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A critical analysis of contemporary challenges to Catholic schools in Scotland

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MA (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
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Abstract

This thesis offers a critical analysis of the contemporary challenges facing Catholic schools in Scotland. Drawing on historical, theological, policy-based and statistical sources, it examines how Catholic education in Scotland, as shaped by the 1872 and 1918 Education (Scotland) Acts, the contribution of religious congregations, and the Catholic Church's teachings, now operated in a rapidly changing social landscape.

A number of main challenges facing contemporary Catholic schools in Scotland are identified, namely: poverty; pluralism and secularism; the public debate concerning the continued state-funding of Catholic schools; the curriculum; and staffing and recruitment. Through analysis of recent data pertaining to the challenge presented by poverty and the Scottish policy context, this thesis demonstrates that while schools can help mitigate the impact of deprivation, they cannot address its structural causes alone. It is argued that Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology provide distinctive and compelling frameworks through which Catholic schools can respond to these challenges.

Tensions are highlighted between the distinctive nature of Catholic schools and national policy requirements, alongside geographical disparities within Scotland specifically with regard to the availability of Catholic teachers. The thesis concludes by proposing recommendations for school leaders, academics and Church authorities, emphasising the need for a clearer formation for Catholic educators and school leaders in the mission and identity of the Catholic school, and policy approaches informed by Catholic Social teaching and Liberation theology.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that Catholic schools can continue to make a vital contribution to Scottish society when they effectively and confidently integrate their historic mission, theological foundations and contemporary responsibilities.

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Author’s declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis 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.

Callum Thomas Timms
October 2026

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context

Catholic education in Scotland has developed within a particular historical, theological and social landscape which continues to influence the identity and responsibilities of its schools. The settlement which brought Catholic schools into the state system, secured through the Education (Scotland) Act 1918, allowed them to retain their character while contributing fully to the state's educational aims. The work of religious congregations and the commitment of lay teachers formed an approach which is still evident in the life of Catholic schools in Scotland today. As will be demonstrated, Catholic education is grounded in an approach which describes schools as Christo-centric communities where faith and learning go together, and where children and young people are formed for the common good through a particular concern for those who are most vulnerable.

These commitments now exist within a rapidly changing context in Scotland. Child poverty remains widespread and continues to impact attendance, wellbeing and attainment in ways which accumulate across the course of a young person's life. Scotland's religious demographics have shifted towards a larger proportion of people who no longer identify with any religion whatsoever, and religious diversity across the country has increased simultaneously. Public debate concerning the place and funding of denominational schools continues to attract attention. Within the Catholic sector, there are further debates concerning whether its curriculum is fit for purpose, whether there are sufficient teachers to provide a Catholic education in its schools, whether Catholic school leaders receive sufficient formation for their roles, and overall the sustainability of Catholic schools in light of such pressures. These developments have prompted renewed questions concerning whether Catholic schools can remain faithful to their mission while responding to the social and educational conditions in which they operate.

1.2 Rationale

This study has been prompted by concerns pertaining to justice, credibility and public value in relation to the provision of Catholic schools in Scotland, especially in light of the challenges identified above.

Catholic schools have long understood themselves as communities attentive to the needs of those who are marginalised and most vulnerable, as this thesis will evidence. As such, a concern for social justice is the main driver behind this work. Given the continuing impact of poverty on children and their families, it is necessary to examine how Catholic Social Teaching and the insights of Liberation Theology can shape school responses that are principled, structures and attentive to local realities.

On credibility, it is essential to note that Catholic schools in Scotland are situated within a changing context, which shall be clearly demonstrated. This context is marked by growing religious pluralism and increasing secularism, wherein Catholic schools require an approach to their ethos, curriculum and formation which is both confident and welcoming. They must articulate their identity with clarity while enabling young people from diverse backgrounds to encounter a coherent vision of the human person, the common good and the search for meaning and truth.

Finally, the debate concerning the place of Catholic schools within the wider Scottish educational provision demands an articulation of their contribution to wider society. This is what is meant by referring to their public value. This includes the manner in which they consciously and proactively support the principles of inclusion and nurture, and align with wider societal aims for the purpose of education and schooling.

Together, these three aspects provide a clear rationale for a study which examines these issues through a theological, historical and practical lens. They call for an examination of contemporary challenges, and ultimately for recommendations that can guide schools, academics and Church authorities as Catholic schooling in Scotland progresses.

1.3 Aims

This thesis has four main aims. It seeks to describe and articulate the historical, theological and structural features that continue to shape Catholic schooling in Scotland. It seeks to examine the external pressures that arise from poverty, religious pluralism and secularism, and the public debate around the continued state funding of Catholic schools in Scotland. It seeks to analyse internal challenges related to the curriculum, staffing and leadership. Evidence of these external and internal pressures will be demonstrated throughout the ensuing chapters alongside an analysis of the response to these challenges. It seeks to propose recommendations that are faithful to the mission and identity of Catholic education as espoused by the Magisterium and explored further in Chapter 2 of this thesis, and informed by Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology, and proportionate to what schools and systems can reasonably put into practice.

1.4 Methodology

This study is a desk-based critical analysis of literature which draws together four strands of work.

The first is a critical analysis of the Church's teaching on education and the history, mission and purpose of Catholic education as well as the structures which inform its work today, in addition to an analysis of key theological texts particularly focused on Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology.

Secondly, an examination of Scottish education and policy directed at the reduction and eradication of poverty, including the mechanisms through which schools are asked to mitigate the impact of poverty and disadvantage, and how these align with the mission of Catholic schools.

Thirdly, an analysis of available data pertaining to demographic shifts in Scotland, statistical and analytical sources that describe poverty, religious affiliation and related social trends is necessary to inform this study.

Fourthly, a constructive analysis that is informed by Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology as lenses through which to evaluate contemporary practice and propose recommendations.

This study focuses on state funded Catholic schools in Scotland, and uses published sources rather than new empirical work. Although the study is qualitative and literature-based rather than empirical, the methodology reflects a systematic and critical engagement with the existing scholarship. Themes were identified through extensive reading, comparison and synthesis across sources, allowing the thesis to draw out patterns, tensions and implications relevant to Catholic schools in Scotland. The intention is to contribute to a structured account which is historically informed, theologically grounded and practically relevant for Catholic educators and school leaders, Church authorities and those driving national policy.

Chapter 2: Catholic schools

2.1 Introduction

Catholic education is vast in its scale, and any discussion pertaining to Catholic schools is also challenged by its breadth. This thesis, and this chapter therefore, will focus on Catholic schools in Scotland. To fully understand their mission and purpose, it will be necessary to refer to Magisterial texts which apply internationally but they will be examined here with regard only to their relevance in the context of Catholic schools in Scotland.

This thesis will seek to explore the challenges which are facing Catholic schools in contemporary Scotland. Such challenges shall be derived from a range of sources, namely those interpreted by the Church itself and evident in its Magisterium, as well as those referred to in academic and secular literature with consideration given also to the challenge presented by wider public discourse.

In this chapter I will examine Catholic schools in Scotland from a more general perspective, and will consider their history, the theological foundations which underpin their structures, mission and purpose, and give consideration to the distinctive nature and identity of Catholic schools in Scotland. In doing so, I will begin to note the challenges which exist for contemporary Scottish Catholic schools, and will highlight these as the chapter progresses. Principally, however, this chapter serves to provide context and background to allow for a clear understanding of Catholic schools in Scotland, including an examination of relevant statistical information and the overall structure pertaining to Catholic schools in Scotland, to ensure a common baseline knowledge for the findings which will follow throughout this thesis.

2.2 History of Catholic schools in Scotland

Any understanding of contemporary Catholic schools in Scotland relies on an awareness of their history and background. While this thesis does not seek to address this in full, this short section will offer a synopsis of some of the pertinent literature. With specific regard to Scotland, a contemporary understanding of Catholic schools is not possible without an understanding of the Education

(Scotland) Act 1872) and the Education (Scotland) Act 1918, and the context around these important timeframes.

McKinney and McCluskey define five principle areas to consider when exploring the history of Catholic schools in Scotland, namely poverty within the Scottish Catholic community and the impact of financial constraints on the provision of a suitable school environment, the role of religious orders (particularly female orders), the training of Catholic teachers, an understanding of Catholic identity and how this differs within the Scottish context, and finally the issue of sectarianism (McKinney and McCluskey, 2019b, pp. 5–6). To ensure an awareness of the historical background of Catholic schools in Scotland, this section will seek to provide a brief synopsis of each of these themes, solely to provide context for the critical analysis of the challenges facing Catholic schools in Scotland which will follow throughout this thesis. McKinney and McCluskey produced what is now considered to be a seminal and substantial contribution to the history of Catholic schools in Scotland, comprising original, historical research. This is evidenced by the excellent reviews (Matemba, 2020, pp. 245–246; Sheridan, 2020, pp. 316–318) and by the quality of the scholarship evident in the individual chapters. There has been nothing published that has surpassed this.

A key theme identified by McKinney and McCluskey (2019a) is the central role of female religious orders in the provision of Catholic schools historically. Kehoe notes that such religious communities were largely focused in Glasgow given the Catholic population there, however others did appear in Edinburgh, Perth and Dundee:

> Consequently, it was in these areas where the bulk of the Catholic schools were located, and while the efforts were led by the women themselves, important partnerships formed between sisters and priests (Kehoe, 2019, p. 66).

The religious communities, however, had to respond to rising demand and formed increasing numbers of Catholic schools, particularly in Glasgow, which also

served to create a strain on the limited resources available. Alongside this, the role of women religious could not have been more critical:

> The teaching sisters were an invaluable resource during this critical period because they came from congregations which placed the education of girls and young women at the heart of their socio-religious mission and possessed significant authority as religious personnel. They had specialist skills, provided a form of teacher training to their membership and were extremely cost-effective— compared with lay teachers, both male and female, women religious were cheaper (Kehoe, 2019, p. 68).

Given the poverty and financial constraints already outlined, it seems clear that the provision of Catholic schools amid such a turbulent economic and societal background simply would not have been possible – at least not to this extent – without the expertise and willingness of religious orders. Women religious, as Kehoe notes, did not demand the salary of a lay teacher and as such the availability of education for the poorest and most marginalised was made possible. Moreover, the standard of education that they provided was laudable, for example around the time of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 when it was noted that

> The religious orders and congregations provided high quality approaches to learning and teaching and the government inspectors were normally very satisfied with the schools that were run by the religious (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, p. 81).

As a result of this, such approaches to Catholic schools as implemented by religious congregations were paramount, “arguably helping to ensure the continued viability of Catholic schools in this period of time” (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, p. 82). This highlights that, despite the challenging conditions that were facing Catholic schools in terms of poverty, financial constraints and dilapidated buildings with poor resources, the standard of teaching in the schools run by religious congregations was notable and Catholic schools continued to serve their communities positively. When considering the contemporary challenge

of poverty, this background is helpful and points to possible solutions to support those in most need despite limitations on resources.

The standard of the teachers within the Catholic school went a long way towards determining the quality of the overall provision of education therein, and the training of teachers to work in Catholic schools is the third theme identified by McKinney and McCluskey (2019a):

> Nevertheless, thanks to the religious teaching orders and the establishment of Notre Dame Training College in 1895, professional training was improving amongst female teachers, who represented over 75% of the certified workforce (Vaughan, 2019, p. 53).

Once again the role of women religious is key here. Indeed, the role of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was particularly crucial in teacher training, as

> prior to 1894, when they established their college and convent at Dowanhill in Glasgow's leafy and prosperous West End, no Catholic teacher training programme had existed in Scotland. Their arrival ushered in a dramatic transformation in Catholic education and changed the way that countless young women thought about their futures (Vaughan, 2019, pp. 62–63).

While, as noted above, religious orders did provide some form of teacher training prior to this, it is significant that they subsequently commenced the first formal provision for teacher training as Vaughan highlights. This sought to deliver an improved professionalism which would better serve the pupil population.

With regard to poverty and the financial constraints upon Catholic schools which consequently impacted their resources, McKinney and McCluskey note that:

> There were recurring issues that created serious challenges for the Catholic community and the maintenance of Catholic schools between the two Acts of 1872 and 1918. These challenges included the poverty of many Catholic

> families, poor attendance at school and the lack of Catholic teachers (McKinney and McCluskey, 2019c, p. 24).

The time period given reference to predates the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act which provided state-funding to Catholic schools in Scotland. As such, the Church and the communities themselves, were solely responsible for the provision of Catholic schools and the education that they provided. Given the demographics of the Catholic population, this resulted in the impact of poverty being amplified and the condition of such schools raising considerable concern, not least as a result of "overcrowded classrooms that were ill equipped and located in inadequate buildings" (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, p. 79). This struggle was particularly challenging during this period following the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 as Catholic schools remained independent of the state system and therefore lacked any financial support from the state:

> The Catholic Bishops were anxious about a number of issues highlighted by the introduction of the 1872 Act. They were concerned that arrangements for religious instruction and religious observance in the Board schools had the potential to be instruments to 'advance the Church of Scotland' or even to promote secularism (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, p. 77).

However, there were significant consequences for not transferring denominational schools to the state, and these had a harsh impact, particularly in terms of finances:

> There would be no assistance from the rates for the Catholic and Episcopal schools that were not transferred and remained independent of the Board school system (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, p. 78).

In effect, Catholic and Episcopal schools were "paying for schooling twice" (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, p. 79) as a consequence. As a result of this, the challenges were significant:

> The poverty of many Catholic families remained a serious challenge, and this had a detrimental effect on attendance at school. Catholic families required children to work from an early age to help support the family (McKinney and McCluskey, 2019c, p. 24).

This poverty could manifest itself in a variety of ways. Families could struggle to provide for the basic needs of their children and were unable to provide suitable clothing or anything which would be required in order to go to school, and at this time the Society of St Vincent de Paul

> had a major role to play in supporting children to attend school by providing shoes, clothing, equipment and a lunchtime meal (McKinney and McCluskey, 2019c, p. 24).

In this sense the wider role of the Church is understood as not only providing an education for the growing Catholic population, but catering to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable in society at this time. In doing so, the Church is responding to the social dimension of the communities it purports to serve, and is seeking to remove barriers to education. While it is evident that such initiatives supported school attendance, they did little to reduce or eradicate poverty itself. While commendable for their efforts to support those in greatest need, the Church should arguably have used its voice to challenge the social structures which perpetuated such levels of poverty, and perhaps still does. As we shall see, this remains a theme which the Church espouses to be important to Catholic schools in contemporary society too. While this thesis will consider the contemporary equivalent and how poverty impacts Catholic schools now, it is crucial to understand that working towards the relief of poverty has been key to the mission and purpose of Catholic schools in Scotland for as long as they have existed, and that religious orders have played a key role especially within this function.

The fourth theme highlighted by McKinney and McCluskey (2019a) is that of Catholic identity, and in particular its distinctive manifestation in Scotland. The Catholic Church in Scotland at the time of the 1918 Act sought to provide an education for the growing number of descendants from the Irish immigrant

community, and at this time the Government were seeking to provide a centralised education system; while the Church initially rejected this, financial demands ultimately resulted in Catholic schools in Scotland entering the state-funded system as of the 1918 Act (McKinney and Edwards, 2021, pp. 74–75). Vaughan notes the extent to which this is influenced by Irish migration, and the strength of feeling concerning this as many

> lamented, in 1920, over the exclusion of Irish history from schools in the West of Scotland. In effect, the growing influence of ultramontanism amongst the Catholic clergy in Scotland from the late 1860s ensured that Catholic schools reinforced a British Catholic identity rather than stress the Irish origins of the majority of its pupils (Vaughan, 2019, p. 55).

This sense of identity is crucial to understanding the context of Catholic schools in Scotland, and as Vaughan highlights is not evident within the curriculum of such schools. This diminishes the school communities' understanding of their own purpose, mission and history and as a consequence arguably impacts the overall quality of the school's educational provision. McHugh argues that "Ensuring their genuinely Catholic identity is the Church's greatest challenge" (McHugh, 2019, p. 192). Thus, a greater awareness of this context and an understanding of how to integrate it within the whole life of the Catholic school is key to preserving this sense of identity.

The fifth, and final, theme identified by McKinney and McCluskey (2019a) is the issue of sectarianism. Kehoe notes that

> the media's tendency to conflate Scotland's Catholic schools with the legacy of sectarianism has made legitimate and historically informed public discussions of Scottish education difficult (Kehoe, 2019, p. 63).

McKinney points to historic tensions between the Catholic Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland, whereby the latter has been critical of the position of Catholic schooling. For example, McKinney highlights that

> debates on the position of denominational schooling became more focused on issues such as segregation and sectarianism and parental rights. Catholic schools could be perceived to be sectarian or contribute to sectarianism by segregating children (McKinney, 2019, p. 167).

McKinney (2019) also gives reference to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland which, in 1999, stated:

> Separate schooling, while not necessarily causing sectarian attitudes, and indeed there is no real evidence to show that denominational schools, in themselves, lead to prejudicial attitudes, may nevertheless help reinforce the prejudice and stereotypes which are passed on by society (Church of Scotland Department of Education, 1999, sect. 2.4.2).

Thus, it is especially clear that at this time in 1999 the Church of Scotland's Department of Education continued to be cynical of the provision of denominational education in Scotland. While not explicitly alleging that such provision causes sectarianism, and acknowledging that their position here highlights it does not directly do so, the inference is still made that providing a separate schooling system which pupils of Roman Catholic faith can attend does, they argued, permeate prejudice and stereotypes among wider society. This position would seem to contain contradictions even within itself. However, more contemporary analysis of the Church of Scotland's position on denominational education is significantly more favourable. The Church of Scotland's Faith Action Programme Leadership Team reported to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 2024 thus:

> Where discussions are being held in local authorities about removing voting powers for Church/Religious representatives, we have a particular concern for our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church. In Scotland there is a particular place and role for Catholic education, and we recognise that removing voting powers is resisted by the Catholic Church for the sake of

> maintaining a degree of influence over policies with regards to its schools. We stand in solidarity with the Catholic Church and urge that particular weight be given to their arguments with regard to the distinctiveness of Catholic education (Church of Scotland, 2024, p. 114).

In light of this recent reference, when compared with the historical background, the progress in the relationship between the Catholic Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland is clear. With regard to Catholic schools, this ensures for a more progressive environment in which support is evident in the midst of political challenge. When considering the challenges faced by Catholic schools today, it is important therefore to note that, broadly speaking, the Church of Scotland is a contemporary ally and its support is beneficial to Catholic schools when debates occur in the public sphere.

To conclude this section, the five key themes defined by McKinney and McCluskey as being crucial to understanding the history of Catholic schools in Scotland have been explored. They have not been examined in depth, as their purpose here has been to outline the context in which the challenges facing contemporary Catholic schools in Scotland will be explored in the remaining chapters of this thesis. Nevertheless, what has been of particular note is that those challenges facing Catholic schools historically, both prior to and immediately following the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918, are still evident in the challenges which will be explored concerning their contemporary counterparts.

2.3 Theological foundations of Catholic schools

Underpinning all Catholic schools should, the Church states, be its Christocentric identity. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education writes, for example, that "Christ is the sure foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 34). Furthermore, in the documents of the Second Vatican Council we understand that Catholic schools should also seek to make a positive impact on the world around them and should seek to

> …help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 2).

It has been argued that it is this conciliar document which begins to place Catholic education firmly "within the context of the mission of the Catholic Church" (McKinney, 2011, p. 149). Furthermore, in this document the Magisterium states clearly that "Among all educational instruments the school has a special importance" (McKinney, 2011, p. 150) & (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 5). This allows for a fuller understanding of the role which Catholic schools play in the life and witness of the Catholic Church, and as has been initially noted in the prior section on the historical context for Catholic schools in Scotland, this role emerges over time in the life of the Catholic Church in Scotland and in wider Scottish societal discourse.

A contemporary understanding of Catholic schools is arguably rooted in *Gravissimum Educationis* (Pope Paul VI, 1965) and a more detailed exhortation of their theological foundations has stemmed from documents which succeed this text. Pope Paul VI suggests that the primary function of Catholic education is

> that the baptised, while they are gradually introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 2).

Thus, Pope Paul VI states that the purpose of Catholic schools is to support young people to be formed in their faith, to grow in a deeper appreciation of it and a fuller awareness of the mystery of God, and to be taught how to respond to these beliefs through praise and worship, including through communal experiences of prayer and liturgy. However as expressed earlier in this chapter, Pope Paul VI also roots this goal within the responsibility of contributing to the common good. This, therefore, would seem to suggest that the transmission of faith, and the teaching of how to express it, is the single most important function of the Catholic school, to the exclusion of any secular curricula. Furthermore, the role that the Catholic

school can play in securing social justice is ranked with similar importance. The latter is evidenced later in the same document when it is stated that

> its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 8).

and to "prepare them [pupils] for service in the spread in the Kingdom of God" (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 8). This, therefore, supports a fuller understanding of the mission and priorities of the Catholic school from the perspective of the Church.

In addition, schools are seen as places

> not only to develop with special care the intellectual faculties but also to form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 5).

This is broadly reflective of a subsequent document from the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education which states that:

> Catholic schools must be focused on and devoted to the formation of the whole person (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 35).

Catholic schools, therefore, must attend to the holistic needs of their pupils. However, within this context "caution must be exercised to avoid the recourse to Catholic 'edu-babble' and the eclectic mining for seemingly profound, yet essentially meaningless phrases" (McKinney, 2021b, p. 414), in this case the reference to the "whole person." The concept of the 'whole person' is not fully clarified or developed.

