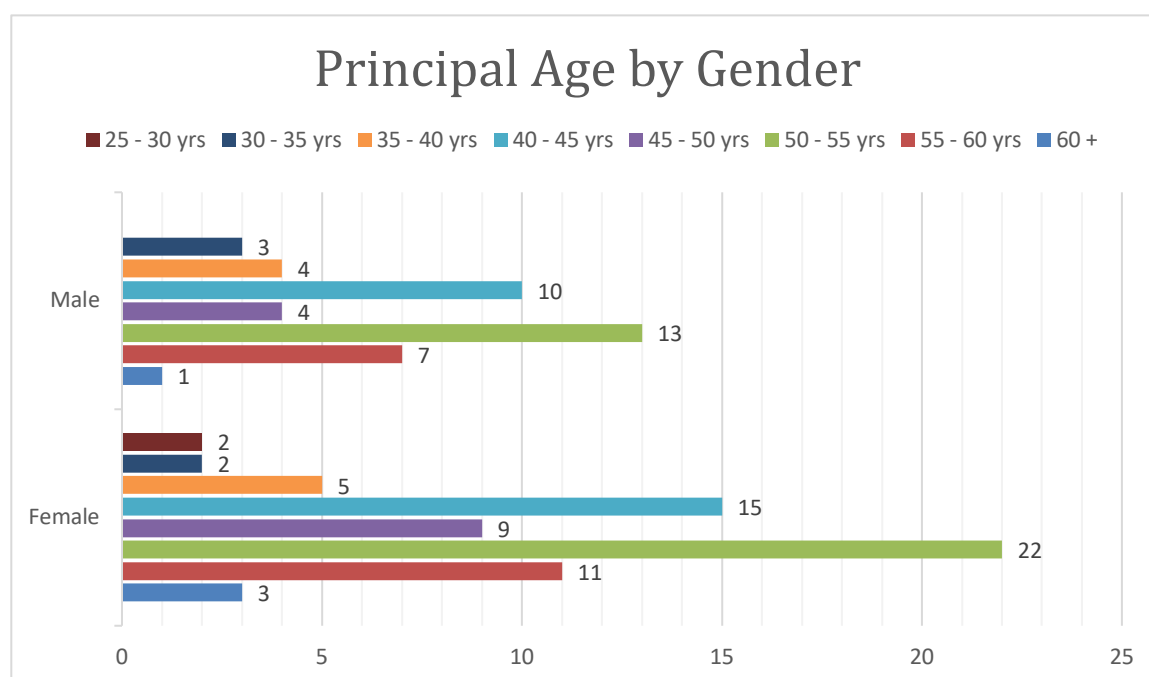
Across both genders the lowest number of Principals fall into the under 40 age groups. 13% of female respondents are between 25 and 40 years of age compared with 16.5% of the males. The largest number of Principals across both genders fall into the 50 to 55 years old group. This is unsurprising, as we saw in question seven, primary teachers with 33 to 35 years' service can retire at 55. For both genders the numbers in the 55 to 60 years old group is almost half of what we see in the 50 to 55 bracket. For females the numbers drop from 31.8% in the 50-55 bracket to 15.9% in the 55-60 group. A similar drop can be seen in the data from male participants, dropping from 30.9% in the 50-55 age group to 16.6% in the 55-60 group.

The age group with the biggest difference between the two genders was the 30 to 35 year olds, with 7% of male respondents falling into this group and just 2.9% of female respondents. Across all age groups there was less discrepancy than I had initially assumed. There was a relatively even spread of males and females across all age groups, with the exception of the 25 to 30-year-old age group in which there were no male respondents. For both males and females over 80% of respondents were over 40 years of age. This is in keeping with the desire that Principals would have significant experience in teaching prior to taking on the roll.

The data presented in this chapter was taken solely from the questionnaire. Some of the data was as expected, but there were also some unexpected results. In chapter six I will

analyse the responses from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the 13 Principals and one aspiring Principal who engaged with the second phase of my research.

Chapter 6:   Interviews with Principals, Aspiring Principals and Diocesan Secretary

6.1   Introduction

As previously outlined, I conducted interviews about the selection process with three groups, Principals and Aspiring Principals, Independent Assessors for an Archdiocese, and Monsignor Murphy, the Diocesan Secretary for Education in a large Diocese.

I will report the findings of these interviews by looking at each group individually. I will outline the experience of the individuals in each group in order to provide context for their responses and then report on the themes arising. Where relevant, I will refer to themes that arose in the other interview groups for comparison. This chapter will focus on the interviews held with Principals, while the next will address the interviews with Independent Assessors from the Diocesan List.

Monsignor Murphy's views, as expressed during my interview with him, will be interspersed through both chapters in the context of how they relate to the responses provided by the other two groups. Monsignor Murphy was interviewed because I considered it important to have the official view of a Diocese on the selection process for school leaders and also on the selection and training of Independent Assessors. It was also important to hear what the Catholic Church (at least in one large Diocese) looks for in its school leaders. As Diocesan Secretary for Education the Monsignor is well placed to provide this perspective.

6.2   Interview Participants – Principals and Aspirants

6.2.1   Principals

Following requests for participants via email and telephone calls, 13 Principals and one Aspiring Principal were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Each was given a pseudonym and all transcripts were checked for identifying information. In all cases, some details needed to be changed to ensure anonymity. In most cases this was a place name, school name, or the name of a colleague mentioned by a participant. All school names used are fictional. To present context for the information provided by participants, they are profiled below, by gender for ease of reference.

Table 12   Interview Participants - Male Principals

Name	Years teaching	Years as Principal	Previous Leadership Experience	Internal / external hire	Masters Degree	School Type
Fiachra	10	8	AP 2 in previous school	External	Yes	Vertical. All-boys. Urban. Non DEIS. 38 Staff 524 Pupils
Oisín	19	2	Deputy Principal in previous school	External	Yes	Mixed vertical. Urban. Non DEIS 24 Staff 368 Pupils
Naoise	20	18	Deputy Principal in first year teaching	External	No	Mixed vertical. Rural village. Non DEIS. 7.5 teachers. 137 Pupils
Fionn	19	2	Nil	Internal	Yes	Mixed senior. Suburban – Non DEIS 31 Staff 360 Pupils
Ferdia	14	New (*Note:* 1st male Principal and only male staff)	Deputy Principal in previous school	External	Yes	Girls vertical. Suburban. Non DEIS. 16 Staff 277 Pupils
Conor	37	8	AP 2	Internal	Yes	Mixed junior. Suburban. Non DEIS. 33 Staff 352 Pupils
Aodhán	7	6 months	AP 2 in previous school	External	Yes	Mixed vertical. Suburban. Non DEIS. 33 Staff. 472 pupils.

Table 13 - Interview Participants - Female Principals

Name	Years teaching	Years as Principal	Previous Leadership Experience	Internal/ external hire	Masters Degree	School Type
Doireann	17	New	AP 1 in previous school	External	Yes	Vertical girls – boys in junior classes. Non DEIS. 20 Staff. 295 Pupils
Aisling	18	12	Nil	Internal	Yes	Vertical mixed. Rural. Non DEIS. 17 Staff 134 Pupils
Eimear	33	1	AP 1 for 1 year	Internal	No	Vertical mixed. Urban-DEIS. 38 Staff 250 Pupils
Gráinne	21	12	Deputy Principal before appointment	Internal	Yes	Mixed vertical. Urban (Citycentre) – DEIS. 20 Staff 181 Pupils
Aoife	15	10	Previously Principal in small 2 teacher school	External	Yes	Mixed junior. Urban - Non DEIS. 16 Staff 150 Pupils
Béibhinn	22	11	Previously Principal in small 6 teacher school	External	Yes	Mixed senior. Suburban – DEIS. 35 Staff 374 Pupils

6.2.2 Aspiring Principals

Having intended to interview some Aspiring Principals about their experiences and perceptions of the selection process, I was surprised that I had difficulty finding anyone who was willing to speak to me. I sent an email request for participants to all Catholic primary schools in the country and asked that it be forwarded to all teaching staff. This was done twice and yielded no participants. I contacted Principal colleagues in other schools and asked them to pass on my request to any of their staff who might have leadership aspirations. Again, there was zero response. I did succeed in interviewing one Aspiring Principal, Méabh. We had a former colleague in common who put us in contact. Méabh was very willing to discuss the selection process.

Méabh: At the time of interview, she was engaged in a round of interviews for various principalships for which she had applied. She has been teaching for 27 years and is currently working in her third school. She has a Master's in Guidance Counselling and is currently working towards her PhD. She had also worked as a lecturer in one of the colleges of education. She teaches at St Dabhnait's, an all-boys junior school. St Dabhnait's is staffed by 11 teachers. It is in an affluent suburb of a large city and does not have DEIS status.

6.3   Interview Findings - General

The semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix C) used during the interviews was split into four areas of questioning.

Table 14   Interview schedule - Areas of questioning

	Area	Question related to
1	Participant Background	participant career experience, their school, leadership experience and qualifications.
2	Application & Selection Process	motivations for applying, expectations of the job, interviews and the preparation and feedback, knowledge of selection criteria and frustrations with the process

3	Standard Application Form	the four leadership domains, choosing referees, use of non-professional experience in completing the form, ease/difficulty of form.
4	Principalship	the four leadership domains, choosing referees, use of non-professional experience in completing the form, ease/difficulty of form.

Analysis of the interview transcripts highlighted six main themes arising across participants. Each theme was made up of a number of subthemes. The table below outlines the themes and sub-themes that will be explored in this chapter.

Table 15   Interview responses - Themes and Sub- themes

	Themes	**Sub-themes**
1	Candidates with a perceived advantage	• Internal candidates • Male candidates
2	School Leadership	• Motivations • Personal definitions of school leadership
3	Standard Application Form	• Choice of referees • Use of non-professional experience • The Catholic Church • Selection criteria

4	Interviews	• Interview preparation • Interviews Post-interview feedback
5	Candidate suitability for principalship	• Who do Principals think are suitable? • What do Principals think selection panels want?
6	The Selection Process	• Pros and cons of existing process • Suggested alternatives

6.4   Theme 1 - Candidates with a Perceived Advantage

6.4.1   Internal Candidates

Amongst the participants there was an overwhelming perception that an internal candidate was much more likely to be selected than an external candidate. This is all the more interesting given that 75% (nine) of the participants were external hires themselves.

However, the accuracy of their perception is supported by the results of an IPPN survey presented in '*Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action*' (IPPN, 2022, p.44) which found that internal candidates were more than four times more likely to be appointed than external candidates.

In many cases there was a grudging sense of acceptance from participants that an internal candidate would get the job. Aodhán, for example, felt that he was 'taking a shot at nothing' applying for a position when there was "a very strong candidate who'd been a Deputy Principal for years and had been acting up as Principal for six months." Oisín expressed similar sentiments:

>And for some of the positions, you could be up against an internal candidate, where there was no chance of anybody else getting it, because the Deputy went for it, they were going to get it.

Aoife, who had been interviewed 14 times before getting her first principalship and is now an Independent Assessor for her diocese, observed that internal candidates seemed to be the preferred option for many schools:

>If it was a female …. It was a female who was either connected to the school in some way, maybe perhaps worked in the school.

Blackmore et al. (2006) study of Principal selection in two Australian States has many parallels with the Irish case. One of the major themes arising in their interviews was what they described as "the covert rule about the appointment of preferred applicants". Similarly, this was a trend noted by the participants in this study. As Blackmore et.al. note

>The appointment of incumbents leads to a pattern of 'reproduction of the known', with applicants known to panel members (for example Acting Principals or Assistant Principals) often selected rather than 'unknowns'.

>(2006, p.305)

As we will see below, this pattern of 'reproduction of the known' is something that the participants in the current study are aware of and have concerns about.

Méabh, the Aspiring Principal, and Doireann shared a strong view that the decision on who to appoint was often made before anyone was even interviewed. Méabh who, due to her experience and length of service, has many friends and peers who are school leaders, believed that it is often apparent to candidates if the job is de facto gone:

>I haven't spoken to anybody who has gone through this process who doesn't feel like the job was gone before they went in [interviews] ......an absolute nod and a wink.

Doireann highlights the frustration of figuring out during the interview that you are "going through the motions." Having gone through six interviews in different schools before being appointed as Principal, Doireann had plenty of experience. She was clear that, although nothing would be explicitly said during an interview, "it was just in the manner of the board" that the job was already decided. She mentioned that while you would be hopeful going into the interview, because after all you had been called to interview, that often changed before it concluded:

> I think whatever about going in prior to it, you certainly get it once you leave. By the end of the interview, you know, whether this is a real job or not. I wouldn't say beforehand; you don't know……but you certainly get the sense as the interview progresses.

Naoise, who had been a Teaching Principal for 18 years, had recently started interviewing for Administrative Principal posts, although he had not been successful at the time we spoke. He queried if there was actually a secondary set of unofficial criteria applied during interviews:

> I sometimes think that there's another layer of criteria that is not in the actual list of criteria. And the reason I say that is because for most interviews that I have gone for the person who is incumbent [in the school] has gotten the position.

It is worth noting here that when I asked Naoise if the successful internal candidates would have had anything in the application form that he did not, he mentioned that most had a Master's degree. Naoise does not and, although it is not officially required, it may be the case that not having a level nine qualification is hampering his chances.

The current selection process has no role for the outgoing Principal. In fact, Chapter 4 of Circular 44/2019, which outlines the procedures for appointments, specifically states that

> The person vacating the position of Principal of a school shall have no involvement in the recruitment and appointment procedure for the Principal Teacher that will replace him/her.

> (D.E.S, 2019, p.73)

In spite of this, several of the participants claimed that there is a degree of succession planning happening in schools, with the outgoing Principal championing a particular candidate or, in some cases, grooming colleagues to replace them. Bébhinn gave an example of a local school she was familiar with where a former staff member who had left to take on a Principal position in another school later returned to the original school as Principal. Bébhinn observed about the selection:

> I wasn't surprised ……. a lady who had been Deputy Principal there, went on to principalship somewhere else, she was being groomed for the role. It was well known, I suppose, in the community, that she was being groomed for the role for the last few years.

Whilst not justifying this kind of behaviour, Bébhinn could empathise with the outgoing Principals who might, perhaps, be trying to protect their legacy:

> I do think, in a lot of cases it's the outgoing Principal just wanting to maintain control…. But it's not necessarily a bad thing that a Principal who has worked their butt off for X amount of years really wants to be invested in the person who take up the reins.

Having been Principal of two different schools Bébhinn could understand that it can be difficult for the outgoing Principal to let go and realise that their involvement is no longer necessary or required. Méabh was also able to share a similar experience she had. In this instance she had been both a candidate for the job in question and a member of the local community in which the school is located. In fact, her own children had attended the school. While we were discussing alternative Principal selection methods Méabh noted

> On paper, it says that the current Principal has no role. On paper, it says all of this. The dogs in the street know that's not the case. So, that job I didn't get, again, that candidate was chosen by the incumbent at the time. And it's only because I live locally, it's my local school, this is an open secret that he chose that candidate.

Naoise also felt that the selection process could be "maybe a bit nepotistic perhaps". There is a danger of viewing these comments as arising from disappointment or sour grapes.

However, similar situations were alluded to by Independent Assessors who were interviewed. For example, Cónall was trying to illustrate the importance of care in picking referees when he mentioned the following tale. He was speaking about a selection panel he had been a member of that had decided on their preferred candidate, but could not proceed to select them as the candidate's referees refused to support the appointment:

> Now, the interesting thing, and this is where sometimes things can fall down, is that the two people that they contacted were the previous Principal and the previous Principal before that. But unknown to the panel, or probably unknown to the Chairperson, they had their own candidate in mind. And second time around weren't involved in second time [sic], their preferred candidate got the position.

Whilst Cónall did not elaborate on how he knew that the successful candidate was the 'preferred' individual, it is interesting that a candidate considered suitable by the selection panel was prevented from being appointed by their own referees. The selection procedure as laid out in Circular 44/2019 only allows for the checking of references of proposed appointees after interviews have been conducted. Checking references prior to interview might help to flag issues like the one above, but this would require a change to official procedure. Cónall's story does support Méabh, Bébhinn and Naoise's assertion that the selection process can resemble, in Méabh's words "the anointing of a successor" by the outgoing Principal.

A secondary issue arising from the widespread perception that internal candidates are favoured is the repercussions when an internal candidate is passed over in favour of an external one. Both Fiachra and Bébhinn were appointed as external candidates to large schools, both of which had internal candidates unsuccessfully apply for the position. Both

of them noted repercussions, but to vastly different extents. Fiachra was cognisant that taking leadership of a school to which you are new will always be somewhat challenging:

> I also felt that maybe in the first year or two, because I was moving to a brand-new school and I was an external candidate, that would take quite a while for me to get to know the characters, not just the staff, or parents or the kids, and try and get my head around the culture of the school.

Fiachra's approach to handling the disappointment of one internal candidate was to build a strong positive relationship with him, to support his interests and to let him see that the selection panel had made a good choice:

> I did get a sense that one individual that had gone for the job, that particular {sic} was really disappointed. I think we managed to overcome all that. I was very supportive of the interests, I suppose, that that particular teacher had. And since then, that particular candidate was appointed Deputy Principal, so that probably helped things as well. And I think he sees the amount of work and effort I put into the school as well and he respects that.

The repercussions in Fiachra's case were relatively mild and easily overcome. But Bébhinn, through no fault of her own, faced the most extreme reaction to her appointment. She had been a Teaching Principal in another part of the country prior to being appointed Principal of Scoil na Mara. She moved to this particular area for family reasons. The problems began immediately:

> But first of all, it was a great shock that an outsider got the role. It was a shock that someone who was Principal of a small school had been elevated or parachuted in, maybe, to a very big school. And there was a lot of disappointment, resentment, bitterness I suppose, surrounding the appointment.

Whilst several staff had applied for the job, they seemed to rally around the disappointment of one in particular and use this to express their dissatisfaction with an outsider being brought in. The situation became malicious, with a campaign of undermining set in train:

> One person, in particular, that the whole staff had fully expected to the get the role, and there were secret meetings held, and there were letters written to the Bishop and letters written to the board [of management]. Members of the interview committee were phoned and challenged on the appointment, on their own personal phones at home. There was a lot of rumours, very malicious rumours spread about myself.
>
> Bébhinn

Among the rumours spread were that Bébhinn's family (who own a successful local business) had paid for her to get the job and an accusation that she had slept with one of the selection panel members. Although Bébhinn didn't speak much about how this all affected her personally, she did say that she had 'blacked out' a lot of what had gone on. Clearly this was a traumatic experience for her. She did discuss

how all of this backlash impacted on her leadership. She admitted to being 'completely blindsided' by the situation and that it occupied much of the discussion and relational work she had to do in the first year of the principalship:

> There was very little talk about children, about education, about the school's development, I would say for the first, certainly, year. It was the fallout from the appointment. But that's being kind, it actually went on much longer than that for a lot of people.

Bébhinn is not alone in experiencing bullying and gossip as Principal. The recent *Irish Primary Principals and Deputy Principals Health and Well-being Survey Report* highlights that 21% of those surveyed experienced bullying behaviour and a further 14.5% experienced cyberbullying (Rahimi, 2022, Fig. 28). A similar study conducted in 2015 found that 14.4% of principals had experienced bullying by colleagues and 24.9% had experienced gossip and slander (Riley, 2011, p.129). Factors including the social isolation of the Principal within the school context and the fact that workers in management roles tend to be more exposed to workplace bullying (Buonomo, 2020, p.3) may account for a relatively high level of Principals reporting that they have experienced bullying.

