Value for Learning: stakeholders' perspectives on leading, teaching and learning in small Irish primary schools.

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Introduction

In 2019, Department of Education and Skills (DES) statistics indicate that 44.1% of all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland had four or fewer class teachers and fitted the definition of a small school used by the DES since 2011. In 2019, these schools were catering for 14.5% of all primary school pupils. Many of these schools are located in rural areas, including geographically isolated places such islands.   The number of small schools has fallen consistently since independence – in 1924, 80% of all Irish primary schools had two teachers or less. They served a local population where children walked to school, often through the fields, not always wearing any footwear, and potentially carrying a sod of turf for the school heating system, as immortalised in Alice Taylor's (1988) reminiscences about her rural childhood. Closures of many of these local schools over the intervening decades have been blamed for contributing to rural decline.

One segment of the national school system (complex when considered in terms of patronage[2]), the Protestant sector, is out-of-step with the system overall with regard to

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[2] The National School system in Ireland has its origins in the 1831 Stanley letter. The Westminster government established a system for elementary education in Ireland that provided funding towards the establishment of schools by a local patron but did not own those schools, nor did it directly employ the teachers. The original intention was that the system would no non-denominational to include children of Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and other Reformed Christian faiths. By the 1850s, this system had denominationalised as the main churches were intent on operating their own schools with their own form of religious education (Coolahan 1981, Lodge 2004). The Church of Ireland's schools only fully entered into the National School system in 1904 (Parkes 2011, Lodge 2020). After independence, the new Irish State retained the denominational education system where the State paid the teachers and provided most of the funding for the schools but did not own the schools nor did it directly employ the teachers (Drudy & Lynch 1993). The rights of both churches to own and operate their own institutions (including schools) and the right of parents to ensure their children were educated according to their conscience were embedded in the 1937 Constitution / Bunreacht na h-Eireann. Thus, Church of Ireland bishops continue to be the patrons of the great majority of Anglican National Schools in their dioceses and the link between individual or grouped parishes and their schools continues, as does the interest by the Church of Ireland General Synod in oversight of its school sector.

profile by school size. 79% of all primary schools under Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian or Society of Friends patronage are small schools with 4 class teachers or fewer. These schools can be found in urban as well as rural areas, in places of high population as well as places with scattered inhabitants. This sector was particularly impacted by the policy changes of the last decade with regard to State support for small schools. It is worth noting that this same sector experienced significant reduction in numbers in earlier decades. From the late 1960's and continuing on into the 1970's a significant number of primary schools under Church of Ireland patronage closed. These closures occurred as a result of the Church of Ireland reflecting upon itself and recognising its own declining numbers in some parts of the country, rather than being the result of the State pushing for economic savings. The closures of the 1960s and 1970s arose out of the push to close what were seen as redundant churches. During this time, the Church of Ireland also saw the creation of parish unions and groupings which reduced the perceived need for individual parish schools. A report was presented to General Synod in 1968 (entitled *Administration 1968*) and this formed the basis for the introduction of a policy of the rationalisation of churches, parishes and schools from then onwards.[3]

This paper explores the impact of policy changes on the small schools in the Protestant primary sector. It reports on a study conducted in 2015/16 engaging with the communities in, and served by, small Protestant primary schools. This study explored the impact of the Value For Money review of small schools on their communities. It also engaged the voices of a wide range of those who are part of the lives of these small schools including principals, teachers, parents, children, members of the Board of Management to gain an insight into the key aspects of life and culture in small Irish schools. Participants emphasise the positive, familial aspect of the culture of these schools which gives a strong sense of identity as well as facilitating good cultures of teaching and learning. It is clear from participating principals in particular that these positives outweigh for them the significant stresses of workload and lack of systemic support.

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[3] The authors express our appreciation to Dr. Ken Fennelly for this important background information on changing policies about small primary schools in the Church of Ireland.

Evolving policy focus about small schools

Just over a decade ago Ireland hit a very serious financial 'bump in the road' which gave rise to significant cuts in public spending. The cuts (both actual and planned) outlined first in the McCarthy Report (Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes 2009) gave a clear indication of what was seen as low-hanging fruit and an easy target in Irish education. Small schools were among those perceived easy targets and many were recommended either for amalgamation or closure as they were viewed as a more costly option than their larger counterparts. This move to trim the system of small schools because of their perceived costliness was not limited to Ireland. In Finland, the number of small schools fell from 2093 to 660 between 1992 and 2012 in order to save money for the exchequer (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer 2014).