It is within this Magisterial document that we also begin to find reference to the Church's understanding of challenges which face Catholic schools in the contemporary context, as well as what it might consider to be the protective factors which will ensure their future:

> The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education is aware of the serious problems which are an integral part of Christian education in a pluralistic society. It regards as a prime duty, therefore, the focusing of any attention on the nature and distinctive characteristics of school which would present itself as Catholic (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 2).

Specific challenges will be explored in considerable depth as this thesis progresses. It is helpful to note that later Church documents do give greater consideration to these issues, most notably the Catholic schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997). This document examines the very serious issues and challenges facing Catholic schools, such as the breakdown in family relationships and the increasing lapse from the faith among the young. It is helpful to note that the Church's documents do give consideration to these issues. Furthermore, it is of note that the Congregation for Catholic Education argues that the response to such a challenge can be found in the distinctiveness of Catholic schools themselves, thus suggesting that this is their strength rather than something for which they can be critiqued. This will be given attention as this thesis develops.

A clearer understanding of the relationship between the importance of developing knowledge and the centrality of developing as a person is also explored. The Church states that the school's

> task is fundamentally a synthesis of culture and faith, and a synthesis of faith and life: the first is reached by integrating all the different aspects of human knowledge through the subjects taught, in the light of the Gospel; the second in the growth of the virtues characteristic of the Christian (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 35).

It goes on to state that the wider curriculum should not be regarded "as a useful means of teaching apologetics" (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 39) which does seem to suggest that while Catholic schools are charged with providing a broad education which should be illuminated by Catholic faith, the wide range of subjects do not necessarily need to be taught with explicit reference to the denominational status of the school. This is further supported by the assertion that

> A Catholic school conforms to the generally accepted school programming of today, but implements these programmes within an overall religious perspective (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 57).

There is, however, an obvious tension here which will prove challenging to the nature of the Catholic school, namely the provision of an education which is informed and underpinned by an explicit theology, yet is beyond the scope of being accused of being indoctrinatory. This is particularly the case when the question of the role of evangelisation arises. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education has stated, for example, that

> The activity of a Catholic school is, above all else, an activity that shares in the evangelising mission of the Church (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 101).

It is emphasised that

> It is precisely in the Gospel of Christ, taking root in the minds and lives of the faithful, that the Catholic school finds its definition (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 9).

This, however, would seem to be antithetical to the notion of a school which is inclusive and welcoming for all. In particular, as the pupil population of Catholic schools becomes increasingly diverse, such a catechetical approach to education

is called into question. Consequently, there is considerable debate concerning whether Catholic schools are indoctrinatory by their nature and very existence. This has led, for example, to an assertion that

> faith schools, insofar as they succeed in their religious mission, are indoctrinatory. And, since the religious mission of faith schools is precisely what distinguishes them from common schools, this is an argument not for the reform of faith schools, but for their abolition (Hand, 2003, p. 99).

This, Hand argues, is because

> there are no educationally legitimate means by which teachers can impart religious beliefs to pupils. Because the evidence and argument in support of a given set of religious beliefs is always, at best, ambiguous, the only way of reliably imparting those beliefs is to resort to some form of psychological manipulation or pressure (Hand, 2012, p. 551).

Accordingly, if Hand's argument is accepted then it would seem impossible to reconcile such a basis for school-based education with the notion of inclusivity which has also been claimed to be a key feature of Catholic schools. Groome argues, for example, that Catholic schools should embody what he calls a "Catholic universality: From the Greek *katha holos,* which literally means 'to include everyone'" (Groome, 2014, p. 118). This thesis will go on to consider this debate, particularly in light of pluralism, and in doing so will give further consideration to the debate related to claims that Catholic schools are indoctrinatory.

Once again, however, the importance of the contribution of Catholic schools to ensuring a fairer society was emphasised by the Congregation for Catholic Education:

> Since it is motivated by the Christian ideal, the Catholic school is particularly sensitive to the call from every part of the world for a more just

> society, and it tries to make its own contribution towards it. It does not stop at the courageous teaching of the demands of justice even in the face of local opposition, but tries to put these demands into practice in its own community in the daily life of the school (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 58).

This serves to underpin the important role that the Church considers Catholic schools must play in implementing its social doctrine. This extract highlights that each Catholic school should strive to make a contribution towards peace and justice globally, however perhaps of more significance here is the mention of implementing these values in the daily life of the Catholic school. As this thesis progresses, consideration will be given to how Catholic schools seek to implement these principles at the local level, and analyse the effectiveness of their actions in this regard with particular reference to the poverty these schools may face amongst the pupil population. With reference to the earlier argument, this focus on social justice combined with an aspiration for inclusivity is expressed thus:

> In its ecclesial dimension another characteristic of the Catholic school has its root: it is a school for all, with special attention to those who are weakest (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 15).

While this quotation serves to neatly align two key areas which Magisterial documents have espoused as key to understanding Catholic schools, it does not address the challenges outlined thus far with regard to the tension between inclusivity and evangelisation. This undoubtedly requires further examination and the debate concerning this will continue to be considered. Nevertheless, the latter part of this quotation implicitly refers to the preferential option for the poor which is embedded within Catholic Social Teaching.

Examining the international context in this regard, McKinney argues that there are several responses to the preferential option for the poor which demonstrate a range of approaches within Catholic schools.[1] He notes that there are

> serious anxieties about the disconnect between the history and self-proclaimed aims of some Catholic schools to serve the poor and the reality of the operation within the schools (McKinney, 2018, p. 221).

Another area McKinney considers is "the situation when Catholic schools have to be completely self-funding and consequently educate the children of the wealthy" (McKinney, 2018, p. 221). While this is not primarily a concern in Scotland given the state-funding available, it is nonetheless important to bear in mind. McKinney goes on to consider "the role of Catholic schools that have made a radical commitment to the preferential option for the poor" and emphasises that they have achieved an improvement in the life chances and social mobility of their pupils as a consequence (McKinney, 2018, pp. 221–222). This is a lens through which Catholic schools in Scotland could be more closely examined, as is the final area explored by McKinney, who considers the

> intervention in the Catholic school curriculum to ensure that the children and young people have a properly formulated knowledge and understanding of the world-wide and local challenge of poverty and associated social evils (McKinney, 2018, p. 222).

When considering the challenge that poverty presents to Catholic schools in Scotland, an awareness of these areas of importance will be crucial. It is evident from these statements that within the Scottish context a Catholic school rooted in the preferential option for the poor should subsequently be able to serve more effectively the mission of the Church as stated above, which seeks to prioritise the weakest and most marginalised and ensure an inclusive provision of education. In doing so, fostering an awareness amongst pupils of the centrality of these themes

[1] McKinney is a leading international scholar in the relationship between Catholic schools and the preferential option for the poor and has written extensively on this topic: McKinney (2018; 2021a; 2021b; and 2023) are just a few of his works on this topic.

by embedding them in the curriculum of the school ought to be of the utmost importance.

Groome argues that this work of Catholic schools "is more needed than ever, both to serve the common good of its societies and likewise to nurture the faith life of its students" (Groome, 2014, p. 115). He goes on to posit:

> Their philosophy and curriculum, however, must be shaped by the core convictions that lend Catholic faith its identity. And the curriculum includes not only *what* we teach but *why* and *how* and *where* (the school's ethos) we teach it and *who* we encourage its participants to become (Groome, 2014, p. 115).

Thus it is clear that, from Groome's perspective, the Catholicity of the school must permeate its entire life, however he addresses the challenge of inclusivity by stating that

> Although the rationale for such spirituality arises from Catholic Christian faith, the vision they suggest can be embraced by all people of good will (Groome, 2014, p. 115).

He argues for eight key areas to fully embrace the faith identity of the Catholic school, which he says are

> A Catholic anthropology… A Catholic Cosmology… A Catholic sociology… A Catholic epistemology… A Catholic historicity… A Catholic politics for justice… A Catholic spirituality [and] A Catholic universality (Groome, 2014, pp. 115–118).

These areas would, arguably, lead to a school which is undoubtedly Catholic in its identity and which meets the ambitions of the curricular documents. Such a school would have clear theological foundations in its approach to the breadth of the curriculum and across the whole life of the school. However, this will face

considerable challenge depending upon the context of the school. As this thesis will explore further, particularly in Scottish Catholic secondary schools it is not necessary to be Catholic to teach in most positions, thus to imply that many subjects (for example the Social Subjects) must be taught through the lens of the Catholic faith becomes difficult, and in some cases perhaps impossible. As such, Groome's vision is an appealing one and would undoubtedly reflect a school experience which is Catholic in almost every aspect of its nature, however this aspiration is not achievable in reality, given the current challenges facing Catholic schools in Scotland. As will be explored, significant numbers of staff and young people in Catholic schools in Scotland do not identify as Catholic, and those in leadership positions are often unaware of the purpose of Catholic education as espoused by the Magisterium. This renders Groome's vision a distant ambition in the current context.

Grace considers another challenge which faces contemporary Catholic schools, and within this context also seeks to explore their purpose and theological basis. He suggests

> It may be said that one of the prime purposes of the Catholic school and perhaps its fundamental rationale is to keep alive and to renew the culture of the sacred in a profane and secular world (Grace, 2002, p. 16).

This analysis from Grace, and subsequent reference to this paper, is central to understanding the ongoing challenges facing Catholic schools. It is a seminal work which has underpinned subsequent scholarly discussion of such challenges, and therefore its inclusion in this thesis is justified by its standing in contemporary discourse which serves to highlight Grace's work has not been superseded by more recent publications. While the impact of growing secularism will be considered later in this thesis, the role of the school in focusing attention on that which is sacred is of note here. It is important to consider that the contexts in which Catholic schools in Scotland operate are changing, as we shall consider. However despite this it could be argued that their mission and purpose is not defined solely by their surroundings but rather, as Grace seems to suggest, they have a fundamental basis for existence and that is centred on sanctity and holiness, rooted

in their Christocentric identity. With this as its foundation, Grace goes on to note that the Church's documents aspire for Catholic schools which set out to achieve radical change in the world. He notes that

> the challenge for the Catholic school is not only to attempt to give meaning and purpose to the lives of contemporary youth, but also to take a stance, with the Church, in a larger struggle for the soul of the world (Grace, 2002, p. 31).

Thus, it is crucial for Catholic schools to have a clear understanding of their mission and purpose, and of the Church teaching and beliefs which underpin it.

Several key themes, therefore, emerge from the Church documents and academic literature in this analysis with reference to the theological foundations of the Catholic school, and how this enables us to reach a fuller understanding of their mission, ethos, purpose and identity. Firstly, that the Catholic school must be Christocentric in its nature with a profound sense of being rooted in the mission and teachings of Jesus Christ. Secondly, that the Catholic school should be inclusive and welcoming, especially in an increasingly pluralistic culture. Lastly, that the Catholic school should respond to the social challenges of the contemporary world and, inspired by faith, seek to address the problems which exist both by supporting those within the school and by educating them to tackle the wider injustices which face their communities and the world as a whole. As has been noted throughout this section there are considerable challenges to these aims which require further exploration, and will be addressed in considerable depth as this thesis progresses. Such challenges include the tension between the focus on the Christocentric nature of Catholic schools and their requirement to be inclusive places of welcome to all, especially in an increasingly pluralistic society. Within this context, a further challenge emerges whereby the tension between evangelisation, catechesis and accusations of indoctrination emerges. Furthermore, tensions emerge between the ideals of Church teaching and what happens in practice, and in what is espoused when contrasted with the practical work that the Church has undertaken to eradicate poverty both in the past and present, and where it has fallen short in this regard. In light of this initial

exposition of these challenges, further consideration of the literature pertinent to these areas is required in order to evaluate the effectiveness of Catholic schools within these contexts, and to examine whether they are successful in realising their own purpose as espoused by the Church and how in practice these tensions are addressed.

2.4 Catholic schools in the Scottish context

This section shall seek to provide an overview of the context for Catholic schools in Scotland, to ensure that any reference to such schools in the ensuing chapter is rooted in a clear understanding of the governing principles, structures and statistics pertaining to the schools in question. In doing so, this section will consider key bodies which have a role in the governance and regulation of Catholic schools and appointments thereto, in addition to considering the distinctive elements of the recruitment process (namely that which is referred to as Church Approval) and will also consider the numbers of Catholic schools in Scotland and public attitudes concerning them.

According to the Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES), there are three main bodies within the structure of Catholic education in Scotland: the SCES Executive Board, Diocesan Education Groups and the Catholic Education Commission (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2015). The SCES Executive Board

> is responsible for developing appropriate strategic priorities and for ensuring that the necessary steps are taken to address these strategies (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2015).

Such strategy would be within the scope of the work of SCES, which was "established in 2003 by the Bishops' Conference of Scotland to establish and implement national policy on all educational matters on behalf of the Roman Catholic Bishops of Scotland" (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2009). The role of Diocesan Education Groups is

> to monitor and respond to local education issues, in the light of national strategies and advice offered by SCES. Their main function is to ensure that the needs of the Diocese are being addressed appropriately, with regard to school provision, teacher recruitment and support (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2015).

Ultimately, within this context, it is the diocesan Bishop who is granted authority within the Education (Scotland) Act 1918 and who is responsible for Church Approval, however the advisory groups are in place to support the wider work of the Church on education matters. Furthermore, SCES themselves highlight that

> the Bishop of each Diocese is responsible for setting education policy to suit the needs of the Catholic community within the local diocesan context" (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2009).

The role of the Catholic Education Commission has evolved over time, and while it

> previously operated as a consultative body, involving a wide representation from the Catholic Education community [it] has developed and changed and is achieved through the engagement of SCES with partner agencies and associations (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2015).

It exists to

> provide a forum for seeking views on issues of national significance for Catholic education so that these views could inform the strategy developed by SCES and its partners when addressing these issues (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2015).

To enable to full understanding of such structures, it is also important to consider the existence and role of Diocesan Advisers in Religious Education, who work

> in Dioceses to support the teaching of Religious Education in schools [and] develop resources and provide advice and in-service training for teachers (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2010).

Such support can extend to assisting Senior Leadership Teams in Catholic schools and can go beyond the scope of Religious Education as a subject, instead supporting with the wider ethos and life of the Catholic school.

Finally, the St Andrew's Foundation for Catholic Teacher Education is based at the University of Glasgow. It describes itself as

> the home of Catholic Teacher Education in Scotland and an international hub of knowledge exchange and research (University of Glasgow, no date).

It is rooted in a partnership between the Bishops' Conference of Scotland, University of Glasgow and the Scottish Government, and is the sole university provider authorised to issue the Catholic Teacher's Certificate in Religious Education in Scotland. For that reason, any consideration of Catholic schools in Scotland must take account of the St Andrew's Foundation given its role in the initial teacher education for any teacher working in this field.

Recruitment to teaching posts in Catholic schools in Scotland is governed by criteria stemming from legislation and applied by SCES on behalf of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland. The most recent guidance on Church Approval, published in 2019, refers to this stating:

> The 1918 Education (Scotland) Act, and subsequent related legislation, states that a teacher can only be appointed to a post within a denominational school provided they

> *"satisfy the Secretary of State as to qualification, and are approved as regard their religious belief and character by representatives of the church or denominational body in whose interest the school has been conducted"* (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2019).

This policy explains that, with reference to the legislation above, both qualification and approval are necessary prior to any appointment to a teaching post in a Catholic school in Scotland. While it is not necessary for all those appointed to be baptised Catholics, the document does go on to insist that Church Approval will only be granted in certain cases if the applicant can evidence that they are a practising Catholic:

> In light of Church Doctrine and current guidance from the Catholic Education Commission, the Bishops' Conference of Scotland insist that, as a minimum requirement, the posts of headteacher or principal, deputy headteacher or deputy principal and teacher of religious education are to be filled by practising Catholics (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2019).

This does, however, represent a change in policy within recent years. In 2012 this approach faced legal challenge at an Employment Tribunal following the rejection of an application by an atheist for a promoted post within a Catholic school in Glasgow (Buie, 2012). At this time, the Church's list of posts which required the applicant to be a practising Catholic was broader:

> Teachers who do not profess to be Roman Catholics may be appointed to any posts in an RC school except that of head teacher, principal or assistant principal teacher of guidance or religious education, principal teacher of biology, teacher of religious education or senior teacher in a primary school. Except in the case of those posts listed in the previous sentence, non-Catholic candidates (who are automatically deemed to have been approved by the Church) and approved Catholic candidates will be considered on their individual merits (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2007).

This Tribunal focused on an applicant being denied approval for the post of Principal Teacher of Pastoral Care. As noted above, a Principal Teacher of Guidance would have required to evidence that they were a practising Catholic under the policy in place at that time, and while the role of Principal Teacher of Pastoral Care would encompass the responsibilities listed under Guidance, it was not accepted by the Employment Tribunal that the roles were the same and accordingly the claimant was successful in this Tribunal. When considering the challenges facing contemporary Catholic schools in Scotland, this case also allows for a deeper exploration of the autonomy of the Church in recruitment procedures. Given that the Education (Scotland) Act 1918 sought to provide assurances around the recruitment of teachers in Catholic schools and the role that the diocesan Bishop would have in this procedure, this would seem to evidence that such power is limited and ultimately that Catholic schools face a significant level of scrutiny in their application of the Church Approval process. Furthermore, it would seem apparent that the reduction in posts requiring applicants to practice the Catholic faith would seem to stem from legal challenge.

Such challenges in terms of recruitment are amplified when considering the availability of suitably qualified teachers for Catholic schools. Midlothian Council produced a report that it titled a *Denominational Review* in 2021 in response to such concerns, noting that this was taking place

> in the context of a national shortfall in availability of teachers with approval necessary to teach in Roman Catholic (RC) schools (Robertson, 2021, p. 2).

As a result of this issue which the report calls a “crisis in faith education” (Robertson, 2021, p. 2) with reference to comments from the late Archbishop Philip Tartaglia, several Catholic primary schools in Midlothian Council are managed under temporary arrangements by a Leader of Learning rather than a Headteacher, in order for this individual not to need to be a practising Catholic. However, given a footnote in the Church’s guidance acknowledges that there can be differences in terminology and any reference to Headteacher should be understood to mean “the most senior leadership post i.e. the person with overall responsibility for the day to day management of the school” (Scottish Catholic

Education Service, 2019), it is difficult to understand this as anything other than another example of the Church's policy being undermined and therefore having very little credence in the contemporary Scottish educational context.

Alongside the challenge of recruiting staff who are both qualified and meet the Church's approval criteria, the religious background of pupils attending Catholic schools is also of note. In Midlothian Council during 2019/20, 40% of those attending Catholic primary schools identified as Catholic. By school, this was broken down accordingly:

RC Primary School	Total Roll	Percentage RC
Sacred Heart	127	34%
St Andrew's	157	36%
St David's	192	41%
St Luke's	201	34%
St Margaret's	40	48%
St Mary's	135	51%
St Matthew's	55	41%
	907	40%

Table 1: Percentage of Catholic pupils attending Midlothian Council primary schools (Robertson, 2021, p. 3).

Given all except one primary school within this local authority consist of a pupil population which is majority non-Catholic, and combined with the challenges in recruitment, it would seem that these figures present a considerable challenge to the continued existence of Catholic schools in their current format. This thesis, therefore, will seek to explore this challenge further with a view to considering the sustainability of the current model of Catholic schooling in Scotland in light of the arguments against them and the evidence in this regard.

With regard to the national picture, during the 2022 teacher census 8,836 full-time equivalent teachers were working in Catholic schools in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023). As of April 2022, there were 358 publicly-funded Roman Catholic schools in Scotland and the existence of other faith based schools is also notable:

Number of publicly funded schools [note 1] in Scotland by religious denomination, as of April 2022	
Denomination	No. of schools
Non-denominational	2,079
Roman Catholic	358
Inter-denominational	7
Episcopalian	3
Jewish	1
Total	2,461
Note 1: Including both Local Authority and Grant Aided schools	

Table 2: Number of publicly funded schools in Scotland by religious denomination, as of April 2022 (Scottish Government, 2024).

Catholic schools are the second largest provider of state- funded school-based education in Scotland, although state-funded schools overall are, broadly speaking, non-denominational as these figures highlight. That said, it is of note when considering arguments in relation to inclusivity, that schools of other denominations do exist. It is also worth noting that the overall number of Catholic schools has fallen from 366 in 2014 (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2015, p. 38). Nevertheless, what is also significant here is that given the number of Catholic schools in Scotland the Church does continue to hold considerable influence in terms of the state's provision of a school-based education in Scotland. While this has been challenged as already outlined, the number of Catholic schools continues to evidence their importance in society as a whole.

Finally, when considering Catholic schools within the Scottish context, it is important to consider public attitudes towards them. This was covered in considerable detail in the 2014 *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey*, which looked

explicitly at public attitudes to sectarianism. In summary, what this document noted was that

> Overall, 43% of people in Scotland oppose denominational schools, while 25% support them. Opposition has fallen in recent years, from 50% in 2007. Catholics were much more likely to support denominational schools than other groups. 62% of Catholics supported denominational schools, while 18% opposed them (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2015, p. iv).