6.4.2 Male Candidates

As was highlighted earlier, primary teaching is a female dominated profession in Ireland, with males comprising just 15% of the profession. However, they hold 33% of Principal positions (1,061 posts). This disproportionate over-representation has given rise to a widespread view within the primary education sector that being male is a definite advantage in seeking leadership positions. Indeed, there is a large body of research evidence to show that men are, in fact, advantaged in leadership selection generally, and particularly in female-dominated professions like education. Men in teaching are riding the 'glass escalator' (Williams, 1992) to school leadership roles. Williams describes the 'glass escalator' as "subtle mechanisms in place to enhance [men's] positions in [women's] professions" (1992, p.108). Several other researchers have shown that, rather than suffering negative career effects due to being 'tokens' (Kanter,1977), men in 'female professions' have substantially better chances of promotion than women who are equally qualified, Cognard - Black (2004);Wingfield (2009) and Santos and Amâncio (2018). It is important to remember, though, that it is not that men necessarily want promotion and advantage more than their female colleagues. Williams (1992, p.108) and Holland Iantosca, (2022, p.2) note men may feel pressured to apply for leadership positions by both societal gender role expectations and from within the workplace, irrespective of their own personal career aspirations and goals:

> despite their intentions, they face invisible pressures to move up in their professions. Like being on a moving escalator they have to work to stay in place.

> (Williams, 1992, p.87)

During the interviews it became quite apparent that the female participants were very conscious of this male advantage. It was also evident that many of the male participants were not only aware of it, but had also benefitted from it themselves.

Naoise, the longest serving Principal in the group, is currently in the process of applying for Principal posts in larger schools than his current one. He felt that, while there is an advantage in being male, it applies mainly to a specific type of male:

> Certainly, there is a rule [unwritten] that if you are a lad, you wear a jersey for a kind of team and play football [Gaelic], or hurling. Certainly, that's a huge advantage. Or if you're involved in some sport, or sporting activity, that's always seen as a very positive thing.

Naoise, doesn't identify as being one of these 'lads'. He is more musical and academic than sporty. However, he still benefited from the male advantage. He was appointed as Deputy Principal of his previous school within a year of qualifying as a teacher and Principal within a further two years.

The dominant example of masculinity in primary school teaching in Ireland is the type Naoise refers to. They are typified by being very actively involved in a sport (usually Gaelic games) ideally at county level, but at the very least a bit of a star in the club and both expecting and being expected to be appointed to school leadership. This particular example of hegemonic masculinity is not unusual. Connell (1987) suggests that in Western nations images of masculinity "are constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sport" (p.84-85).

It is also the case that there are several subordinated masculinities at play in Irish primary schools too. Traditionally, many in the profession said about male primary school teachers that they "were either GAA or GAY". Amongst the many issues with this saying is that it overlooks the fact there are a wide variety of masculinities amongst male primary teachers, many of whom do not fall into either of the two expressions of masculinity mentioned.

O'Keeffe and Deegan (2018) refer to these as "non-synchronous masculinities". Of the seven male participants, only Naoise and Oisín actually pointed out that they do not view themselves in terms of the hegemonic masculinity. Oisín, as an openly gay man, is never going to present his masculinity in the heteronormative manner of the hegemonic

masculinity. Naoise, on the other hand, shares the heteronormativity of the hegemonic group, but that is where the commonalities end. In some ways male teachers like Naoise are more isolated even than those like Oisín, as they don't comply with the standard accepted masculinities typically seen in schools.

Fiachra and Aodhán also benefitted from the advantages of the 'glass escalator'. Unlike some of the female participants, Fiachra had his choice of principalships. Having applied and interviewed for two Principal posts, he was offered both. Fiachra had been an Assistant Principal 2 in his previous school, so had some school leadership experience. Aodhán applied and interviewed for Principals posts in two large schools and was offered the role in St Patricks. Like Fiachra, he had held an Assistant Principal 2 post in his previous school. However, he had been in the position for only a few months before applying for Principal roles, so had little actual school leadership experience. A striking similarity between Fiachra and Aodhán was their involvement in sport. Although no longer playing for their counties, both had done so in the past. Both had also captained club teams and both were very involved with coaching in their respective clubs. In both cases they had mentioned their involvement with GAA in their application forms.

In the case of the female participants, three were very aware of the reality of males having an advantage in the selection process. Interestingly, none of the females who were appointed as internal candidates mentioned this imbalance.

During our discussion about her applications for principalship, I asked Méabh how she thought selection panels came to their decision in appointing a Principal. One of the factors she highlighted is that she is a woman, "…I'm the wrong gender, right? Which sadly seems to still be pervasive in education".

Bébhinn was also very upfront about the advantages her male counterparts had. She articulated the point that it is not just the school community, but the wider local community, who are wrapped up in the cult of the male Principal. She highlights that word is spread around the community in advance about who is getting the job:

> So, the community are watching and listening and they're being given signals, very clearly. It can be very explicit; the things they've heard can be very explicit. Like, "we need a man in this job now, with experience in whatever, IT". Just so happens that we know another local teacher who's male, is a whiz with IT. So, there definitely are signals sent out.

As Bébhinn notes, this kind of approach is off-putting to other potential candidates who hear about the preferred candidate. The danger inherent in this is, schools may not be

getting the best possible Principals with potentially effective Principals are not even applying for positions. This cannot be good for schools and, more importantly, their pupils.

One of the most surprising realisations to arise from the interviews was just how deeply entrenched acceptance of male advantage is, even among female Principals. Aoife is a very well regarded, high profile Principal, who works on a leadership development programme in her spare time. She was one of the youngest Principals in the country when appointed to her first school. In speaking about the process of applying for her current post she made a comment that really shocked me:

> ...it was quite a unique phase, in that it might have not been a high interest. I know no male went for it; at the time I went for it.

The implication of this statement is that, subconsciously at least, Aoife believes that she might not have gotten the post had there been a male candidate. This was an offhand remark, but the question is, does Aoife believe she was lucky to have gotten the job because no male applicant applied? Is the 'glass escalator' so ingrained into the professional psyche that well qualified and experienced female candidates simply take it as a given that they will always lose out to male candidates?

6.5   Theme 2 - School Leadership

6.5.1   Motivations for becoming school leaders

In a context where applications for Principal posts have dropped continuously over the past two decades (IPPN, 2022, p.42), it is important to attempt to discover what factors draw teachers to school leadership in Ireland. Currently the role of Principal is considered unattractive by many. Factors contributing to this include; a lack of role clarity, the increasingly challenging and complex nature of the job, a constantly increasing workload, lack of work-life balance and a perception that those in the role are both over-worked and under-valued. Teaching Principal roles are even less attractive when potential candidates realise that they have all of the above to consider as well as teaching a class. As part of a recent membership survey, IPPN questioned members on the response rates to the most recent advertisement for the Principal role in their school. This showed that 27% had just three or fewer applications (35% in the case of Teaching Principal roles), 36% of schools had no internal applications and in 68% of schools surveyed the Deputy Principal did not

apply for the role (IPPN, 2022, p.42). These numbers, particularly those relating to the percentage of Deputy Principals who do not put themselves forward for Principal, are indicative of major problems. Clearly, in the case of primary school leadership, being Deputy Principal is not seen as a stepping stone to the role of Principal.

However, despite the negative factors outlined above, people do still apply for the role of Principal. What motivates someone to put themselves forward to be Principal?

International research in this area has tended to show some common motivations across nations. The main factors that come up repeatedly across the literature are; desire to have a positive impact on students and staff /to make a difference (Cranston (2007), challenge both personal and professional (Halsey & Drummond,2014), initiating change (Nakitende, 2019), opportunity to shape pupil learning opportunities (Shenhav et al, 2021), option to relocate, promotion, status and a belief in their own suitability to lead (Muller, Hancock & Wang, 2022). In regard to the motivation to lead a Catholic school specifically, Kerins and Spaulding (2022) found that the majority of their participants felt "a call to vocation in Catholic school leadership" (p.92). While this was not the case with the current research, two participants did talk about a vocation, or calling. Generally, the motivations of the participants in this study were consistent with what might be expected based on the literature, with some differences, which we will examine below.

A motivator for the three of the participants who had been internal appointments was the preservation of the existing school culture. Fionn and Conor were happy with how things worked in the school and were keen for that to remain the case. Fionn wanted to continue the good work that he felt his predecessor had begun:

> I think one of the main motivations was that I knew that the school was in a really good place. I knew there, I suppose the character of the previous Principal and the effort that she had put in to creating a particular type of culture in the school, and I conscious that I actually wanted to keep a lot of the work that she had done.

For Conor, the decision was based less on his desire to preserve the legacy of his predecessor and more on his fondness for the school culture:

> I thought, well look, I'll apply for it. I thought, I couldn't think of a school anywhere that I'd be more happy to lead. I pretty much knew the workings of the place. I knew what worked here. I was pretty much – had a strong sense of the culture of the school. That I wanted that culture to continue.

Gráinne was not quite as obvious in talking about school culture. However, her appreciation for the school and its culture was clear and definitely formed part of her motivation to apply to be Principal:

> Well to be honest, I was probably kind of heavily emotionally invested in the school. On that basis because I've been here for, I had been here for quite some time, almost a decade at that stage. I felt I was probably, as an internal candidate, one of the best people who could do the job and understand the needs of the community.

All three of these participants, who were internal candidates, were well motivated and it is easy to see why a selection panel would be happy to have them over similarly qualified external candidates. However, selection boards need to consider if repeating this pattern is always in the best interest of the school. Gronn (2006) refer to this selection of internal candidates as 'cloning their own'. By this they mean that schools, or selection panels on their behalf, are playing it safe by sticking with a known quantity, someone who knows how things work in the school. Similarly, Grummell et al. (2009) highlight selection panels leaning towards internal candidates due to 'local logics'. Candidates who have an understanding of the values and culture of the school and/or community are unlikely to disrupt the status quo. None of this is to say that any given internal candidate is not the best person for the position. It is, rather, to note that selection panels should be aware of the dangers inherent in this pattern repeating itself each time a new Principal is required in a school. Repeated 'cloning their own' may lead to group think and a lack of creativity in a school.

Throughout the literature a key motivator for applicants is the desire to challenge themselves and for a change in their work (Muller et al. (2022); Shehav et al. (2021), Halsey and Dummond (2014)). This was also the case for some of the participants in this research. Fionnnd Fiachra both identified that they were looking for a new challenge, although they had different reasons for doing so. Fionn felt that he was not as challenged by his classroom role as he had previously been:

> I'd been teaching for 13 years at that stage …..I was if I'm being honest maybe getting a bit stale with teaching …..

Fionn's need for a new challenge is understandable, particularly considering that he was working in a senior school, which would mean he was teaching eight to 12 year olds only. With just four grades to teach, things could get repetitious. Aodhán shared Fionn's view that over time teaching had become a little less challenging for him, "I won't say I got bored of teaching, but certainly the challenge was lessening and lessening".

Fiachra's motivation was slightly different. Being from a family of Principals, he was familiar with the role and believed he was ready for it:

> I suppose, I wanted a challenge. I felt I had the experience and I felt I had the skill set. And I suppose more importantly, the interpersonal skills. I felt I had all those to do the job. I suppose the fact as well, in the background, my father was a school Principal for 40 odd years. And my sister was a Principal in X. And so, it was the talk in the house.

In Fiachra's case, it is likely that there was an expectation that he would be a Principal, either from his family or, perhaps, from himself. He may have aspired to achieving the same as his father and sister. Research on career development and decision-making does show that family of origin expectations can influence career choices at all levels (Duffy, 2009), (Halpern, 2005)

Unlike Fiachra and Fionn, Conor was motivated more by feeling a need for change rather than needing a new challenge. Prior to considering the role of Principal he had begun working part-time with the National Induction Programme for Teachers and he had completed a Master's degree:

> I was experimenting with doing stuff outside school. And I probably was reaching that stage, I was reaching my 50th year. So I was at that stage through the induction programme and the masters that obviously I was getting to a place where I needed a bit of a change.

As the saying goes, 'a change is as good as a rest' and it is not unusual for people in any profession to get professionally restless in mid-career. In teaching, in particular, in spite of the fact that you work with a new group of children each year, after several years it can be hard to find the challenge in the job.

Belief in one's suitability to do the job (Shenhav et al.,2021) and self-efficacy - a belief in one's ability to do the job (Nakitende, 2019) have both been identified in the literature as motivators. In the case of this study, this sense of self-belief was a major motivator, as was a desire to lead. Aodhán, Aoife, Aisling, Doireann, Méabh and Oisín all believed they had

what it takes to be a Principal and really wanted to pursue leadership in a school environment. Both Aodhán, Oisín and Méabh had principalship as a career aspiration for some time, unlike the other participants who came to it over time, or as attractive positions arose:

> I knew I always wanted to be a Principal because I want to lead and I like leading.

> Aodhán

> It has always been in the back of my mind, and I've been a teacher for a number of years and found myself unexpectedly in an academic environment…. I am confident in my teaching, but I think that I have enough experience. And having had the background in *academia,* it gave me a bit if confidence, as far as, 'I think I could probably do the job'.

> Méabh

> I always had it in my head, that I would like to do it, I'd like to be Principal, I'd like to get to a leadership position.

> Oisín

Doireann and Méabh were motivated by their self-belief in their ability to lead a school community well.

Having a positive impact or making a difference in the lives of children and teachers appears as a popular motivation across the literature and it was the case for Bébhinn, Doireann and Ferdia too. Cranston (2007), Hancock and Müller (2009), Barton (2009), Halsey & Drummond (2014) all found that the desire to make a difference, or a positive impact, was a high priority for the school leaders in their studies. Ferdia typified this idea. He felt one of the main rewards of leading a school was making "a difference in these children's lives."

The desire to re-locate arises as a motivator both in the literature and for some of the participants in this study. Three participants highlighted relocation as a secondary motivator in applying for principalship.

In Ireland the desire, or need, to re-locate can force teachers to apply for Principal roles as there is currently no system that allows experienced teachers to transfer to new schools and maintain their seniority. So, a teacher relocating will be appointed as the most junior

teacher in the school. Ireland operates a last in first out system when schools lose teacher appointments. So, an experienced teacher having relocated could find themselves out of job and looking for work again very quickly. If teachers are appointed to Principal or Deputy Principal roles, however, they leapfrog existing school staff to be become the most senior members of staff and thus have job security. Pragmatic experienced teachers who need to re-locate will almost always apply for leadership roles.

Kerins and Spaulding (2022) found that a majority of participants in their study of early career Catholic elementary school Principals described being motivated by "a calling to a vocation in Catholic school leadership." Watkins (2018) describing the *Visions for Educational Leadership* project, in which 70 senior school leaders in state Catholic schools in Wales and England were interviewed, highlights that a key theme that arose was the idea of school leadership as a 'vocation'. Indeed, the Catholic Church sees teaching and school leadership as a vocation too. In 1965, *Gravissimum Educationis,* stated

> Beautiful indeed and of great importance is the vocation of all those who aid parents in fulfilling their duties and who, as representatives of the human community, undertake the task of education in schools. This vocation demands special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and to adapt.

Although only one of the participants in this study, Naoise, actually used the word 'vocation' in relation to motivation to become a school leader, several others discussed leadership as a form of service and feeling a calling to the role.

Naoise was clear that the role of Principal in a Catholic school required the individual to have a charism. He viewed his own faith and educational background as being important factors in his being called to work in education and school leadership:

> For me, I suppose my faith is a very important part of my life. And I suppose I had the experience that I was taught by nuns. And they lived their faith and had a fantastic ethos towards young people…. I thought their vision for young people, the voice for young people, their children at the centre of education, the centre of what we do…. And very much part of community, very much part of children's lives and offering something that was outside themselves, complete service. And I wanted to give that service too, maybe not in religious vocation, certainly for me as an education vocation.

Naoise sees part of this vocation as showing in being respectful of and showing care for others. Watkins (2018) expresses this sense of care as typical of Catholic schools. She says that vocations are about love or, more specifically, engaging in 'practices of love'. Several other participants displayed a similar understanding of this vocation, or calling, through their definitions of school leadership, which will be discussed later.

Eimear explained that in thinking about applying for the Principal role when it came up in her school, she spent a lot of time talking herself out of the idea. In fact, she didn't make

the decision to apply until two days before the closing date. She describes her internal discussions to illustrate that she struggled with the decision before having an epiphany that she shouldn't be completely closed off to the idea:

> But when the job was advertised, I thought, no, I don't need that stress in my life…. I found myself talking myself out of it. But it still kept coming back to me and every time it came back to I'd talk myself out of it again…. Then I just kept thinking, hang on a minute, this just didn't sit right with me. It just kept coming back to me and it just kept saying, why the hell not? Why am I not?

Eimear continued on to say that it was members of the local community asking her if she was applying that finally prompted her to go for it. Her description is not untypical of those who have a vocation or calling to something. In talking about "it" in regards to the idea of being Principal, she is unconsciously suggesting that the decision almost took on a life of its own, that it was something she fought to resist, but that in the end it was almost divine intervention.

6.5.2 Personal definitions of school leadership

Participants were asked how they personally define school leadership in respect to their own style of leadership. The variety of descriptions was very interesting. Although each definition was unique to the participant and, to some extent, their school context, there were some commonalities. For Aisling, Eimear, Naoise and Fionn there was a vocation, or service element, in their description. Ferdia and Conor were more drawn to the managerial aspects of the role. Aodhán, Doireann, Fiachra, Aoife, Bébhinn, Oisín, Gráinne and Méabh all took a relational view of school leadership.

Eimear, Naoise and Fionn were very clear in their definition of leadership as service or vocation. However, Aisling's definition needed a closer look in order to ascertain that she was feeling the same way. Perhaps because she was relatively new to the role, Eimear had a clear idea around how she defines leadership. She would have thought about this as part of her preparation during the selection process:

> I think that leadership is service. It's leading from not too far in the front…I think it's about seeing what's to be done. Having a vision, seeing what's being done, and having the courage then to do something.

While her focus is on the service element of leadership, Eimear recognised the importance of relationships:

> Leadership is about relationships. It's about affirming people. You're leading by being good at what you're doing, by putting your heart and soul into it. And not

bringing people down, but making people feel a bit better. I do think that's service, really.

Fionn, who is very active in several social justice movements, highlighted the service

aspect of leadership in an almost penitential manner:

> I think I always gravitate to the idea of, leadership is about service and that idea that you're contributing to something, you're giving something back and you're giving up yourself.

Fionn's desire to serve is indicative of his having become a Servant-Leader:

> Becoming a servant leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.

> Greenleaf, 2014, p.20

According to Greenleaf (1970) and Adams et al. (2014) "a servant-leader is a servant first"

(p156), and we can see from Fionn's next statement that he clearly sees himself in this

way:

> You're serving, you're here to serve and serve the community, the children and your staff… It's about empathy and having compassion and an ability to understand how other people are feeling at that particular time

Expressed in this definition of leadership are religious values based on the life of Jesus

Christ, the original servant-leader. In living these values through his work, Fionn is

partially fulfilling the mission of Catholic education - evangelisation.

Naoise's definition of school leadership describes it as a vocation and as a sense of service.

He uses the two expressions almost interchangeably. Naoise was self-conscious of using

the word vocation - as soon as he said it he appeared keen to justify it, saying, "I know that

sounds kind of high and pious, but I think that's important". He then switched to using

"sense of service" instead. Naoise is not alone in having difficulty with naming his

'calling' to school leadership a vocation. For many Catholics, the word vocation conjures

up images of taking Holy Orders or Religious vows, so there is an innate difficulty in

appearing to equate a life in school leadership with a life as a priest or religious sister.

Watkins (2018) explains this difficulty with the word vocation:

> As a layperson, the Catholic school leader has a contract, a salary, a pension and an expectation round retirement. The job is not totalising, or eternal, nor even necessarily permanent.

> (2018, p.162

As vocations to the priesthood or a religious order are seen by many within the Catholic world as the most serious way of serving God, it is understandable that school leaders would be reluctant to put their own calling on the same level.