As the Irish economic situation deteriorated, the Irish Inspectorate was tasked with undertaking a 'Value for Money' (VFM) review of small schools in 2011. This exercise defined small schools as those with four or fewer class teachers. The definition of what is a small school has not been a consistent one - in 2004 the IPPN report had defined small schools as those with 8 or fewer teachers where principals were also teaching in the classroom). The VFM report focused in particular on the costs per pupil associated with various sizes of school. It reported that small schools with four or fewer teachers were a more costly option than their larger counterparts:

> ▶ Cost of running a 1-teacher school €6,870 per pupil
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> ▶ Cost of running a 2-teacher school €4,833 per pupil
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> ▶ Cost of running a 3-teacher school €3,582 per pupil
>
> ▶ Cost of running a 4-teacher school €3,425 per pupil (flattens thereafter)
>
> ▶ Cost of running a 16-teacher school €3,214 per pupil

The VFM report argued that there was no international evidence that small schools were measurably better places of learning than their larger counterparts. However, neither did the report present any evidence that small schools were less educationally effective, stating that the evidence was inconclusive.

The recommendations of the VFM report included the closure or amalgamation of schools similar in ethos or language of instruction that were within 2km of each other and the amalgamation of similar schools within 8km of each other. The McCarthy Report on cost savings in 2009 had recommended that all primary schools with 50 or fewer pupils should be closed or amalgamated with a projected saving of €18 million due to a reduction in teaching posts. Interestingly, the same report did not factor in the costs of increasing space and resources in existing schools to cater for the additional pupils, or the cost of transporting children longer distances to schools or the reality that teachers whose schools closed would be redeployed, possibly as additional staff into the schools that were earmarked for expansion. Research in the UK and Norway had already show that savings brought about by closing small schools were offset by the requirement for more accommodation and resources in the schools to which these children were moved, plus the cost of transporting them there (Bell & Sigworth 1987; Forsythe 1983; Kvalsund 2009).

The VFM report was quietly shelved, eventually seeing the light of day in 2013 with statements from politicians that its recommendations would not be implemented, presumably in response to political pressure in rural constituencies. It remains unclear exactly what the reasons were for the shelving of the report and this would bear further exploration. However, those directly involved with small schools had perceived the report hanging over them like the sword of Damocles, undermining morale and future sustainability. Even after confirmation that its recommendations would not be implemented, Blackburn (2015) reported that teachers in small schools felt that the Inspectorate's sole focus on the cost of schools had highlighted misunderstanding of, and disregard for the culture and value of small schools. Her interviews with teachers in small rural schools outlined the alienating impact of that report both on their sense of being a valued part of the education system and on their sense of security for the future.

But times change and policy evolves in response to the ever-changing cultural, political and social context. In 2019, environmental concerns had emerged as a serious issue to be tackled at policy level. In 2019, the Ministers for Education and Skills and Rural & Community Development held a one-day symposium on small schools, emphasising the role small schools play in rural and environmental sustainability by keeping education provision local. Similar

concerns have brought about a change in thinking about the value of small schools for rural sustainability in the UK (e.g. O'Brien 2019; Church of England Education Office 2018).

While the change in policy represented a more positive view of the small school as a phenomenon, it did not focus particularly on the voices of all those who make up the community of a typical small school. Instead, once again, policy-makers saw the small schools as a means of achieving a new policy – measurable rural and environmental sustainability rather than measurable, narrowly-defined cost-saving. At the 2019 DES / Department of Rural & Community Affairs Symposium on Small Primary Schools, speaking on behalf of the General Synod Board of Education, archbishop Michael Jackson (2019) made it clear that the GS Board was pleased to note the Department of Education and Skills' acknowledgement of the positive contribution that small schools make to those who learn in them and to the communities they serve. At the time of delivering this paper, we continue to await the promised reconvening of that symposium by those two government Departments to consider how best to support small Irish primary schools.

Thinking about small schools nationally and internationally

Small schools are not unique to Ireland. They can be found all over Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, and throughout the developing world (Mulkeen & Higgins, 2009; Quail & Smyth 2014). They continue to serve geographically scattered communities across many parts of the world. We in Ireland have much to learn both from international research and good practice in terms of teaching and learning, leadership and State policy. Some European jurisdictions such as Finland and Scotland have undertaken more research about small schools than has been the case in Ireland despite all three countries having similar proportions of small schools in their primary systems (e.g. Dowling 2009; Kalaoja & Pietarinen 2009; Wilson 2008).