It must be noted that, while other denominational schools exist as noted above, this survey took the view that

> In Scotland, 'denominational schools' can be considered almost synonymous with 'Catholic schools' (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2015, p. 38)

and as such the questioning reflected this and gave specific reference to Roman Catholic schools. The study also considered public attitudes on whether Catholic schools contributed to sectarianism, noting that

> while few blamed faith schools for breeding sectarianism, some people thought that the existence of such overt divisions between Catholics and non-Catholics made divisions on religious grounds seem normal (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2015, p. 38).

The findings of the *Scottish Social Attitude Survey* were also referenced by the Scottish Government and contained within the *Final Report of the Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism* (Scottish Government, 2015). With reference to this report, McKinney notes that

> The Advisory Group does not include all of the additional information provided in the 2015 SSA report… the *Final Report* fails to provide a fuller picture of the range of views in the SSA report on what is considered to

> contribute *most* to sectarianism that is relevant to their discussion of denominational schools. The SSA report points out that there are very low percentages of respondents who considered denominational schools, internet/social media, and traditional media to be among the aspects of Scottish life that contribute *most* to sectarianism (all 5% or less) (McKinney, 2015, pp. 25–26).

Accordingly, a fuller understanding of such viewpoints tends to suggest that while such perceptions exist, they are a minority. Perhaps it is little surprise, therefore, that "Those who thought denominational schools contributed to sectarianism were more likely to oppose them" (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2015, p. 39). Moreover, as was highlighted in the Scottish Government's *Interim Report,* the perception of the general public on such matters has limited benefit when considering policy and seeking to understand the real causes of issues such as sectarianism:

> The debate around schools in Scotland can quickly degenerate into sterile or emotive conversations about the importance of religious identity in education versus the importance of single-provider education (McKinney, 2015, p. 26).

Consequently, while a consideration of public attitudes is essential to a broad awareness of the challenges facing contemporary Catholic schools, this is a useful analysis of the limitations to such evidence. Nevertheless, as McKinney highlights in conclusion to this point, the Scottish Government's Advisory Group "is consistent… in rejecting claims that denominational schools are a source of sectarianism or have been responsible for sectarianism" (McKinney, 2015, p. 26). As this thesis progresses, the challenge presented by public attitudes towards Catholic schools and the issue of sectarianism will be considered further.

This summary has sought to provide an overview of the context and structures of Catholic schools in Scotland. In doing so, it is intended to provide a clear explanation upon which any discussion in this thesis will be based, and serves to outline some of the challenges which will be explored in detail as this paper progresses.

2.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has sought to outline the context concerning Catholic schools in Scotland, which are the focus of this thesis. In doing so, several important areas have been examined. This chapter commenced with an exploration of the background and context facing Catholic schools in Scotland by briefly noting the Church's role and the Magisterial expectations while introducing an awareness of the Education (Scotland) Acts of 1872 and 1918 respectively, which are key to understanding the contemporary provision of Catholic schools in Scotland. This chapter went on to explore the historical context for Catholic schools in Scotland, and used five key themes highlighted by McKinney and McCluskey as the basis for doing so (McKinney and McCluskey, 2019b, pp. 3–6). A consistent area among all themes here was the impact of poverty on the provision of Catholic schools – this is a theme which will continue to be explored throughout this thesis. Consideration was given to the theological foundations upon which Catholic schools in Scotland are based – this focused primarily on reviewing the Magisterial literature which informs the mission and purpose of Catholic education worldwide, and considering some of the challenges which were noted therein. Attention was also given to some notable academic commentary on the mission and purpose of Catholic schooling, again to provide important context for the chapters which follow. Similarly, these allowed for an initial exposition of a range of challenges which will be explored in considerably more detail as this thesis progresses. Finally, the specific Scottish context for Catholic schools was considered by investigating the structures involved, the recruitment processes, and the challenges these can pose alongside the numbers of schools and indicative statistics pertaining to the pupil population.

Having delved into the context and ensured a clear understanding of what is meant when referring to Catholic schools in Scotland, this thesis will now progress with a detailed analysis of the challenges such schools are facing. These challenges will be considered in two categories: those which are external (in other words, the challenge derives from outwith the Catholic school, such as poverty, public attitudes and sectarianism) and those which are internal (in other words, those

within the control of the Catholic education system, such as its curriculum and the challenges posed to this).

Chapter 3: Poverty and Catholic schools in Scotland

3.1 Introduction

It is clear that poverty has informed the work of Catholic schools in Scotland since their inception. This was the case both prior to and following Catholic schools entering the state sector in Scotland, and has been demonstrated in the previous chapter. This chapter, therefore, will seek to consider the challenge presented by poverty and the implications of this for contemporary Catholic schools in Scotland.

In doing so, this chapter will approach the challenge of poverty by considering key areas. Firstly, a statistical analysis considering available data which allows for a clear understanding of the challenge of poverty in Scotland, and specifically child poverty, will be examined. Thereafter, attention will be paid to the policy context given the Scottish Government's stated aims in this regard and campaigns from prominent teaching unions such as the EIS *Standing Up to Child Poverty* campaign (The Educational Institute of Scotland, 2024). Following this, consideration will be given to the relevance and application of Catholic Social Teaching in Scottish Catholic schools, as well as considering what Liberation Theology can offer to this discussion.

This chapter, therefore, aims to consider not only what the challenge of poverty means for Catholic schools in Scotland, but also sets out to establish whether such schools have a distinctive approach to tackling this and whether it is effective in practice.

3.2 Statistical analysis of the challenge presented by poverty

The challenge of poverty, and child poverty in particular, is one which receives a justified wealth of attention in the media and in political discourse in Scotland. This section, therefore, will seek to evidence that issue with reference to a range of statistics. In doing so, the challenge of poverty regardless of faith will be particularly evident. This section will also appeal to statistics including those related to the Scottish Government's Pupil Equity Funding to highlight where such statistics concern Catholic schools in Scotland.

A current analysis of data is essential, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2024 report demonstrates a thorough analysis of the contemporary situation. The focus of this data is the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's analysis of the UK Government's Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics, which uses data from the Family Resources Survey to ascertain disposable income(Department for Work and Pensions, 2025). It is, however, of note that the sample size for this data was limited, covering less than 17,000 households across the United Kingdom meaning that the Joseph Rowntree's analysis of this information may be limited in its scope, hence the importance of further analysis of data such as that from the Scottish Government. The analysis focuses on measures of relative poverty after housing costs, and it is therefore also important to note that while this offers a helpful consistent measure of deprivation it does not account for other social factors which impact on poverty such as housing quality, health and educational provision. The data from this report, however, does provide a comprehensive overview which this thesis will use as a foundation for exploration of the Scottish Government's own information and statistics, and a wider analysis of the implications of the present challenge. Furthermore, this 2024 report situates the patterns and trends of poverty in Scotland within the wider policy landscape, allowing for a detailed consideration of the impact of such decisions. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation summarises the current position in light of poverty rates over time:

> Poverty in Scotland fell rapidly over the decade from 1999–2002 to 2009–12, from 24% (1.2 million people) to a low of 18% (900,000 people). Over the following decade the trend in the after housing costs (AHC) relative poverty rate has reversed, creeping back up to a level of 21% in 2020–23 (1.1 million people) (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 14).

This serves to highlight the extent of the challenge in wider society, and the context in which Catholic schools in Scotland find themselves. The report adds that "Scotland made more significant progress [than the rest of the UK] in reducing poverty, but it has also seen a steadier increase over the last decade" (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 14). When considering the depth of poverty, the report adds that

> Very deep poverty steadily increased between 1994–97 and 2019–22 when nearly 1 in 10 people (9%) in Scotland were trapped in very deep poverty, making up nearly half (45%) of all people trapped in poverty in Scotland (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 14).

With specific regard to children, it is noted that currently around 1 in 4 children in Scotland are living in poverty, and over recent years this has remained consistent around 24% (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 16):

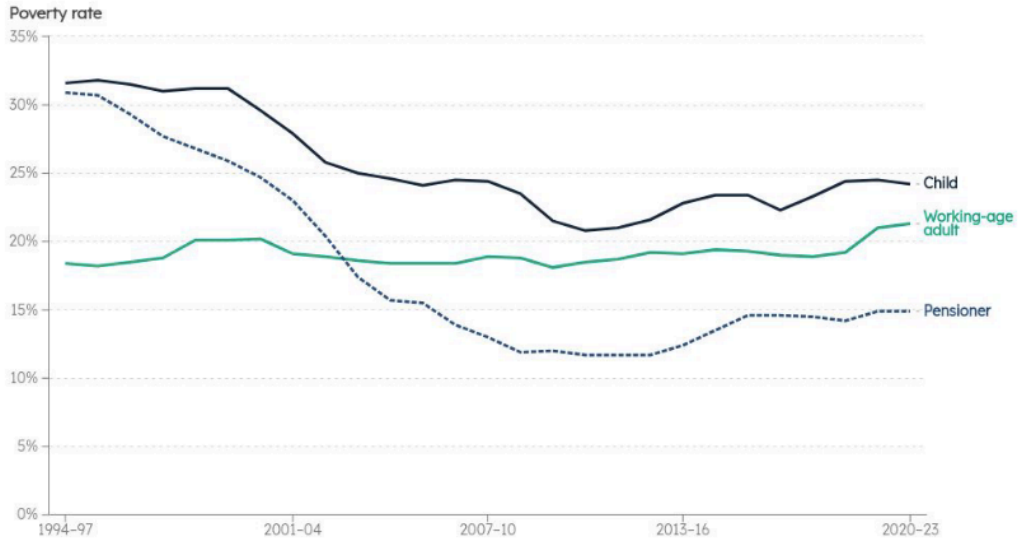


Figure 1: Poverty rate (AHC) for children, working-age adults and pensioners - 1994-97 to 2020-23 (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 16).

These figures, while showing some progress over time, highlight the consistently concerning rate of child poverty which impacts children and young people regardless of the school that they attend. This does, however, mean that Catholic schools are also faced with the challenge of such child poverty rates. Moreover, as Figure 1 demonstrates

> Children in Scotland continue to be at a greater risk of poverty than the rest of the population (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 19).

Accordingly, there are considerable challenges amid the policy context which will be explored in the next section. Such policy commitments have considerable impact on the work of schools, however as was highlighted in the previous chapter, addressing such poverty has always been a feature of Catholic schools in Scotland, and this chapter will go on to consider the application of this mission in contemporary Scotland.

It has been further noted that additional factors can have a significant impact on exacerbating the effects of poverty on families. For example:

> Around 3 in 10 (31%) children in single-parent families were in poverty. Nearly 2 in 5 children in a family with a baby (37%) or in a large family (38%) are trapped in poverty.
>
> Over half (53%) of children from a minority ethnic background are trapped in poverty, 5 times the 2031 target and more than twice the poverty rate found for all children. Minority ethnic children now make up a fifth of children in poverty but a 10th of all children (Birt *et al.*, 2024, p. 22).

Thus, it is crucial to consider additional factors which may influence a young person and their family's socioeconomic background. There can be no doubt that the trend in statistics related to child poverty are concerning, and show worrying increases in the rate of children living in such conditions. However, it is essential to note that such statistics do not fully portray the lived experience of the individuals they represent. A cautious approach is therefore required when applying this data to an educational context. Bearing in mind the Congregation for Catholic Education's clear statement that the Catholic school must form the whole person (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 35), it is important to consider the wider implications for their life. It must be grounded in the wider experience of the young person, since as stated earlier, Groome notes the curriculum of the Catholic school must go on to consider who they "encourage [their] participants to become" through a full formation which examines not only curricular content but a wider ethos taking into account their own situation and environment (Groome, 2014, p. 115). As this chapter will go on to consider, there is a demonstrable correlation between such factors and a young person's

attendance at school, wellbeing and attainment. Indeed, it is essential to recognise for example that

> Exposure to multiple risk factors (low SES, frequent school absences) is more detrimental than exposure to a single risk factor (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 60).

Accordingly, a detailed consideration of this challenge is necessary and placing such a challenge within the context of Catholic schools offers an opportunity to consider a tailored response through the lens of faith while examining the benefits and drawbacks of such an approach.

The impact of poverty on educational outcomes is clear, and without doubt. However there must be consideration of the impact of wider social factors too, if this challenge is to be properly understood. Moreover, questions remain over the measures used to ascertain educational success. Later in this chapter, Grace's assertion that the

> ultimate goal of the educational process is the formation of good persons equipped with the knowledge and skills to serve the common good (Grace, 2013, p.104).

Thus, while examination based results and subsequent attainment statistics provide a methodology to analyse the impact of poverty on education, it is arguably not an effective means for considering whether Catholic schools are meeting their stated aims. This invites a wider debate on the purpose of education more generally, but for the purposes of this discussion it introduces a degree of doubt on the reliability of attainment statistics as a measure for educational success. This aligns more closely with a Catholic anthropology which, as has been examined, focuses on the dignity of each human being regardless of their background and centres the focus on the individual rather than nameless data.

Compounding factors concerning a family's socioeconomic status created an uneven playing field. Those whose parents and carers have experienced higher education and positive job prospects, for example, are more likely to be active participants in the learning of their children:

> Parental education and higher job status may be beneficial for children's educational outcomes via parental involvement, such as supporting learning at home, attendance at parents' evenings, or membership in parent-teacher associations (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 60).

Conversely, children and young people whose parents and carers do not share this level of education may find themselves unable to support them in the same way. That is not to say that they do not wish to be involved in their learning, but rather they may feel ill-equipped to do so:

> parents with lower education and job status may not have the knowledge, skills, and time to help their children catch up with missed content during periods of absence. Work inflexibility may further prevent parents from engaging with their children's school to address the consequences of absence (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 60).

What is notable in this evidence is not only the impact on parental involvement in education, but also the increased likelihood of absence and inability to work collaboratively with school to reach an effective conclusion to support with this. Subsequently, young people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to significant challenges to enable them to thrive in education.

The impact of such rates of absence is clear:

> school absences overall had adverse consequences for academic achievement among all pupils. This was equally confirmed for truancy and sickness absences: Higher absences were associated with lower academic achievement (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 69).

Given the explicit focus on attainment which will be considered later when reviewing the policy context in Scotland pertaining to poverty, it is essential to understand the impact that attendance has on achievement. The link between attendance and socioeconomic status has already been highlighted, but Klein and Sosu emphasise it further in relation to this point concerning absences:

> Consistent with our hypothesis, we found evidence for a stronger negative effect of sickness absences on the achievement of pupils from lower compared to higher SES backgrounds. These differences in the effect of sickness absence on achievement were statistically significant for SES indicators of social class, FSM, and housing tenure (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 69).

What becomes clear from this evidence is that socioeconomic status also has an ability to determine a family's capacity to recover from a period of school absence. For those families where parents and carers have engaged in higher education, for example, they are better equipped to support children and young people to cover missed learning at home when compared with those who have a lower socioeconomic status:

> low-SES students are more likely than high-SES students to suffer the negative consequences of being absent due to illness. Consistent with the cumulative risk theory (Evans et al. 2013; Rutter 1979), pupils exposed to multiple risk factors (sickness absence, low SES) had significantly lower achievement progress than did peers exposed to a single risk factor (i.e., sickness-related school absences) (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 69).

Additionally, evidence examined by McKinney, Hall and Lowden (2020) from the Scottish Households Survey further serves to highlight the rarity of any individual factor acting in isolation. Arguably a significant finding is the number of children and young people living in poverty who are also young carers:

> Around 40% of the children living in poverty are in a family with a disabled member, usually an adult. For half of these children, there is no adult working in the household. The children themselves may be the primary or sole carer for a disabled adult: there are approximately 44,000 young carers (young people under 18) in Scotland who care for a friend or a member of the family because of illness, disability, mental health or addiction (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, pp. 65–66).

The concept of "cumulative risk" is a particularly concerning one given the compounding factors which the literature cited has highlighted. This has an especially adverse impact on families already facing the challenge of poverty. Additionally, the particular challenge presented by the number of children and young people who are young carers presents particular barriers to education. In terms of the challenge to educators, this means that when considering responses to issues such as poor attendance, there is no simple solution as in reality the problems needing addressed will be diverse and far-reaching. For example, those who are young carers may not be in a position to leave an adult they may be caring for if they are the sole support for them in terms of providing medication and meals. The difference between those in opposite socioeconomic statuses, therefore, as Klein and Sosu highlight, is significant as

> high-SES students recover more quickly from sickness absence learning loss, possibly because they must address only one risk factor (sickness) or because their families use assets to catch up on missed lesson content (variation by parental class and FSM) (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 69).

Whereas, for those already affected by poverty, additional factors must also be considered such as

> more entrenched health problems, or their families may find it difficult to effectively manage their children's health due to disparities in access to health care (NHS Health Scotland 2014), impairing their children's ability

> to focus on learning. This suggests that the association between SES and school attendance and achievement extends beyond learning loss (Klein and Sosu, 2024, p. 69).

Albeit within a different context internationally, analysis by Chaudry and Wimer further highlighted the interconnectedness between health inequality and child poverty:

> Among health measures, childhood obesity was 40% more prevalent among poor families; asthma was 30% more common; and, children in poor families were 4 times more likely to be in fair or poor health. For education, grade repetition and dropping out of high school were approximately twice as likely among poor than nonpoor children. Children who were poor were nearly 9 times more likely to have very low food security and almost 7 times more likely to become a teenage mother (Chaudry and Wimer, 2016, p. S24).

This makes it unequivocally clear that attainment and wellbeing are inextricably linked. Therefore, the challenge of poverty can only be addressed by effective partnership working. Given the evidence presented here, any attempt by Catholic schools to address this in isolation will prove ineffective, and the input of the Health Service will be key to ensuring that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are supported with all the barriers which low income presents.

Additional issues to consider include housing and family types. It is known that

> children who belong to families with limited resources are more likely to: live in rented accommodation; live in the most deprived areas; belong to lone parent households; have three or more siblings in the family; live with a disabled adult; live in a household where only one adult or no adult works (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 68).

Thus, the scale of the challenge becomes increasingly clear. No single agency or service, such as Education or Health, can single-handedly address the needs of those impacted most by poverty. Instead, a multifaceted approach at government level is required to begin to address these needs. The ensuing section of this thesis will examine the efforts made by the Scottish Government in this regard. For educators, there is a need to be empathetic to the wider context facing children and young people and to ensure an awareness of its impact on their learning and attainment.

There is no established or straightforward manner in which to examine the extent to which poverty impacts Catholic schools in Scotland specifically. Using published information from The Scottish Government, however, it is possible to begin to exemplify the challenge within this context. Pupil Equity Funding is, however, arguably a way in which this can be assessed to some extent.

While the policy context which surrounds child poverty in Scotland will be considered in the following section of this thesis, an understanding of the purpose and operation of Pupil Equity Funding is key to any analysis of the data which can be gathered from its implementation. The Scottish Government defines it as

> additional funding allocated directly to schools and targeted at closing the poverty-related attainment gap (The Scottish Government, 2023, p. 1).

This funding forms part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme. It is a useful metric when considering the scale of the challenge presented by child poverty in any given school as it is calculated based on an eligibility criteria which is directly linked to poverty-related criteria:

> Publicly funded primary, secondary and special schools will receive £1,225 in 2023/24 for each child in P1 to S3, or equivalent, who is registered for free school meals under national eligibility criteria (The Scottish Government, 2023, p. 5).

While policy initiatives such as Pupil Equity Funding and, more broadly, the Scottish Attainment Challenge, are clear in their aspiration to address educational inequalities as seen as linked to poverty, the implicit assumption in this aim must be examined further. Chapter Two of this thesis emphasised the role which structural injustice and social responsibility play in exacerbating poverty and educational barriers, thus it is clear that schools alone cannot address such wider challenges which originate within economic, political and social structures.

In Scotland, all pupils in Primary 1 – Primary 5 are entitled to Free School Meals, and Glasgow City Council have further extended this provision to Primary 6 and 7 pupils. This impacts the calculation as an estimate is therefore necessitated for these age groups:

> The estimated number of P1-P3 pupils who would be registered for free school meals using the national eligibility criteria. This was done by taking the proportion of pupils registered for FSM in primary schools in 2014 and then applying those to the 2021 school rolls for P1 to P3 (The Scottish Government, 2023, p. 5).

In addition to the data being skewed by the automatic entitlement for Primary 1 – Primary 5 pupils, it is important to note that those in Primary 6, 7 and secondary school only qualify under particular circumstances, principally related to benefits which parents or carers are in receipt of. Given not all families living in poverty claim the benefits to which they are entitled, Free School Meals data will undoubtedly underestimate the scale of poverty being faced by children and young people. Despite this limitation, it arguably remains the only published measure which can be used for this purpose. This, therefore, allows an analysis of the current school allocations for Pupil Equity Funding. It is important to note that these were based on data from 2021, allocated in 2022/23 and the annual allocation was fixed for four years (The Scottish Government, 2023, p. 5) so the data being referred to is from this context. From the data published, Catholic schools make up 45% of the twenty schools which received the highest allocation of Pupil Equity Funding based on Free School Meals entitlement alone. Similarly, of the 20 secondary schools which received the highest allocation based on Free

School Meals entitlement alone, nine (45%) were Catholic schools (Scottish Government, 2022). When this data is linked with the denominational status of each school by seed code, using the current school details available from the Scottish Government (The Scottish Government, 2025), it becomes apparent that Catholic schools in Scotland receive 21% of the current allocation of Pupil Equity Funding (Scottish Government, 2022) despite only accounting for 14.5% of Scotland's schools (Scottish Government, 2024). This serves to highlight that, while Catholic schools do not face poverty in isolation and the scale of this challenge is only fully understood when considering the entirety of Scottish education, Catholic schools do face the challenge of supporting a disproportionately higher percentage of young people living in poverty when examining the averages from these statistics. This, therefore, emphasises that Catholic schools must take this challenge seriously, must seek to address it proactively, and arguably should seek to use their own charisms as places of faith to ensure this approach is taken with a motivation which stems from their core mission and purpose.