Aisling began her definition of school leadership by saying it is important that as a leader you "be the change you want to see". She used this to explain the importance for her of leading by doing, showing others what is expected, not simply giving instructions and watching others work. Aisling believes that it is important not to ask others to do something you would not do yourself. So, in true servant leader style, she gets involved in all aspects of the work of her school community.

At the opposite extreme of leadership definitions were Conor and Ferdia, who took a much more pragmatic view. Both are focused on elements of school leadership that are subject to external evaluation. Conor's view was that it is about "being organised in such a way that there are systems in place that the organisation can run seamlessly". For him, this included the management of all the resources of the school:

> So it's the management of all of your resources be they physical, human or financial.

Fostering a culture of improvement was the focus of Ferdia's definition. He was clear that the culture of improvement had one function "the best interests of every child in school". The remaining participants, Doireann, Aoife, Bébhinn, Fiachra, Méabh, Gráinne and Aodhán, all defined their school leadership in terms of relationships. Branson et al. (2019) outline the change in focus for leadership worldwide. They note that the key considerations for leaders in today's world are all relational. This is very much consistent with modern leadership theory. Where once the emphasis in leadership was on providing technical expertise, directing and controlling (McKinney, 2022), now the focus is on relationships in order to create the conditions for optimal performance:

> Now, the onus is upon leaders to carefully nurture and skilfully support people within the organisation by focussing on such things as relationships, interpersonal skills, psychological commitment, communication, empowerment, teamwork, trust, participation and flexibility.

> Branson et al., 2019, p222.

Branson et al., (2019) describe this relationship centric leadership as 'transrelational',

leadership and points to Jesus as an exemplar of this form of leadership.

In defining school leadership, the remaining participants implied that they viewed themselves as relational leaders. For Doireann leadership is defined "by relationships". Aoife, Aodhán and Bébhinn expressed the belief that the core of leadership was about empowering, enabling and developing staff and pupils "to be the best they can" (Aoife). Fiachra explained that, for him, leadership was all about interpersonal skills and using them to support those around him, for example, picking up when colleagues were overloaded and did not have the capacity to take on anything else. For Méabh and Gráinne, leadership was defined through feeling. Méabh believed that a good leader "can be judged on how they make the people around them feel". Compassion was the key to school leadership in Grainne's opinion, being "very compassionate to the needs of staff, students and community".

Burns (1978, 2010) in his seminal work *Leadership*, points out the key to successful leadership:

> the most powerful influences consist of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons *engage* with one another.

<div align="right">Burns, 2010, p.11</div>

Although Burns first highlighted this concept in 1978, leadership theory appears to have overlooked the real significance of relationships until the early part of the 21st century. It is very clear that the majority of our participants are aware of the centrality of relationships and building on existing relationships for effective school leadership. Here again we can see similarities with the servant leadership practiced by Jesus Christ. He rejected the traditional form of leadership, centred on power, control and coercion and, instead, led with love and kindness. This is what St Paul later termed 'agape', or unconditional love, which in Christ's case involved sacrificing himself to save others. Punnachet (2009) believes that in Christ we find the example of servant leadership upon which Catholic school leaders should model their own practice. From what we have seen from the responses of the Principals interviewed, it is clear that they almost all possess several of the characteristics of Catholic servant leadership.

6.6. Theme 3 - Standard Application Form for Principal Appointments

6.6.1 Choice of referees

The SAF requires applicants to provide the names and contact details of three referees, one of whom, it suggests, should be the applicant's current employer. In the words of Fiachra:

> I think it would be questioned in a lot of ways if the candidate in question didn't put down the name of their own Principal.

The notes on the form also make it clear that referees should be people who know the applicant in a professional capacity only and that that relatives and friends should not be used. There would be some natural crossover in teaching between colleagues and friends, so most take this instruction to mean that friends who do not have a background in teaching should not be used. Many of the participants found it difficult to select the other two referees and some were not happy to have to give the details of their current employer. As we have seen above, one of the motivating factors for people applying for Principal roles may be to get out of their current school and in some cases this could be because of poor relations with school leadership or other colleagues.

All of the participants had used either their Principal or Chairperson as a referee, as this was seen as necessary and it made absolute sense to each of them except Méabh. In her case a new Principal had been appointed to her school while she was on career break and on her return to the school the new Principal had been out on maternity leave, followed by parental leave. This meant that while Méabh had never actually worked with the Principal, she still felt obliged to use her as a referee. For her it felt like "wasting a reference".

Six of the participants also gave the name of former Principals as referees. They were of the view that these would have a good understanding of their abilities as a professional, having seen them grow and develop as teachers. Four participants had referees who were former teaching colleagues who had gone on to be Principals themselves. They felt that these would have a knowledge of the participants' professional abilities and collegiality, as well as an understanding of the role of Principal. Amongst the other popular referees were union activists (INTO officials), lecturers at ITE colleges, directors of national education agencies the participant had worked with and the chairpersons of various sports clubs.

Five of the 13 participants had a priest or religious sister as one of their referees. In one case (Oisín) this was a priest who had sat on the BOM of the school he was working in. In all other cases the priest or religious was a personal or family friend, or their Parish Priest. It is interesting that so few sought references from clergy/religious, given they were applying to lead Catholic schools. There are a number of potential reasons for this. Firstly, quite simply the number of clergy/religious in Ireland has declined greatly in recent decades. In the past many Catholic families in Ireland would have had a relative who was a priest, brother or religious sister, but this is now increasingly rare. According to a 2022 survey conducted by the Association of Catholic Priests there are now just 2,116 priests

across the 26 dioceses on the island of Ireland. This contrasts with a figure of 5,791 working priests in Ireland in 1971 (McSweeney, 2022). Most diocesan priests now must work across several churches, or even parishes, so it is less likely that they get to know their parishioners on a personal level as they would have in the past. Consequently, they may be less inclined to be used as referees. Secondly, all of the participants focused on having the majority of their referees from within the education world, perhaps reflecting a perception that what is most important to selection panels is evidence of a solid background in the profession. It appears that there may be a growing perception amongst applicants that their Catholicity (adherence to the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church) is of secondary importance to their experience and expertise in leading teaching and learning. This is supported by the interviews undertaken with Independent Assessors. They were all of the opinion that panels prioritised the best candidate for the particular school, irrespective of how religious the person might be.

6.6.2 Use of non-professional/voluntary activities to complete sections of SAF

As with the questionnaire respondents, interviewees were asked about the inclusion of non-professional (voluntary, community, sporting, arts or religious) activities in their SAF. The SAF does not include a section for such activities, but it is possible to use them as examples within the four leadership domains. In both the questionnaire and interviews the percentage of those who included non-professional activities was similar, 77% of questionnaire respondents and 76% of interview participants. It is clear from both the questionnaire and the interviews that there is a high level of volunteerism amongst the cohort. From the questionnaire results 98% of the respondents were currently or had in the past been volunteers. Although only 76% of interviewees had mentioned these voluntary activities in their SAF, all 13 of them (100%) were actively engaged in some form of volunteerism. Census 2022 found that 711,379 people (13.8% of total population) engaged in voluntary or unpaid work in one of 5 activity areas. Males were more likely to volunteer in sporting organisations, while females were more likely to volunteer in community organisations (CSO,2022). This corresponds with the findings from my survey. Krag and Holtrop (2020), looking at volunteerism in Australia, found that volunteers tended to be older (over 35), well connected socially and employed. In the current research 94% of questionnaire respondents and 92% of interviewees were over 35 and all are employed. As Principals are so highly visible within their local communities it is reasonable to say that they were all well connected. By far the largest sector of voluntary involvement amongst questionnaire respondents was sport, with 34% involved with the GAA and a further 13%

involved with other sporting organisations. The data from the interview participants gave a broadly similar picture. Of the nine interviewees who had included voluntary activity in the SAF, six had mentioned sports volunteering. Of these, three had spoken specifically about GAA, either in a playing, coaching, or committee membership capacity. These were all male and were also the three youngest Principals interviewed. They were still at an age and life stage where it was feasible to balance active involvement in high-level sport with family and work commitments. In mentioning their involvement Fionn and Ferdia had described their involvement in training and managing teams, both adult and underage, as evidence of experience in leadership.

All nine of the interviewees who included reference to non-professional/voluntary activities were applying for their first principalship and, although not new to education, they would be classed as early career individuals in school leadership. Qvist and Munk (2018) found that those in the early stages of their career gain significant positive economic returns if they have been involved in volunteer work when compared to peers who have not. However, Petrovski et al. (2017) study on the effect of volunteer work on employability in Denmark, found that there was no link between them.

It is very clear, however, that through their involvement in voluntary work, these nine Principals did gain significantly in human, social and cultural capital. These positive personal benefits of involvement in voluntary work are noted across the literature, including by Kanter, 1995; Petrovski et al., 2017; Quist & Munk, 2018; Barton et al., 2019; Krag & Holtrop, 2019; Wallrodt, 2019; Scharfenkamp, 2022. In terms of human capital, volunteers gain skills that may relate or be transferable to their jobs. The networks of people they might not ordinarily meet are also of benefit to those aspiring to be Principals. This type of social capital is key to getting things done around a school. Volunteering provides cultural capital of the type that is important for Catholic school leaders. It signals a person's work ethic and social conscience to a prospective employer. Social conscience, in particular, is crucial for Catholic school leadership, given the focus in such schools on social justice and the preferential option for the poor. The nine interviewees who included their volunteerism in the SAF may well have been wise to do so, Rodell and Lynch (2016) found that co-workers and supervisors gave credit to employees who volunteered. It is very likely that the selection panels, acting on behalf of the employers, would do the same.

The four interviewees who did not include any voluntary or non-professional activities in their answers on the SAF were Gráinne, Méabh, Bébhinn and Aoife. In the cases of

Bébhinn and Aoife, both were already Principals when applying for their current roles. While both actually do volunteer in different areas, they believed that their work in their first Principal posts gave them enough experience and examples to complete all sections of the SAF without the need to refer to non-work related activities. Gráinne was already the Deputy Principal of the school when she applied to be Principal. As a result, she felt that it was her knowledge of the school and community and her track record in the school that would win her the role. Similarly, Méabh felt that her experience across the education system and her academic qualifications were what would give her an edge in the selection process.

Interestingly, both Méabh and Aoife made reference to the GAA with regard to use of non-professional activities in the SAF. Aoife in discussing applications she had made for posts in rural schools said "I'm not involved in GAA in any sense, so I didn't have that to put down". Aoife pointed out that this was the type of activity she believed rural schools might prize and that, in some ways, she was at a disadvantage in not being a GAA member. However, it appears that this has not worked against her, as she has been appointed to two different Principalships. Méabh was discussing the types of candidates who seemed to be being appointed to Principal roles when she stated, "there seems to be still a very strong GAA thing". She then went on to explain that she had recently heard that she had missed out on an appointment to a candidate who was four years out of college and whose main attribute seemed to be that he played hurling. Obviously, it is very difficult to prove that this is the case, but Méabh's comment does serve to highlight that there is a perception in the system that there is an 'old boys network' around the GAA that advantages its members in leadership selection. This perception may be understandable given the figures around the over-representation of senior inter-county players in teaching.

Kelly et al. (2019) reported that county players they surveyed were questioned about whether they believed that being inter-county players helped with their employment and promotion prospects. 71% of top division hurlers and 62% of top division footballers believed that playing for their county had helped them get their job. Many of them also held the belief that their promotion prospects were positively impacted too, 30% of top division footballers and 26% of top division hurlers (Kelly, 2019). In an early study with the same cohort, Kelly et al. (2018) found that 69% of the players felt that their involvement at inter-county level had assisted in the development of leadership skills, 65% believed that their self-confidence had increased, 50% felt they had developed the skills to work under pressure and 48% felt that they had built connections that would help them in

their professional careers. These benefits are perceived by the players themselves, so it is unsurprising that their colleagues in education may also have similar perceptions.

6.6.3 The Catholic Church

As I was investigating the selection process for leadership of Catholic schools, I expected to hear a lot about the influence of the Church on the candidates and the process. In fact, during the interviews with the Principals surprisingly little mention was made of the Church or clergy. Where the Church was mentioned, the issues raised were all different, with no obvious pattern.

Eimear mentioned how surprised she had been at how little she had been asked at interview about the school ethos. She had expected to be closely examined on this critical area. When this did not happen she concluded that the fact that the BOM Chairperson would have been aware that she is a 'practising' Catholic satisfied him that she would uphold the ethos. Her expectation that the school ethos would be central to her interview is understandable given that the school, the parish, and the BOM Chairperson are all connected to an order of priests with a specific charism. It could also be argued, though, that Eimear's previous role as the school's HSCL was evidence that she had the skills needed to uphold the school ethos and the order's charism, which focuses on practical love for thy neighbour.

Aisling indicated that in contemplating applying for the Principalship of her school she had been concerned that, despite being a regular Mass-goer and making a very conscious effort to raise her own children in the faith, she might not be religious enough to lead a Catholic school. She was concerned that her lack of theological and scriptural knowledge might hinder her chances. Neidhart and Lamb (2016) Neidhart, Lamb & Spry (2012) found that Principals in their study on faith leadership questioned their own theological knowledge base and understanding. Aisling's concern is easily understood given the importance placed on the vocation of school leadership in Church documents. For example, in *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982) the role of Catholic educator is described thus:

> *A Vocation, rather than a Profession:* The work of a lay educator has an undeniably professional aspect; but it cannot be reduced to professionalism alone. Professionalism is marked by, and raised to, a super-natural Christian vocation. The life of the Catholic teacher must be marked by the exercise of a personal vocation in the Church, and not simply by the exercise of a profession.

It is easy to see why one might feel unprepared and unqualified to lead an organisation of people with a "super-natural Christian vocation". This is in addition to the responsibility of Catholic school leaders for "averting the spiritual impoverishment" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014) of Catholic schools. *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014) outlines what is needed from those leading Catholic schools:

> If we want to avert a gradual impoverishment, Catholic schools must be run by individuals and teams who are inspired by the Gospel, who have been formed in Christian pedagogy, in tune with Catholic schools' educational project, and not by people who are prone to being seduced by fashionability, or by what can become an easier sell, to put it bluntly (III,1, a).

All this shows the pressure that those of us leading Catholic schools can feel regarding the faith leadership aspects of the role. It might also explain why Aisling hesitated in deciding to apply for Principalship.

Méabh mentioned the Church in relation to the Certificate in Catholic Religious Studies/Religious Education (CCRS/CRE), the qualification required for employment as teachers or Principals in Catholic schools. Méabh expressed concerns about the lack of consistency in terms of interview boards seeking evidence of this qualification. She does not have the certificate, but had been called for interview by some schools, while receiving apologies from others who said they could not interview her without the qualification.

Méabh felt this was unfair, that either the qualification was required or it wasn't and that different schools and interview boards should not have different requirements. She is, of course correct. This is stated as a requirement in all dioceses and, therefore, should be applied across the board. It is problematic if candidates are being appointed to Principalship without the CCRS/CRE.

The inconsistency highlighted by Méabh also raises questions about the oversight of appointments being made to principalship. The names and details of proposed Principals must be sent to the Diocesan office for approval by the Bishop (or his nominee). Is an assumption being made that the interview board have done their due diligence and confirmed the candidate's qualifications? Perhaps it is the case that the interview board believe that the Diocesan office is responsible for checking. Either way, the possibility for error is high and this indicates that more structured procedures are required.

Msgr. Murphy also raised some issues with the CCRS/CRE. He noted that he sees some problems with the way in which some of the certificate courses are delivered by the

colleges of education. He was of the opinion that the intent of what the Bishops' Conference had set out in their document *Recognition of Qualifications to Teach Catholic Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools on the Island of Ireland* Conference (2018), was simply not being met. He felt that graduates of these courses struggle to apply the theory and theology they had learned on the course to actual teaching. He was also of the view that most of the candidates entering the colleges of education needed extra instruction on "the whole area of catechetics", as they were leaving second level education without the necessary grounding. He said

> I certainly would like them [the colleges of education] to look again at how they approach the diploma [certificate] programme. And is there a way that in the programme there'd be some kind of a preparation year where people coming in would get some type of a top up, and the whole area of catechetics. Because they don't have it coming from post-primary school.

The Monsignor's concern about the quality of the CCRS/CRE stems from a greater worry he has concerning issues highlighted to him by Principals retiring from the Diocese.

During the school years 21/22 and 22/23 a total of 77 Principals will have retired from schools within the Diocese. Many of them have expressed reservations about the ability of their successors to support and maintain the Catholic ethos of their schools. The Monsignor mentions specifically a concern that the younger generations of Principals taking on the role are from "a theologically and spiritually deprived background" by comparison to those retiring. He reports that

> A concern of the Principals going out is, we were able to support the ethos of the school. And we were able to support the fact that it was a Catholic school. What in the name of goodness, how are you going to help the new younger teachers coming on [to Principalship], who don't have the same experience with the church and the faith as we have?

To a great extent what is being highlighted here by these retiring Principals is the assumption made by the Church that the majority of teachers in their schools have a deep faith and knowledge of the Church, its laws, practices and theology. Historically this assumption was accurate and, as a result, the Church did not have to consider how to support school Principals in their faith leadership. However, as the Monsignor points out, times are changing and the Church will need to consider how to provide the necessary support to this new generation of Principals. This may include more formal approaches to building the spiritual reserves of teachers and school leaders.

The increasing depth of the chasm between official Catholic teachings and contemporary Irish society's values became apparent in 2015 when the Republic of Ireland became the first country in the world to vote to legalise same sex marriage. 62% voted in favour, in spite of the Church's opposition and its position on homosexuality more generally.

However, the fact that there is wide acceptance of same sex marriage does not mean that teachers and Principals who are in such relationships feel confident to be open about their relationship in a school context. This is particularly true for those working in the Catholic school sector. Oisín highlighted how this issue gave him pause for thought before applying for Principalship. He describes himself as 'openly gay' and has been married to his husband for several years. Oisín had lived and worked overseas in a context where there was easy acceptance of his relationship, before moving home to the small town he is from. He described the feeling of applying for the Principalship of Catholic schools here whilst being openly gay as "having a definite chilling effect". Oisín was quick to point out that there was nothing overt that had occurred that worried him, it was more his own assumptions/presumptions about Catholic education in Ireland. When I asked him if he had worried that his sexuality would preclude him from even being interviewed he explained thus:

> Exactly that to be honest. You have it at the back of your head, especially in a small town, especially in Benhill, somebody is going to know somebody who knows somebody who knows me. You know? There's only probably two degrees of separation there. But just that in the main, you were likely to have a priest on the end of your panel. You were likely going to be asked about ethos and religion, and there is a definite worry that a question might be asked about– it might not even be about lifestyle, but there might be just some way of asking a question, that it may be communicated to let you know that they know.

As Oisín explained, he was concerned about discrimination based on his sexuality, but had been pleasantly surprised by the attitude of the school Chairperson, who is also the Parish Priest. As he reports:

> It's funny, because I would have been, I would have known of the chairperson, the parish priest who's literally down the road. But from somebody where I might have been a little concerned, as to what his reaction might be, it has been nothing but positive.

Oisín's experience is consistent with that of many of those who responded to the *INTO Equality Survey: LGBT+ Inclusion* in INTO (2020). 79% of those respondents who were out in school believed that they received equal treatment from school management. However, many respondents felt that because of their school's ethos a "don't ask, don't

tell" culture existed. Oisín had experienced something similar with his school Chairperson, as he pointed out

> We haven't openly discussed it, by any means, but it's just like I mention my partner's name and that's it, he doesn't bat an eyelid. And he's [the Chairperson] hopping down to the school every day, actually every day.