Policies towards small schools differ internationally. For example, Sweden, Finland and England have seen small schools as politically and culturally important to support rural and isolated communities and have taken steps to actively support them (Aberg-Bengtsson 2009; Hargreaves 2009; Kalaoja & Pietarinen 2009). One of the difficulties in Ireland is that policy

has tended to frame small schools in terms of the cost-savings. Advocacy groups representing teachers and principals have tended to focus on the stresses or challenges associated with teaching or leading small institutions (e.g. INTO 2003; INTO 2015; IPPN 2004; IPPN 2005). While it is undoubtedly important to highlight the challenges facing those employed in such settings, the lack of more wide-ranging Irish research focusing on teaching and learning as experienced by all members of the school community has framed small schools as both expensive and negative without telling a more inclusive, representative and accurate story.

International research gives us a more rounded picture. The benefits of small schools for those who learn in them have been well documented. For example, Francis (1992) found that children learning in small schools were happier than their peers in larger schools. Finnish research tells us that small schools (which cater for 20% of the primary school-age cohort) are characterised by positive relationships where children develop independent learning skills and where teaching is characterised by innovation and the importance of the small school to its local community is recognised (Kalaoja & Pietarinen 2009; Autti & Hyry-Beihammer 2014). These findings are very similar to those reported by Austrian and Swiss researchers (Raggl 2015). Finnish research also acknowledges that teachers have to operate in a system that does not plan curriculum and resources as well for the multi-grade class situation as it does for single-grade classes, giving rise to stress and overwork for teachers (Kalaoja & Pietarinen 2009).

International research also points toward the benefits of re-framing systemic thinking about small schools, enabling a move beyond negative discourses that focus either on unit costs or on teacher stress due to mismatch of curriculum and resources for the multi-grade setting at system level, in order to recognise the potential of small schools to benefit to the whole system. Both England and the United States have used aspects of small school organisation and relationships to benefit larger schools in order to develop more positive relationships that support teaching and learning (McKinney et al 2002; Hargreaves 2009).

A Study of Irish Small Primary Schools: Methodology

Lodge and Tuohy undertook a study of small primary schools in Ireland entitled *Value for Learning*. The summary report was published in 2016, launched at the General Synod of the

Church of Ireland as an addendum to the Education debate in May that year. The study invited principals, teachers, parents of 2nd class children and chairs of Boards of Management of primary schools under Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian and Society of Friends patronage with between 1 and 4 class teachers to respond to surveys. As noted already, 79% of all schools in the Protestant sector have between one and four classroom teachers. 83% of the applicable schools in the Protestant network engaged in the research and were located across the jurisdiction in both urban and rural areas. The timing of the survey enabled members of the Protestant small schools' community to respond to the VFM report on Small Schools.

Questionnaires were sent to parents, teachers, principals and chairpersons of the Board of Management. The questions explored the significance of different aspects of school life for the respondents. Parents and teachers were asked their perceptions of how children responded to school life. They were asked what they valued in the small school, what they found of benefit and what they found most challenging. The questions were designed to triangulate with a previous study *Our Schools, Our Community* (2011) involving all Protestant schools. Principals and Chairpersons of Boards gave information on the satisfaction and challenge of their leadership roles. They also outlined their reactions to key areas of school development. Responses were collected on a Likert scale, and there were opportunities for open written responses. Each of the groups was also asked about their reactions to the VFM Report published in 2013.

The researchers also invited a sample of eleven schools that had agreed to participate in the survey study to take part in a further qualitative study involving classroom, assembly and playground observation, as well as interviews of school personnel, Board members and parents, plus focus groups with children. Previous work undertaken in Ireland has tended to focus in particular on teachers' and principals' experiences and the researchers felt that a broader perspective across the small school community was important. The researchers followed up by holding discussions about the project outcomes with policy, patron and management bodies.

A key aim of the study was to fill the gaps in our understanding of small Irish primary schools from the perspectives of a range of those who make up the community of a small school. The study was supported by the General Synod Board of Education of the Church of Ireland, the Governors of the Church of Ireland College of Education, the Church of Ireland Primary School Managers' Association, the Church Education Society and Dublin City University.

Value for learning: **participants' perspectives on leading, living and learning in small schools**

The summary report of this study (Lodge and Tuohy 2016) highlights the positive responses to the survey by all stakeholders about the various aspects of life and learning in small schools. Respondents noted the caring ethos, the tendency for there to be a family atmosphere, the relatively low level of negative discipline and the limited extent of bullying. Classroom observation showed organised classrooms where there was a lot of independent learning by children as the teacher worked with different groups in the one room. They also observed peer learning where children worked together and taught each other. Playground observation noted children playing together across age-cohorts often in limited space.

Children's perspectives

Children were very positive about their experiences of their schools across all eleven schools participating in the in-depth study. They focused on the positive relationships, their enjoyment of life and learning in school and their sense of belonging. A child who had previously been in large schools commented positively on the benefit of knowing everyone in the small school and of feeling included by the peer group.