This section has sought to highlight the scale of the challenge which poverty presents, not only to Catholic schools but across Scotland, while also examining the impact within the Catholic context specifically. This chapter will go on to consider the implications of secular policy and to examine what a specifically Catholic response, motivated by Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology, may look like.

3.3 Policy context concerning child poverty in Scotland

Given the scale and significance of the challenge presented by poverty which has been highlighted in the preceding section, a considerable policy focus has emerged in Scotland relevant to this issue. This section will examine said policy context with a view to considering its implications for Catholic schools in Scotland. In doing so, it will consider policy in the broader sense which applies to all state funded school contexts and not only Catholic schools. This chapter will then go on to consider the specific approaches that Catholic schools can and do take in the ensuing sections.

The consideration of the policy context in this section is limited to its manifestation within the field of education, however such a narrow focus is arguably part of the problem rather than the solution for addressing child poverty, It has been noted that

> despite equal access to education being well-established, policy inclusion is effectively hamstrung in practice due to a lack of resources and the absence of policies in areas outside education which would support it (Ivinson, 2020, pp. 141–142).

What will emerge over the course of this section is an analysis of a range of policies which seek to suggest how schools may counter the challenge of child poverty in Scotland. However, as is noted here, limiting such policy to the area of education alone limits the scope of its success. Education, and schools specifically, can undoubtedly play a part in tackling poverty, however if left to do so in isolation then the impact of this approach will not serve to fully address the scale of the problem. Additionally, this notes that there must be sufficient resource to make this possible. Consideration has already been given to the role that Pupil Equity Funding has in this regard, and additional policy areas will be examined as this section progresses.

While considering this wider context for a discussion on relevant policy, it is worthwhile observing that:

> Geographical differences at a whole jurisdiction level can be illuminating but they can also mask real within-jurisdiction inequality (Ivinson and Thompson, 2020, p. 18).

This variation across contexts lends itself to the varying of policy approaches and underlines the need to ensure that resources are available which are most suited to the local context to support those addressing child poverty. As has already been demonstrated, strategies such as Pupil Equity Funding is calculated at a school level. Such an approach, arguably, reflects the needs of the local context, however

does continue to highlight the challenge of expecting education to address this much larger social challenge. Local needs, however, become evident when comparing figures at this level with the national average:

> Scotland, for example, has the lowest number of children living in poverty among the jurisdictions as well as the lowest prevalence of low pay. Far more young people from deprived areas in Scotland go on to higher education. Yet poverty levels are high in parts of Glasgow and in former industrial area of Scotland (Ivinson and Thompson, 2020, p. 18)

It would seem clear, therefore, that it is necessary to delve deeper into the challenges that poverty presents. In particular, an approach tailored to local needs is essential. Within Scotland, such an approach within schools forms part of the national Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) policy approach, which is a key pillar of Scottish education and pertains to the wellbeing of all young people. The policy approach now has legal grounding in Scotland:

> the 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC) policy enshrined in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, aims to place children and young people at the heart of planning and delivery of services, in line with the International Rights of the Child (Ivinson, 2020, p. 156).

At its broadest, GIRFEC strives to provide support universally for all children and young people, ensuring that their needs are met, and their rights are respected. However, given that the process of achieving this involves meeting the needs of those impacted by a range of factors, including poverty, it is notable that GIRFEC's legal standing places an important duty on schools in Scotland to consider how best to meet the needs of pupils directly faced with this inequality. GIRFEC also provides a lens through which schools must consider pupil wellbeing, and this includes how concerns are raised and addressed in a supportive manner. GIRFEC's emphasis on wellbeing aligns closely with the clear aims and mission of the Catholic school, however the framework principally explores wellbeing through physical, social and educational indicators. From a Catholic

perspective, a fuller understanding of the inherent dignity of the human person must also account for spiritual and moral development. Consequently, whilst GIRFEC provides an important framework for supporting children and young people, it may not fully encompass the broader anthropological vision which underpins Catholic education.

Additionally, GIRFEC allows an understanding of the central role that children's rights and pupil wellbeing has within the Scottish education system at present. Within this context, and with specific regard to poverty and its impact on children and young people, the Scottish Government has placed significant emphasis on closing the poverty-related attainment gap through different initiatives.

> There have been two recent major government initiatives to address the attainment gap such as the School Improvement Partnership Programme (2013–2016) … [and] the Scottish Attainment Challenge (2015); the National Improvement Framework; and the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill of 2017. Pupil Equity Funding was introduced in order to target and support schools in closing the poverty related attainment gap. (Ivinson and Thompson, 2020, p. 22).

The Scottish Improvement Partnership Programme "aimed to develop capacity and support sustainable work across classrooms, schools and local authorities to tackle educational inequality" (Ivinson and Thompson, 2020, p. 22) and a wide range of projects which used data effectively to implement change. However, an analysis of the efficacy of these programmes overall might suggest that the focus remains too narrow, and that consideration to further factors is extremely necessary:

> Despite these reforms, the Scottish research community is calling for a broader agenda that recognises the importance of a range of issues such as: early years interventions; the quality of the home learning environment; positive school leaver destinations and the challenges for new arrival children (Ivinson and Thompson, 2020, p. 22)

This, arguably, complements the assertion earlier in this section that isolated consideration of one approach or context to address the multifaceted challenge of child poverty is ineffective. Earlier, it was noted that education alone cannot address the scale of this challenge. Here, it is emphasised that even within education a broad range of factors must be fully understood in order to properly address the implications of poverty and support children and young people, and their families, to overcome these barriers. In doing so, these policy approaches are aiming to address the gap in attainment between those in the wealthiest and poorest parts of Scotland.

Considering the Scottish Attainment Challenge more closely, its aim

> "is to close the equity gap and improve literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing in Scotland" (McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 240).

The Scottish Attainment Challenge assumes that reducing educational inequality will contribute to reductions in poverty and address wider issues of social disadvantage. While this assumption is reasonable, it necessitates further consideration. Grace (2013, p. 104) argues that Catholic education strives to prepare children and young people to enter the wider world prepared to be at the service of the common good rather than solely the achievement of improved academic outcomes. It may therefore be questioned whether narrowing attainment gaps alone are a sufficient indicator of success, particularly if wider inequalities relating to wellbeing, participation and social inclusion remain unchanged. To achieve this, the Scottish Government set targets and placed them within a legal framework, embedding them in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017.

> This required the Scottish Government to produce delivery plans and annual reports and also required local authorities and health boards to jointly publish annual reports explaining how they were working to reduce child poverty in their area. Importantly, the Child Poverty Bill and action is integrated into wider measures to tackle poverty in Scottish society (McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 240).

This would begin to evidence that, perhaps, consideration is being given outwith the sphere of education, given the expectation of health boards to report on this issue. Nevertheless, this thesis will limit its scope to the role played by schools and the implications for Catholic schools in Scotland. For all local authority schools in Scotland, therefore, these statutory processes mean that data will be gathered which will be used to determine the progress made against the Scottish Government's targets on child poverty prior to the deadline of 2030. Ultimately, there would seem to be a shared view that progress towards these targets has been mixed, with some evidence of success and good practice but that the pace of change is not sufficient:

> The consensus opinion is that some progress has been made in narrowing poverty-related attainment gaps, but not as much as would have been desired given the scale of public investment (McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 240).

As this section continues to consider the policy landscape which is demanding progress towards these targets, it is important to bear in mind this point. It is apparent given this consensus that there is still some way to go if the goal of reducing, and ultimately eradicating child poverty in Scotland is to be achieved. Given the historical context of Catholic schools in Scotland concerning poverty, and the mission of Catholic schools espoused in the magisterial texts analysed in Chapter Two, it is apparent that contributing towards this goal is a central focus for Catholic schools in Scotland.

A key limitation of the policy approaches considered above is that they are predominantly responsive rather than proactive. Many initiatives seek to mitigate the effects of poverty through targeted support and intervention, yet fewer seek to address the structural conditions which perpetuate poverty in the first place. Groome's eight key dimensions for Catholic education referred to earlier, not least a "Catholic politics for justice" (Groome, 2014, pp. 115-118) demands consideration of whether educational policy should focus primarily on helping young people navigate poverty or on challenging the social and economic structures which continue to produce it. From this perspective, Catholic educators

should strive to form young people who are prepared to contribute to society by leading and advocating for such structural change at the service of the common good. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the impact that education can actually have on reducing child poverty, and to analyse how success in this regard will be measured. It has been argued that the Scottish Government's current approach to measuring child poverty does not necessarily align with the actions being taken to reduce poverty within Scottish schools:

> School education sits awkwardly in this national project to eradicate child poverty in Scotland by 2030. With success to be determined according to household income levels, school education would appear to be on the margins. Only one action makes a direct contribution to this goal, i.e., the Educational Maintenance Allowance payment to 16–19-year-olds in education, which counts toward household income (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 243)

Assessing progress towards tackling child poverty by the metric of household income alone does not take cognisance of much of the work being done in Catholic schools, and schools more generally, to support young people living in poverty. The approach that schools take to addressing poverty is, arguably, more responsive to need and does not tackle issues related to household income specifically. In addition to Education Maintenance Allowance, perhaps other policies could be seen to have a direct correlation with household income. An expansion of free school meals and the provision of breakfast clubs, for example, do have an impact on household income as they reduce costs for parents and carers, especially those living in poverty. That said, there is clearly scope to build upon this and implement new strategies which boost household income, specifically through education.

Such consideration of lifting children and young people out of poverty through education should, arguably, also explore what can be done to support school staff. In particular, taking an approach with non-teaching staff in school to ensure that they are fairly paid would seem a reasonable suggestion:

> finding funds to remunerate everyone who works in school education to a level that would raise employees above the poverty threshold would be a concrete income-oriented action, although this would be based on the assumption that many of those employees have household incomes that are currently below the threshold and that they have children (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 243).

Taking such an approach would be consistent with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching which will be considered in the following section of this thesis. It suggests a mechanism which would tangibly impact household income, and where non-teaching school staff have children, this has the potential to make a significant impact on the resources available to allow the family to thrive. Exploration of poverty in the preceding sections of this thesis has defined clearly the challenges which it presents, and increasing household income by ensuring children's primary caregivers are paid fairly would contribute towards this goal.

In addition, a longer-term approach centres on improving attainment of children and young people who live in poverty, in order for them to secure well paid jobs in the future which ensure they remain above the household income threshold for those in poverty. To be effective in contributing towards the reduction or eradication of child poverty, it is necessary to consider factors outwith the scope of education, namely salaries and wider social factors:

> this would only be impactful if it delivered adequate remuneration for those who become young parents or contributed to these young adults not becoming parents living in poverty with young children (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 243)

As is highlighted by this example, even the limited impact that school education can have on household income is still impacted by wider factors. Accordingly, any expectation that schools can be a significant factor in ultimately eradicating child poverty seems to be misplaced optimism. As this section proceeds to explore policy which strives to achieve the aim of such an eradication, bearing this

limitation in mind provides an essential reflective lens through which to analyse current strategy.

Beyond such initiatives which would have a direct impact on household income, as has been alluded to there are further policy directives which seek to address child poverty more indirectly by tackling the factors which most closely contribute to or exacerbate the demands on family finances. As has been noted, for the Scottish Government "a central thrust of anti-poverty action is to reduce the costs of living for households experiencing poverty" (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 244). To exemplify this approach, the following is a non-exhaustive list of approaches which are currently in place:

> increasing provision of after school and holiday childcare …reducing the hidden cost of the school day, setting a new minimum level for School Clothing Grants, introducing the Young Scot National Entitlement Card to enable children living in poverty to access in-kind support in non-stigmatising ways, and increasing free access to some basic essentials (i.e., sanitary products) in schools (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 244).

These approaches, properly embedded into the life of a school, also seek to preserve the dignity of children and young people who are living in poverty. The combination of universal provision alongside discreet methods of accessing targeted supports should, it would seem, allow for those in greatest need to benefit from the assistance available. Moreover, the responsiveness of schools to such need is notable. The pandemic and lockdowns served to highlight this greatly. During this time, schools changed their approaches quickly to support those in most need, demonstrating a capacity to be extremely "nimble in contributing to the wider tackling poverty agenda" (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 245). This highlights an impressive capacity to adapt to challenging circumstances, and to use the knowledge of the children and young people they seek to serve to ensure that they are striving to meet their needs.

Given the strength of this adaptability, and the capacity for education to contribute meaningfully to the wider picture of reducing child poverty, within the context of this thesis it seems appropriate to question whether the potential of schools is being fully grasped:

> very few reports showcase the potential of promoting financial inclusion and welfare rights through working in partnership with Education (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 245).

Thus, further consideration should be given to exploring the direct impact that schools and education more broadly can have on reducing and eradicating child poverty in Scotland. There will be variation between schools and local authorities with regard to particular implementation of strategies to support learners from deprived backgrounds, and an analysis of best practice would seem to be an essential step in assessing the potential of education to tackle poverty.

A further modern manifestation of the challenge presented by poverty is a clear division in access to digital technology. During the pandemic, this division impacted children and young people living in poverty and deprivation most (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 246). This necessitated a quick response given the particular circumstances of that time, and increasingly local authorities sought to provide suitable devices for all learners. However

> Providing devices is only the beginning of a solution as they have to be maintained and in good repair to function properly and be replaced when necessary. Many of the households experiencing poverty and deprivation are unable to replace faulty or broken devices (McKendrick in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 247).

Therefore such policies which, when enacted, only fully consider the initial rollout would risk putting further pressure on families already struggling financially. While the initial cost of a device is met, further challenges concerning its maintenance and tools necessary for its use may not be present. This highlights

such a division when devices become increasingly used for homework, for example.

When considering the impact of these policies overall, it would seem to be clear that, while laudable and to be welcomed, largely they will make little substantive difference towards the complete eradication of child poverty in Scotland. This is because they tackle symptoms of poverty rather than its root causes:

> the priority should be on poverty at source rather than trying to fix its effects through proxy help (Shanks in McKinney *et al.*, 2023, p. 250).

Again, the totality of the role that school education can actually play in eradicating child poverty is called into question. Having taken into consideration the evidence presented thus far, it would seem clear that a balance is necessary. On one hand, school education in isolation will never fully address the challenge that poverty present and certainly will not, single-handedly, eradicate child poverty. However, the initiatives which schools enact following national or local policies to support families struggling with the impact of poverty, and so go some way to relieving its effects.

The policy context for reducing child poverty is grounded in legislation, namely the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 which is placed targets for the reduction of child poverty into law, and is underpinned by the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022 (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 79). The targets are set thus:

> there will be less than 10% of children living in relative poverty, less than 5% living in absolute poverty, less than 5% living with combined low income and material deprivation and less than 5% in persistent poverty (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 79).

With specific regard to the delivery plan, it embeds the strategies referred to above and

> aims to support those in employment to further their careers and help those who are in unemployment to move into work. It also aims to provide targeted aid in practical terms: a new minimum school clothing grant across Scotland, practical support for children's meals during school holidays, and new support for childcare (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 79)

Placing such approaches within a plan which is attached to legislation serves to highlight the central role which schools are playing in the Scottish Government's ambitions to meet its targets on child poverty by 2030. Notable, however, is the effort to consider how school-based strategies such as free school meals are also made available through holiday periods. In addition, projects specific to each school were the focus of the School Improvement Partnership Programme, commencing in 2013, which placed a "sharper focus on evidence-based interventions" (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 80). This programme sought projects from the most local level, namely those in schools, to address local needs pertaining to engagement and attainment and promoted collaborative approaches to achieve these goals, with a plan for evaluation of each project to be undertaken locally and by the University of Glasgow's Robert Owen Centre (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 80). As a result of this approach

> teachers, individually and collectively, acquired greater knowledge and understanding of the local context …and they felt that they were more empowered to tackle educational inequality (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 80).

This approach would seem to be key to addressing those factors which have already been stated to differ at the most local level. In empowering practitioners who know the children and young people best to forge a path best suited to their needs, there is clear scope to mitigate the impact of poverty at the school level, even if not tackling the root causes of the poverty faced by said young people.

In 2015, the Scottish Attainment Challenge was launched and was

> underpinned by the National Improvement Framework, the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence and 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC) and is a collaboration between the Scottish government (through Education Scotland) and local authorities (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 80).

Placing this approach within these existing policy frameworks evidences that it aspires to address core issues through the multifaceted lens of wellbeing through GIRFEC, learning and teaching through the Curriculum for Excellence and raising attainment through the National Improvement Framework. The collaboration between national and local government becomes key when considering the projects which form an integral part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Initially, nine local authorities were identified where the levels of deprivation were most prevalent and these authorities were given additional funding, however this failed to support schools with significant levels of deprivation in other council areas (McKinney, Hall and Lowden, 2020, p. 80). This led to developments in the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which the Scottish Government describes as a key project with a mission

> to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap (The Scottish Government, no date).

Key to this development is Pupil Equity Funding, which is the

> primary model for distributing funding to the education system, with funding of £130 million annually to be allocated to 97% of schools (The Scottish Government, no date).

This sees funding targeted directly to schools based on children living in poverty, and puts funds at the disposal of the headteacher. In doing so, schools have complete autonomy within the rules and parameters of the funding to address poverty and seek to close the attainment gap. In considering how to target such

funding, headteachers may heed the advice of the Scottish Government who recommended that the actions of schools to address the poverty gap be centred around the following areas:

> putting the child at the centre; addressing individual needs; building respect and trust; balancing autonomy and accountability; and enabling flexibility and creativity (Mowat, 2018, p. 305).

In addition to Pupil Equity Funding, priority is also given to care-experienced pupils and meeting their needs given the compounding factors which impact such young people. Grounding an approach in these five principles does not seem unreasonable, however there is a lack of clarity concerning what such projects might look like in practice. This has allowed for a significant level of variation in the application of Pupil Equity Funding, which may be a strength in some cases where it is underpinned by an evidence basis and is authentically catering to local need, but such scope may also lead to headteachers simply seeing the extra funding as a means to solve existing problems, such as staffing, albeit within the structures and requirements which accompany the money.

A key challenge within Scottish education, and evidenced in approaches to tacking poverty such as the National Improvement Framework, is its use of language without substance, and statements without academic rigour. For example, the six drivers in the National Improvement Framework have been argued to have insufficient justification for their selection and, more generally,

> terms such as 'outstanding' come to be defined in narrow reductionist ways … It is paralleled in Scotland in a quest for 'excellence' …[which] despite appearing prominently in the title of the Scottish curriculum, the term is not defined within the policy document (Mowat, 2018, p. 313).

This would seem to infer that, while earlier comments noted that policy directives required a clear evidence-based approach for local projects, the same level of detail is not being applied at a national level, and rhetoric is taking precedence

over critical analysis and academic substance. Such an approach would be concerning as it would fail to address the scale of the challenge which poverty presents, and which manifests itself in the daily struggle faced by families as well as the poverty related attainment gap. Any approach must go beyond rhetoric, recognise the seriousness of the challenge, and pay heed to the urgency needed to address it to ensure the safety and wellbeing of those living in deprivation and poverty.

A further analysis of the steps being taken in Scotland to address poverty focuses on the structures which are in place. In favour of the current approach, it is notable that

> Education policy in Scotland, whilst emanating from the centre, is devolved to local authorities through local outcome agreements and it could be argued that this form of governance would enable innovation at both vertical and horizontal levels (Mowat, 2018, p. 313).

It seems reasonable, therefore, to infer from this statement and the evidence throughout this section of the thesis that taking national policy directives in tandem with local strategies would allow for the most direct and effective initiatives and projects which allow poverty to be addressed through, for example, reducing the cost of the school day for families.

By contrast, a criticism of this structure may concern responsibility and accountability, and a lack of clarity in this regard:

> it is not inconceivable that the Scottish Government could be accused of ‘throwing money at the problem’, leaving local authorities and schools accountable for what then transpires (Mowat, 2018, p. 313).

Such a reliance on local authorities, and ultimately on individual schools and headteachers through Pupil Equity Funding,

> "bring with them increased accountability with schools having to evidence through data the impact of their improvement agendas" (Mowat, 2019, p. 217)

which arguably serves to move responsibility and misdirect attention from the root causes of poverty and "systemic inequalities which create the conditions under which families live in poverty" (Mowat, 2019, p. 217). This, therefore, means that the challenge of poverty persists and becomes deeper rooted if left unaddressed. Accordingly, as this section has emphasised, careful consideration must be given to how schools can contribute to the work being done to reduce and eradicate child poverty, but much greater consideration must be given to other areas beyond education which are best placed to tackle the prevailing injustices which perpetuate financial hardship and the lack of basic essentials.

To best understand the role that schools can and should play in order to contribute to this work most effectively, further research is necessary. This would allow for a greater understanding of the link between poverty and attainment, and should consider the views of children and young people if it is to be most effective:

> little attention has been devoted to understanding and addressing school-related factors that might serve as a barrier to attainment for children from low-income backgrounds. Even more scarce is research focused on understanding these relationships from the children's own perspective (Naven *et al.*, 2019, p. 315).