Oisín was pleasantly surprised with the acceptance he received from the Chairperson, as I was with the comments made by Monsignor Murphy on the same topic. The Monsignor was stating the importance of the Principal in the role of carrier of the light of the ethos in their schools and he mentioned that, whatever their personal circumstances, Principals in the diocese are very loyal to their calling as faith leaders in schools. When asked for an example, he told me

> We have a small number of Principals who are in gay relationships but it hasn't changed their approach to the school, to the faith. They've never advertised it but the Principals have married people of their own sex. And if you were to go into those schools, they are run as well as any convent school……. they still deliver, they still act as leaders of a Catholic school.

The reaction of both these clerics is certainly not what would be stereotypically expected from two Catholic priests. There is a common misconception that the Church teaches that homosexuality is a sin. This is not the case. While the doctrine does stipulate that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered", the *Catechism of the Catholic Church 2nd Ed.* (2018) outlines a more loving attitude to homosexual people. In part 2358 the Catechism states

> They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 2nd Ed. Para. 2358

In this section the doctrine is referencing two interconnected ideas from Catholic anthropology. The first is the idea that all human beings are created in God's own image and likeness. The second is the conviction that God is to be found in the ordinary aspects of life. This is the Ignatian idea of seeing God in all things. What these ideas mean for the faithful is that all humans are deserving of human dignity, respect, understanding and love and this feeds into the reputation that Catholic schools have for openness and inclusion. Everyone is welcome to be part of our community. All of God's creation is intrinsically good and worthy of respect and dignity. In the words of His Holiness Pope Francis, speaking with Associated Press

> We are all children of God, and God loves us as we are and for the strength that each of us fights for our dignity.

> Winfield, 2023.

Given these doctrinal realities, the reactions of Oisín's school Chairperson and the comments of Monsignor Murphy seem altogether less surprising. Both men are modelling what we would like to see across all Catholic educational institutions, an openness to all and a love for our fellow man. The more Principals like Oisín open up about their positive experiences with school authorities, the more we should see other colleagues having the confidence to be their authentic selves in school.

6.6.4 Selection Criteria

All of the Principals interviewed indicated that the advertisements for their posts had made them aware that the four domains from the LAOS framework would be used in the selection of the successful candidate. They also all received a copy of the *Schedule of a Catholic School* with their letter of invitation to interview. Both of these documents give candidates some guidance about what interview boards are looking for and aid their preparation. Increasingly, some BOMs are using their advertisements to highlight knowledge and expertise that would be desirable in the context of their school. Aoife noted that her role was advertised in this way and that she found knowing the school's desired skills helpful in her preparation for interview. Unlike senior leadership roles in other areas of the public service and in the private sector, applicants for principalship do not receive a detailed job description for the role. This is because the Department of Education has not updated the official role description since 1973. However, since then the role has had duties and responsibilities added by legislation, policy, guidelines, circulars and societal expectations. The IPPN report *Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action – A Roadmap to Sustainability* (2022) includes the results of a search of all legislation, policy, guidelines and circulars that include specific duties or responsibilities of a Principal. For the period 2016 to 2022 (to June) the report found 162 documents that added to duties/responsibilities of Principals. When the individual duties or responsibilities are extracted from these documents, the list runs to 29 bullet-pointed pages. These cover the generic responsibilities common to all schools and do not include the additional duties required of Catholic school Principals who are leading not just an educational community but also a faith community. The duties arising from sacramental preparation, school liturgical events, Catholic school week, religious inspections and the general upholding of the ethos, add another level of responsibility to Principals in these schools.

The IPPN report found that while duties in all Domains were increased by some of the 162 documents they searched, duties in Domain 2 – Managing the organisation – were increased by all the documents. Duties in this domain tend to be administrative and divert Principals attention from the important work of leading teaching and learning.

The streamlining of Principals' duties is long overdue.

6.7   Theme 4 – Selection Interviews

The Principals interviewed spoke a lot about the interview section of the selection process, including preparation, the interview itself and post-interview feedback.

Amongst the Principals interviewed there were four means of preparation undertaken. These were preparing alone, requesting support from colleagues/friends, paying for coaching/preparation from a specialist and, finally, a combination of the last two.

Conor and Eimear were the only candidates who worked by themselves in preparing for the selection process. It is of note that at the time of their appointments both had been teaching in excess of 25 years and had experience in other schools and/or other roles in education. Eimear mentioned that, although she largely prepared alone, she did check some details or notes with her husband, who is also a primary school Principal. So, to some extent she also falls into the category of seeking support from colleagues/friends. While she may not have discussed the application to any great extent with her husband, she benefited from the knowledge about the role that she accumulated over time from her husband's Principalship. So, she had the advantage of an insider's view of Principalship because of her spousal relationship with someone performing the role.

Fionn, Méabh, Doireann and Naoise did not pay for coaching or preparation sessions, but did receive advice and help from friends/colleagues or supports in place for aspiring Principals. Fionn had completed a leadership qualification only a month prior to the position becoming available. Because of this he felt that he was in a position to prepare alone. However, he did have an informal conversation with the retiring Principal in order to gain more insight into the school context. Méabh initially did a mock interview with a Principal friend and as a result of this experience realised that she needed to know more about the role. So she undertook the IPPNs 20-hour online course, Ciall Ceannaithe (meaning "the teachings of experience"). This is aimed at newly appointed and aspiring

Principals and gives them an insight into the role through the wisdom of experienced

Principals. Méabh found this course very helpful. She believed the knowledge gained put

her on a more equal footing with those applicants who had some leadership experience. Doireann spoke with several Principal friends about various aspects of the role, but overall felt that she was competent enough to manage the process unaided. Naoise, having 18 years' experience as Principal, was of the opinion that he did not need any great external assistance in preparing. He did, however, have a Principal colleague run though some questions with him prior to interviews.

All of the other Principals interviewed had either used specialist preparation companies or a combination of such services along with support from colleagues/friends. Oisín, Bébhinn, Ferdia and Fiachra utilised professional services for interview preparation/mock interviews only. When it came to their SAFs, each of them had a trusted colleague or former colleague who read through the form and offered advice and suggestions. Aisling and Gráinne had support from a recruitment specialist in completing the SAF and preparing for interview.

 In preparing for the selection process for her current role she had the advantage of already being a Principal, which gave her access to supports available through the Centre for School Leadership (CSL). CSL offers all Principals six free career coaching sessions.

Aoife used the coaching service to hone in on her interview skills and developing a school vision.

The Principals had some complaints about the system for unsuccessful candidates to get feedback from interview boards. Currently, applicants for Principal roles are only entitled to receive their own total mark and the breakdown of this mark across the four leadership domains. They do not receive feedback in terms of comments or suggestions from the interview board, nor are they told at what position they were ranked. As several of the Principals mentioned, the marks are useless without any commentary. As Aoife put it, "it's a completely futile exercise". Interview board notes, if any, and scoring sheets are held for 18 months and each candidate's own are available to them on request. However, the fact is that Independent Assessors are advised at training to keep notes to a minimum. Circular 44/19 chapter four, section 5.3 states very clearly "There is no appeal mechanism available for Principal posts." However, an unsuccessful candidate could resort to civil law to contest the fairness of the process used (judicial review). This might explain the reluctance of interview boards to provide feedback to applicants. Also, as Ferdia pointed out, the teaching community in Ireland is close-knit, so there can be a fear of giving someone

negative feedback as you are very likely to come across them again. However, feedback is important as it provides people with the opportunity to grow and improve.

Another frustration for the participants arose around positions where there was an internal applicant. The Principals were resentful of being called for interviews that seemed to them to be just a box ticking exercise as the internal applicant was most likely to get the job.

However, this is particularly strange given that most of those who brought it up were, in fact, external appointments themselves. However, on further investigation the actual reasons for their frustration were varied. Bébhinn was concerned about the expense to candidates who she felt were probably only ever called for interview to maintain the optics of an open process. She highlighted that

> …if a Board knows who they're going to employ and they are going to employ them, that they would save the other candidates the expense, the time and all they invest emotionally into preparing for a role.

Méabh, who had been in this position more than once, concurred with Bébhinn about the intrinsic feeling of injustice of the situation. She expressed her feelings evocatively:

> It feels really pointless. It feels absolutely pointless. You were a placeholder, you're a place setter.

Méabh and Bébhinn expressed the feeling of being used very clearly. Naoise offered a straight-forward solution, although one which would be unlikely to be acceptable to the education stakeholders, including many teachers. He suggested that

> If there's someone really good in the job that should get the job, that you shouldn't go through the whole rigmarole of the whole process. I know it's a public appointment but I think if someone is doing the job well and the board are happy, the board should be able to say well, X is going to get the job. Because that saves all the hassle. It's time wasting.

To be clear, in this incidence Naoise was talking about a situation where someone was already in a role as Acting Principal. However, as he pointed out, the same could apply to a Deputy or Assistant Principal within a school. But such a system would be limiting schools to a small talent pool and to looking inward, while many require a new direction and vision that can only come from someone coming in from outside. Naoise's suggested system is somewhat similar to that applying in Spain. There, Head Teachers are either elected by their colleagues after proposing themselves for the position, or someone can be appointed to the role by the education authorities, even if they have no desire to be the Head, Vázquez-Toledo et al. (2021)

One final, but important, frustration was outlined by Ferdia. He was keen that more thought be put into the choice of Independent Assessors for interview boards. In particular, he felt that they should have some experience in schools with similar contexts to the one seeking a new Principal. Ferdia explained how frustrating it can be when an Independent Assessor appears not to have done their research:

> Well I think sometimes even the external interviewer not knowing their background. Then it could be very particularly honing in on one area during the interview and asking very particular questions. Then it turns out they're not really relevant to the school, that can be very frustrating.

Ferdia's point highlights the need to ensure that Independent Assessors are carefully selected and thoroughly prepared for their role. As we will see in the next chapter, this is not necessarily the case at present.

6.8   Theme 5 - Candidate Suitability

6.8.1   What characteristics do Principals think makes someone suitable to be a Principal?

Figure 32   Words used by Principals in describing the characteristics needed to be an effective Principal

During the interviews, I asked the Principals what they thought were the characteristics needed to be an effective Principal. Figure 32 above highlights those that they felt were

important. The larger the font of the word in the figure the greater the frequency with which that characteristic was mentioned.

The list of characteristics developed from the Principals' responses, shows considerable correspondence with the lists found in the literature.

Clearly, some of these characteristics could be categorised together due to the manner in which they can overlap. For example, someone who is empathetic could also be described as person-centred. This list doesn't fit neatly into any of the frameworks presented in the literature review. However, I do consider it possible to divide these characteristics into two broad categories. In order to trust and believe in the leadership of the Principal, staff, parents and, most importantly, pupils need to develop that trust in the Principal as a professional and also as a person. The first group of characteristics are those that help stakeholders develop confidence in and trust for the Principal as a professional. The second group are those that help stakeholders believe in the integrity and trustworthiness of the person who is also Principal. Using the characteristics outlined in the Word Cloud above, I illustrate below which characteristics fall into each of the two groups. There are, of course, some that belong to both groups.

Table 16   Characteristics building trust in Principal

Characteristics that build trust in the Principal as Professional	Characteristics that build trust in the Principal as a Person
Builds and maintains good relationships	Builds and maintains good relationships
Calm	Empathetic/Compassionate
Competent/Knowledgeable	Person-centred
Experienced	Sense of humour
Considered decision-maker	Uphold the ethos (model the values)
Uphold the ethos	Good listener
Good listener	Good communicator
Good communicator	Open
Humility	Approachable
Risk-taker	Collaborative
Courage	Integrity
Open	Respectful
Approachable	Discreet
Hard- worker/Energetic	Caring
Collaborative	Bridge-builder
Level-headed	Needs-focused
Integrity	Resilient
Respectful	Positive
Discreet	
Reflective	
Present/Visible	
Brings out the best in people	
Team-builder	

Patient Problem-solver Organised Good time-management	

It is clear that the Principals interviewed are more focused on the characteristics of Principal as professional than those of Principal as person. However, a review of each list makes it clear that the two are inextricably linked and that the professional and personal characteristics of the individual cannot be separated. In order to be accepted as the leader of the school community you need to be a proficient, capable and confident professional, but you also need to be a person who is not actively disliked. It is difficult for those we work with to separate the Principal as professional from the Principal as person. If a colleague is angry about a decision that the Principal as professional makes they are not going to separate those feelings when sitting next to the Principal as a person over coffee break. Principals, like others, have professional and personal identities. Blose (2022) contends that "personal aspects of self surface in their leadership practices (professional self)" (p.279). Our professional identity tends to include our construction of 'how to be, act and understand' in terms of our work life and also where we sit within society (Bolívar et al., 2014). Continuing with this idea, it is likely that some of the characteristics in the Word Cloud actually relate to the Principals' professional and personal identities of self.

Many of the desired characteristics of effective principalship are those that help individuals gain group acceptance. A Principal is in a unique position of being both an insider and an outsider within a school community. There is an isolation that comes with being a leader.

As Áodh (an assessor) said during his interview, "principalship is a lonely enough spot at times". In Ireland Principals are trained and experienced teachers and I suspect that it is as teachers that many would identify if asked. However, to other members of the school community you are the Principal, the lady in the office, the boss, the person who gives out stickers and so on. Although Principals may construct their professional identities around being a teacher, they cease being considered or thought of as a teacher by others at some point. Because of this insider/outsider dichotomy a Principal is constantly trying to retain acceptance from the wider school community and the groups within that community.

Exhibiting the characteristics that build trust in the Principal as a professional or as a person help Principals to maintain their acceptance from the community. As Branson et.al (2019) describe it, "acceptance not appointment creates leaders" (p.223). As soon as a Principal loses acceptance, or if they fail to gain it in the first place, they can no longer be considered a leader. If 'followers' mistrust their leader, they will not cooperate with the additional tasks that help school cultures flourish. It is difficult to lead a school vision to fruition if the school community is not on board with the leader, collaborating and supporting one another.

6.8.2   What do Principals think Selection Panels are looking for?

Having just told me what they considered to be the characteristics of an effective Principal, the participants described what they believed the selection panels look for. Interestingly, there was very little overlap in their answers. However, as we will see in the next chapter, when the Independent Assessors were asked what makes an effective Principal their answers were very similar to those given by the Principals. They were, again, focused on the relational aspects of school leadership, experience, and communication skills. It is surprising then that the Principals answers to this question didn't align with what they believed was an effective Principal. Rather, they were of the opinion that the selection panels choose Principals based on very different criteria. Méabh, Doireann and, to some extent, Aodhán were of the opinion that an internal or local candidate was what selection panels looked for. Méabh shared her experience of questions being more favourable to an applicant who was already working in a school than to those applying from outside.

Doireann intimated that in her opinion interview boards could become complacent in their selection if there was an internal candidate being interviewed:

> I think it depends on whether it is an internal candidate or not. I think if there is an internal candidate there that fits the bill, they are happy to appoint.

Doireann did continue on to suggest that, in the absence of an internal candidate, Assessors would look for someone interested in other people, particularly children, and who was willing to give of themselves for the betterment of their pupils. Aodhán was under the impression that the selection panel "would have their decision made nearly before the interview". Aodhán had believed that the selection panel would spend a great deal of time going through the SAFs and have "done their homework on the person", as he put it, prior to the interviews. It is particularly striking that Doireann and Aodhán felt that there is some predetermination in selection, given that they were both external appointees. As we saw earlier in this chapter, IPPN (2023) found that 51% of those surveyed were external appointments.

Fiachra, Conor and Oisín were of the view that what the selection panel looks for varies from school to school and depends on context. Both Fiachra and Oisín felt that the outgoing Principal could affect what the panel looked for, not by interfering with the decision, but rather by the legacy they were leaving in the school. As Fiachra put it:

> If it's a school where the predecessor maintained a good reputation in the school, then that reputation would be maintained. Or likewise, if the was a case that there was a lot of controversy in the school, and a lot of difficulties, a lot of conflict, that someone could come in, new, and sort that out.

Fiachra considers that, depending on the job done by the outgoing Principal, the selection panel will either attempt to maintain the status quo or find someone with an entirely different approach. Oisín agreed with Fiachra, believing that whilst some selection panels may be looking for "a clean sweep" others may want stability. Conor was also of the view that what the selection panel looks for varies from school to school, but also depends on other factors. These could include what the BOM wants, the school culture, the makeup of the selection panel, or even the personality of the Chairperson of the BOM. Conor's assumptions indicate that he does not believe, or is unaware of, the discussions that take place at short-listing meetings or prior to interviews.

Bébhinn and Aisling felt that the main thing selection panels were looking for was someone who was from a church-going, religious Catholic background. Bébhinn believed that the upholding of the school's ethos would be foremost in the minds of a selection panel. Aisling felt that selection panel always have "someone from a religious

background" on them. It is interesting that she clearly believed that an Independent Assessor with a religious background would have more influence on the decision-making process than the other panel members. This, perhaps, stems from the history of Catholic Church control in both schools and wider Irish society.

Bébhinn also noted that, in her opinion, some selection panels are still looking for a Principal "teacher", that is, someone who would be the best teacher in the classroom. As she points, out this does not necessarily mean that they will be the best Principal. Bébhinn believes that some selection panels need to have more respect for school leadership as a professional area. Being a great teacher does not provide someone with all the skills required to lead a school. Having said that, she did note that the Principal should also be a good teacher.

Naoise felt that selection panels were looking for candidates who have a "profile". When asked to explain this further, he simply said "did they wear the jersey?". Naoise was referring to candidates who had played/play either Gaelic football or hurling at county level and the impression amongst some in the system that such candidates are favoured by selection panels. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the GPA/ESRI survey of players showed that a higher proportion of intercountry players were employed in education than in the equivalent group of the general population. The GPA/ESRI survey also highlighted that 19.3% of footballers and 20.9% of hurlers were of the view that being an inter-county player had positively impacted their promotion prospects (Kelly, 2019). Given these figures there may well be a perception that those who play at county level are more likely to be promoted. The question is, though, are they appointed because of their GAA profile or because playing sport to high level says something about them as people and, perhaps, about the skills they may have developed through sport? High level sport, such as county level football or hurling, involves self-discipline and ability to work collaboratively and improves communication skills.

The remaining four Principals Aoife, Ferdia, Fionn and Eimear, all felt that selection panels are looking for experience, ideally including some leadership experience. Eimear also mentioned that with this experience should come strength of character. Ferdia noted that you need to be able to "handle the tough decisions". All four felt that the selection panels preferred individuals who had held middle or senior leadership positions in a school, but that they also take leadership of initiatives or projects into account.

6.9   The Selection Process

Given that all of the Principals had been through the selection process, I thought they might have some interesting suggestions about possible changes or improvements to the process. I was, therefore, surprised when five of them could offer no suggestions. Of these, Eimear was the only one who admitted that she could not see any other practical way of selecting school leaders. Fionn, Aoife, Aisling and Oisín were variously happy with the process as is or, as Aoife pointed out, had not given it much thought after being appointed herself.

Bébhinn and Aodhán favoured selection being based on more than one interview. As Bébhinn pointed out, the role of Principal is similar to that of a CEO in a medium sized enterprise in the private sector. This is especially true in terms of the number of people in a Principal's care. It is, therefore, appropriate that, like our colleagues in the private sector, Principals go through a rigorous selection process that consists of more than one interview. Aodhán was clear that appointing a Principal after one interview is actually a huge risk for a school:

> Things are quite unfair. Like me, I'm 34 years of age, I've just got the Principalship in a big school. I'm probably going to be there for 30 years. And I was selected based on a 50-minute interview. And I was never in the school previous to that [interview].... It was a huge risk getting me. There's something around it, I guess maybe there should be two or three interviews.