> *"I was in a big school for two years. I didn't even know all those in my class. Here I know everyone in all classes".*

A few children wished there was a larger pool of potential friends. Three pupils wanted "*more pupils, so that I can have more friends*". More of the participants noted the value of knowing everyone, of having a feeling of belonging to a tight-knit community:

> *"If there were too many friends in the school you might forget their names"*

"My friends look after me if I feel a bit lonely"

Children participating in the focus groups commented on the lack of bullying in a small school:

"There is a smaller chance of you getting bullied."

"In a big school, some big children might be mean to you."

Older children also commented positively on being given responsibility for younger children in multi-level classes and in the school yard.   Older pupils reported feeling responsible for younger ones, even though it might be a bit annoying at times.   They had a sense of responsibility to set a good example to younger children. The term *"role model"* was used by juniors about the seniors and seniors about themselves. The ability to help one another depended to some extent on the spread in the classroom.   Senior pupils reported helping young ones in paired reading, computer buddies, *Figure it Out* or *Golden Time*.   They also helped in Mathematics and Irish class or with spellings.   Younger pupils knew they could ask for help and reported that they had been helped by others.   They had a sense that older pupils were smarter, and they hoped to emulate them by listening to what they were taught. Older pupils felt important and respected when younger ones came to them and listened to them:

"You feel smart, like you are the teacher".

The researchers who conducted the site visits to the eleven schools commented positively on the capacity of the children to learn independently in their classrooms and their maturity as learners in being prepared to wait for teacher attention for example. There was a stress on independent learning, where children found their own pace through worksheets and workbooks, sometimes with little interaction with their peers or with other pupils in the classroom. Pupils spoke of liking activities and wished for less time filling out worksheets. Pupils spoke of overhearing lessons taught to other groups in the same classroom, rather than being part of these lessons.

In other classrooms, there was genuine multi-grade teaching, where a theme was presented to different grades together and developed either in cooperative learning between grades, or else in separate grades, with the pupils coming together at the end. Pupils told us of group

work projects they enjoyed, of helping younger pupils and younger pupils talked about mentors and help from older ones.

The researchers noted that, in the playgrounds during breaktimes across the eleven schools, no child was observed by themselves for an extended period, and there seemed to be a concerted effort to ensure that individuals were included in activities. In one of the eleven schools, a child with ASD was part of a group playing a game and the children seemed very inclusive of the child's unwillingness to adhere to rules such as being caught. The researchers commented that the eleven playgrounds generally seemed happy and inclusive places. They raised the question as to whether in some schools older pupils might have lost out on an important aspect of competitive play because of the need to watch out for younger children and include them in the play due to the small size of the play space shared with children ranging in age from four years to twelve years. In particular, the use of the tackle in football would have to be restricted when younger children were playing with older and bigger children. This could hamper the development of skills in the older child. This 'gentleness', while having benefits, might mean that the child might not develop the attitudes necessary to play contact team sports such as rugby, hockey or football. Of course, similar constraints may happen in larger schools where there is limited access to playground space.

Parents' perspectives

Parents reported three key reasons for choosing a small school for their child/ren. High academic standards, religious patronage and the desire to have their children in a small school were most typical reasons. The caring nature of small schools was highly praised by parents and they were equally positive about the quality of teaching and learning which they and their children experienced. The co-educational nature of the schools was also a factor for some of the parents.

Small schools were also seen to be very welcoming of parents and of children with disabilities special needs. In general, there were very positive responses from parents about the schools' performance in terms of school organisation, academic standards, the care for the children and a welcoming atmosphere. For some parents, a key reason for selecting their children's

school was its small size. Over a fifth of all responding parents selected the small size of the school as the main determining factor in the choice of their children's school.

	Percentage positive	Chosen as priority N= 825
Welcoming atmosphere	92.1	92
Academic Standards	87.1	179
The standard of discipline	86.9	12
Cultural life	80.0	31
Welcome given to parents	79.5	1
Size of School	78.5	149
Facilities	73.8	7
Family atmosphere of multi-age classroom	70.6	23
Recommendation of other parents	68.0	47
Inclusive of pupils with SEN	60.5	15
Closeness to home	59.6	50
Church patronage	55.3	145
Secondary access	40.5	9

Table 1 The percentage of parents who indicated that the indicated item was 'important' or 'very important' in deciding to send their child to school, and the frequency with which that item was chosen as the single-most important factor in the decision.