To conclude this section, therefore, it seems clear that the role of schools in addressing the challenge presented by poverty is considered a key part of the Scottish Government's plan to achieve the eradication of child poverty. However, academic perspectives seem to agree that the expectation placed on education in this regard is significant, and arguably excessive. Schools can address the impact of poverty, but not its root causes. There have been some examples of success with regard to local evidence-based projects, however further research is needed to ensure this progresses in the most effective manner possible, and the views of children and young people will be essential to this. As this chapter progresses, a

specifically Catholic lens through which the challenge of poverty may be addressed both in practice and pedagogy will be considered.

3.4 Relevance and application of Catholic Social Teaching

In the Catholic school setting, Catholic Social Teaching offers an authentic response to the challenge presented by poverty which is grounded in Church doctrine. Thus, a clear basis for pedagogy and teaching emerges in addition to recommendations for the ways in which school leaders should consider the needs of their most vulnerable learners. This section will consider the framework offered by Catholic Social Teaching, and will seek to exemplify what this looks like in practice. In doing so, the relevance of Catholic Social Teaching to this discussion will be considered and the application of it referred to with critical analysis.

At the Second Vatican Council, a significant development in Catholic Social Teaching emerged which is of paramount importance when considering its relevance to this particular challenge of poverty, which has been an enduring issue for Catholic schools as demonstrated by the earlier reflections on their history in Scotland. This development

> was a renewed corpus of Catholic social teaching centred on "a preferential option for the poor" and a more extensive criticism of structures of oppression and exploitation (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007a, p. 5).

This approach, Grace and O'Keefe note, becomes firmly rooted in Catholic education when *The Catholic School* is published by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. This publication from Grace and O'Keefe is significant as it seeks to analyse the practical application of the aims of the Magisterial text, and applies an essential critical lens in doing so. Accordingly, it remains a key publication for consideration in this discussion of the intersection between the aims espoused by the Church through the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, and the lived reality of Catholic schools who claim to prioritise the formation of the whole person with a particular attention paid to the poorest and most vulnerable. *The Catholic School* states clearly that "First and foremost the Church offers its educational service to the poor" (Sacred Congregation for

Catholic Education, 1977, para. 44) and is a point further emphasised by the Congregation for Catholic Education who emphasise that:

> When the preferential option for the poorest is at the centre of the educational programme, the best resources and most qualified persons are initially placed at the service of the least, without in this way excluding those who have less difficulties and shortages. This is the meaning of evangelical inclusion, so distant from the logic of the world (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2002, para. 70).

Thus, those living in poverty are said to be central to the mission of Catholic schools, and the preferential option for the poor should become a key consideration for those responsible for Catholic education and Catholic schools specifically. This, argues McKinney "has significant consequences" (S. J. McKinney, 2023, p. 41) as arranging the structure of a school to best cater to the needs of those who are most marginalised should inform every aspect of school planning. Ultimately, it should involve a conscious attentiveness to those impacted directly by poverty, and can only be achieved by "listening to the poorest and arranging the school to suit them" (S. J. McKinney, 2023, p. 41).

Grace argues that the Catholic Social Teaching, therefore, should be considered across the breadth of the curriculum. In doing so, it presents an opportunity to more fully realise what this particular area of Church doctrine can offer to an enduring social challenge. He notes that

> the rich heritage of Catholic social teaching, with its implications for the teaching of many subjects in the curriculum, could provide such distinctive and counter-cultural material (Grace, 2013, p. 104).

This distinctive approach for Catholic schools offers an opportunity to examine social issues through the lens of faith. Arguably, Catholic schools in Scotland are particularly well suited to do so given the longstanding history of their service to

the poor, and this approach which Grace describes as being distinct from wider contemporary culture therefore merits careful consideration.

Grace also highlights what such an approach may be based on:

> As educational discourse in contemporary society becomes increasingly dominated by the language of 'training', a Catholic educational discourse which emphasises 'formation of the person' is not only counter-cultural, but more humane. It insists that the ultimate goal of the educational process is the formation of good persons equipped with knowledge and skills to serve the common good motivated by faith and a Catholic social conscience (Grace, 2013, p. 104).

Thus, we move from a consideration of the curriculum and learning about social ills, to an active service of those in need and the best interests of all through the pursuit of the common good. As this analysis proceeds, it will be necessary to consider what such efforts may look like when exemplified in the life of the Catholic school. In particular, consideration should be given to what is presently happening in Catholic schools and what should be considered for the future. Grace suggests that *Caritas in Veritate* (Pope Benedict XVI, 2009) may offer a firm basis for this work as it contains

> a number of strong statements which have the potential to animate the consciousness and action of Catholic youth in their subsequent vocations and roles in adult life (Grace, 2013, p. 102).

This provides a concrete example of how the Church's social doctrine may be used to influence the life of the Catholic school, and inspire values which young people who attend Catholic schools will carry with them for the remainder of their lives. In Scotland, this is practically exemplified by the Pope Benedict XVI Caritas Award which is an award of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and administered by their agency, the Scottish Catholic Education Service. It uses scripture and the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI to encourage young people in their final year of

high school to reflect on their faith and to put their beliefs into action through acts of loving service in their school and parish community (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2011). Integrating service to the common good into the language and actions of the Catholic school is a demonstrable means of embedding Catholic Social Teaching into the educational experience for children and young people attending Catholic schools in Scotland. If done effectively, their acts of loving service also enable them to reflect specifically on the challenge of poverty and to address it in their own settings through practical measures and service to the common good.

This would seem to be a practical example of the vision which Grace espouses, especially when he goes on to speak of the role that Catholic schools have in the formation of young people at such a key stage in their lives:

> Catholic schools and colleges clearly represent crucial arena for the forming and informing of conscience. The Catholic social conscience of the young will not simply result from the acquisition of knowledge about Catholic social teaching, although that is the necessary foundation. It will require the nurture of their spirituality and Christian faith by a constant interaction between such social teaching and the teaching, practice and mission of Jesus Christ and the saints. To be truly animated, such students need opportunities to be involved in Catholic social action projects in their communities and beyond (Grace, 2013, p. 105).

Initiatives like the Pope Benedict XVI Caritas Award seek to combine these elements. The Award considers learning, prayer and action to be its three essential pillars (Scottish Catholic Education Service, 2011) and in so doing we see the key themes which Grace speaks of emerging. Through the core learning, which is focused on scripture and a Papal Encyclical, students are exposed to the Church's teachings and must demonstrate their understanding of it; through reflection learners must consider the impact it has on them, and what their own views are, thus informing their conscience; and through action they are inspired to follow the example of Christ to put the needs of others before themselves. This is only one example, and Grace notes that there are many other recorded "examples of such

formative and practical action by Catholic schools and colleges in different parts of the world" (Grace, 2013, p. 105). However, it is clear when considering Grace's position that there is considerable scope to view this formation of the young people in Catholic schools as a core element of their purpose and mission.

Given the validity of Catholic Social Teaching as a mechanism for both teaching about and inspiring action to address poverty within the context of the Catholic school has been established, it is necessary to consider critically what it can achieve. Reasonable questions centred on this might include:

> How do Catholic schools respond to poverty, child poverty, food insecurity and the digital divide? (McKinney, 2020, p. 321)

and

> But what, if anything, can Catholic schools do to about world hunger? (Byron SJ, 2015, p. 202).

McKinney's suggestion in response to such questions supports the practice considered thus far. When contemplating the Pope Benedict XVI Caritas Award, the methodology comprised of learning, prayer and action. McKinney suggests that

> there are three levels of appropriate response: theological, educational and social action (McKinney, 2020, p. 321).

This tripartite response could be taken up by Catholic schools in Scotland, not only as a methodology for the delivery of the Pope Benedict XVI Caritas Award or as a structure for a topic within Religious Education, but rather as guiding principles to underpin the entire ethos and values of the school community. In doing so, it would be concurrent with the aims espoused by the magisterial texts already explored, and would be putting the teaching and mission of Christ at the

centre of the school while aligning well with national policy and government priorities in relation to poverty and inequality.

To begin with, it seems that there is a consensus that to embed the principles of Catholic Social Teaching within the life of a school, consideration must first be given to teaching young people about it, and about the challenges that it seeks to address:

> Catholic schools can highlight the social injustices of poverty and hunger as part of the curriculum in the classroom (McKinney, 2020, p. 321)

Only once pupils are aware of the challenges facing the world around them, and the fact that the Church has a specific area of teaching and doctrine dedicated to understanding these challenges and offering a response, can they progress to meaningful reflection and ultimately social action:

> …pupils can study the sociological and economic causes of child poverty and hunger and the crippling effects of hunger and engage in theological and ethical reflection drawing on contemporary Catholic Social Teaching (McKinney, 2020, p. 321).

Having learned about the scale of such hardship, and perhaps also been led to an understanding of its reality in their own school and wider community, young people will, conceivably, wish to respond meaningfully. Similarly, a school underpinned by a set of values informed by Catholic Social Teaching will want to take their knowledge of the effects which McKinney highlights here and, prompted by their reflection, engage in work to best support the young people in their care. During the pandemic, the response of Catholic schools was admirable:

> They have responded with social action that is rooted in the theological preferential option for the poor. They have drawn on the resources that are available to them including support from the Catholic Church (McKinney, 2020, p. 327).

Such responses evidence how Catholic schools respond to the clear rationale which makes them distinct from other places of education, namely their Christo-centric nature from which stems the need to follow Christ's example through the preferential option for the poor which is a "biblical, theological and ecclesial mandate" that Catholic schools share in (McKinney, 2021b, p. 419).

This, therefore, forms an essential part of understanding the role that Catholic Social Teaching plays and demonstrates its relevance when considering the challenge to Catholic schools presented by poverty. This is the methodology to address the challenge which is unique to Catholic schools, and makes them distinct. McKinney highlights that

> Catholic schools, like other schools, respond in practical ways to the daily effects of child poverty in schools. They also have the 'mission to the poor' or the 'preferential option for the poor' that has been identified above and is understood as a theological mandate. The word mandate indicates that this is not choice but a fundamental Christian commitment. It is clear from the research evidence that Catholic schools have had to be very attentive to this preferential option for the poor during the period of restrictions and lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic (McKinney, 2022, p. 199)

As the section examining the policy context noted, all schools in Scotland are faced with demonstrating and evidencing how they are contributing towards national efforts to reduce poverty. Therefore, practical approaches like breakfast clubs are as likely to be found in non-denominational schools as Catholic schools. However, the fundamental difference between these settings is the rationale which underpins the work. In the Catholic setting, such work is not merely a policy directive or exercise in supporting pupil wellbeing. Rather, as has been made clear in the literature examined, it is an essential mark of the Catholic faith and is therefore a fundamental part of the mission of the Catholic school. As a mandate, it is not something Catholic schools can choose whether or not to implement. To fail to take such an approach, arguably, would be failure to act as a Catholic school. Moreover, McKinney notes that evidence supports that difference that such

actions on the part of Catholic schools made during the pandemic lockdowns, and as has already been noted, the ability of Catholic schools to seek support from the wider Church (whether that be parishes, or organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul), further evidences the strength of fully embracing the school's place within the Church in order to maximise the range of supports on offer and to best help young people and their families who are faced with poverty, deprivation and financial hardship.

Even if the principles of Catholic Social Teaching are embedded in the practice of a school, it remains essential to consider those who may be left behind and to constantly evaluate the effectiveness of the approaches taken. For example, during the pandemic lockdowns, despite the significant efforts made to support those most in need

> children who experience digital poverty in Catholic schools were not always able to access online religious education, online religious services and, at times, pastoral support (McKinney, 2022, p. 200).

As such, it is clear that yet more work is required to ensure the equality of access to religion and pastoral support, especially at times when access to services is already challenging. Considering the need for pastoral support is of the utmost importance. Earlier in this thesis, it was noted that wellbeing has a direct impact on other factors and it is essential to ensure that children and young people feel safe and supported before expecting them to be able to engage meaningfully in learning tasks and progress towards increased attainment.

This thesis has already taken cognisance of the cumulative risk which arises from compounding factors affecting a young person's wellbeing. The Catholic Church is particularly attentive to this in terms of its approach to education. It

> recognises that families are fragile or broken up …[and] makes the connection between broken families and the experience of material and spiritual poverty. The Catholic schools offer 'caring and sensitive' pastoral care and help to these families (S. J. McKinney, 2023, p. 39).

Given this emphasis on pastoral care and the conscious identification of those in greatest need, the potential impact of Catholic Social Teaching in action becomes clearer. Catholic schools, therefore, should use the lens of the Church's teaching to consider the factors which may have most impact on vulnerable young people. In doing so, they should implement the principles of the social doctrine to ensure that those in most need receive timely care and support. This should be accompanied by a carefully considered curriculum which includes deliberate teaching of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, with the aim of ensuring young people leave school with the knowledge and values to carry these principles into their own lives beyond the school gates.

Recent years have served to highlight the needs of the most vulnerable. The Covid pandemic, for example, was key in

> illuminating society's rampant economic, social, religious, and physiological inequities and the prognosis could be grim! (Friedman *et al.*, 2020, p. 215).

Catholic Social Teaching offers a response to this situation for Catholic schools which is rich in authenticity, distinctive in its nature, and responds directly to the demands of the Church and the needs of young people and their families. With that in mind:

> Urgency dictates therefore, that Catholic educators continue to enact and model Catholic Social Teachings, a foundation of Catholic education. Respect for the life and dignity of the human person, the call to care for family and community, principle of solidarity in uniting the human community, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, providing persons with rights that ensure decent lives such as an education, preference for the poor, and care for all creation are principles that inform teaching and learning in Catholic schools (Friedman *et al.*, 2020, p. 215).

Considering the list of principles which underpin Catholic Social Teaching, it is clear how these might present a criteria or checklist for school leaders especially to contemplate when compiling School Improvement Plans, for example. The mission to form the whole person, considering the totality of their needs, and forming their conscience, aligns closely with an emphasis on the life and dignity of the human person. Enacting these principles in the Catholic school should not, however, be limited to the pupils in such a community. Consideration must be given to parents and carers, and to both teaching and non-teaching staff. When applying this caveat, other principles such as the dignity of work and rights of workers take on a greater significance and their importance should not be underestimated by school leaders.

This calls for Catholic teachers, and senior leaders in particular, to reflect on their motivation, and on their understanding of the mission of Catholic education. In doing so, they should be confident that the Church's teaching calls them to service, and empowers them to best support the young people in their care:

> Teaching as vocation demands that educators assume responsibility to protect and respect the dignity and worth of their students and families (Friedman *et al.*, 2020, p. 227).

School staff are the most significant resource in their efforts to tackle poverty. When applied to the Catholic school, the reference to teaching being a vocation takes on a particular meaning, and the language of Catholic Social Teaching enables them to contemplate this in a particular way. It also seeks to ensure that these principles are embedded deeper than content to be taught or projects to be managed. Rather, they should permeate every interaction a Catholic teacher has with young people, families and colleagues if it is to be taken seriously as a mechanism for tackling poverty and injustice within Catholic education.

This, as has been suggested, has particular ramifications for senior leaders in Catholic schools. While differing viewpoints exist on leadership styles, it has been suggested that

> Catholic educators are servant leaders, charged to put faith into action especially during times of crisis and especially in service of those on the margins (Friedman *et al.*, 2020, p. 219).

Byron develops this focus and considers what educators can do, and what they should aspire towards:

> Theirs is an educational mission, so their main contribution has to be in the area of understanding. They have to help their students understand the problem and then motivate them to help as best they can (Byron SJ, 2015, p. 202).

Thus, the goal of listening to and understanding the needs of the young people in their clear is obviously paramount. However, the greatest success would arguably be achieving the latter part of Byron's statement. Namely, if children and young people leave Catholic education having been inspired by the social doctrine of the Catholic Church and recognising the necessity to engage is the work of peace and justice, then they will use these values to make a tangible difference to their communities, wider society and the world around them. This, arguably, is what Catholic educators should aspire to most of all, and in doing so the impact of Catholic schools on reducing poverty and addressing the impact of poverty will be seen in abundance.

However, that argument relies on Catholic school leaders having a clear and detailed understanding of Catholic Social Teaching. A study which interviewed Catholic primary school headteachers in North West England sought to understand school leaders' perceptions of the Catholicity of their setting (Walbank, 2012). One headteacher interviewed stated:

> But it goes beyond the Church because it's also about...going out into the community and having an awareness of the issues that there are in the broader community and the issues that there are worldwide. . . It's a way of life isn't it? (Head teacher school 2) (Walbank, 2012, p. 176).

This school leader clearly understands that the mission of the Catholic school necessitates an awareness of the issues which impact their learners the most. Arguably, Catholic Social Teaching is implicit within this response and could well be a factor in their approach to addressing the issues to which they allude. However, it is concerning that this is the closest reference to the Church's social doctrine that can be found within the headteachers' views shared in this paper, and it is notable that no explicit reference is made to Catholic Social Teaching or the preferential option for the poor. It therefore calls into doubt whether Catholic school leaders truly understand these principles, or whether they are mainly guided by instinct and government policy. In the case of the latter, there is a role for the Church (perhaps through the Scottish Catholic Education Service in Scotland, operating on behalf of the Bishops) to consider how further formation can be provided for headteachers and senior leaders to ensure their awareness of key Church teaching, and their confidence in embedding these principles into the management of their setting, their ongoing evaluation and future planning. Perhaps there is scope here to make use of professional learning such as the Into Headship qualification, which is a requirement for headteachers in Scotland, to educate those who hope to lead Catholic schools. These options should be considered further and an approach devised to ensure the most effective professional learning is available.

In summary, the relevance and application of Catholic Social Teaching for Catholic schools in Scotland, when faced with the challenge of poverty, may be summarised with reference to scripture and the question Christ put to his followers:

> Unavoidably, students in Catholic schools will find themselves asking, in the words of Matthew's gospel (25:37), 'Lord, when did we see you hungry?' And the answer to that question will come in coursework as well as in off-campus community service programmes (Byron SJ, 2015, p. 204).

The bedrock of Catholic schools, as has already been well established, is their Christo-centric identity. The words of Christ himself demand that Catholic schools

consider he needs of the most vulnerable both within and outwith their walls. Coursework and learning are an essential component of this, to educate towards an understanding of and empathy for those in greatest need. Social action emerges as the fruit of this learning, and as a necessary manifestation of a theological awareness stemming from the portrayal of Jesus Christ as being closest to the poor.

3.5 What can Liberation Theology offer to the discussion concerning the impact of poverty on Catholic schools in Scotland?

It has been argued that Liberation Theology offers a particular vehicle for responding to poverty and the needs of the most marginalised in Catholic schools. Liberation theology was a response to poverty and state oppression in Latin America. Liberation theology draws on scripture, theology and lived experience, and challenges structural sin. Liberation theology is not a homogenous term (Phan, 2000). This thesis adopts a Catholic interpretation of Liberation theology and understands this as expressed in the work of theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez and also John Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria. This thesis acknowledges the limitations and critique of Liberation Theology. It has been critiqued for being too focussed on scripture, having a too narrow interpretation of scripture and overly influenced by Marxist thinking and methodology (Phan, 2000; Powell, 2008; Torevell, 2013). The counter to these critiques is that all three of the named theologians mostly used ideas from leading scriptural scholars for their theology and applied scripture to concrete situations of oppression and poverty. The challenges of their physical contexts influenced their application of scripture. Further, they did not in fact solely rely on scripture, but drew on the ideas of key theologians and Church teaching. All three theologians may have used some Marxist methodology in the early stages of their work, but renounced this after the Vatican condemned the use of Marxism. It is to be noted that while the writing of some of these theologians came under scrutiny from the Vatican, none of them were ‘silenced’ nor banned. While acknowledging these limitations of Catholic Liberation Theology, the preferential option for the poor is a very appropriate and useful analytical lens for understanding the 21st century care, or mission, to the poor in Catholic schools.

This section, therefore, will consider this argument and the merits of this viewpoint with a view to concluding whether Catholic schools should actively seek to embed this approach in their planning and leadership.

This particular viewpoint builds upon Catholic Social Teaching, and emerges in a particular way from Latin America and the work of key figures, with the notion of the preferential option for the poor which we have already considered within the Church's social doctrine stemming from this work:[2]

> The care for the poor in contemporary Catholic contexts is often referred to as the preferential option for the poor, or option for the poor. These terms have been adopted in common usage by the Church from the Theology of Liberation and the Conference of South American Bishops (S. McKinney, 2023, p. 79).

This context is key to our understanding of Liberation Theology, and throughout this section, consideration will be given to a more detailed analysis of liberation theology, but specifically how it can be a mechanism for addressing the specific challenges presented throughout this paper as relevant to Catholic schools grappling with the challenge presented by poverty in Scotland and its impact on the young people in their care.

To embed the principles of Liberation Theology in the life of a school, young people must first be taught from the perspective of theology and must have an awareness of scripture. It is here that Liberation Theology finds its foundation:

> Gustavo Gutiérrez is very clear that the theological understanding of contemporary poverty and deprivation is rooted in a close reading and interpretation of scripture. It also necessitates an acknowledgement that the option of the poor is integral to Christian discipleship (S. McKinney, 2023, p. 79).

[2] Aside from the Catholic Liberation Theologians, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV have all championed the preferential option for the poor.