Aodhán's point is valid. This is particularly the case if an interview board selects an external applicant, as they have no way of knowing if what they see at interview is what the school will actually get. To a lesser extent the same could also be true for an internal applicant. Just because someone is a good teacher, or has done well as an AP1 or 2, it does not always follow that they will make a good Principal. This places a burden of risk on the shoulders of the interview board (Gronn & Lacey, 2006, p.116). The option of multiple interviews was also favoured by five of the Independent Assessor, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Ferdia and Gráinne both favoured some form of trial or probation period, perhaps even under the mentorship of the outgoing Principal. Ferdia suggested that this would give both the school and the probationary Principal an opportunity to see if they are a *fit*. Walker & Kwan (2012) define *fit* as a match in values of the school and the candidate.

Méabh and Doireann had similar ideas about centralising the selection process. Méabh suggested that, for example, a diocese might have a set number of selection panels who would conduct all interviews for Principals in the area. Doireann's suggestion was that the Chairperson of the BOM should not sit on the interview board, which should instead be constituted of three Independent Assessors. Both ideas would mean that all candidates

would be interviewed by Assessors not known to them, thus removing any suggestion of bias toward internal candidates. Méabh did caveat the idea by pointing out that this would remove local knowledge of the school's context, which may not be desirable.

Fiachra, Naoise and Conor each had their own unique ideas about changes to the selection process. Fiachra had spent some time in Finland working with schools there and was struck by how well qualified both teachers and school leaders there are. He noted that teachers must have a Master's degree and that school leaders often had a range of other qualifications up to doctoral level. He suggested that a Master's degree should be the base level qualification for principalship here.

Conor suggested some form of group interview or activity, as he observed that the ability to communicate and collaborate with others is so central to the role of Principal. He felt that the opportunity to observe candidates working with others would be invaluable to selection panels.

Chapter 7. Interviews –Independent Assessors and Diocesan Secretary

7.1   Participants

As described earlier, nine Independent Assessors were interviewed in the course of this research, in addition to Monsignor Murphy, the Diocesan Secretary for Education of an Archdiocese on the island of Ireland. Each participant was given a pseudonym and all transcripts were checked for identifying information. In order to present context for the information provided by the Independent Assessor participants, each is profiled below.

Aengus: Has been teaching for 31 years including, seven as a Deputy Principal and 10 as a Principal. He has been on the assessor list for three or four years and has sat on six panels. He does not know how he ended up on the list.

Áodh: Taught for 32 years before retiring in 2014. He spent the last 16 years of his career as Principal. At the time of interview, he was a new addition to the list having volunteered for the role. He had not yet interviewed for a Principal role, but had been involved in selecting Deputy and Assistant Principals.

Sadhbh: Taught for 30 years before retiring in 2021. She had been Principal for the final 18 years of her career. Sadhbh volunteered to be an Independent Assessor as she was being approached by schools to assist them with Principal selection and could not do so until she was on the list. She has been on the list for nine years and has sat on between 15 and 20 selection panels.

Cónall: Taught for 37 years and retired in 2021. He spent some time as the National Co-ordinator of an educational project before returning to school and spending 17 years as Principal. He was asked by the INTO to join the list of Assessors. He has been an Assessor for 13 years and estimates that he has been involved in approximately 25 panels.

Niamh: Taught for 40 years and retired in 2017. She held leadership roles for 27 years and was a Principal for the last 13 years of her career. She was invited by the Archdiocese to join the panel of Assessors in 2013 and she estimates that she has been a member of between 10 and 15 selection panels.

Tomás: Took early retirement in 2017, prior to which he had been Principal of a junior school. He had also spent nine years seconded to a State agency that focused on continuing professional development for teachers and BOMSs. He was invited to join the panel of

Assessors, although it is not clear by whom. He estimates that he has sat on approximately 35 selection panels.

Seán: Has been teaching for 26 years and has been Principal for the past 10. He was put on the list of Assessors five years ago has sat on two selection panels. He was not aware that his name had been added to the list until he received a text message from a senior member of the Diocesan education team informing him of it. He had previously been approached by the Episcopal Vicar, but had declined. He was, as he pointed out, 'volunteered'.

Maude: Retired in 2020, having previously been the Principal of two different primary schools for a total of 16 years. Invited to join the panel of Assessors in 2012 she was bemused at the invitation when it arrived from Archbishop's House. However, she had been an active member of the INTO at national level for several years, so it is likely that she was a union nominee. Between 2012 and her retirement she estimates that she was involved on three or four selection panels per year. This has decreased since she retired, as she picks and chooses which panels she will agree to do.

Neasa: Has been teaching for 24 years and has spent the last six as an Administrative Principal. Prior to that she held a senior role at a State Agency for two years and worked for six years with an education support service. She volunteered to be an assessor in 2020 and has been part of two Principal selection panels. She pointed out that it would have been more had Covid not prevented face-to-face interviews for so long.

7.2   Interview Findings – General

Analysis of the interview transcripts highlighted four main themes and a number of sub-themes arising across participants. These are outlined in the table below and will be will be explored in this section.

Table 17 Independent Assessor interviews - themes and sub-themes arising

Theme	Sub-theme
Becoming an Independent Assessor	• Selection and training • Guidance on ideal candidates from Diocese
Application Process	• Standard Application Form (SAF) • References/Referees • Selection criteria and short-listing
Interviews	• Effective principalship

	• Candidates with perceived advantage
Improving the process	• Possible changes to the process

7.3   Theme 1 - Becoming an Independent Assessor.

Circular 0044/2019 sets out the procedures for recruitment and appointment of Principal teachers. It stipulates that the selection panels for such positions must be of mixed gender and include at least one external assessor who is independent of the school and its BOM. All patronage bodies manage this in their own way, but schools under the patronage of the Catholic Church apply to the education secretariat in their Diocese for a list of approved Independent Assessors from which they can select. These tend to be experienced Principals or Chairpersons (of BOMs), or retired Principals who worked in Catholic schools. One of the questions that arose during my interviews with Principals was how these individuals are selected and what type of training they receive. This was followed up during my interviews with the Assessors and Msgr. Murphy by asking them about selection and training.

In relation to selection of the approved Assessors Msgr. Murphy explained that they are either recommended for the role, or they can volunteer. For those who are recommended, there are three routes by which this can occur. Principals can be recommended by the BOM Chairperson of their school, a Chairperson can be recommended by the pastoral team in the parish and, finally, the Diocesan Advisors may recommend a Principal/Chairperson following a school visit. All those proposed or volunteering to join the approved list must be approved by the Diocese/Archdiocese and also by the INTO. The table below shows how the Assessors I interviewed joined the list.

Table 18   Routes to becoming an approved Independent Assessor

Volunteered	Invited by Archdiocese	Invited by INTO	Added to list without their knowledge
Áodh	Niamh	Cónall	Aengus
Sadhbh	Tomás		Seán
Neasa	Maude (but believes at behest of INTO)		

Neither Aengus nor Seán were told in advance that they were being placed on the list. Aengus discovered his name was added when a school contacted him to be on a selection panel and Seán received a text message informing him he was now on the list. Seán had previously done significant work for the Archdiocese and sits on a Diocesan committee. It is likely that through this work he had proven himself to be suitable for the role of assessor and shown an understanding of the needs of the Church and her schools in leadership selection.

Aside from Aengus and Seán, Maude was the only assessor who was surprised that she was considered. She was invited to join the list by the Archdiocese and explains that when she attended training she felt somewhat out of place:

> The crowd that was there on the night were all committed Catholics. I felt it was written on my forehead, "I do not go to mass, or believe any of this stuff".

Maude, who describes herself as a 'lapsed Catholic', had successfully led two Catholic primary schools by the time she was invited to become an assessor and she was also deeply involved with INTO, which must approve all prospective Assessors.

Áodh, Sadhbh and Neasa all volunteered for the role as local schools had been inviting them to sit on interview panels and they had been unable to assist because they were not on the approved list.

Cónall was approached by a member of the INTO Central Executive Committee and asked to consider the role because of his years of work on the Principals and Deputy Principals Committee of the union.

Like Maude, I wondered what it was that made these or other individuals suitable to be approved by both the Church and the Union to help select school leaders for the large number of schools in a Diocese. When I asked the Monsignor, he responded that

> It would be how they would live out the Schedule in their own school, it would be how they relate to the parents and the pupils and their staff.

The Schedule he referred to is the *Schedule of a Catholic School*, the document that outlines what it is that makes a school a Catholic school specifically and described in Chapter 2. The Schedule is a key in describing the type of person a Diocese is looking for in a Principal too. In response to my question about what a Diocese looks for in its Principals, Msgr. Murphy gave a very particular description that included several factors but principal among them was the idea that

> We'd be looking for somebody who would live out what's contained in the Schedule for the Catholic school. A person who would be willing to uphold

the ethos of the Schedule, who states that the Catholic school promotes the education of children and the foundation of children in the Gospel, and in the teachings and the person of Jesus Christ.

Msgr. Murphy, 2023

When asked how this was communicated to Assessors, the Monsignor mentioned that Assessors are trained and that the Schedule is discussed at these training sessions. He was also keen to point out that interview panels were asked to ensure that the *Schedule of a Catholic School* is part of and informs the criteria for interviews. This appears to be straightforward and it should be clear to Assessors that it is to guide their decision making. However, not all of the Assessors who participated in this research had received training or were clear about what the Diocese was looking for. There were differing accounts of the training provided and many of the Assessors were unsure if they had received direct guidance about the type of person the Diocese wants as Principals. The table below indicates who received training and/or guidance and who did not.

Table 19   Training and guidance received by Independent Assessors

Assessor	Trained	Type & Focus	Guidance
Cónall	Yes	Face to face Recruitment procedures & legalities	No
Sadhbh	Yes	2 x Face to face 1 on recruitment	No
Áodh	No	None received	No
Aengus	Yes	1 x Face to Face Recruitment and interview techniques	No
Maude	Yes	1 x Face to face Recruitment legalities	Need to be a practising Catholic stressed
Seán	No	None received	From his other work with the Diocese he was able to say "someone who lives the teachings of Jesus Christ"
Tomás	Yes	Face to Face Could not remember content	"Diocese look for a good Catholic, someone who will model [Catholic] values, cause no grief and deliver on teaching and learning
Niamh	Yes	Face to face ongoing. Ethos & recruitment legalities	"Training is ongoing, intense and rigorous, the diocese trusts selectors to make the right decisions"
Neasa	No	None received	No

As Table 18 shows, none of the Assessors interviewed made reference to the *Schedule of a Catholic School* forming any part of the training they were given. The disparity between the message the Diocese believes it is sending to Independent Assessors and what they are receiving is noteworthy. It may be suggested that the *Schedule of a Catholic School* might get somewhat overshadowed for Assessors by the focus on the various legalities of recruitment practices and labour law. They are not legal professionals and as the training is provided by both CPSMA (representing the employer) and INTO (the union) it is likely that they place an emphasis on getting the legalities right and focus on the repercussions when procedural mistakes are made. The Assessors, all having had involvement with Catholic schools, would have prior knowledge of the Schedule and may, therefore, not focus on it and its importance in the training sessions to the extent it merits. Aengus mentioned that much of the session he attended involved going through a PowerPoint on protocols and procedures. Essentially the session was based on the traditional model of transmission of information from the 'experts' to the 'learner'. This model of teaching does tend to encourage learners to zone out and miss important information. It is clear that in the case of all of the Assessors who had received training, it was only those who had done previous work with the Diocese, Tomás and Seán, who were clear on the type of person needed. It would perhaps be prudent if at least one of the training sessions provided concentrated solely on the *Schedule of a Catholic School* and how it helps to establish the criteria for the type of Principal the Diocese is seeking. As Mgrs. Murphy pointed out

> And you see the other thing too is that the Education Act is very clear on how the Board of Management, and the Principal is on the Board, how the Board of Management are responsible to the Patron for upholding the ethos of the Patron in the school. And it's the Principal teacher on a day-to-day basis, she is the carrier of the light of the ethos of that school.

It is this last sentence that is crucial; the Principal is "the carrier of the light of the ethos of that school". It would appear to be of fundamental importance, then, that the people charged with selecting Principals are provided with a touchstone or benchmark against which to judge applicants for the role.

The training for Assessors is renewed every three years. It involves an initial six hours of face-to-face input, split into two three-hour sessions, followed by an annual one-hour session for all Assessors. Table 18 shows that not all of the Assessors interviewed appear to have received the full training on offer. Aengus and Maude, for example, only received one session. However, this is not to say that the full training was not offered. It may be that they simply were not available to attend at the time.

7.4   Theme 2 – The Application Process

7.4.1   The Standard Application Form for Principal Appointments (SAF)

As we saw earlier, there is one standard application form for Principal appointments used by all patronage bodies. The Principals interviewed were unanimous in finding this form cumbersome and time consuming. However, they believed it provided candidates with ample opportunity to present themselves to the Assessors in the best possible light. The Independent Assessors interviewed had a wider array of opinions about the form. While all of them agreed that, in Niamh's words, the SAF gives "candidates an opportunity to showcase themselves", the majority also found various faults with it.

Sadhbh, Neasa and Áodh expressed concerns over the size of some completed SAFs. Sadhbh felt that they can become cumbersome, having seen some completed forms reach over 100 pages. Neasa pointed out that the fitness for purpose of the SAF really depends on how it is completed, "sometimes the form can be, it can be huge". Áodh suggested that candidates should only provide outline answers to the questions in the form "as you get in depth at interview". The size of some of these completed application forms might result from what some of the Principals highlighted as the repetitive nature of the SAF. They commented that some of the domains overlapped and it was difficult to decide where to put some information. In this case it's likely that information was duplicated to ensure it was included in "the right place". This view is supported by Seán, who said

> I think there's too much of an overlap. I think sometimes in people's examples, you're struggling to decide as a candidate, "Which domain do I put this into?"

The nature of the SAF can also lead to candidates feeling they have to provide a record of every course they've ever taken. As Maude put it

> All the waffle at the end……, I just wade through, it's a lot of rubbish. I'm looking for proper courses. Don't be telling me you did basket weaving as a summer course, because that was your three days [Extra Personal Vacation days].

A cause of concern for Cónall, Maude and Sadhbh was the amount of text in applications that had clearly been copied and pasted from applications to other schools, college assignments, or theses. Many of the Assessors commented on the fact that applicants would often submit SAFs with the incorrect school name, on occasion with pieces about the ethos of a school under a different patronage and sections of text that seemed to be in the wrong context. Cónall probably expressed the Assessors' views on this best, saying, "it shows a lack of thought and consideration given to the role".

Currently in Ireland there are five companies offering tailored interview preparation for Principal roles. They also offer services variously called SAF 'analysis', SAF personalisation, or simply SAF 'templates', and charge between €150 and €450 for their services. Blackmore, Thomson & Barty (2006) research in Australia found some evidence of a similar trend, noting, "there are also subterranean mutterings about people who have paid to have their applications professionally prepared" (p301). The services involving support with the SAF have started to come to the attention of the Assessors. As Neasa described it

> Sometimes the application form does not reflect the person that's in front of you, because they have a lot more time to fill it out and different people can have a look at it and they can get advice.

Seán was aware too that what is presented in the SAF may not always be what a school would actually get if the person was appointed. He believes that the interview should be used to ascertain if they really mean what they put in the SAF:

> I think the application form gives a good structure. But really, I think there's a lot of them circulating around the place. I think people cannot be sincere when they never were, and I think it is a good opportunity for evidence. But in the interview, I would very much focus on following up on points raised in the application form. I'm trying to draw them out, are they telling white lies?

Seán highlights here the real value of the SAF to interview panels. It gives them an opportunity to take what an applicant has written and interrogate it. It is a tool used to check if the candidate has a real depth of knowledge and experience and if they have deeply held values and a clear vision for the school. Tomás believes that the SAF is losing its value because preparation courses and the number of completed SAFs in circulation are leading to "less individual answers". He claims there is a homogenisation of answers beginning to show up in the selection procedure. He was unsure if this is a new phenomenon or simply more noticeable as numbers of applications for Principal roles have decreased significantly in recent years. The IPPN (2022) report on leadership sustainability showed that in the 21/22 school year 16% of Principal posts advertised on educationposts.ie had to be re-advertised before the positions could be filled.

7.4.2   References/Referees

Circular 0044/2019 provides that in the selection process for Principals only the references of the highest ranked candidate are to be checked. So, rather than applicant references being used as part of the short-listing process, as in many other industries, references are

only used to confirm or call into question a proposed appointment. This means that should a referee call the candidate's ability/personality/integrity into question during the telephone conversation with the panel chairperson, the interview panel has to review its decision. Two of the Assessors had experienced this on selection panels they were on.

With regard to the timing of reference checks, five of the eight Assessors interviewed expressed the belief that it would be preferable to check references in advance of interviewing. Their reasons for this were varied. Áodh was of the opinion that if a candidate was unsuitable for some reason, it was unfair to "drag them along for an interview". Neasa felt that being able to check the references prior to interview could be helpful, "because it would give additional information" about the candidate, so the interview panel would have a broader view on candidates. Tomás was concerned that as the interview panel only see candidates in the interview scenario, it is more difficult to be sure that you have the correct impression of them. He felt that, as the decision to appoint a Principal is of such significance for the school, it is important to have as much information as possible about candidates prior to decision making:

> It's a handicap not being able to check prior to interview. It's a huge burden to put on a school if you get the wrong person. Someone might interview wonderfully but turn out to be the wrong person [for that school].
>
> Tomás

Cónall supported checking references prior to interview to prevent situations such as the one mentioned above where referees do not actually believe the candidate is suitable for the position, or where there may be some internal politics that may cause issues. This turned out to be the case in the story Cónall described. The two referees were retired

members of the school's Leadership and Management team who had their own ideas about who the new Principal should be and it was not the candidate in question. Had the panel been in a position to check references before the interview they may well have been able to avoid what must have been a very difficult situation for the candidate. Like her colleagues, Maude believed it would be beneficial to check references of all candidates prior to interview. In fact, she felt it was "madness not being able to check all candidates' references". She was clear, though, that the "union [INTO] would probably give reasons" why it was best to check only for the proposed appointee.

Aengus took a balanced view on the issue. Whilst he would prefer to be in a position to check references before interviews, he could see that this could disadvantage some

candidates. He was of the opinion that some applicants could miss the opportunity to be interviewed based on some small detail mentioned, or excluded, during reference checks.

Seán and Niamh agreed with Aengus with regard to the possibility of bias at interview if references had already been checked. Seán stated that if any flags were raised by referees, "I probably would be negatively predisposed before the interview". It was his opinion that the current way of doing things "creates an even playing field" for applicants. Niamh agreed with this sentiment, saying, "in terms of an equal footing for candidates, it's good that references aren't checked until afterwards".

The process of appointing a Principal is, of course, an agreed procedure between the Patronage Bodies, the Union and the Department of Education. It is likely that the reference element was intended to ensure a level of fairness and transparency for all candidates. However, from the point of view of an unsuccessful candidate whose references are not even considered by the selection panel, it might appear unfair.

In respect of who candidates should ask to provide references for them, there was consensus amongst the Assessors that referees should know the candidate in either a professional or academic context. Seán pointed out "you might see the odd person make a mistake and where they put down their hurling manager or the club chairperson". Aengus, Seán and Neasa were keen to emphasise the importance of candidates having their current Principal or Chairperson as a referee. All three stated that not doing so was "a red flag".

The SAF does actually state that one of your referees should be your Principal/Chairperson. However, candidates do sometimes omit them for a variety of reasons. For example, in Méabh's case described above, the candidate omitted her Principal because they had never actually worked together. Aengus suggests that some candidates may not have disclosed to their Principal that they are looking into moving on. There may, of course, be other reasons that someone would omit their Principal as a referee, such as a personality clash or having been through a disciplinary procedure. However, the Assessors were clear that such an omission would cause them to pause for thought.