Two items reflect the emphasis on the welcoming atmosphere of the school for parents in making the choice of schools.   It is clear from the positive experience of the parents that their expectations were being met.   30% of parents chose this item as indicating what the school does best.   It seems that parents believe that this type of atmosphere is an essential contribution to other aspects of school life.   In the written responses, the care of pupils was regularly stated as the main positive of the school and was operative in the way pupils are known as individuals, '*rather than as numbers*'.

	%age positive	Chosen as priority
Provides a caring community	99.0	125
Relates to pupils as individuals	98.5	120

Table 2 The percentage of parents who indicated that the school was 'good' or 'very good' at providing the service indicated in the item, and the number of parents who indicated that the item was what the school did best, from the list of 20 items presented.   (N=825)

A theme that resonated strongly through the responses was that '*teachers had more time for pupils*' and that there are opportunities for one-on-one interaction between teachers and pupils. There was a strong sense that the small size of the school means that any problems a child may have are noticed quickly and, more importantly, there is a response.   Not only did teachers look out for pupils, but the pupils cared for one another.   This peer support was highly valued by parents.   A common image for the school was '*one big happy family'*.   One parent reflected that it they might be better to do home schooling if the school got any bigger. Some parents did have small concerns about the possibility of their children's lives being too

insular in a small school and how this it could negatively impact on their ability to transition to a much larger second level school in the future. Some parents wondered if the intimacy of the small school might make for a difficult transition to secondary school '*the goldfish from a bowl to a pond syndrome*'.

There was relatively little negativity in parental responses though there were comments about the lack of resources to which the school had access. This reflected similar findings in the Tuohy, Lodge & Fennelly study (2011) *Our Schools Our Community* where limited resources and dated buildings were identified by parents in particular as a challenge to teaching and learning.

In their written comments, parents were appreciative of the quality of teaching.   They reported teachers giving time to their children and knowing the children '*strengths and weaknesses*' very well. They felt that children were less likely to be left behind academically in the small classroom.   Some parents reflected that the mixing of classes in the multi-grade classroom was both a blessing and a disadvantage. Younger children were often stimulated and challenged when they overheard lessons for older children.   However, older children could be bored with hearing material being repeated for younger ones.   They would not be challenged by work in lower classes.   Undoubtedly some children benefited from this, but others '*had grown out of the school by 5th and 6th class*'.   Another concern of parents was that, if a child did not get on with a teacher, then they were with the same teacher for a number of years.   This could be difficult.   Some parents lamented the lack of rotation of teachers and would have preferred a single classroom.   Others saw the continuity between teacher and pupil as a major asset of the small school. '*He has benefitted from a teacher for a few years who has known him and therefore understands and meets his need excellently*'.

Although generally happy with the discipline in the school, a minority of parents pointed out that a disruptive pupil can have a very negative effect in a classroom, and this can spread to a number of class groups.   Frequently, younger pupils would not be able to handle an older, disruptive pupil.

<u>Teachers' perspectives</u>

Teachers in the study were keenly aware of the value of their school to the local faith community and of the benefits of the caring environment & family atmosphere created in the small school for pupils.   They felt that children get more teacher attention in small schools and had greater opportunity for both peer and independent learning.

	Percent positive
Younger pupils are exposed to challenging learning when they overhear lessons for older pupils.	98.0
Learning is reinforced for older pupils when it is taught to different groups.	96.0
Pupils benefit academically from a thematic approach to a topic, where different classes work on the same theme, but with different expectations.	93.3
Older pupils benefit academically from acting as peer-tutors and mentors.	91.9
Younger pupils develop their language skills better from being with older pupils.	88.3
Pupils take responsibility for their own learning; they become independent learners	86.2
Pupils tend to be cooperative rather than competitive	76.5

Table 3. The percentage of teachers (including principals) who indicated that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the item describing academic outcomes for pupils in multi-grade classrooms.

Teachers commented positively on the opportunities that a multi-grade class setting presents for facilitating the spiral curriculum. They also commented positively on the benefits of working with children over a longer period of time which enabled them to plan in focused, individual and differentiated ways to meet pupils' needs.   The sixteen Support Teachers generally supported the views of other teachers that children with disablilities and special educational needs, as well as learners from disadvantaged areas benefited from the small school environment.   They did agree that the fast pace of many multi-grade classrooms was a challenge for pupils who struggled, and that the skill of independent learning was difficult. Teachers in both this study and Mulryan-Kyne's (2005, 2007) research noted the need for teachers to develop specialist skills required to lead teaching and learning effectively in small schools and multi-grade classrooms. Research based on the GUI data (Quail and Smyth 2014) indicates that girls' self-esteem can be negatively impacted by certain types of multi-grade situations. Quail and Smyth (2014) argue that teachers need to be sensitive to the need to differentiate as well as to be aware of the gender and age-related needs of their learners in the multigrade setting. Appropriate ITE and CPD input would support the development of this types of teacher sensitivity and expertise.