Young people, and arguably school staff too, must begin with a clear understanding of the scriptures. From this foundation, Liberation Theology argues, they will come to know Jesus Christ's attentive care to the poorest, marginalised and most vulnerable. It is this knowledge which prompts action and it is that action which is described here as a response to the call to be contemporary disciples, following Jesus' footsteps and seeking to serve those in need as he did. This is an approach which gives Catholic schools meaning and purpose, and which deserves careful consideration and practical implementation.

When Liberation theology is central to the life of the school, a recognition of poverty and its impacts is key. It is only by understanding the damage it creates that school leaders, teachers and all staff will be inspired to address and challenge it:

> Poverty remains a social evil and the lack of power of the poor and their exploitation by the rich must be recognised and challenged (S. McKinney, 2023, p. 80).

Challenging poverty is not simply about raising awareness, but rather it must involve looking more seriously at the root causes of deprivation and marginalisation. The principles of Liberation Theology would demand that exploitation be examined and confronted. Within the Catholic school, this may involve taking action through the curriculum by encouraging young people to research such social ills and consider their own response. In the wider life of the school, it may involve taking robust approaches to whole school policies which impact on the cost of the school day, striving to ensure fairness and equality even if wealthier families would prefer an alternative which leaders know would result in undue pressure on those most in need.

Gustavo Gutiérrez is considered to be the primary proponent of Liberation Theology. His reliance on scripture in the development of his work means that Catholic schools have a clear basis for taking this approach to support their

students and colleagues, as well as wider society. In doing so, they should be equipped for the robust nature of its response to the needs of the poorest:

> The theology of the poor …may appear to be uncompromising. However, they are consistent with the uncompromising messages of passages in the gospel of Luke such as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and of the barn builder (Luke 12:1621). Gutiérrez also frequently draws from the equally uncompromising judgment of the nations in Matthew 25: 31–46 (S. McKinney, 2023, p. 80).

Thus, it is clear that Liberation Theology offers a relentless and unapologetic mechanism for putting those most in need at the top of the agenda. By rooting these principles in the Gospels, they are in unison with the core aim of Catholic education which aspires to put Christ at the centre, and are concurrent with the mission of the Church which seeks to evangelise by spreading the Gospel in every possible forum. This places such a position beyond reproach as to challenge an approach informed by Liberation Theology would be to challenge the Gospels themselves.

A key principle underpinning this is the idea of accompaniment. The preferential option for the poor is not meant to be a hierarchical proposal, but rather an invitation to accompany those living in such situations. This idea stems from around the time of the Second Vatican Council, and Gutiérrez himself notes that

> one of the richest documents issued by the council says that the church, like its Lord, must walk the “way of poverty” (Gutiérrez, 1988, p. xli).

Accompaniment along this path represents a non-judgmental means by which those facing hardship can feel respected, listened to and exercise choice and control in a situation which can so often be devoid of it. Any practical implementation of policies or curricula informed by Liberation Theology must first consider how it can walk alongside those already facing this challenge.

This, therefore, leads to the question of what an education system informed by Liberation Theology would look like in practice. The Latin American Bishops considered this to be essential:

> Quoting Populorum progressio, Medellin advocates therefore a "liberating education." The bishops see this as "the key instrument for liberating the masses from all servitude and for causing them to ascend 'from less human to more human conditions,' bearing in mind that humanity is responsible for and 'the principal author of its success or failure.' (Gutiérrez, 1988, pp. 64–65).

This serves to underpin the importance of these values within any education system, as well as giving a sense of their purpose. Ultimately, Liberation Theology's place in the curriculum of a Catholic school should service to empower young people to improve their own lives and to advocate for improvements for others. Developing this idea, it is argued that

> Education as liberation can enable the marginalized to improve their social, economic, and political condition (Friedman *et al.*, 2020, p. 219).

Given the potential that education has in this regard, and its capacity to influence and inspire change, Catholic schools have a clear responsibility from Christ's teaching as espoused in Liberation Theology, and by the mandate given to them through key Church documents, to work proactively towards the eradication of poverty and the immediate relief of its consequences.

Given the range of data available to school leaders (not least those datasets which have been exemplified in this thesis so far, but also more local data including SIMD data by pupil, free school meals and school clothing grant information), Catholic schools are well placed to consider the needs of learners in the planning process, and to best suit the needs of their own young people:

> Catholic schools and educators are obligated to consider the economic conditions of their students as they plan and deliver instruction, essential to liberation (Friedman *et al.*, 2020, p. 219).

Making this a central consideration for planning aligns not only with the Church's teaching, but also with the aims of government in this area. It seems a straightforward step to suggest that all discussions concerning planning for the life of a school – whether when planning a lesson or crafting a new whole-school policy – should begin with this simple challenge question: what do we know about the economic circumstances of the children and young people in our school that is relevant to this project?

In doing so, school colleagues and learners will recognise the focus on inclusion and challenging the barriers to fairness. This can be achieved through a resolute focus on marginalisation, and is arguably more important than ever before as poverty and its impacts are so readily felt (as evidenced earlier in this chapter):

> Liberation theology promotes inclusive, politically engaged, and knowledgeable Catholic participation [and] …needs to be re-examined …to further renew and strengthen teaching which challenges economic systems turned against the poor and marginalised (Admirand, 2018, p. 164).

This underlines the importance of taking the rigorous stance proposed by Liberation Theology. It must, therefore, permeate every aspect of Catholic school life. This should be the case regardless of the particular setting the school finds itself in – hidden poverty exists regardless of the school's geographical location, and those students who have not experienced poverty personally must learn about it in order to understand its impact and therefore to be equipped to tackle it throughout their school career and in their adult lives.

The papacy of Pope Francis encouraged this and made clear that the preferential option for the poor was not simple or straightforward:

> comfortable liberation theology is an oxymoron: true liberation theology seeks liberation but in the process, should discomfort and unsettle. Francis has certainly begun to do this as evidenced in the reaction towards his critiques of capitalism (Admirand, 2018, p. 164).

While the pursuit of improving wellbeing may instinctively lead to seeking ways in which to avoid unsettling young people in the process of their learning, it is argued that it is a necessary component of an education informed by Liberation Theology. Ultimately, when presented with the scale and impact of poverty, the aim should not be unqualified reassurance. Rather, it must be a realistic presentation of the situation faced by young people and their families on a daily basis. This honesty, however uncomfortable, is needed to ensure that action follows from the learning process. Pope Francis faced significant rebuttal from his detractors, however this never deterred his approach as Admirand notes. Instead, he called out economic exclusion and the pursuit of greed. Learning in Catholic schools must therefore do likewise.

This must, of course, be achieved with a degree of sensitivity. A culture of dialogue and debate supports this model, and allows young people to reason for themselves:

> The key is to promote a classroom where students' views are encouraged and respected as long as such views do not denigrate and undercut Catholic (and human rights teaching) that upholds the dignity and value of every human being (Admirand, 2018, p. 165).

Within such a model, young people are presented with the facts and figures, and guided by the principles and values which underpin the life of the school as well as their learning of Catholic Social Teaching, they arrive at their own conclusions. The teacher's role in this context is to guide them according to the principles upon which Liberation Theology is based: the life and dignity of all human beings, created equal by God. This, Admirand presents, would be a reasonable and

worthwhile approach to educating young people about the contemporary challenges faced by the society in which they live.

This approach also has a key strength in its inclusivity. While underpinned by Church teaching, these principles extend beyond theology and their adherence to human dignity as a secular right means that young people of no faith would also be supportive of these aims:

> For students in our classrooms, especially those with no interest in organised religion, with deep sympathies to atheist views, or indifference to religion in general, they can appreciate authenticity, real struggle, and honesty; in not having all the answers, but not blind to the unjust and wrong realities of our world; and trying, in little and in systemic, structural ways, to make this world a happier, healthier, and more just place (Admirand, 2018, p. 165).

This evidences how the offering of Catholic education can be enhanced for all learners, not only those who are Catholic, by demonstrating an attentiveness to the needs of the poor, a passion for social justice, and a determination to take action to put such principles into practice. In doing so, the aim is not to evangelise such pupils but rather to demonstrate the authenticity of the Catholic faith within the context of the denominational school, which becomes increasingly evident as the Church puts its beliefs into action, responding to the needs of the marginalised as Christ instructed in the Gospels, and inspiring those who bear witness to such action.

This action is a direct response to the call of the Church to be at the service of the poor. It is embedded in the documents pertaining to Catholic education, and is not regarded as an 'optional extra' but rather an integral part of Catholic education:

> The document provides a clear indication that the preferential option for the poor should be 'at the centre of the educational programme' (section 70) and states that all Christians are called to follow the example of the Church (section 71): "Becoming the voice of the poor of the world is a challenge

> assumed by the Church, and all Christians should do the same" (McKinney, 2018, p. 223) (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2002, paras 70–71).

This offers further legitimacy to those calling for Liberation Theology to be a core element of Catholic schools. It further states it should be central to the life and mission of these establishments, and this has serious implication for Catholic school leaders to consider. It also requires an approach from Church authorities – in Scotland this would refer to the Bishops' Conference and their agency the Scottish Catholic Education Service. They must review the guidance they offer to Catholic schools, and find ways to encourage such practice. They should actively consider how they can empower Catholic school leaders to be confident in their use of the language offered in Liberation Theology, and to unapologetically decry structures of injustice which prevail and impact the young people in their schools most negatively.

The need for this response is urgent, and the action of those involved in Catholic education at every level must be prompt. McKinney argues that

> we are now experiencing an irruption of the poor in the United Kingdom and that preferential option for the poor and solidarity with the poor are the demands of discipleship of Jesus Christ and this ought to be reflected in Catholic schools (McKinney, 2021a, p. 30).

Thus, the argument that Liberation Theology has much to offer to Catholic schools is validated within this context. Learning about the needs of those in poverty is not an abstract concept or a matter for history, but is a very real and current requirement. In that sense, the need for such an education is particularly urgent. It is therefore necessary to continue an exploration of what schools may practically do to implement this, or to consider what is already being done:

> Catholic schools are addressing the poverty of the children and young people as best they can, often with limited resources. The response of the Catholic schools is inspirational, and, at the same time, it is deeply

> disturbing and dispiriting that this should be the situation in the twenty-first century (McKinney, 2021a, p. 37).

While disheartening that poverty does exist on such a scale in contemporary society, this shared mission to address it is reassuring. Catholic schools are clearly undertaking valuable work in this area, regardless of whatever impediment may be in their way. In doing so, colleagues, young people and their families will feel respected, and will recognise the role that Catholic education must play in upholding the dignity of all.

One possible means by which to embed Liberation Theology through teaching and learning involves

> the popular pedagogy of liberation theology [which] "extensively uses the contributions of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire" (Oldenski, 2011, p. 69)

This approach is explained as:

> a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement on the struggle for their liberation (Freire and Macedo, 2017, p. 48).

As a recommendation for practical implementation, this is an important point. Firstly, any teaching about poverty must involve the principle of accompaniment referred to earlier. It must seek to ensure that young people are aware of their own reality, and recognise the injustices that they face. While uncomfortable, this section has already explored the necessity of doing what is right even in the face of challenge or discomfort. Ultimately, only by being awake to the challenges they face will young people learn of the need to struggle for liberation. It also build community, which in turn is a key element of this approach to resistance:

> This pedagogy produces a solidarity with the oppressed and then the oppressed with each other (Oldenski, 2011, p. 63).

In doing so, the principle of solidarity which also underpins this approach becomes clearer. Young people learn to work for a better society for themselves and their future. This has the potential to be a thoroughly rewarding approach for Catholic educators, as young people use their autonomy and personal leadership to influence change in tangible ways through their learning about their own social circumstances and the need to improve the society around them.

Liberation theology introduced the term "preferential option for the poor" and is very focused on the plight of the poor and the marginalised. This has been developed in a profound theological way in leading theologians such as Gutierrez, Sobrino and Ellacuria. Despite initial reservations about Liberation Theology many aspects of this theology have been adopted in papal teaching, especially in the teaching of Pope Francis and the early stages of the teaching of Pope Leo XIV. The advantage of Liberation Theology is that it has been developed in a deep and profound way.

To conclude this section, Liberation Theology offers concrete suggestions to ensure that the requirements of Church teaching to prioritise those who are poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised are put first. It requires serious consideration, and there is scope for further work to scale its implementation nationally. It should not be the reserve of one teacher, classroom or department. Rather, its principles must permeate every aspect of Catholic school life.

3.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter has sought to consider the challenge that poverty presents to Catholic schools in Scotland. In doing so, it has analysed wider issues and gone on to suggest mechanisms which would allow for this challenge to be properly addressed through the lens of faith.

In a statistical analysis, the scale of the challenge was made clear. Despite some areas of progress, the challenge of poverty remains a hugely significant one which rightly deserves a great deal of the attention of those responsible for education, both nationally, locally and at classroom level. By considering the policy context, an understanding of what has been done so far emerged, and an awareness of the current pressures on school arising from government policy became apparent. Most importantly, it became clear that schools were part of the solution, but not the sole answer. Schools, ultimately, can respond to the impact of poverty but will not tackle its root causes. Education is key, however urgent action beyond this scope is needed.

Finally, through exploring Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology, a clear language and framework for Catholic schools began to emerge. This needs further research, and would benefit from practical guidance on its implementation from Church authorities, however its merits are unquestionable. By embracing the Church's social doctrine and Liberation Theology, Catholic schools will become increasingly mindful of the needs of the most vulnerable, and will build upon their work demanding social change. This is essential:

> Progressive educators cannot afford to abandon efforts to change school practices or the world (Oldenski, 2011, p. 67).

Catholic schools must hold on to the principle of hope – a genuine hope rooted in faith that they can contribute to a better, fairer and more equal society as has already been evidenced. If they do not, then it calls into question their purpose. As Oldenski puts succinctly:

> unless a particular Catholic school is considering the principles that give it its Catholic identity and is trying to live by them, it does not deserve to stay in existence (Oldenski, 2011, p. 26).

This is the most pertinent challenge which Catholic schools (and others) must respond to. If Catholic schools fail to do so, then they are abandoning the core of their mission and arguably relinquishing their identity in the process.

Chapter 4: Further external challenges facing Catholic schools in Scotland

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore two further challenges to Catholic schools in Scotland. These challenges pertain to mostly external factors – namely to increasing pluralism and secularism in Scotland, and to the debate concerning state-funding for Catholic schools in Scotland. It is the intention of this chapter to evidence these challenges, and to analyse their impact on Catholic school in Scotland. This analysis does not seek to solve these challenges, but rather presents them as areas which merit further research. These areas also require careful consideration by Church authorities in Scotland if Catholic schools are to be suitably prepared and equipped to address them at the most local level, and if the national institutions are to robustly defend the status of Catholic education.

4.2 Pluralism and secularism

Turning firstly to the religious profile of Scotland and how it is changing, the data available from the most recent census is enlightening. In particular, the prevalence of secularism is significant:

> [The] Scottish census, carried out in 2022, shows 51% of the population reported they belonged to no religion – a sharp increase on the 36.7% in 2011 (Carrell, 2024).

For the first time, the majority of people in Scotland identified as being non-religious. This represents a significant shift in Scottish society as is evidenced by the change over time not only since 2011 but also since the census prior to that in 2001:

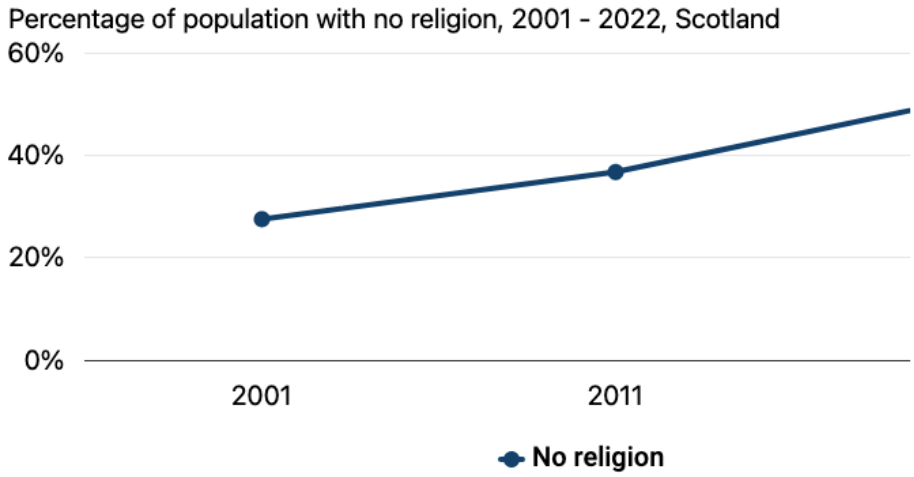


Figure 2: Percentage of population with no religion, 2001-2022, Scotland (Scotland's Census, 2024).

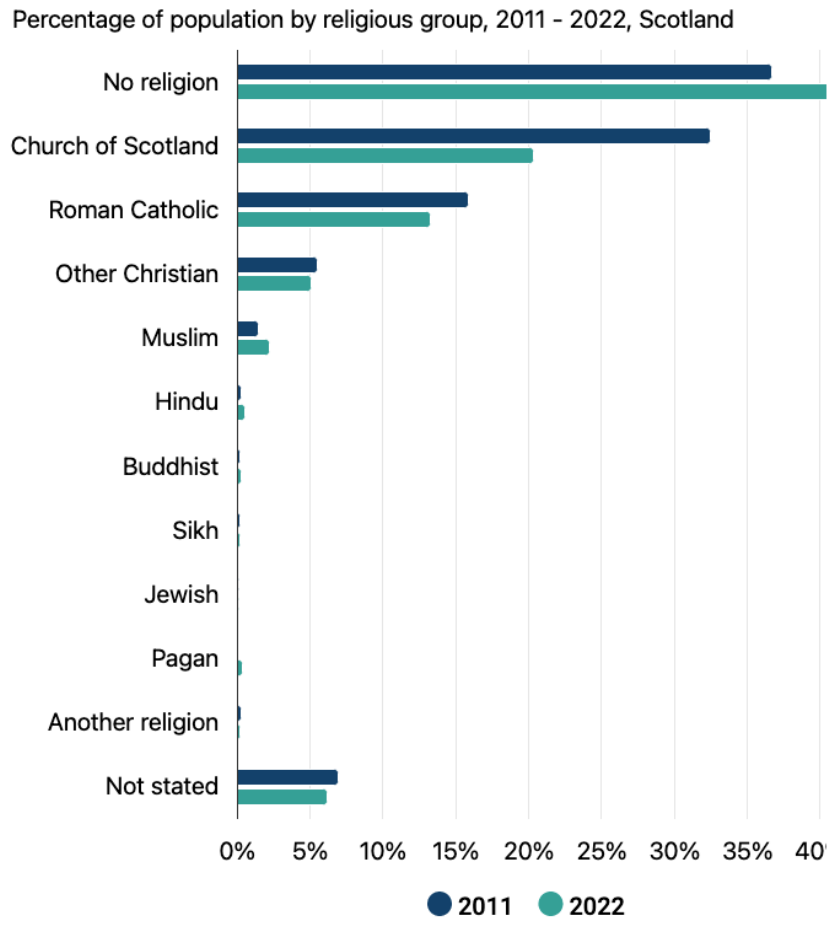
Accordingly, the profile of Catholic schools in Scotland has changed too. Teachers will note this increasing level of diversity, and without also taking practice rates among baptised Catholic into account it is already evident that increasing numbers of young people will have no experience of faith or religion whatsoever.

Within those who do identify as religious, the largest groups remain consistent:

> The increase in people with no religion in Scotland coincided with a decrease in people who said they belong to the Church of Scotland… However 'Church of Scotland' remained the largest group among those who said they had a religion.
>
> The next largest religious groups were 'Roman Catholic' (13.3%) (Scotland's Census, 2024).

Thus, the position of the Catholic Church as the second largest religious group in Scotland remains, however the influence held as a result of this may be seen to

diminish given the prominence of those with no religion at all. Scotland is, however, seeing increasing pluralism at the same time:



Notes: (1) Category order matches the 2022 census form. (2) The 'Pagan' option was added in 2022 so there is no comparable data for 2011.

Figure 3: Percentage of population by religious group, 2011-2022, Scotland (Scotland's Census, 2024).

This shows that, while those stating they have no religion has increased and the numbers identifying with the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Church have decreased, between the 2011 and 2022 census there is an increase in other religions such as Islam and Hinduism. Again, this shift will be reflected in Scottish schools, including Catholic schools, and will have implications for the manner in which Catholic education is presented.

Specifically considering the implications for Catholic schools in Scotland, Conroy and McGrath note that

> It is certainly difficult to rebut the claims of Scottish sociologist, Steve Bruce (Bruce et al., 2004) that Scotland (in common with the rest of Europe) is in the throes of an irreversible decline in religious practice (Conroy and McGrath, 2007, p. 389).

Thus, it is evident that there is a need to reflect upon what this means for Catholic schools. It must be considered whether this significant shift in Scottish demographics merits a discussion around the status of Catholic schools in Scotland, which have enjoyed particular protections as a result of the 1918 legislation. The Catholic Church in Scotland must be prepared for such a discussion – reliance on the status quo may not be sufficient to justify the support of the state under these circumstances. This debate will be given some consideration in the ensuing section of this thesis.