7.4.3 Selection Criteria and Short-listing

Circular 0044/2019 provides that applications for a Principalship should be opened and candidates short-listed at a meeting of the interview board held some weeks in advance of interviews. In spite of this specification, the Assessors I interviewed did not all experience this arrangement on every occasion. In fact, Aengus, Sadhbh and Niamh were alone in

experiencing all short-listing being done by the interview board on every occasion they had been involved. Seán concurred with this, but then caveated it by saying that on the occasions he had sat on interview boards for Principal roles the number of applications had been so low that it was decided to interview them all. On this point Tomás was in agreement, noting

> Due to the recent drop in applications short-listing is not required. Schools are interviewing all or re-advertising.

Tomás had a different experience to his colleagues in that he felt that 80 % of the interview boards he had been on had been handed the short-list and that the outgoing Principals had actually done the short-listing. Tomás offered no evidence to support this claim and if it is accurate it is hugely problematic in terms of procedure. Circular 0044/2019 Chapter 4 Section 9 expressly stipulates that

> The person who is vacating the position of Principal of a school shall have no involvement in the recruitment and appointment procedure for the Principal Teacher that will replace him/her.

(p.73)

Whilst Tomás' experience was that the vast majority of interview boards had the candidates pre-shortlisted, Cónall had the opposite experience. His experience was that, for the most part, short-listing was done by the interview panel in accordance with procedure. He noted that on the occasions where he and the other external member had been handed a list without prior discussion, they had always made a point of insisting on seeing all applications and short-listing from there. Cónall observed that the only occasions that he had experienced this was when the BOM Chairperson was inexperienced and had not been involved in the Principal recruitment process before.

Neasa and Maude had mixed experiences; both had been handed the list of short-listed candidates as often as they had been involved in meetings to do the short-listing. However, Neasa's experience was limited to just two interview boards, so it is perhaps not wholly reflective of the average assessor experience.

With regard to choosing selection criteria, all of the Assessors stated that this is always done collaboratively with the interview board. In general, the Chairperson of the BOM will have consulted with the BOM about the needs of the school and will bring those ideas to the interview board. Typically, there will be some discussion about these and the Independent Assessor will support the BOM Chairperson by adding in additional criteria that are considered necessary. All of the Assessors noted that the selection criteria are context driven and take into account the current and future needs of the school. Aengus

noted that because all Catholic schools must consider the *Schedule of a Catholic School* when choosing selection criteria, there tends to be "some commonality across schools".

Cónall observed that inexperience can cause BOMs and their Chairperson to come up with "unsuitable criteria like; must be interested in sport". However, here the experience of the Independent Assessors comes into play. They will refocus the Chairperson on the leadership and management needs of the school.

All of the Assessors agreed that the selection criteria were most often based on the four domains of the *Looking At Our Schools* (DES, 2016 & 2022) document, as this is where the marking scheme is derived from. The Assessors found the domains useful in helping to structure interviews, but also in helping candidates focus their answers on the SAF. As Maude observed, the domains offer candidates some structure in completing the SAF and composing their cover letter.

With regard to short-listing, I queried each of the Assessors on what it was in the application forms that stood out and allowed an applicant to be chosen for interview. Table 19 below outlines the factors that the Assessors look for to help with the applicant short-listing process. Excluded from this table are Aengus and Seán. Aengus answered the question by talking about how he uses the interview to check the veracity of the information provided in the SAF. Seán noted that on the occasions he had been on interview boards so few people had applied that it had been decided to interview all candidates and, therefore, short-listing was not necessary.

Table 19   Factors on SAF that stand out for Independent Assessors

Assessor	Factors on SAF that stand out	
Áodh	An applicant's ability to articulate their own achievements and vision	
Sadhbh	A correctly filled in form. Qualifications[1] Other experience within the education system	Detailed cover letter Teaching experience [2]

Cónall	A fully rounded individual Comfortable dealing with people and conflict	Knowledge of leadership, management and curriculum Evidence of leading whole school projects
Niamh	Relevant postgraduate qualifications Evidence of leading school projects	Teaching experience
Tomás	Qualifications References	Maturity Community involvement
Maude	Experience Evidence of up-skilling	Evidence of strong work ethic Experience in relevant school type
Neasa	Detailed cover letter Qualifications Education focus	Identified strengths Practical leadership experience

Notes: [1] Assessors were referring to additional qualifications above and beyond basic teaching qualifications. There is no requirement to have additional qualifications, but is considered desirable.

[2] Teaching experience covered both years in career and the types of schools' candidates had taught in, including the socio-economic context within which those schools operated.

What is interesting in these responses is that, aside from looking at qualifications and experience, no two Assessors are looking for the same elements/factors in candidates' SAFs. This does indicate that the selection process is quite subjective and that Assessors are not clear on what it is the Patron is looking for in a Principal. There is a degree of the Assessors' personal preferences at play. The selection process lacks objectivity. It appears that each assessor has their own idea of the skills needed to be a successful Principal and that these ideas are diverse. Palmer and Mullooly (2015) completed a US national survey of top-level district administrators seeking information on the attributes they look for when hiring Principals. Palmer's study had 114 responses and these 114 administrators came up with 150 desired attributes for Principals. To some degree this number of attributes reflects

the wide range of contexts and needs of schools, but it also points to the level of subjectivity in Principal selection. Palmer point out that;

> Using subjective methods creates a reliance on intuition as a primary assessment for evaluating principal candidates.

Palmer's findings certainly seem to be echoed in this research. The Assessors having different criteria for a Principal appointment does lead to some concerns about the subjectivity of the process. It appears that the Assessors are focused on what Baltzell and Dentler (1983) termed 'fit'. 'Fit' is described as a perception and projection of characteristics and community values that a candidate possesses that demonstrate congruence between the candidate and the organisation. Using 'fit' as a selection criterion, while not ideal, would be more justified if all Assessors were operating from the same definition of what the right 'fit' for a role looks like. As we can see above and as we will see when we investigate the Assessors' views on effective principalship, this is not currently the case. Each assessor is focused on a different set of attributes. In regard to the data in Table 19, what is clear is that all of the Assessors represented had a focus on contextual elements, such as teaching experience and qualifications. The need for candidates to have experience working in similar type of schools is particularly telling. Maude made a comment about school context that is illustrative of this idea that the successful candidate is the right 'fit'. She was talking about what she would focus on when reading the SAF and said

> I also would look, if it was a DEIS school, I would look for experience in DEIS. With the greatest of respect to Kerry, there's no point in telling me you worked at Ballygowherever in Kerry, and now you want to be Principal in [the inner city of Dublin], and you have no DEIS experience.

The implication here is that such a candidate would not be the right 'fit' for a DEIS school. However, this does not necessarily follow. This thinking runs the risk of eliminating candidates from the competition based on perception of their unsuitability rather than actual fact.

When I asked Msgr. Murphy about the type of person a Diocese looks for to run its schools there was some overlap with what the Assessors had said. However, unsurprisingly, the Monsignor had a greater focus on the Catholicity of potential Principals. What was surprising, though, was the breath of the Catholicity the Monsignor described. It went far beyond looking for Principals who are regular Mass attenders or who are involved in Ministry within the Parish. His description is presented here in full for clarity:

> The very first thing that we would look for is a person who would be a skilled leader as an educationalist at primary level. Ideally, somebody who would have

experience of teaching in the classroom and working with a variety of age groups. A person, as well, who would have an experience of working with children with special needs, children from disadvantaged homes. Not so much disadvantaged homes. We'd be looking for somebody who would live out what's contained in the schedule for the Catholic school. A person who would be willing to uphold the ethos of the schedule, who states that the Catholic school promotes the education of children and the foundation of children in the gospel, and in the teachings and the person of Jesus Christ. We'd be looking for a person, as well, who would have good skills in dealing with staff, and in dealing with parents. And somebody who will have a record of service in the community.

It is interesting that the Assessors were focused on the practical experience of candidates in terms of teaching, but none of them mentioned the schedule or the teachings of Christ in regard to what stood out for them on SAFs. Tomás did mention that community involvement always draws his eye on an SAF. Tomás had perhaps the most holistic focus of the Assessors in terms of what factors help them to decide on short-listing. Community involvement is, of course, a crucial part of the role of Principal. Mgrs. Murphy went on the highlight this during our interview. He reported that having a "record of service in the community" was particularly important due the fact that "the role of the primary school in the local community is very important". The Monsignor also suggested that it was important the Principal be aware of the needs of the community and considers opening school facilities to the wider community.

Many of the Assessors gave more detailed clues as to what they look for in a Principal in response to the being asked about what qualities/skills make an effective Principal. We will discuss this in the next section.

7.5   Theme 3 - Interviews

This section investigates some of the elements that are highlighted during Principalship interviews that may make a candidate more or less attractive to the interview board.

7.5.1 Effective Principalship

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding about the type of candidate that Assessors believed would make suitable Principals, I asked each of them to describe what makes an effective Principal. While each assessor gave a different answer, there were some commonalities, in particular in relation to the practical skills required, such as organisation and time management. Four highlighted the ability to have difficult conversations/make unpopular decisions. They also stressed that principalship can be a lonely role and that an effective Principal would need to be strong enough to deal with that.

Figure 33 below outlines the qualities and skills of effective Principals according to the Independent Assessors.

Figure 33   Assessors' views on qualities and skills of effective Principal

AENGUS
- Fair but not easily swayed
- Accepts that they cannot keep everyone happy
- Good organisation skills, time management skills a work/life balance
- Ability to have the difficult conversations
- "You are not one of the staff. You'll be friendly with them and they'll be friendly with   you."

ÁODH
- Needs a multi-faceted understanding of leadership.
- Leads the team because ethos and atmosphere come from the top
- A sense of humour
- Ability to be affirming of both staff and children
- " Principalship is a lonely enough spot at times because you certainly don't have the collegiality of the classroom, like all the teachers would have."

SADHBH
- Hardworking multi-tasker
- Good teaching career
- A people person
- Brave, have the courage to make the unpopular decisions rand them seem normal, no big deal."

CÓNALL
- "Well somebody who not only talks the talk but walks the walk."
- Abreast of changes in policy, curriculum.
- Empathetic, supportive and affects change in a positive way
- Understand the role and can manage the day to day
- Ability to make the difficult decisions for the school's benefit

NIAMH
- Knowledgeable, competent,
- Flexible and without ego
- Strong interpersonal skills
- Discernment
- Visionary

TOMÁS
- Provides a safe environment in which to learn
- "Principalship is a 'vocation' almost".

SEÁN	• "There is a respect there that allows people to respect themselves, empower themselves, offer whatever they have without fear of being turned away, ridiculed or whatever." • Personal relationship with each staff member treating everyone the same, fairness, consistency and expecting that in return • Good educational knowledge • Humane in dealing with people • Really listening and knowing what matters to people
MAUDE	• Must have good leadership skills • Be open, rational, transparent and honest • Ensure that children and staff are top priority • Staff should know "you have their backs" • Make and communicate the hard decisions • Strong personality as "you have to stand in your truth."
NEASA	• Confident in their own ability and a very good communicator • Sure of their values and what they want to achieve as a leader • Good educational knowledge • Patience, perseverance, flexibility • High priority placed on relationships

7.5.2   Candidates with Perceived Advantage

We saw in the Principal interviews, there was a perception amongst the participants that internal candidates had an advantage at interview stage. This view was supported by the IPPN study referred to earlier. In order to explore this further, I asked each assessor if, in their experience, internal or external candidates had predominantly been appointed to Principal roles. All of them indicated that in their experience there was no pattern to appointments of external or internal candidates. There was agreement across the board that the successful applicants had been those who performed best at interview. With that said, five of the Assessors did elaborate on the advantages that were implicit in being an internal candidate. Aengus admitted that there is a natural advantage accruing to internal candidates because "they know the school and they know the staff".

Tomás was of the opinion that internal candidates would always be called to interview as a matter of courtesy. This may well be the case but, if so, it could lead to unsuitable internal candidates being called for interview, with raised expectations that they could be appointed.

Cónall observed that BOM Chairpersons can take two very different approaches to appointing a new Principal. On one hand, there can be some attempt at 'reproduction of the known' (Blackmore et al, 2006) from the Chairperson. They will try to find a candidate similar to the outgoing Principal, "because they don't want any hassle", as Cónall put it.

On the other hand, the Chairperson and, indeed, the BOM may well feel that a change is needed and that the new Principal needs to be "a breath of fresh air". However, as Cónall made clear, the interview board will always seek to appoint "the best candidate".

Sadhbh and Niamh were both of the opinion that internal candidates were at some advantage. Niamh was of the view that if an internal has a good track record within the school "they're certainly at an advantage". Sadhbh had a dichotomous perspective on the advantage of the internal candidate. Firstly, she considers being employed at the school an advantage, stating, "I always say actually for an internal candidate it's actually theirs to lose because they know the school so well". Secondly, she caveats her first statement by saying that in actuality she would have higher expectations from internal candidates.

Sadhbh concurred with Cónall in respect of the interview board seeking the best possible candidate. According to her "it's really the best person for the job" irrespective of where they are coming from. It is interesting that no-one suggested that the appointment of an

internal can sometimes lead to line management problems – the relationship between former colleagues must change and this can lead to resentment

Áodh had experience of being an external candidate appointed to a school where there had been an internal candidate who had fully expected to get the job. He was clear that the issue was not so much that internal candidates have an advantage, but that "there's an expectancy that if somebody from the school went for it, they would get it". Áodh points out that this sense of entitlement to the position doesn't just come from the candidates themselves, but also from the wider school community. This idea is supported by the experiences of Principal participants Bébhinn and Fiachra outlined above. Both of them had to deal with the negative reactions that arose when they were appointed over internal candidates. The sense of entitlement referred to by Áodh may originate from the system that was used in primary schools prior to 2003, when promotion was based on seniority/length of service. So there would have been an expectation that the longest serving teacher would generally be the next to be promoted.

7.6   Theme 4 – Improving the Process

As with the Principal participants, there was consensus amongst the Independent Assessors that the current selection process is in need of improvement. There was a sense that, in particular, basing the decision on one 60-minute interview was simply not good enough. The Assessors suggested that there was a need for change right from teachers requiring a mandatory leadership qualification before even being allowed to apply for Principalship. The Assessors largely focused on how the selection process could be better set up to prepare those seeking Principal roles for the realities of the job.

The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) published a report entitled *Learning to be a School Leader in Ireland* (2021) that outlined Irish and international practice in the area of professional learning for school leadership. This describes the lack of mandatory qualification for principalship in Ireland, but offers one reason for maintaining the status quo in this area, noting that

> Such a requirement might appear to be desirable, but due to the current shortage of applications for principalship, it might limit the field even further. An average of 10% of principal positions at post-primary level had to be re-advertised in 2018 and 2019 and 11% - 14% at primary level.

(CSL, 2021, p.45)

The IPPN 2022 publication *Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action* provides re-advertisement figures for the 2021/22 school year. 376 Principal roles were advertised and, of these, 60 (16%) needed to be re-advertised. So, the problem in filling posts is becoming more severe.

In the OECD's *Improving School Leadership,* Pont et al. (2008) compared 22 OECD countries in regard to leadership preparation for school Principals. Ireland was just one of four that did not have pre-service or induction training. In Ireland the only State provided training is not mandatory and is done in-service. This leads to Principals who feel unprepared when taking on the role. The IPPN (2022) report found that 56% of those surveyed felt that they had not been given sufficient opportunity to develop their leadership skills pre appointment. Given that the same report found that a startling 50% of respondents had undertaken no professional learning for leadership pre appointment and 31% had no school leadership experience, it is very clear that this is an area in which significant improvement is required.

The Independent Assessors gave varying reasons for their belief that upskilling should be mandatory for those seeking principalship. Niamh was of the view that there should be mandatory upskilling in "teaching and learning, legal and administrative and how to implement distributed leadership", as these are not necessarily skills taught during teacher training. Áodh was of a similar view, although he was not clear on whether this training should be pre-service or induction training. He suggested

> Courses that prepare you for what is expected of you as a Principal. The practicality of being a Principal, the duties and responsibilities of everything, monies, curriculum, legalistic things, all these type of things. Learning on the hoof is not ideal.

Maude believed it should be mandatory that applicants have undertaken a leadership qualification before being eligible to even apply for principalships. She was of the opinion that the existing model of in-service professional learning should also be maintained, particularly in regard to mentoring by experienced Principals. The feeling of support is crucial she believed.

Aengus was of the view that courses should be undertaken prior to appointment because this would indicate that an applicant had a genuine interest in the role. He also felt that it is a great way to model lifelong learning for your school community.

Another area of contention for the Independent Assessors was the fact that the decision to appoint a Principal is made after just one interview that lasts between 40 and 60 minutes.

Given the importance of the role and its effect on student achievement, this seems to the Assessors to be a risky strategy. Both Maude and Cónall pointed to the private sector, where senior management roles are more commonly decided after several rounds of interviews. Sadhbh and Niamh both agreed that their needs to be a staged process, so that Assessors have more time and opportunity to consider the candidates in terms of the school context. Seán could see the argument for rounds of interviews, but felt that "the outstanding candidate should stand out after an hour, 20 questions and the application form together".

Neasa took the desire for a staged process one step further, suggesting a formal recruitment style agency be set up to appoint Principals "because it's a huge job". In fact, Ireland has such a body for making appointments to the Civil and Public Services. The Public Appointments Service (PAS) was established in 2004 to manage recruitment for State agencies such as the Health Services Executive, An Garda Síochana, the Defence Forces, the Prison Service, local authorities and all civil service roles up to Principal Officer. The PAS also has a Top Level Appointments Committee which recruits for the most senior leadership roles in these organisations. It is not unrealistic to suggest the PAS would be in a position to take on Principal recruitment too or, at least contribute to the process.

Aengus and Seán both expressed concerns about the suitability of some Assessors for the position. Aengus suggested that some of the people on the list were not suitable due to lack of training or being retired so long that they may have lost touch with the job of Principal. He suggested that all Assessors should be reviewed and re-trained at regular points. Seán was clear that Assessors should have at least five years' service as Principals themselves before being invited to be on the list of Assessors. Seán was also of the view that each interview board should have at least one Independent Assessor who is still actively working as a Principal.

Neasa, who had previously worked in teacher induction, had probably the most comprehensive ideas about changes that might improve the Principal selection process. Two of her more interesting, but possibly most logistically difficult, suggestions were that every appointment to Principal should include a trial or probationary phase, so that both school and Principal have a safeguard if it isn't working out. Secondly, Neasa suggested that all appointments to the role of Principal should be made by the end of April each year. This would enable schools to arrange for the newly appointed Principal to be released from teaching duties so that they could go and shadow the outgoing Principal for a few weeks before they take over the position.

Chapter 8:   Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1   Research Question

How do the perceptions of Patron/Assessors/Principals about the Principal selection process in Irish Catholic primary schools align with each other and with the realities of the process?

The aim of this research was to investigate the realities of Principal selection for Catholic primary schools in Ireland and if the perceptions of the key players aligned, or if there was a need for greater clarity about the process.

The participants identified a number of areas where there is a need for clarity or change for one or all groups. The main finding is that neither Principals nor Independent Assessors could say what characteristics and skills the Diocese/Church want Principals of Catholic schools to have. Many of the other findings relate back this lack of clarity.

8.2   Key findings

8.2.1 Questionnaire

The goal of the questionnaire was to ascertain the type of people who are being appointed to leadership of Catholic primary schools. There were 112 respondents to the questionnaire and I am not going to attempt to represent them all in one profile. However, the data provided by the respondents, as reported in Chapter 5, does indicate what their main demographic characteristics are.