In visiting multi-grade classrooms, researchers reported that they observed a strong element of good organisation where teachers dealt with one group and assigned work to another, and later turned to the second group while the first worked by themselves. It seems that some subjects lend themselves more to the multi-grade experience – art, SESE and to some extent English writing and reading. In these subjects, the curriculum is seen more as a spiral, where the same topic can be revisited at different levels. Topics like mathematics however tend to seen as more linear, with pupils building on prior knowledge to get to new levels and new skills. The NCCA is continuing to develop a new curriculum for primary schools. They are focusing on developing the spiral curriculum which broadens learning outcomes with eight key milestones. These milestones are not to be seen as a linear model of key stage achievement for assessment. Rather it is seen as an aid for teachers planning the delivery of the curriculum in a 'mixed ability' or 'multi-grade' setting. This approach takes into account the diverse nature of classrooms and the need for differentiated learning. It recognises the broad 'multi-grade' experience within Irish primary classrooms and the NCCA hopes that it will be a major asset for teachers in small schools.

Generally, the smaller size of the school tended to help pupils with behavioural difficulties, as there was a more consistent approach to them. A number of the Support Teachers felt that children were more likely to have access to Support Teacher in a small school as it was easier to qualify for withdrawal than in larger units. This balanced the tension than can exist when a busy class teacher has to deal with so many pupils at different levels and can find it hard to give time to a pupil with special educational needs. Resource personnel reported that individual differentiation is a more natural process in the multi-grade classroom, but some also said that they were less confident that teachers would develop suitable resources or follow up on individual education plans due to the pressure of planning and meeting the needs of multiple groups in the one classroom. Others were very happy with the cooperation of the class teachers.

Teachers reported the challenge presented by an over-crowded curriculum, especially in a multi-grade setting which resulted in a need to engage in significant levels of additional planning. Professionally they felt that breadth of diverse needs in the classroom led to creative teaching. The curriculum itself is very broad, and it becomes more diverse when the

teacher has to integrate different levels of a topic to suit different age groups. Although every classroom has a range of abilities and interests, the challenge of the multi-grade classroom gives the experience of different levels of the curriculum in the one year. Especially in larger multi-grade classes, the range of ages, abilities, needs and other social requirements can be overwhelming. When it works well it can be very satisfying, but the downside is that it takes a lot of planning. Teachers reflected that if they were not creative with resources and approaches, a child might see a topic taught in the same way two, three or four times over their time with the teacher. This context of lesson planning can be stressful, whereas in a single-grade, one can build up a repertoire by repeating a range of activities each year. Also, when teaching a theme, finding appropriate activities for different levels can be demanding. The time involved in teaching different groups means that it can be hard to cover the full range of activities for all pupils.

Teachers' responses indicated that their experience of the multi-grade classroom, while busy and challenging, is also rewarding. The key stress point for teachers was the amount of time that they spent on planning. Their focus was on developing resources to suit a wider range of pupil abilities and interests than they might have found in a single-grade classroom. The dominant view of the curriculum among teachers in Ireland seems to be a subject-based curriculum with a multiplicity of objectives. Teachers find it challenging to meet the varied needs of children in a multi-grade classroom and to plan and organise for these wide-ranging needs. Teachers have a professional sense of commitment to delivering the full curriculum to all pupils. This creates a logistical problem of organising classrooms and scheduling learning experiences so that each grade level separately experiences the full curriculum. This has strong implications for the development of modules on multi-grade teaching in initial teacher education for all participants, and for the support of teachers in multi-grade classrooms in their CPD (Mulryan-Kyne 2007).

Teachers are hindered by the dominant methodology presented in text books which tend to focus on the single-grade context only. The resource support that teachers would typically find in textbooks is dominated by publishers' ideology of producing multiple texts for each single-grade setting. This creates a challenge for teachers in multi-grade settings to integrate activities and exercises presented in discrete units or to develop their own resources.

Responding teachers reported a sense of isolation from colleagues.

I would feel less isolated as a teacher	27.9
I would engage more with colleagues about teaching and learning	22.2

Table 4.   The percentage of teachers (including principals) who indicated that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the item describing how teaching in a single-grade classroom might impact on their professional relationships with colleagues when compared to their multi-grade experience.

Interesting however, although they would have more colleagues in a larger school, teachers did not feel that this would increase their levels of engagement with colleagues around teaching and learning, or positively impact their own sense of isolation as teachers. Therefore, this sense of isolation seems to be more of a comment on the traditional image of the teacher as the lone individual working in the classroom than it is a specific issue for those working in small schools, though it may also reflect the lack of opportunities for collegial cooperation in the small school setting.