There is a suggestion that the shift in demographics is different depending on the locality within Scotland. This is unsurprising given the impact of migration in the history of the Catholic Church in Scotland. Nevertheless, it is an important factor to consider in this discussion as it means that Catholic schools will be impacted by pluralism and secularism in different ways and at a different pace depending on where they are situated within Scotland:

> In the 2001 Census, reported levels of the absence of any religious affiliation are proportionately higher in the North and East of Scotland than in the West (Conroy and McGrath, 2007, p. 389).

In light of this evidence, it is incumbent upon Church authorities to give particular support to Catholic school leaders in the north and east of Scotland given they are facing these challenges more urgently. If trends continue to follow their current pattern, the effectiveness of the Church's action in these areas may inform a process in the other parts of the country later. Consideration must therefore be given to key areas such as the impact on staffing, changes to pupil demographics, what this means for the identity of the Catholic school, and how to handle

situations such as young people and their families who do not wish to engage in particular aspects of the faith life of a Catholic school.

Given this increasingly diverse society, it is reasonable to ask whether Catholic schools are preparing children and young people for the reality of the world around them. There may be a preconception that Catholic schools are only preparing school leavers with knowledge specific to the Catholic Church and that this breeds ignorance of other faiths and contexts. On the contrary, it has been noted that

> Students attending Catholic secondary schools in Scotland held a more positive attitude toward religious diversity, compared with comparable students attending schools without a religious foundation (Francis *et al.*, 2014, pp. 49–50).

This infers that Catholic schools in Scotland are, therefore, responding positively and proactively to the challenge presented by religious pluralism and increasing diversity. They are ensuring that young people have the skills and values to interact with the wider society, which they are exposed to during their Catholic education, and which therefore ensures that they are prepared to contribute positively to a contemporary Scotland outwith the school environment.

However, secularism can present quite a different challenge. With increasing numbers (and now over half the population) identifying as having no religion, a greater understanding of this viewpoint is needed. It is suggested that

> Secularisation represents the denial of the validity of the sacred and of its associated culture. It works to replace this by developing logical, rational, empirical, and scientific intellectual cultures in which the notion of the transcendent has no place. It affects the world view of many individuals so that religious concepts, religious discourse, and religious sensitivities are regarded as simply irrelevant to the everyday business of life. (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007b, p. 2).

It is within this context that Catholic schools perhaps face a greater challenge. It is argued that the prevailing secular culture sees faith and reason as antithetical to one another, and therefore that matters of religion and faith should be consigned to the private sphere. In this context, a conceivable challenge to Catholic education emerges. However, for the Catholic school it is not only its existence which is queried, but also the manner in which it educates at present. This stance argues that anything pertaining to faith is not only inappropriate in the context of education, but also that it is irrelevant and to be given no consideration in the public realm whatsoever.

Given what has been stated already about the specific response of Catholic education to the challenge of poverty, it is therefore of grave concern that

> Secularisation challenges religious beliefs about the inestimable dignity of every human being and the need to balance individual rights with communitarian responsibilities (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007b, pp. 2–3).

It has already been established in this thesis that the dignity and life of every human person is a fundamental principle in Catholic education and it underpins much of the ethos and mission of Catholic schools. Any erosion of the Catholic schools' motivation for following this principle risks reducing the focus on this pivotal area of work. While, as has already been noted, the Church is very much aligned with secular priorities in this respect in terms of reducing poverty and closing the gap between the richest and poorest pupils, Catholic schools have been demonstrated to have a distinctive approach to this work stemming from their rationale for doing so which has the example of Christ as its foundation. Should that principle be removed or diminished, then the distinctive identity of Catholic education is impacted too.

The legislation which brought Catholic schools into the state's control might be thought to offer protection in this regard. This would offer considerable reassurance to Catholic schools and to the Church more generally. However, some have cast doubt on the security which is offered:

> there is the pressure placed on Catholic schools as instruments [to] Conform to the pedagogical, cultural, and juridical imperatives of the state. This is where indeed the 1918 legislation itself, and despite its apparent safeguards, is likely to be the source of this challenge in so far as Catholic schools continue to be "held, maintained and managed as a public school by the education authority who . . . shall have in respect thereto the sole power of regulating the curriculum and appointing teachers" (Conroy and McGrath, 2007, p. 400).

Thus, amid rising secularism which may call into question the very mission of Catholic education in Scotland, there is a suggestion that the legal safeguards are insufficient. With that in mind, the need for Catholic schools and the Church to have a ready defence for the arrangements pertaining to funding and the Church's approval system for staffing seem more urgent. An awareness, for example, of the evidence presented in this thesis that Catholic schools contribute to a more tolerant society owing to their positive attitude towards diversity and pluralism should be essential for Catholic school leaders. It is not enough to merely foster such values in their own schools, but the ability to evidence it will be key to any future debate on this matter.

Moreover, in the midst of these changing demographics, there is an argument that Catholic identity more generally will be diminished. Accordingly, Catholic teachers may lack the awareness of their own faith to be able to present it authentically to children and young people:

> as Catholics become increasingly homogenised and loose their distinctive cultural and religious attachments, there will be insufficient committed Catholic teachers to not only serve the needs of students but maintain a coherent and sustainable Catholic educational identity (Conroy and McGrath, 2007, p. 400).

This creates a particular challenge relating to the mission and ethos of Catholic schools in Scotland. Namely, if the understanding amongst staff of the purpose of the Catholic school is lacking, then can such a school authentically call itself Catholic? As a result of such a shift, the quality of religious education and faith based experiences for children and young people would be significantly diminished, and school leaders would be led more by the direction of the local authority or national policy than by the Church, despite holding the word "Catholic" in the name of their school. This is a serious concern, and is beyond the scope of Catholic education alone. Instead, it is a challenge which the Church nationally (and internationally) must consider. As children and young people grow up in an increasingly diverse Scotland, they will question their faith and will expect answers. Without a sufficient cohort of colleagues in Catholic schools who can educate and form the young people in their care in the faith, these questions will be left partially answered or not at all, resulting in a wider concern for the future of the Catholic Church in Scotland.

However, it feels essential to conclude this section on an optimistic note. It has been recommended that the Bishops, Scottish Catholic Education Service and Catholic school leaders must take time to properly articulate the role of Catholic schools in Scotland, and to understand their contribution to Scottish society in the past, present and future. They must be prepared to respond to this in light of societal shifts and changing demographics. If they do so, there is considerable hope that Catholic education will continue to enjoy considerable support in Scotland:

> if they can muster the capacity to continue to make both an innovative and thoughtful contribution to public education and effectively articulate the philosophical and empirical grounds for its value both in its own terms and in those of public political discourse, then Catholic education in Scotland may thrive after all (Conroy and McGrath, 2007, pp. 403-404.).

This approach relies on the commitment of those responsible to engage in the discussion and debate which pertains to the place of Catholic education in the face of increasing pluralism and secularism. The contribution of Catholic education in

Scotland was widely celebrated in 2018, marking the centenary of the 1918 Act. With a proper understanding of its mission and future potential, particularly should it choose to embrace the approach to current societal challenges as explored in Chapter Two, then the future of Catholic schools in Scotland will remain clear, their purpose apparent and the educators whose commitment ensures their success will be capable of responding to any challenge they may face, especially in defence of the inclusive and welcoming education they have been evidenced to offer.

4.3 The debate concerning the state-funding of Catholic schools in Scotland

The challenges explored in the preceding section give an indication that the continued funding of Catholic schools by the state is a matter for debate. Opponents of Catholic schools have formulated many arguments in opposition to government funding supporting schools predominantly run by a particular religious denomination. This section will consider this debate, and offer an initial discourse on the responses to this challenge which continues to face Catholic schools in Scotland.

One such argument in opposition to state funding may be summarised thus:

> there are two separate questions: should there be separate faith schools and should they be funded by the state. I would say 'Of course, if parents wish it' to the former and 'I am not persuaded' to the latter (Bruce, 2003, p. 274).

At first glance, this argument seems logical. It is not opposed to the existence of Catholic schools per se, however rejects the model which sees them funded by the taxpayer through the government's budget. This could be argued to be a wider principle, namely

> that people may object to the state support of faith schools because they object to all forms of state support for any particular religion (Bruce, 2003, p. 274).

This is a familiar argument, that the state and religion should remain completely separate entities. In this regard, opposition to state funding is not limited to Catholic schools, but rather argues that the state should not actively support religion in any form. Again, this argument seems to be rational and reasonable, and it is understandable why it might secure public favour, especially when (as the last section highlighted) over half of the Scottish population do not identify as religious. It is therefore necessary to consider whether there is an adequate rebuttal to this argument which justifies continued funding for Catholic schools in the current manner.

This, in essence, forms the foundation of the Humanist Society of Scotland's rejection of Catholic schools:

> The Humanist Society Scotland are opposed to Catholic schools because they do not believe that schools should be based on one set of religious beliefs and the government should not endorse any form of religion …They state that all schools in Scotland should be totally inclusive and be open to all children. They also state that there should be no separate curriculum and no separate school buildings (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, p. 109).

This section will go on to consider the response to such arguments, however it should already be apparent that the funding model does not represent the government's endorsement of Catholicism as a whole. As has already been noted in the previous chapter, tensions already exist between the priorities of Catholic schools and the demands of the government and its policies. Indeed, the limitations of legislation already mean that Catholic schools are limited in the scope of their curriculum and staffing, and the suggestion that Catholic schools are not inclusive would seem to be misinformed, and fail to understand their diversity.

A further argument in opposition to Catholic schools has been that they represent a form of segregation which fosters division. This seems to be the second half of the rationale presented by the Humanist Society of Scotland, too. While the

previous section already addressed this to some extent, with evidence noting that young people attending Catholic schools in Scotland were more likely to be positive about religious diversity than those who attended their non-denominational counterparts, it is necessary to further consider this argument which may be articulated thus:

> Problems arise …because, despite the respective promotions of the general good of society, separating young people into different schools impedes understanding between different communities, which would seem essential for harmonious living. The separate schools in Northern Ireland are seen by many to be a case in point (Pring, 2018, p. 149).

Given the particular challenges within the Northern Irish context, it does not seem a reasonable comparison. Moreover, this point lacks any clear substance to support the inference that Catholic schools foster division. Furthermore, there is once again an inference that Catholic schools comprise of only Catholic children and young people, which is not the case (particularly in the north and east of the country where, as noted earlier, there has been a sharper decrease in the number of Catholics). As such, this argument seems to be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Catholic schooling in Scotland, and should be one which Catholic educators are ready to rebut.

There is a clear distinction between religious education, which has its own merits, and the funding of Catholic schools, which is more readily being called into question. It has been argued that state funded education should be a solely secular endeavour and that the approach to teaching religion should be informed accordingly:

> The Secular Society considers the state funding of faith schooling to be an inappropriate response to the expansion of religious diversity and advocate a secular education system that retains religious education, though as the study of objective and neutral study of religious and non-religious viewpoints (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, p. 109).

However, what is clear from this is that rising secularism has the potential, if not the likelihood, to be coupled with a rising pressure on Catholic schools to respond to critique around the funding that they receive. Ultimately, as public attitude shifts then political will moves also. This presents a tangible risk to Catholic schools in their current form, and necessitates a clear articulation of their purpose and identity in order to respond to such criticism.

Particular criticism goes beyond the principle of funding Catholic schools in the first place, and goes on to consider the extra costs which denominational education presents:

> The National Secular Society also points out that there can be further costs accrued by faith schools – the cost of free transport for children to the faith school (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, p. 109).

Catholic schools typically cover a much larger catchment area than their non-denominational counterparts. This is particularly the case in those areas of the country where fewer Catholic schools exist. Accordingly, local authority policies on school transport may mean that young people travel considerable distances by bus in order to reach their place of education. The cost of this transport is also met by the local authority, and by extension through taxpayer's contributions. This leads to a concern that costs of this nature are inflated for Catholic schools in a way that would not be anticipated for their non-denominational counterparts. This, the argument follows, would suggest that Catholic schools incur additional costs and that this is an unreasonable expectation in a diverse and increasingly secular society.

Conversely, those who support the state funding of Catholic schools may firstly appeal to the choice which it offers to all:

> State funding or partial funding of faith schools is perceived by those who support faith schools as an acknowledgement of their democratic rights to

> be offered the choice of the most appropriate form of state schooling for their children (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, p. 109).

The offer of Catholic education reflects a rich history which has been demonstrated throughout this thesis. Catholic schools are a key part of Scottish society, and were sought by the state prior to the 1918 Act. Accordingly, proponents of Catholic schooling argue that the availability of such an education is fundamental within a democracy which respects their rights and parental choice. Prior to their incorporation into the state, Catholic schools existed and were an important source of education for Catholic families. This has not changed, and Catholic and non-Catholic families alike choose to send their children to such schools for a variety of reasons. This serves to demonstrate the importance placed on their availability by families, and by children and young people themselves.

Moreover, it has already been evidenced that the Catholic Church is the faith group in Scotland with the second largest number of adherents. Accordingly, it is important to note that a significant number of people in Scotland are Catholic, and that a significant number therein contribute positively to society, not least through taxation:

> state-funded Catholic schools are a legitimate option in Scottish society because those who support faith schools are tax-payers and have a right to be supported in their choices of publicly funded school education (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, p. 109).

Thus, if the principle of democracy infers that those who contribute to society should have a stake in the way in which their contributions are used, then the Catholic population and wider supporters of Catholic education should be able to feel confident that their tax will contribute to a society which reflects their views. This, in no small part, should be based on the dignity and life of every human person which we have stated must underpin Catholic education and, arguably, should be the hallmark of any decent society which values all its people. Accordingly, if there is to be confidence of these principles underpinning the type

of education which parents and carers choose for their children, then state funding of Catholic schools in Scotland must be seen as integral to the democratic principles Scotland espouses to maintain.

This is a core aspect of the argument presented by Grace and O'Keefe. They suggest that Scotland has a particular safeguard owing to state funding, however this should not result in a complacency. Rather, it is necessary for Catholic educators to be well versed in the arguments which support their continued funding and overall existence:

> This threat to the "preferential option for the poor" in Catholic education exists wherever religious congregations are declining and where there is inadequate financial support from the State. Those Catholic school systems which receive substantial support from the state, including England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand have defences against the weakening of this mission (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007a, p. 10).

It is no exaggeration to argue that a reduction in the provision of Catholic education and funding thereof would most negatively impact the poor and marginalised. Given the impact that Catholic schools in Scotland have been shown to have in respect of their work in this area, and the potential to do more by fully embracing the principles of Liberation Theology, their contribution to serving the poor must not be underestimated. This work has merit in its own right as has been explored, however in the context of the debate concerning the funding of Catholic schools it is imperative to reflect upon the impact of those who are neediest should Catholic schools no longer have the funding to support them. In summary, abandoning state funding of Catholic schools would mean "that its poorest citizens are denied access to a schooling culture which has much to offer them" (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007a, p. 10).

Furthermore, there is a basis in human rights and international law which would favour the choice of Catholic schools being available, and would infer that state

funding should not be removed if it has been granted historically. This approach leans on the establishment of Human Rights and their place in international law:

> Catholics schools are a public acknowledgement of the validity and application of Article 27, section (3) of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, pp. 109–110).

The argument here is that parents have a right to choose the type of education that they believe best suits their children. In that regard, it seems unequivocal that parents should have the right to opt for a Catholic school for their child, and that they should be able to do so without any financial pressure associated with their choice. This is not the case in other jurisdictions, and may lead to a rebuttal that could be framed thus:

> I see no reason why parents, churches and para-church associations should not be able to successfully indoctrinate their children in the required faith outside of school hours and without state legitimation (Bruce, 2003, p. 275).

Setting aside the loaded term "indoctrinate" for now in order to focus on the rebuttal itself, this might seem initially difficult to refute, especially since state funding of Catholic schools is not the norm internationally. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is a significant difference in the Scottish context. Any reasonable interpretation of a removal of state funding would recognise that this would offer Scottish parents less choice than they currently have, as there would undoubtedly be individuals who might wish to choose a Catholic education, but who would not be able to do so because of possible financial implications. This would present a reduction in the choice offered, and would therefore reflect a position whereby the rights referred to above are diminished, not perhaps by international comparison but certainly by contrast to the current offering. This, therefore, is an unacceptable proposition and completely antithetical to the principle of parental choice.

On a final note in consideration of this debate, the contemporary political landscape is important to note. Political discourse concerning the funding of Catholic schools may be summarised by two polarised viewpoints summed up accordingly:

> On the one hand, states welcome the cultural, economic, and personnel resources which the Church provides for educational services. It is often the case that government ministers and senior officials (regardless of their personal religious or ideological position) commit their own children to Catholic schools for quality education. On the other hand, some political ideologies which are strongly secularist or strongly nationalist are suspicious of what a Catholic education provides (Grace and O'Keefe, 2007a, p. 4).

This gives rise to the need to ensure that Catholic educators are aware of this ongoing debate, and conscious of their own role in securing the future of Catholic schools in Scotland. For as long as this debate persists, it will be necessary for reasoned and articulate voices comprising of all stakeholders (teaching and non-teaching staff, academics, the Church, parents and carers and children and young people, as well as other partners in Catholic education) to be comfortable in their presentation of a reasoned defence of Catholic schools, and in particular their funding from the state.

In Scotland, current politics would infer that there is slightly less pressure in this regard, however. Those with greatest influence in Scottish politics in recent years have consistently defended and praised Catholic schools, and readily taken opportunities to do so:

> the leadership of the Scottish Executives and Government has been resolute in their support (and praise) …[Alex Salmond] accepted an invitation to deliver the annual Cardinal Winning lecture at the University of Glasgow (McKinney and Conroy, 2015, p. 110).

The example set by Alex Salmond was followed by his successor as First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who delivered the Cardinal Winning Lecture on the occasion of the centenary of the 1918 Act (The Scottish Government, 2018). The current First Minister, John Swinney, has a long and consistent track record of supporting Catholic schools, too. As Cabinet Secretary for Education and Deputy First Minister, he also attended the Cardinal Winning Lecture (The Scottish Government, 2018) and spoke separately to Catholic headteachers, praising the contribution that Catholic schools make to Scottish society (Diamond, 2018).

Given the current political landscape, and in light of the contribution which Catholic schools are clearly understood to make to Scottish society, it would seem that the threat to their funding and existence is not immediate:

> At present, it is highly unlikely that any political party would risk the electoral consequences of making a purely secular system part of [its] manifesto (Humes, 2015, p. 134)

However, it would be seriously naïve to infer from this that the challenges presented here should not be taken seriously. With shifting patterns in Scotland's demographics, a change in political opinion is not unimaginable. It is timely, therefore, for all stakeholders referred to in this section to ensure that they are prepared and well equipped for the debate around the funding and, by extension the existence, of Catholic schools which is inevitable. The timing of such a pivotal and monumental moment in this debate is unclear, but it is reasonable to infer from the evidence presented that it is coming and that a robust defence of Catholic schools will be needed.

4.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has sought to briefly consider two further challenges faced by Catholic schools in Scotland: pluralism and secularism, and the debate concerning continued funding by the state.

On the former, this thesis has evidenced the shifting landscape and the impact that this is having already on Catholic education, however it has noted that the

evidence demonstrates young people educated in Catholic school are well prepared for a religiously diverse community and as such foster values of openness and tolerance which will be essential for the world they live in. It has recommended, however, that Catholic educators must ensure they are well aware of their role within the context of an increasingly secular society, as the strength of Catholic schools lies in its distinctiveness, and without this then its educational mission will be undermined.

On the latter point, pertaining to funding, this chapter has shown that current political will amongst those with greatest influence at present is strongly supportive of Catholic schools. However, it has also demonstrated the nature of the argument which opposes the state's funding of Catholic schools in Scotland. It has argued for an increased awareness among key stakeholders of this debate, and concluded that the time will come in the foreseeable future when they will be called upon to articulate their defence of Catholic schooling to secure its future in Scotland according to current funding principles.

Chapter 5: Further internal challenges facing Catholic schools in Scotland

5.1 Introduction

In this final substantive chapter, two challenges which have been categorised as 'internal' to the Catholic schooling system in Scotland will be considered: the curriculum, and staffing. This chapter does not aspire to resolve the debates or concerns pertaining to these areas fully, but rather seeks to expose the challenges as they are currently presented as a means of inviting further research and discussion, and placing them within this overall framework of important challenges which are facing Catholic schools in Scotland.

This chapter will seek to provide evidence to justify that each presents a credible challenge at present, and provide brief recommendations in terms of framing the future discussion and debate.

5.2 The curriculum

Grace suggests a provocation for beginning to contemplate discussion of the curriculum in Catholic schools:

> Robert Davis wrote a ground-breaking chapter with the title, 'Can there be a Catholic curriculum?' His purpose was to generate a debate among Catholic educators about this crucial issue at a time when both government and economic agencies internationally appeared to be dominating the content, assessment and purposes of curricula (Grace, 2013, pp. 103–104).

This debate remains ongoing, but is perhaps timely at present given the Scottish curriculum is in the midst of a major review (Education Scotland, 2024). This presents a rare opportunity to consider what the curriculum should look like in Catholic schools in Scotland, and to contemplate whether the distinctive nature of Catholic schools may extend across the curriculum or if it should be limited to the religious education syllabus.

Contemplating Davis' seminal study which has been described by some as groundbreaking and has been highly influential on subsequent scholarship, he argued that

> the price Catholic schools have had to pay for their accreditation as appropriate centres for the 'delivery' of the modern curriculum is a restriction of their Catholicity to those features of school life where secular society is prepared to permit the manifestation of Catholic ideas (Davis, 1999, pp. 221–222).