The two main findings from the questionnaire were:

- Bias towards male candidates

- Lip-service to Catholic element of the role

1.There is a bias toward male candidates in terms of the size of school they lead, the level of education they require before appointment and even the number of applications they need to make before being successfully appointed as Principal

The questionnaire results indicate that the majority of Catholic school Principals are female. Most are under 50 years of age and have been in the role for less than 15 years. Most females lead mixed vertical schools without DEIS status and located in rural area, while the majority of their male colleagues are Principals in urban or suburban schools. For

the overall majority the medium of instruction is English. The majority of female Principals are Teaching Principals. In contrast, the majority of male Principals surveyed are Administrative Principals. As Principals pay is determined by the number of staff in the school, an administrative Principal will make a much higher salary than a teaching Principal who has 6 or less teachers on staff. Being an administrative Principal also means that you have a larger school leadership team, as again these posts are allocated based on the number of teachers on staff.

The majority of females are in their first principalship and had to make more attempts than their male colleagues to be appointed. The majority of all Principals surveyed were external appointments. The majority are educated to at least Master's degree level. This is particularly the case for those with less than 15 years in the role. Among those with longer service in the role males were much less likely than their female colleagues to have attained this level. In fact, the combined categories of 16 – 20 years and 20+ years' service just two males held Master's degrees in comparison to females, 19 of whom held Master's degrees and one held a PhD/EdD. This clearly shows that females needed to be better educated than males to gain Principalship. However, in the 15 years or less service categories there is a new pattern emerging and it seems as though postgraduate qualification is a must regardless of gender.

Female Principals are likely to be or have been involved with a sporting, community or voluntary group in her locality and to have referred to this in their application for the role. However, unlike their male counterparts, they tended to be involved in a wider range of activities than just Gaelic games.2.There appears to be an element of lip-service being paid to the Catholic part of the role

Those who responded to the questionnaire are of the view that the Principal of a Catholic school should be a practising Catholic and that attendance at Mass is important. They are able to explain and speak about the 'characteristic spirit' of the school, but are unlikely to mention Christ in their explanation.

From the responses to the questionnaire, it became apparent that there are almost a set of stock answers to questions around ethos and/or characteristic spirit. Many of the responses mentioned teaching Gospel values, ensuring children knew the doctrine and teachings of the church and that prayer was a part of the school day. Very few responses specifically mentioned Jesus Christ and the relationship of the school leader with Him or the absolute importance of modelling how He lived for the children. This may well stem from a lack of knowledge about what is required to lead a Catholic school. As we saw in earlier chapters

there is a distinct lack of formation programmes or further training for Catholic school teachers in Ireland.

This questionnaire results are specific to Principals of Catholic schools only. There is a great deal of data available on Principals generally, but it is difficult to find data on Principals of Catholic schools apart from their number and gender. The data provided by the questionnaire results will be useful to other researchers, or organisations targeting professional development or other supports at this cohort, because they provide some demographic insight into the group. However, it is not generalisable to other Principal cohorts.

8.2.2 Interviews

Interviews were carried out with three cohorts, Principals and aspirants, Independent Assessors and Msgr. Murphy and the key findings from that process are presented here.

1. <u>There is a complete lack of clarity about what the Catholic Church in Ireland want in a Principal of a Catholic school</u>.

    The Church believes they are giving a clear message around the type of person or the characteristics that the Church would wish for in Principals of Catholic schools. Unfortunately that message is not being received by Assessors or by candidates for principalship. Principals who have been appointed to lead Catholic schools were unable to define what the Church looks for. Only two of the Assessors were able to provide responses, and they were both quite vague. This means that if the majority of Assessors do not know what the Church is looking for there is little coherence in what is already a subjective process. I asked Assessors what it was on the SAF that made a candidate stand out enough to be short-listed for interview. Perhaps unsurprisingly, apart from experience and qualifications no two Assessors were drawn to the same elements of the form. This suggests that short-listing is quite subjective and that there is a lack of clarity amongst Assessors on what the Patron is looking for in Principals.

    We saw in Chapter 7 Msgr. Murphy's response to and, while it is comprehensive, the problem is that there are many different ways of interpreting what is meant by "someone who lives out the schedule". Surely the 7 points of the schedule, which refer specifically to what a Catholic school should look like are not sufficient in terms of establishing the type of person needed to lead such a school. The Church is making the assumption that there is shared understanding of what this looks like in reality, but Assessors are unclear about this, as are PrincipaThere is a need for open and clear communication of what is required. Like the Catholic Church in other

countries (UK, USA, Australia), the Irish Catholic Church should be specific about the qualities the leaders of her schools should have. While the Irish context is different in terms of the number of schools under Church patronage, this is perhaps even more reason the stipulate what is needed in a school leader

2. <u>There is a need to review the selection criteria and processes for Independent Assessors</u>

With regard to the Independent Assessors there were a number of issues flagged by the Principals and the Assessors themselves. The official way Independent Assessors are selected is that they can volunteer, or be nominated by diocesan officials or by the INTO. All prospective Independent Assessors must be approved by both the diocese and the union. There is no clarity, however, on what the criteria for approval by either body are. All nine of the Independent Assessors were placed on the list of approved Assessors in different ways, including two who were placed on it without their knowledge, so there is no pattern apparent in that regard. If the diocese and union must both approve an assessor, this means they have a veto. There is a need for more transparency around the selection of Independent Assessors, so that boards of management, candidates for Principal roles and school communities can be assured that competent, experienced individuals with a clear understanding of what is needed are choosing their school leader.

A concern raised by some of the Independent Assessors themselves was the suitability of some Assessors. There was concern that some lacked training and that others may be so long retired that they have lost touch with the day-to-day demands placed on Principals. There was a suggestion that Assessors should be reviewed on a regular basis, every two years for example. One of the Assessors also made the valid point that no interview board should have two retired Principals as Independent Assessors and that there should be at least one practising Principal on each selection board.

3. <u>There is no consistency in the training of Independent Assessors and the training is not fit for purpose.</u>

None of the Assessors had received any training on topics such as candidate selection, interview techniques or unconscious bias. Six of the nine Assessors had received some training, which they reported consisted of sessions on the recruitment process and the legalities surrounding the appointment. Msgr. Murphy mentioned that there was work done in these sessions on the *Schedule of a Catholic School,* so that the Assessors might

understand the type of Principal needed. None of the Assessors mentioned the schedule in regard to their training. This suggests that there is a miscommunication between those designing the training, those delivering it and those receiving it.

4. <u>There is a perception amongst the research participants that male candidates and those already working in the school have a higher chance of being appointed Principal.</u>

During the interviews with the Principals it became apparent that there was a perception that male candidates also had an advantage at interview, but only a certain type of male. It is important to note that this was discussed by both male and female participants. Both the results of the questionnaire conducted for this research and national figures available through IPPN and the Department of Education indicates that there is some truth in this perception. Nationally males make up 15% of the primary teaching profession, but hold 33% of Principal posts. As we saw in Chapter five, 57% of the male respondents to my questionnaire were Administrative Principals. Two of the male Principals and three of the females were aware of the 'glass escalator' effect working to the advantage of male candidates.

The perception amongst the Principals was that a very specific group of males enjoy particular advantage. This group are those who are involved with the GAA. Assessors did not mention anything about this or, in fact, male advantage at all. However, the GPA study (Kelly, 2019) found that 20% of elite GAA players believed that being involved helped their promotion prospects. The findings of this research tend to suggest that in education, at least, there is some basis to these perceptions and beliefs. Interestingly, none of the Assessors highlighted gender as either an advantage or disadvantage. It may be a case of unconscious bias resulting from cultural traditions about males taking on leadership roles.

As the results of the questionnaire showed, 63% of respondents were external appointees, as were 75% (nine) of the Principals I interviewed. Despite this there was a strong perception that internal candidates have a clear advantage and will most often be selected. This view is supported by recent research conducted by IPPN that should that internal candidates were over four times more likely to be appointed then external candidates. Most of the Principals I interviewed had no real issue with

someone from within a school being selected. They did, however, view calling people for interview when the role had almost certainly already been filled as unfair and felt it left individuals feeling their time was being wasted, feeling used and generally inconvenienced. This is understandable as the emotional labour put into preparing for interview is high and realising that it was a wasted effort must be overwhelming. Several of the Principals mentioned that if there was someone internal and capable interested, BOMs should be able to offer them the role rather than putting external candidates through the interview process.

When asked about any patterns in the appointment of internal versus external candidates, all of the assessor agreed that there was none. In their experience the best candidate at interview got the job. Five of the Assessors then pointed out that internal candidates were at an advantage due to their knowledge of the school and being known to the school community. One assessor did feel that the expectations she would have of an internal candidate at interview would be higher than for an external one.

5   Catholic school leadership is a 'calling' or vocation

Much of the literature on Catholic school leadership, as well as, several Church documents, highlight the vocational nature of the role. Catholic school Principals are central to the Church's mission and are faith community leaders as well as educational leaders. For some of the Principals I interviewed a calling to lead was one of their motivations in applying for the role. Others defined Catholic school leadership as a form of service. There seems to be an understanding that leading a Catholic school is about giving back to a community and about ensuring that all children in the school are provided with the opportunity to make the most of their education. It appears that the Principals have a keen awareness of the social justice aspects of their role and have a desire to improve the situation of marginalised children in their care.

Mons. Murphy indicated that he was concerned that the younger generations of Principals would be 'spiritually deprived' by comparison with those who are retired or about to retire. The transcripts of the interviews conducted with Principals seem to indicate that they are less focused on doctrine and theology and are striving to live their Christian values and share them with the school community.

6   <u>The selection process requires an overhaul with changes needed at every stage.</u>

- **SAF:** In general, there was consensus amongst the Principals that the SAF was useful in helping them to present themselves and their achievements in the best light. There was some suggestion that it could be quite cumbersome and time- consuming to complete, with some overlap between the domains. The Assessors were in agreement that the form is cumbersome and expressed concern at excessive length of some. There was a suggestion from Assessors that the form was losing its value because of SAF preparation services and examples of completed SAFs in circulation. Several Assessors pointed out that what is contained in such forms does not always provide an accurate picture of the individual who then presents for interview

- **Selection Criteria and Short-listing:** Both Principals and Assessors were clear that the LAOS document acts as selection criteria for principalship. Principals expressed a desire that schools might share school specific criteria in adverts for the vacancy. Assessors indicated that the selection of such criteria only occurs at short-listing meetings and are not shared with candidates. Several Assessors expressed the view that there should be mandatory qualifications for those applying for principalship. With regard to short-listing, some of the Assessors intimated that procedure is not always followed in regard to the entire interview board short-listing candidates together. It was also suggested that outgoing Principals are sometimes involved in the process.

- **Interviews**: There was agreement across the board from both Principals and Assessors that one 50-60-minute interview was not sufficient to make such an important decision. Given the importance of the Principal in terms of children's educational outcomes all parties agreed that more consideration should be

given, as a wrong decision can have long lasting consequences for a school. Circular 44/19, which lays out the selection procedure, in a manner that suggests only one interview, but it does not expressly forbid more. In theory, therefore, there appears to be no reason a BOM could not decide that they would like to interview prospective Principals more than once.

- **References**: Five of the nine Assessors suggested it would be beneficial to the process if references could be checked prior to interview. As Principals took great pains over the decision about whom to ask to be a referee, when they were candidates themselves, they might also be in favour of this. However, two of the Assessors shared concerns that what they read in a reference or hear from a referee could cloud assessor's judgement. This may well be the reason for the current system.

- **Certificate in Religious Education:** It appears that despite it being a requirement of all dioceses the CRE is not being sought by every selection panel.

- **Feedback:** Finally, Principals expressed a desire that unsuccessful candidates be provided with constructive feedback above and beyond their marks. However, any concerns about possible negative fallout, including litigation, should not prevent reasonable and limited feedback from being given to help the candidate to improve their performance in future interviews.

8.3   Recommendations

In consideration of the findings of this research, there are several recommendations to be made and they are outlined here.

1. *Clarification needs to be provided by the Church to all Independent Assessors and Principals/Boards of Management on the qualities and skills considered necessary/desirable for those leading Catholic primary schools.*
   - In the first instance the Church in Ireland needs to clarify its own expectations for those leading schools. It is recommended that the Bishops' Conference

ensure the development of a Person Specification that can be used for recruitment of Principals and training of Assessors. This should cover both the school leadership and the faith leadership aspects of the Principal's role. There are examples of these in the UK and Australia.

- It is recommended that, once a Person Specification has been developed, an awareness campaign is run by CPSMA and that Assessors and Principals receive mandatory training. This will ensure Assessors are all getting the same message and know what the Church wants from its Principals. The training, which should include instruction on the Schedule, should also help to clarify for Principals the expectations placed on them as a faith community leader.

2. *The selection process should be altered at several points.*

- Consideration should be given to introducing a requirement for an academic qualification in school leadership for candidates applying for a position as primary school Principal for the first time. This would reflect the increased complexity of the role.

- Verification that short-listed candidates hold a CRE or equivalent should be an explicit responsibility of the selection panel and included in their recommendation to the BOM and forwarded to the diocese along with the documentation seeking the approval of the bishop.

- Advertisements for Catholic Principal positions should not only highlight the LAOS domains and the *Schedule of a Catholic School,* but also include school specific criteria. These should be context driven and could be drawn up by either the BOM or a committee representative all school community members, including pupils.

- A review of the SAF is recommended. The form needs to be more user friendly. Issues of overlap between domains require clarification and candidates asked to give a maximum of three examples in each domain. Total maximum size of the completed form should also be specified.

- The majority of Assessors suggested that references should be checked prior to interview. There are issues of fairness here, so an alternative is required. It is recommended that after the short-listing meeting, the Chairperson of the interview board checks reference for candidates short-listed for interview. If all references are problem free then candidate should be invited for interview. If a problem is identified the Chairperson should revert to the interview board who

can consider the issue and decide together whether to call the candidate for interview or not.

- There was widespread agreement from participants in this research that one 50 to 60-minute interview is not sufficient for the recruitment of a Principal. Suggestions to change this include a staged approach with rounds of interviews, as is the case for leaders in the private sector. As this is a very specialised area, it is recommended that the current system be reviewed and amended in line with current best practice in executive selection and Principal selection internationally.

- Finally, it is recommended that unsuccessful candidates should, upon request, be given constructive feedback post-interview. This should be given by the selection panel Chairperson and should go beyond numerical marks and assist in identifying skills gaps or highlighting answers that may not have been considered acceptable.

3. *Training for Independent Assessors should go beyond recruitment procedures*

- While training is provided for Independent Assessors it tends to focus on the legalities of the process. Principals have a dual role as both educational and faith community leaders. Assessors should be familiar with the requirements for both aspects of the role. For this reason, it is recommended that they be provided with a more varied and richer professional development programme focusing on Catholic school leadership, challenges to Catholic education, interview skills and updates on Church documents or doctrine.

- It should be mandatory that the initial training is completed by Independent Assessors before they are appointed to a selection panel.

- Each diocese should bring their Assessors together once a year, in June when the recruitment season is ending, for a meeting to share practice and ideas. The ITE colleges can provide an example of this with their placement tutor meetings that help them to ensure quality and consistency in their assessment of students.

4. *Principals require regular professional development and faith development*

- Just as the Department of Education provides ample opportunities for Principals to develop as educational leaders, the Church should also provide professional development for faith community leaders. Principals currently receive no training or support to assist them in leading a faith community. There appears to be an assumption that they will just know how to do it alongside their educational duties. The difference is that they have years of training and experience for the educational leadership role.

- It is also the case that Principals must draw on their own spiritual reserves for support during the trials and tribulations of school leadership. If the Church places Principals at the forefront of its salvific mission, it should provide school leaders with spiritual support and faith formation. This can take many forms, but the example of the National Retreat and National School for Formation in

the UK would build on skills and processes already well-established in Ireland and offered to other faith community leaders. Access to a spiritual director or occasional spiritual guidance would be a straightforward starting point.

5. *Formation of a Catholic Primary Principals Association*

While Catholic School Management i.e. the BOM, are well represented by CPSMA, there is currently no organisation supporting and advocating on behalf of Catholic Principals. It is recommended that the formation of a Catholic Primary Principals Association be facilitated. Similar to the Association of Catholic Primary Head Teachers (CHAPS) in Scotland, such an association could offer Principals the opportunity to collaborate with others in mutual support of their role as leaders of communities of faith. Local networks and events could be established and a national Annual Conference could be organised with CPSMA or ICBC to offer formal support. This conference could be used as a faith formation event for school leaders. Some of the school trusts like CEIST and ERST conduct such events annually and these are well received by the schools in these trusts. It is a simple thing but makes them feel supported. This association could also arrange retreats, pilgrimage and opportunities to undertake voluntary work, all of which would replenish and restore the spiritual resources of Principals

Each of these recommendations is based on issues and concerns that arose in the research findings. Some will be more feasible than others. However, I cannot emphasis enough the urgent need for clarification on what the Church wants in a Principal. The continued ambiguity around the person specification, skills and, to some extent, the strength of faith of Principals, simply cannot continue.

8.4 Limitations

Like all research, this study was not perfect and there are three limitations that it is important to highlight here.

1) One of the questions in the questionnaire asked respondents if they believed the Principal of a Catholic school should be a practising Catholic. It was only when I started analysis of the questionnaire responses that I realised I had omitted to clarify what was meant by a 'practising Catholic' for the purposes of the study. It is likely that different respondents had different interpretations of the term. This

means that the answers and analysis of that question need to be viewed with caution, as they may be unreliable. I assumed a shared meaning between the

researcher and the respondents, something an experienced researcher should never do.

2) While the Principals who participated in the interview phase of the research were from several dioceses across the island of Ireland, the Independent Assessors were from one diocese only. Therefore, their responses are not generalisable to every diocese.

3) The fact that as a Principal myself I have gone through the same selection process will undoubtedly have shaped some of my interpretations. It would be impossible to believe otherwise, despite having gone through the process 13 years ago, I still remember it clearly. This is something I needed to be aware of when analysing the data.

4) For both phases of the research the sample size was small. Small sample sizes reduce generalisability of results. They provide the researcher with a limited number of perspectives on the subject being researched. Small samples are more susceptible to the influence of individual participant characteristics, researcher bias and unusual events.

8.5 Future Research

There are several areas arising from this research that would benefit from further research. These include:

- The lack of clarity on the respective roles of the Department of Education, the Patron, and the BOM in school governance is problematic and can be a source of stress for the Principal. She/he is responsible to all three. The governance arrangements of primary schools in Ireland compared to those that apply elsewhere merits further research.

- I was fascinated by the entrenched idea that an internal candidate will always be appointed Principal. Despite all the evidence pointing to the majority of Principals having been external candidates, including some of the participants, the perception persists among interviewees. Further study on the reasons for this perception and why/how is it so entrenched in the cohort psyche would be informative.

- The acceptance amongst the participants that males, in particular, those involved with GAA benefit from the 'glass escalator' warrants further study. What is it about males involved in the GAA that is providing them which such an advantage over not just females but also other men who do not fit the stereotype. The acceptance

of this situation by the female participants in a majority female profession also merits further investigation.

- The treatment Bébhinn received when she was appointed Principal of her current school was shocking. It struck me that if she as Principal was treating a staff member in a similar manner the BOM or the union would quickly intervene on the teacher's behalf. Yet it seems that it was somehow perceived as a reasonable way to behave towards the Principal. The double standard here is disturbing. Unfortunately, I doubt Bébhinn is the only Principal to have experienced such treatment and the bullying of Principals by teachers, parents and other adults could be usefully studied further. There is a considerable body of work in existence on adult-to-adult bullying in schools, but most of it focuses on situations where the Principal is the alleged aggressor or a bystander to bullying. There is a gap in the literature in this area.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

The completion of a doctoral dissertation is a significant milestone and is the result of a lot of work, dedication and perseverance. The process is a long one from that very first study weekend to the brink of submitting. It has been in equal measures humbling, frustrating, stimulating and invigorating. Above all else this process has been utterly worthwhile. The growth I see in myself both personally and professionally has been unexpected.