In spite of the challenges that they reported (e.g. an awareness of the greater amount of time they were giving to planning for multi-grade), teachers were also very positive about the positive sense of teamwork and informality between them and their colleagues in their small schools. They were very aware that the small size of their school meant that each of them carried significantly heavier loads for such practical things as playground supervision than would be the case in larger schools. They were aware too that they had limited access to appropriate multi-grade resources. This reflects the reports by the INTO (2003, 2015) and IPPN (2004) about the challenges and additional workload that the single-grade bias in our education system (curriculum planning, education publishers, low visibility in initial teacher education) creates for teachers in small schools in particular. Responding teachers reported that few of them had access to dedicated input regarding multi-grade teaching as part of their initial teacher education programme. Multi-grade teaching and the lack of adequate systemic support for the prevalence of this phenomenon across multiple jurisdictions as at the root of many of the documented challenges. These same issues for teachers have been documented internationally in both developed and developing countries (e.g. Bharadwaj 2001; Bajaracharya & Bajarcharya 2003; Mulryan-Kyne 2007; Berry 2007; Berry & Little 2007; Mulkeen & Higgins 2009; Brown 2010).

<u>Principals' and Chairpersons' perspectives</u>

All principals who engaged in our study were also classroom teachers so essentially were balancing two roles within their workload – they had the same responsibility for at least two classes as their colleagues while also having significant administrative and leadership responsibilities with minimal secretarial or other support. Many of the principals felt that the curriculum was overloaded in the multi-grade classroom and that this was affecting the quality of some children's experience. Added to that, they also felt that there was inadequate resourcing for administration for a teaching principal, and that this militated against achieving excellence in both their teaching and their leadership roles. Regardless of the lack of supports for their multiple roles, principals reported a sense of their work being rewarding, though the variety of tasks could lead to a high level of stress trying to balance these demanding multi-grade teaching and administrative roles, reflecting the findings of the IPPN (2005) and INTO (2003; 2015) reports.

Principals reported that they were well-motivated for their work in spite of the challenges. They talked about being proud of their school and also having a sense of both pride and achievement in their own leadership role in the school. They reported having very supportive staffs in their small schools. Southworth's (2004) study of principals in different sizes of schools reported that teaching principals were at an advantage in terms of their collegial relationships because they were perceived as leading from within the team. This tended to result in more collegial and warm, supportive relationships between leader and colleagues, providing some balance to the other stresses and demands. Wilson's (2007) research with school leaders in small Scottish schools reports on a very similar finding where principals report the stress of having to juggle multiple roles but also note that their relationships with pupils, with colleagues and with others in the school community sustain them.

Chairpersons and principals each reported ongoing concerns regarding the maintenance of the pupil numbers and the challenge to retain ethos in cases where few of the children belonged to the faith community. They also expressed worries about managing school finances and explained the difficulty of fund-raising in a small community. Some schools were concerned that there was a big burden on parents and that the added support of voluntary contributions might not continue. These extra finances were needed for on-going

maintenance and also updating teaching resources. The fixed cost element of schools such as heating, light, etc. has become very expensive and eats into the budget, impacting small schools disproportionately. It was felt that large schools benefited from being able to distribute the fixed costs (heating, light, etc.) when they have more pupils for capitation grants. There was also a sense that larger schools attracted more teaching resources as they easily reached the different thresholds for support teachers and other services leaving small schools to cope through relying on their own existing resources.

Responses to the VFM Report

There was a strong affirmation that small schools make a valuable contribution to Primary education and their contribution to the life of the parish. Chairpersons and Principals were convinced that the cultural advantages of small schools outweigh economic issues.

	Chairs **N=95**	Principal N=128	Teachers N=190	**Parents** **N=835**
Small schools make a valuable contribution to primary education in Ireland.	**95.8**	95.5	97.3	**93.7**
The school is an essential part of the identity of the local parish	**88.5**	92.7	94.1	**80.1**
Cultural advantages of small schools outweigh economic issues	**87.5**	86.6	78.8	**76.8**
Amalgamations and federations should only be between similar types of schools (e.g. Protestant with Protestant)	**70.8**	67.9	65.5	**44.5**
Large schools have a lot to learn from small schools	**77.1**	72.3	59.0	**67.4**

Table 5.   The percentage of respondents on each of the questionnaires for Chairpersons, Principals, Teachers and Parents, who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with statements relating to the political and cultural role of small schools.