In practical terms, state funding has meant that Catholic schools in Scotland face significant limitations. The curriculum, with the exception of Religious Education, follows the same curricular documents in all subject areas as their non-denominational counterparts. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to question whether the entirety of the school lives up to the Catholicity that it espouses in its name and mission. As has already been highlighted, only senior leaders and those delivering Religious Education are required to be Catholic. In practical terms, this calls into doubt whether young people are truly experiencing an education which allows them to learn about the world through the lens of faith. These limitations are worthy of contemporary investigation, and the opportunity presented by the Curriculum Improvement Cycle merits further consideration by the Catholic Church in Scotland.

Davis built upon this work in a publication with Franchi, where they argued that such a tension between state-funding and the aims of Catholic education continued to result in significant limitations on what the Catholic school can achieve in contrast to its stated aims. Davis and Franchi state that groups in society continue to argue

> against the existence and funding of religious schools, supposedly confirming the standard allegations that faith-based education is constitutively irrational, anachronistic and sectarian (Davis and Franchi, 2013, p. 43).

Davis and Franchi argue that this pervading tension between Catholic schools and the state limit the ability of Catholic educators to provide a curriculum which fully embraces the Church's vision. In their articulation of subject areas, from literature to science, they argue for a unique approach to education which they see as authentically Catholic. They argue that, to make this possible, the Catholic school must

> question some of its current partnerships with the state, especially as these encroach upon social institutions the state neither created nor legitimately governs, and to require of its own civic and charitable agencies a more critical attitude towards the funding criteria and the strategic priorities set by governments (Davis and Franchi, 2013, p. 47).

However, when contrasting this with a historical understanding of the state-funding model for Catholic schools in Scotland, the protections given to Catholic education must not be ignored. Moreover, the necessity of state-funding at the time of the 1918 Act to ensure the continued existence of Catholic schools must be seen as something which enabled the growth of Catholic education in Scotland, rather than inhibiting its potential. While debate around the curriculum is merited, and it is clear that for the most part the taught curriculum of Catholic schools in Scotland mirrors their non-denominational counterparts, the number of Catholic schools in Scotland and the protections with regard to Religious Education, teacher approval and staffing are significant and arguably preserve its integrity going forward.

Grace argues that a key element of a Catholic curriculum must be providing children and young people with the skills needed to understand the teachings of the Popes. Papal encyclicals form a rich source of Catholic teaching, however it is argued that young people in Catholic schools do not have the skills to make best use of this:

> While it is undoubtedly true that the language used in the encyclicals has been an impediment, it is also true that Catholic educational institutions at all levels have failed to provide curriculum mediations of this teaching as a crucial part of the formation of Catholic youth (Grace, 2013, p. 99).

Given what has been explored already concerning the importance Grace places on educating children and young people to fully understand the Church's social doctrine, this suggestion is unsurprising. He adds that "the potential for permeation of Catholic social teaching is considerable across many subjects" (Grace, 2013, p. 100). However, its scope goes beyond allowing learners to ascertain a richer understanding of the Church's response to social ills. Rather, educating students towards an ability to access papal teachings independently could serve as a catalyst to enable lifelong learning of the Church's response to issues in the world. This will provide a lens through which they can assess situations of critical importance throughout their lives.

Considering the Church's social doctrine specifically, however, there is an opportunity to ensure that this is an integral part of Catholic schooling. Embedding this at the heart of Catholic education should promote engagement. Children and young people who are growing up in an increasingly secular world will recognise the impact of this teaching on the social ills which wider society presents to them outwith the lens of faith:

> This strategy would have many advantages. It would, first and foremost, have the potential to engage the interest and involvement of senior students at a time when many of them begin to question the relevance of their faith to contemporary challenges (Grace, 2013, p. 105).

This would offer an incredibly powerful and distinctive curriculum, which would engage learners around real world issues but do so through a faith based perspective which is rooted in the preferential option for the poor. The focus on engagement is key, as young people consistently demonstrate their determination to serve those in most need and their passion for social justice is notable. This

emphasis on senior pupils reflects the Pope Benedict XVI Caritas Award explored earlier, and offers opportunities to reflect further learning to opportunities such as this.

However, such a significant shift in approach in terms of the curriculum is no simple task. The current restrictions have already been considered, and the need to upskill staff has been explored earlier in this thesis:

> transformation will require school authorities to struggle for more relative autonomy in curriculum provision; it will require changes in professional preparation and continuing professional development programmes for Catholic teachers and it will require school leaders to be innovative agents of change (Grace, 2013, p. 104).

These challenges are not insurmountable. With the correct structures in place, professional learning opportunities could be offered which would meet the needs of Catholic educators. This would require the support of school leaders, who would need to ensure that staff are given the time needed to engage in such opportunities. If the struggle for greater autonomy was realised, and opportunities presented through the Curriculum Improvement Cycle came to fruition, then the scale of the professional learning would require considerable partnership working. Earlier in this thesis, the partners involved in Catholic education in Scotland were considered. Professional learning on this scale would benefit from input from all stakeholders, and would produce the best results if the Scottish Catholic Education Service were to work in partnership with academics at the St Andrew's Foundation for Catholic Teacher Education and school leaders to present a robust programme of professional learning which encourages practitioner enquiry, raises awareness of key Church teachings and embeds the needs of the most marginalised in society in order to equip Catholic teachers, many of whom may have been practicing for many years, to cater to a new and evolving curriculum in Catholic schools.

If this were to be achieved, it would go a significant way towards securing what some have suggested:

> proposes that 'the Catholic school seeks to integrate the curriculum, to unify faith and culture, and to bring together the different pieces of the school programme into a higher synthesis that influences the social and spiritual formation of pupils' (Gleeson, 2019, p. 3).

In doing so, it would not see these aspects as independent of one another. Rather, societal challenges would be viewed through a spiritual focus. This does not seek to assume that all pupils or teachers share that same spirituality, but rather offers an authenticity to the discussion. By grounding its motivation in faith, children and young people in Catholic schools will be aware as they learn of society's many problems that there is a deeply considered response from the Church, and that it offers a way to address these challenges through respect for the dignity of all.

Having previously considered the challenge presented by pluralism, it is necessary to consider any proposal concerning the curriculum against this backdrop. Franchi notes that there is a tension, particularly with reference to the teaching of Religious Education:

> In contemporary Catholic teaching, the appropriate conceptual framework for religious education oscillates between the principles of catechesis …and broader educational thought …It is not clear, for example, how this approach can accommodate the diversity of worldviews found in the contemporary Catholic school (Franchi, 2013, p. 468).

He goes on to add that the current curriculum for Religious Education in Catholic schools in Scotland may present a particular barrier to non-Catholic students:

> the language of personalization, when added to expressions of explicit faith commitment in some of the core learning, suggests that the non-Catholic pupil (or even the non-practicing baptized Catholic) in the Catholics school

> would be unable to participate fully in religious education classes (Franchi, 2013, p. 475).

This serves to highlight the delicate balance which must be maintained when discussing the curriculum in Catholic schools. It is necessary, and essential, to maintain the distinctive nature of the Catholic school, however it has already been highlighted that this must be done in such a way that preserves the dignity of non-Catholic learners, and ensures that children and young people are prepared to take their place in a diverse Scotland informed by principles which teach tolerance and respect. Linked to this, the challenge presented to Catholic schools they seek to indoctrinate their learners has already been noted, albeit briefly. Any curricular recommendations must, therefore, take this into account.

5.3 Staffing and recruitment

Finally, a brief consideration of emerging challenges pertaining to staffing will ensue. This would seem to be a particular challenge for Catholic schools in parts of Scotland, and the geographical divide within the country becomes particularly evident. This section seeks only to evidence the existence of this challenge, and recommends further research be given to this area which is vital for the future of Catholic schools in Scotland.

Beyond Scotland, this challenge is already evident. In a particular sense, securing the right candidates for leadership positions is a challenge:

> Finding and supporting visionary and skilled leaders for schools, universities and places of learning has become a central pre-occupation for those responsible for education. (Whittle and Wodon, 2024, p. 1).

Securing Catholic school leaders with the skill, passion and motivation needed for the role is an essential element for the responses suggested to every other challenge this thesis has considered. Without leadership teams who are well placed to deliver on these aims, Catholic education remains at a standstill at best, or (perhaps more likely) enters decline. Therefore consideration must be given to

what steps are necessary to increase the skillset and pool of prospective leaders for Catholic schools. As this section progresses, it will become evident that increasing such a pool of teaching staff may be the necessary first step for this to be possible.

As this recruitment challenge deepens, Catholic schools are depending increasingly on non-Catholic teaching staff. Their contribution to Catholic education is inestimable, and the work of Catholic schools would not be possible without them. However, for school leaders, it presents an additional challenge:

> Catholic school leaders have discovered that it is now far more difficult to recruit teachers who are committed, practising Catholic Christians, particularly to serve as leaders within Catholic schools. Moreover, as one contribution to this volume explains, Catholic primary or elementary schools could not function if it was not for significant numbers of non-Catholic teachers working in them (Whittle and Wodon, 2024, p. 6).

In the Scottish context, given the need to be Catholic to deliver Religious Education, this presents a particular challenge in the primary setting. While typically Religious Education may permeate the whole curriculum, for example using the events of Holy Week as a stimulus for a Literacy lesson to produce a piece of extended writing, such opportunities will be far more limited when there is a lack of Catholic teaching staff equipped to deliver such a lesson. It seems clear that this therefore diminishes any argument that Catholic education effectively permeates the life of the whole school.

Such concerns pertaining to recruitment and retention are not limited to Scotland or the UK. It has been noted that

> There are recurrent concerns about the recruitment and retention of leaders for Catholic schools in different parts of the world (McKinney, Fodey and Lappin, 2024, p. 49).

This suggests that the problem is widespread, and as such it is worthwhile contemplating whether other jurisdictions have had success in finding solutions to this challenge. An international comparison would be a worthy focus of future research, and its findings could offer a guideline that might be followed to seek a resolution within the Scottish context.

This thesis has already recommended that any changes to the curriculum would benefit from significant professional learning, and that a key element of this would be partnership working between key stakeholders in Catholic education in Scotland. The same, arguably, is true for the formation of senior leaders in Scottish Catholic schools:

> As the formation of the lay leaders of Catholic schools has become increasingly important there are questions about the preparation and formation of these leaders. …there are debates about the relationship between the academic and practical on-site formation of the lay Catholic leader (McKinney, Fodey and Lappin, 2024, p. 49).

At present, there is no formal requirement for Catholic school leaders in Scotland to demonstrate any form of understanding of Church teaching, or the Church's instructions pertaining to the mission and purpose of Catholic education. This seems to be a flawed system, whereby those exercising direct authority over such institutions do not need to have any awareness of their stated identity. While some checks and balances exist in the recruitment process, earlier reference to the views of Catholic headteachers in England would serve to highlight a limited knowledge and understanding of Catholic education among senior leaders. It is therefore essential that consideration be given to professional learning requirements for senior leaders in Catholic schools if the distinctive identity of these schools is to be maintained and properly implemented.

This challenge is, however, not limited to school leaders. Consistently in this thesis, it has been argued that Catholic educators will have a role to play in presenting a defence of Catholic schools as this debate continues to escalate. To do this, they must firstly understand the arguments presented in support of

Catholic education, and must understand its purpose and mission. If they are unable to do so, the argument for Catholic education is diminished, and in the meantime the quality of said provision will not align with the Church's expectations:

> teachers—especially beginning teachers whose faith may well still be developing might struggle to articulate a distinctly Catholic vision of education and of Catholicism itself, which may weaken the mission and identity of the school (Coll and Reilly, 2024, p. 116).

It is therefore necessary to consider how Catholic educators can be best formed to ensure that they secure such an awareness. To achieve this, it is necessary to consider the context for their Initial Teacher Education:

> until five years ago, the only route to undertaking the Catholic Teacher's Certificate (CTC), which qualifies holders to teach Religious Education (RE), alongside the teaching degree was by attending the University of Glasgow. The St Andrew's Foundation now offer the CTC in six universities around the country, more than doubling the number of newly qualified teachers entering the system each year. While this increase is addressing the issue of recruitment, recent statistics have shown that there is still a shortage of appropriately qualified Catholic teachers, and there remains somewhat of an east/west divide (Coll and Reilly, 2024, pp. 118–119).

Such efforts are laudable, and apparently having the desired effect. In the longer run, it should be hoped that this approach bolsters Catholic teachers' understanding and awareness of the mission and purpose of Catholic education. However, given the current concerns in this regard, it will be essential for course providers to review this regularly and to evaluate their work critically. It is, however, concerning to note the geographical divide which is presented here. This infers that the availability of Catholic teachers is diminished significantly in the east of Scotland, which would reflect the overall divide in terms of Catholic adherents discussed earlier. This, therefore, suggests that the quality of Catholic

education may be impacted in the east of the country to a greater extent by the availability of Catholic teachers. Again, there is scope here for further research to examine the impact that this split has on the provision of Catholic education, and on recruitment to teaching and leadership posts.

The impact on the provision of Catholic education is beginning to be evidenced. This lengthy, but important quote, highlights the views of Catholic headteachers in the east of Scotland:

> headteachers, from a Local Authority in the East of Scotland, explained the ramifications of that shortage in terms of their strategic management and the day-to-day running of their schools. For example, they explained the challenge of tactically having to place their non-Catholic teachers in particular classes, i.e. avoiding those with children preparing for a sacrament …teachers regularly swapped classes for the teaching of RE to ensure that children were at least being taught be someone qualified and approved to do so …they also recognised that even those who were appropriately qualified to teach in the Catholic sector had varying degrees of knowledge of their faith and that required particular management too (Coll and Reilly, 2024, p. 120).

Thus, the overall provision of Catholic schooling is vastly different depending on where in Scotland a young person is educated. Children and young people deserve to experience high quality learning regardless of their postcode, and Church authorities must urgently consider how they can promote recruitment to Catholic teaching in the east of Scotland where it is so underrepresented. Careful consideration should be given to encouraging Catholic teachers from elsewhere to support in authorities where there is greater need, and avenues for funding such campaigns should be examined.

5.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has examined two further examples of challenges being faced by Catholic schools in Scotland, both of which would benefit from further research and more detailed exploration: the curriculum, and staffing.

With regard to the curriculum, the timing is right for a more thorough debate concerning what it should look like in Catholic school settings. Education Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle provides the Church with a rare opportunity to influence change alongside the entirety of the Scottish education system. Seizing this opportunity would ensure that Catholic education's voices are heard and could facilitate a wide ranging discussion on the future of Catholic schools in Scotland, securing their identity for the foreseeable future.

With regard to staffing, there is an alarming picture emerging as it becomes clear that there is a lack of Catholic teachers, particularly in the east of Scotland. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly evident that Catholic teachers and school leaders are not equipped with the understanding necessary to articulate the distinctive mission and identity of Catholic schools. This calls into question the purpose of such places of education, and so addressing this knowledge gap should be an urgent concern for all involved in Catholic education in Scotland.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Summary

This thesis has examined how Catholic schools in Scotland are shaped by their history and mission, and the ways in which they are responding to contemporary challenges. The historical analysis demonstrated how Catholic schools emerged from a clear focus on dignity, inclusion and faith, and that the settlement offered by the Education (Scotland) Act 1918 allowed these schools to retain a clear religious identity while contributing to national educational aims. The theological analysis outlined how Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology place the life and dignity of the human person, the common good, and a preferential option for the poor at the heart of Catholic educational practice, and ergo at the core of Catholic schooling.

The analysis of external challenges demonstrated that child poverty continues to have a significant and profound impact on children and young people in terms of their learning and overall wellbeing, and that while Catholic schools are already taking laudable steps to mitigate its impacts, they cannot single-handedly remove such effects entirely and it is unreasonable to assume that education alone is the key to eradicating child poverty in Scotland. Furthermore, analysis demonstrated that growing secularism and religious diversity require Catholic schools in Scotland to articulate their identity with confidence and to have a clear understanding of their mission and purpose. Ongoing debate about the funding of denominational schools indicates the importance of providing clearer evidence of their contribution to the wider common good.

The analysis of internal challenges highlighted questions about the future shape of the curriculum and the need for clear action on recruitment and staffing of Catholic schools in Scotland, to ensure a consistent Catholic workforce equipped to deliver Religious Education and lead Catholic schools informed by the requirements outlined in key Church documents. It has been demonstrated that Catholic schools require teachers and leaders who are formed in both the educational and theological dimensions of their vocation, and that regional disparities in staffing must be addressed if the sector is to remain stable.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that renewal is possible where Catholic schools draw upon their theological foundations, are attentive to their distinctive history, cater consciously to the social conditions in which children and young people exist today, and work collaboratively with partners across the Catholic education and wider policy systems.

6.2 Recommendations

For school leaders, Catholic Social Teaching should shape improvement planning and daily decision making. Structured cycles of reflection and action can help schools to best understand local needs and identify focused interventions that support those most significantly impacted by poverty and marginalisation, and when informed by a theological grounding this will have the greatest impact as it will be driven by a clear rationale. Educators across the life of the school should be asked to identify where their subjects can engage meaningfully with questions pertaining to the dignity and life of the human person, social justice and the common good. In doing so, caution must be exercised to do this in ways which respect the integrity of each subject area. Pastoral systems should be organised so that risks are recognised early, and pastoral support should also be informed clearly by the theological foundations of Catholic education. Schools should communicate their contribution clearly with an evidence-basis which describes their work to promote inclusion, support families and contribute to positive outcomes for young people, informed by Catholic Social Teaching and underpinned by the guiding principles of Liberation Theology.

Church authorities, including the Scottish Catholic Education Service, should proactively consider what can be done to best support formation for leadership in Catholic schools in Scotland, and to increase teacher recruitment in a targeted manner to best support those areas in greatest need. There should be a clear focus on ensuring that Catholic school leaders understand the mission of Catholic education, and are confident in their ability to navigate this in a changing social landscape where school populations will be increasingly diverse. Church authorities should reflect on the opportunity presented by the Curriculum Improvement Cycle, and should proactively engage with discussion and debate pertaining to curriculum development in Catholic schools in Scotland.

Consideration should be given to what further steps may be taken to widen the availability of the Catholic Teacher's Certificate in those areas where recruitment faces a greater challenge. Student teachers should have access to the same opportunities to explore theological and pedagogical questions related to Catholic education, and learn about the impact that Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology can have on their practice, regardless of where they choose to study. There have already been steps taken to widen this provision, however at present undergraduate student teachers outwith the University of Glasgow remain unable to qualify to teach in Catholic schools within the structure of their degree course. This seems a reasonable step to ensure that their understanding of Catholic education is interwoven with their initial teacher education in the most practical manner. Furthermore, early career formation should include support on addressing the challenges explored throughout this thesis.

Finally, for national policymakers, the process of curriculum review should recognise the distinctive contribution of Catholic education and ensure that there is sufficient scope for Catholic schools to consider their distinctive mission within the national framework.

6.3 Limitations

This thesis is based on published sources rather than any new empirical data from schools, staff, children and young people, families or other stakeholders. Key aspects of the recommendations of this thesis, therefore, require further consideration and study to gather such data which would be key to their success. The policy landscape continues to evolve, and demographic patterns continue to shift over time. This study takes no account of contrary views within Catholic education, pertaining to theological debates on the merits of Liberation Theology, for example. Moreover, it has only sought to expose the latter challenges and has not fully considered the wider debate and implications which require further research.

6.4 Implications for further research

Further work should be undertaken to examine how schools design and evaluate whole-school approaches to poverty through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching. There is anecdotal evidence of such examples, but a robust study would benefit school leaders and support sharing best practice.

Empirical research is required specific to the Scottish context to evaluate any efforts to support Catholic educators and school leaders in their understanding of the mission and purpose of Catholic education. This should examine the extent to which Church teaching is embedded in the lift of Catholic schools in Scotland, and the capacity of leaders to articulate their vision in this context.

This thesis has been limited to implications for the Scottish context, however international comparisons of Catholic curricula may lend itself to considering the wider debate around the opportunity presented by curriculum review in Scotland. Moreover, studies of curriculum development should be considered as a means of evaluating how other subject areas might integrate the principles of Catholic Social Teaching in their planning.

6.5 Concluding remarks

Catholic schools in Scotland are rooted in a long tradition of service, learning, faith and service with a clear commitment to the life and dignity of the human person. Today they operate in a context shaped by profound social, cultural and demographic change, yet their central mission to form young people intellectually, morally and spiritually remains both constant and necessary. They are asked to support young people in a society marked by significant social and cultural change and to do so with clarity of purpose and attention to those who are most vulnerable.

This thesis has argued that Catholic schools can best meet contemporary challenges when they draw deeply on their theological foundations, engage critically with the social conditions that shape young people’s lives, and articulate their distinctive identity with confidence. By drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, investing in staff formation, strengthening partnerships and articulating their contribution clearly, Catholic schools can continue to make a meaningful and

distinctive contribution to Scottish education. Their future strength will depend on their ability to balance faithfulness to their mission with a steady commitment to the wellbeing and dignity of every young person entrusted to their care. Their ongoing contribution to wider society will be measured not only by academic outcomes, but also by the extent to which they help cultivate a more just, compassionate and hopeful society.

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