Completing this dissertation has also meant developing a high level of self-discipline and time management. Balancing research, writing, and leading a primary school, in the midst of a global pandemic was certainly challenging, but it forced me to become more organised and efficient in how I used my time. This has improved my efficiency at work too.

When I began this journey I was besieged by Imposter Syndrome, fully expecting to be asked to leave the course because I could not possibly be capable of producing a body of work to doctoral standard. Now as I come to the end of my journey I realise that it has taught me as much about myself and my capabilities, as about my research area.

One of the most enjoyable parts of this process has been having the opportunity to delve more deeply into areas of research that interest me. Having an idea or wondering about something and being able delve into the literature has been a joy. The research process itself was a rollercoaster of emotions. There were moments of frustration when I couldn't find the right words to express my ideas. Moments of elation when a participant interview produced a nugget of information that would anchor an idea. Yet, these moments were

essential for growth. They taught me perseverance, problem-solving, and the value of seeking help when needed.

Completing this dissertation in an area of research directly connected to my profession has re-ignited a passion for holistic Catholic education that had been quenched within me some time ago. This passion drives my work daily. It has changed my way of leading my school and relating to my school community for the better.

To conclude I can absolutely say that journey has been far more important than the destination, it has been transformative.

Appendix A   **Standard Application Form (SAF)**

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)

DELETION OF ANY FIELD WILL INVALIDATE THIS APPLICATION

Position Advertised, i.e. Principal or Deputy Principal	Name and Address of School	School Roll Number

Applicants, please note:

1   If the advertisement states that electronic applications will be accepted, this Application Form should be emailed to the <u>dedicated email address</u> provided in the advertisement and <u>only to that address</u>.

   If the advertisement states that applications are required to be submitted <u>by post</u>, this Application Form must be sent to the Chairperson's address as specified in the advertisement.

2   The completed Application Form must arrive at the dedicated email address/specified postal address on or before the date and time stated in the advertisement. Late applications will neither be accepted nor considered.

3   Canvassing will disqualify.

4   If completing this form in handwriting, please use **black ink.**

5   Please do not enclose/attach a Curriculum Vitae

6   Do not enclose a separate letter of application or copies of certificates etc, <u>unless specifically requested in the advertisement.</u>

7   The successful candidate will be required to present original documents in relation to teaching/other qualifications prior to appointment.

For office use only	Received by:	Date:	Time:

Protection - Privacy Notice:

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)

All personal information provided on this Application Form will be stored securely by the Board of Management and will be used solely for the purposes of the recruitment process. This information will be retained for the period set out in the relevant appointment procedures, issued by the Department of Education and Skills. In the case of a successful candidate, the information will be retained for the duration of employment and a minimum of one year thereafter. Personal information will be disclosed only to the Interview Board, and will not be disclosed to any other external third party without your consent, except where necessary to comply with statutory requirements or seeking references. You may, at any time, make a request for access to the information held about you as outlined. Should you wish to make any changes, or erasures to any of the information stored about you within the relevant retention period, please contact the Board of Management at the above address.

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">APPLICANT'S PERSONAL DETAILS</td></tr>
<tr><td>Name (as per Teaching Council Register)</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Correspondence Address
Address Line 1:</td><td>Mobile Phone No</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Address Line 2:</td><td>Landline No.</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Address Line 3:

Eircode:</td><td>E-mail Address (Please print clearly if completing in handwritten format)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Total length of accredited service as a primary teacher in Ireland</td><td colspan="2">Total length of accredited service as a primary teacher in other jurisdictions</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">QUALIFICATION TO TEACH AT PRIMARY LEVEL</td></tr>
<tr><td>Qualification(s)</td><td>Awarding University, College or Institute</td><td>Final results received: Day/Month/Year</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td>TEACHING COUNCIL REGISTRATION</td></tr>
</table>

Registration Number: _____

Registered under Regulation (*please tick as appropriate*):

Route 1 (Primary)   ɑ

Route 2 (Post-primary)   ɑ

Route 3 (Further Education)   ɑ

Route 4 (Other)   ɑ

Registration Status: Full ɑ   Conditional   ɑ

<u>Please refer to Circular 0044/2019 Eligibility Criteria For Appointment As Principal and Deputy Principal</u>

If registration is conditional, please state the condition(s) and the date by which each condition must be met:

Condition 1: _____ *Expiry Date:* _____

Condition 2: _____ *Expiry Date:* _____

Condition 3: _____ *Expiry Date:* _____

Pending: *If pending, please state the date of submission of application:* _____

**APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)**

2

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)

DETAILS OF ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS – MOST RECENT FIRST

INCLUDE UNDER- GRADUATE & POST-GRADUATE QUALIFICATIONS. THE SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATE WILL BE ASKED TO PRESENT ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS

Qualification	Awarding University, College or Institute	Length of Course	Final results received: Day/Month/ Year

TEACHING EXPERIENCE - MOST RECENT FIRST (IF NECESSARY EXPAND THE SECTION OR USE ADDITIONAL PAGES IF COMPLETING IN HANDWRITTEN FORMAT).

School Name & Address	Dates of service in the school	Position(s) held	ates
			From: To:
			From: To:
			From: To:
			From: To:
			From: To:

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT/POST(S) OF RESPONSIBILITY HELD (IF ANY) – MOST RECENT FIRST

School Name	Address	Position(s) held	Dates
			From: To:
			From: To:
			From: To:
			From: To:

OTHER RELEVANT EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE - MOST RECENT FIRST

3

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)

Employer/Project	Position	Duties	Dates
			From: To:
			From: To:
			From: To:

ADDITIONAL QUALIFICATIONS E.G. ICT, SEN, CERTIFICATE TO TEACH RELIGION (WHERE APPLICABLE)

College(s)	Qualification	Year of Award	Modules Studied

OTHER RELEVANT, NON-ACCREDITED COURSES – MOST RECENT FIRST:

Course Provider	Duration and Year of Study	Modules Studied

REAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST – CURRICULAR /OTHER

Area	Expertise/Experience

4

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Quality Framework for Leadership and Management in Irish schools, set out in *LOOKING AT OUR SCHOOLS 2016 - a Quality Framework,* provides a common understanding and language around the organisation and practice of leadership and management roles in Irish schools. It identifies the key leadership and management areas in a school (domains), namely:

Leading Teaching and Learning
Managing the Organisation
Leading School Development

Under each competency heading, please describe some of your personal achievements that demonstrate the necessary skills and qualities required for the position of School Principal/Deputy Principal. Please illustrate with examples.

COMPETENCY/DOMAIN 1: LEADING TEACHING AND LEARNING

School leaders:

· promote a culture of improvement, collaboration, innovation and creativity in learning, teaching and assessment

Summarise your experience/key achievements to date under this criterion. Please illustrate with examples which effectively demonstrate your competency under this domain.

**APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP
(OPEN COMPETITION)**

5

COMPETENCY/DOMAIN 2: MANAGING THE ORGANISATION

School leaders:

· establish an orderly, secure and healthy learning environment, and maintain it through effective communication

· manage the school's human, physical and financial resources so as to create and maintain a learning organisation

· manage challenging and complex situations in a manner that demonstrates equality, fairness and justice

· develop and implement a system to promote professional responsibility and accountability

Summarise your experience/key achievements to date under this criterion. Please illustrate with examples which effectively demonstrate your competency under this domain.

COMPETENCY/DOMAIN 3: LEADING SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT
School leaders:

· communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation in the context of the school's characteristic spirit

· lead the school's engagement in a continuous process of self-evaluation
· build and maintain relationships with parents, with other schools, and with the wider community
· manage, lead and mediate change to respond to the evolving needs of the school and to changes in education

Summarise your experience/key achievements to date under this criterion. Please illustrate with examples which effectively demonstrate your competency under this domain.

Domain Four: Developing leadership capacity
School leaders:

6

· promote and facilitate the development of pupil voice, pupil participation, and pupil leadership

· build professional networks with other school leaders

Summarise your experience/key achievements to date under this criterion. Please illustrate with examples which effectively demonstrate your competency under this domain.

Personal Statement
Please use this section to provide further information in support of your application for Principal/Deputy Principal in this school. [Max. 250 words]

7

APPLICATION FORM FOR PRIMARY PRINCIPALSHIP AND DEPUTY PRINCIPALSHIP

NAMES & CONTACT DETAILS OF REFEREES*			
Referee 1		**Referee 2**	
Name		Name	
Role		Role	
Address		Address	
Work Tel Number		Work Tel Number	
Home Tel Number		Home Tel Number	
Mobile Number		Mobile Number	

Referee 3	
Name	
Role	
Address	
Work Tel Number	
Home Tel Number	
Mobile Number	

*Please Note:

1. Only those referees who know you in a professional capacity should be included. Three names should be provided.

2. Close relatives and friends **should not** be listed as referees.

3. As it is probable that referees will have to be contacted outside of school times, it is crucial that phone numbers (preferably mobile numbers) outside of working hours, are given.

4. Referees will be contacted by a nominated Interview Board member as soon as possible after the interviews have been completed, if you are deemed to be considered an appointable candidate. If the current employer (*where applicable*) is not named as a referee, the Interview Board reserves the right to seek a reference from the current employer.

5. The Interview Board in its sole discretion will determine the suitability of any reference. The Interview Board further reserves the right to seek from a candidate the names of additional referees.

I hereby declare that all the particulars furnished on this application form are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and that I am aware of the qualifications, requirements and particulars for this post, as set out in the advertisement and other relevant documentation.

Signature _____   Date _____

8

Appendix B   **Questionnaire and Participant Information Sheet**

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: *Exploring the selection of Catholic Primary School Leaders in the Republic of Ireland*

Researcher: Clíona O'Keeffe, student of the Doctorate of Education

Email: xxxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk]

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this,
Clíona

Purpose of the study:

This study forms part of the requirements for the completion of the degree of Doctorate of Education at the University of Glasgow. The study aims to establish the factors which Principals, Aspirant Principals and Selection board members perceive as important in deciding on the selection of Principals for Catholic Primary. In particular, the study will focus on the influence of Church, State and Community organisations in deciding on what makes a suitable school leader.

What is involved?
You are being asked to participate in completing a 10-minute online survey. The questions will relate to your experience and expectations of the selection process for Principalship.

Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw your participation at any point without explanation or consequences. However, as your identity will be anonymised, it will not be possible to delete any survey responses provided before withdrawal.

Your personal data will be kept in secure password protected files on the University's Online Survey system. Only the researcher will have access to these files.

Participation in this study may allow participants the space and time to reflect on their own careers to date and/or their ambitions for their career. Should participation cause participants any worries or stress about these reflections, the researcher can provide them with the details them for free confidential counselling service available to all education staff.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

Data collected during the study will be used to complete the EdD dissertation, in the production of conference papers and journal articles. The final analysed data will be retained and stored securely. This data may be made available to other researchers by request but without sharing participant personal information.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the research, please contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

_____End of Participant Information Sheet_____

Proposed Questionnaire Content

This questionnaire forms part of a wider study on the selection of primary school Principals in Catholic primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The study forms a large part of the dissertation towards the award of Doctor of Education at the University of Glasgow. This data will be used in completion of the dissertation and in subsequent academic journal articles. All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be de-identified. This research study has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee of the College of Social Sciences.

Consent

Consent	**You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this. Confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines. To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social** **Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk**
	I consent to take part in this research study □ *I do not agree to take part in this research study* □
	I am Principal of a (tick all applicable) DEIS Band 1 school □ DEIS Band 2 school □

1	DEIS Rural school □ My school does not have DEIS status □ Mixed school □

	All-girls school □ All-boys school □ Vertical Girls school with boys to 1st/2nd class □ Vertical school □ Senior school □ Junior school □ Special school □ Mainstream school with special classes □ Other □
2	***I am a*** Teaching Principal □ Administrative Principal □
3	***In terms of the language of instruction, my school is*** An English medium school □ Scoil lan Gaeilge □ Scoil sa Ghaeltacht □

4	*My school is located in*	
	An urban area	☐
	A suburban area	☐
	A rural area	☐
	On an island	☐
5	*I have been a Principal for*	

	1 to 5 years □ 6 to 10 years □ 11 to 15 years □ 16 to 20 years □ 20 + years □
6	*Please indicate the number of schools you have held the Principalship of and the patronage of these schools.*
7	*How many years of teaching experience did you have prior to taking up your first Principal role?* 5 -10 years □ 11 - 15 years □ 16-20 years □ 20+ years □ Other

_____

8	*Please tick __all of__ the awards you had achieved at the time of your first appointment as* *Principal* EdD, PhD or other doctoral level award □ Master's degree (other than the Professional master's in education) □ Professional Master's in Education □ Postgraduate Diploma □ Postgraduate Certificate □ Bachelor's Degree e.g. B.Ed □

	Other _____
9	*Please indicate if you were an internal or external candidate for the 1st Principal role you were appointed to.* Internal ☐ External ☐
10	*Approximately, how many Principal roles did you apply for before being appointed for the first time?* _____
11	*Do you believe that the Principal of a Catholic school must be a practising Catholic?* Yes ☐ No ☐
12	*If you answered Yes to Q 11, please indicate below how important you believe it is that a Principal should attend Mass (or other religious services)*

13	*The Standard Application form for Leadership positions uses the four domains of leadership outlined in 'Looking in Our Schools' (DES,2016) to allow candidates to show how they may fulfil the criteria. Domain Three (see below) highlights the need for school leaders to:* COMPETENCY/DOMAIN 3: LEADING SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT *School leaders:* · communicate the guiding vision for the school and lead its realisation in the context of the school's characteristic spirit

Very Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Unimportant	Not relevant

5	What was your understanding of this when completing the Standard Application form and what aspects of your own career/personal life did you focus on in completing this section?

14	Are you involved with any sporting, community, or voluntary organisations? Yes □ No □ Not currently but have been in the past □

15	If you answered Yes or Not currently please indicate the organisation/s your involvement is/was with and the level of your involvement e.g. player, committee member, leader, coach etc. and if that involvement was local/national/international

ORGANISATION	TYPE OF INVOLVEMENT	LOCAL/NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL
e.g. Tiddlywinks Ireland	*Player, Coach, Committee Member*	*Dublin Veteran Champion, All-Ireland Champion, World Cup runner up, National team Coach, National rep International Federation*

16	*When completing the Standard Application Form for Principal roles did you include reference to your involvement in sporting/community/voluntary groups?* Yes ☐ No ☐ *If Yes, what context was the reference made in?*

	If No, would you be willing to provide a reason? _____ _____
17	***How would you describe your Gender Identity?*** _____
18	***How old are you?*** 25 – 30 □ 30 – 35 □ 35 – 40 □ 40 – 45 □ 45 – 50 □ 50 – 55 □ 55 – 60 □ 60+ □
19	***In what year did you qualify as a primary school teacher?*** _____

Thank you for your co-operation in completing this survey.

Kind regards

Clíona

Appendix C   **Interview Questions and Participant Information Sheet**

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: *Exploring the selection of Catholic Primary School Leaders in the Republic of Ireland*

Researcher: Clíona O'Keeffe, student of the Doctorate of Education
Email: xxxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk]

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

Clíona

Purpose of the study:

This study forms part of the requirements for the completion of the degree of Doctorate of Education at the University of Glasgow. The study aims to establish the factors which Principals, Aspirant Principals and Selection board members perceive as important in deciding on the selection of Principals for Catholic Primary. In particular, the study will focus on the influence of Church, State and Community organisation in deciding on who should be a school leader.

What is involved?

You are being asked to participate in completing either a 10-minute online survey or a 30 – 60-minute audio recorded interview with the researcher. The questions will relate to your experience and expectations of the selection process for Principalship.

Your participation in either the survey or interview are entirely voluntary and you can withdraw your participation at any point without explanation or consequences.

As survey responses are anonymous it will not be possible to destroy any responses you have already provided should you decide to withdraw from participation. Interview data provided would be destroyed if you decide to withdraw participation.

Your data and any other information provided will be kept confidential by use of ID numbers on all files. The list of participants will be kept separately to the list of ID numbers and both will be kept in secure password protected files, stored on separate storage devices housed in different locations. Only the researcher will have access to both storage devices.

Participation in this study may allow participants the space and time to reflect on their own careers to date and/or their ambitions for their career. Should participation cause participants any worries or stress about these reflections, the researcher can provide them with the details them for free confidential counselling service available to all education staff.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

Data collected during the study will be used to complete the EdD dissertation, in the production of conference papers and journal articles. The final analysed data will be retained and stored securely. This data may be made available to other researchers by request but without sharing participant personal information.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

Should you have any questions or queries about the project you can contact the researcher at the email address above or her supervisors Dr Georgina Wardle (georgina.wardle@glasgow.ac.uk) or Prof. Robert Davis (robert.davis@glasgow.ac.uk).

If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the research, please contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

_____End of Participant Information Sheet_____

Semi-structured interview schedule – Principals/Aspirant Principals

(indicative questions and some will only be relevant for those already Principals)

Demographic information:

- What is your current role?

- How long have you been in this role?

- Have you held any other Principalships? (not for Aspirants)

- Have you held/do you hold any other school leadership roles?

- Tell me about your school

- How long have you been teaching and what are your other qualifications?

Application process:

- What was/is your motivation for applying for Principalship?

- What were your expectations/feelings about the role when applying for/accepting the role?
- How many positions have you/did you apply for/interview for?

- What was your preparation for the role of Principal (what did you do, what was available to you?)
- Were you aware of selection criteria for any of the posts you applied for?

- Did you have any frustrations with the entire process/parts of the process if any?

Standard Application Form (SAF):

- Were you able to use experience from your non-professional activities to help meet the requirements of the four leadership domains?
- Were the four leadership domains helpful in guiding your application?

- When completing the application form were you conscious of what the panel might be looking for? What did you do to take this into account?
- What do/did you think selection panels are looking for?
- How do you think they decide on the 'right' candidate?

- Does the SAF give candidates enough scope to 'sell' themselves to selection panels?
- How did you choose your referees?

Principalship:

- Leadership definition in terms of school leadership, how do you define it? Who defines it within the system?
- Does the patron or BOM chairperson outline what they are seeking in a principal?
- What qualities/skills/associations are they looking for?
- Who has 'the right stuff' so to speak? What type of person do you think the selection panels look for?
- Could you suggest other methods of leadership selection?
- Is selection based solely on criteria or is there an element of instinct in the decision?

Semi-structured interview schedule – Selection Panel members

(indicative questions)

Demographic information:

- How many years have you been acting as a selection panel member?

- Were you approached to take on the role or did you volunteer?

- What is your professional background?

- Can you give me an estimate the number of selection panels you have been part of?

- What training undertaken/offered to fulfil the role (adequate/judgement)?

Selection Process:

- In your experience who actually short-lists candidates for interview?

- What criteria are used for short-listing?

- Who decides these criteria?

Standard Application Form (SAF):

- What are you looking for when reading?

- Do you think the form provides panel with sufficient information?

- The 4 domains of leadership are used on the SAF how effective are these? How much use is made of the standards of effective/highly effective practice in each domain as outlined in the 'Looking in our Schools' document from which they are taken?
- How important are the references provided about applicants? As we are only allowed to check references after interview does this effect choice made at interview/selections made?
- Do you think it would be helpful to check references before interview?

Principalship:

- In your opinion what defines a good school leader?

- In terms of the selection process are the panel all working from the same definition?
- Does the patron or BOM chairperson outline what they are seeking in a principal?
- Are selection criteria provided by e.g. the patron or does each individual panel come up with its own?

- What qualities/skills/associations are you looking for?
- Who has 'the right stuff' so to speak?

- Is selection based solely on criteria or is there an element of instinct in the decision?
- Could you suggest other methods of leadership selection?

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