The different stakeholders valued small schools and thought that larger schools could learn from their experience.   This referred in part to the family atmosphere that pertains in these schools and the positive impact of good relationships on teaching and learning, behaviour management and establishment of trust between various members of the school community. One of the recommendations of the VFM was that consideration be given to amalgamating small schools in specific circumstances. A key negative factor in an amalgamation emphasized by respondents was the sense of loss of the school to the local community.   This was true even if amalgamating with a similar type school, as one parish would always be affected. Teachers indicated the following:

Some schools already have been amalgamated and to repeat the process means that in a few years most rural schools are closed and it will all be schools in towns only, which is totally unfair on parents, children and rural communities in general.

It would defeat the whole purpose of small schools.

I do not think it is a good idea to amalgamate or assimilate small schools in my area. The children who are in these small schools are much more in a 'family setting'.   It is a natural progression from home life at a young age.

One of the principals argued:

A community loses its identity when its school closes. Children generally go to a variety of schools, not necessarily to the amalgamated school.

In the context of Church of England schools, Terry (2013) argues that local relationships between school and community are an intrinsic part of the Anglican school ethos, and that such relationships are invitational and inclusive rather than exclusionary. The Protestant community is a very small and diverse minority in the Republic of Ireland (Dalton & Milne 2019). Schools are an important support to that diverse community in maintaining its cultural integrity and distinctiveness inter-generationally, while also welcoming the diversity of its pupil population, as reported by Tuohy, Lodge & Fennelly (2011). In their response to the VFM report in 2011, the Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education made the following argument about the importance of schools to minority communities:

It is the right of parents – especially where a school exists – to educate their children in their own community and their own religious tradition. This Board would ask the Steering Committee to be mindful of the damage that could be done to the Protestant churches/communities in Ireland should a recommendation be based on terms of reference that only considers their presence on economic factors alone. The importance of the school to the local community is of course not just an Irish phenomena, it is internationally recognised.

Concluding discussion

While acknowledging the positivity reported by various stakeholders about their experiences of leading, teaching and learning in small schools, and their importance to the local communities they serve, this research project did not gloss over the genuine challenges that teachers, and especially teaching principals, experience. The challenges are primarily the

result of systemic issues such lack of resources (both physical and curricular), lack of appropriate, tailored ITE/CPD and lack of flexible funding models. As with the work undertaken in previous years by the INTO (2003, 2015) and IPPN (2004, 2005), teachers in the small schools in this study identified significant additional workload associated with planning, accompanied and exacerbated by a lack of tailored resources for the multi-grade setting. They also noted the lack of specialist preparation and support to teach in multilevel classes (in the ITE context in particular) and their need for tailored and accessible CPD. The lack of preparation for the specialist work of multi-grade teaching and its negative impact on practice and on teacher stress was also highlighted by Mulryan-Kyne (2005) in the Irish context and by Berry and Little (2007) in the British context. The inputs by the INTO and IPPN to the Small Schools Symposium in 2019 highlighted the importance of addressing these systemic issues in order for small schools to flourish.

Teachers and principals talked about the need to change the mindset from the single-grade classroom and instead to think *spirally* about curriculum. The NCCA's thinking is spirally focused, but publishing companies who produce resources and text books continue to create materials based on an assumption that all classes are single-grade. The NCCA's thinking is to be welcomed, both in terms of its suitability for the multi-grade setting and also its encouragement of genuine differentiation and inclusion. However, in order for teachers to be able to properly utilise a spiral curriculum, they need appropriate ITE and CPD. The lack of easy access to resources and materials for the multigrade context is an added layer of work for teachers in those settings compared to colleagues teaching single-grade classes. The reality in Ireland is that many schools, not only those formally defined as small schools by the VFM report, have multi-grade classes. These include schools with eight or fewer class teachers, growing schools as well as those losing numbers. This is not just a small schools' issue and can only be properly addressed at system level.

Principals in this study noted the additional workload that they (in common with all teaching principals) faced, as well as highlighting the lack of access to supports typically provided in larger schools. There is a very heavy administrative burden falling on the shoulders of teaching principals in small schools and better supports to address this are urgently required. Again, this is an issue that can be addressed at system level. School leaders in our study also

spoke with great pride in both their work and their schools and highlighted their positive, supportive relationships with their colleagues. Both the principals and Chairs of the Boards of Management were critical of the 'one-size-fits-all' State approach to funding / resourcing and teacher allocation models, noting that it was the system and its structures that created many of the stresses and ongoing challenges they had to deal with. A more flexible approach at State level could mitigate at least some of the challenges those in leadership in small schools experience.

The responses to the survey questions that focused on the recommendations of the 2013 VFM report demonstrated that the various members of the school communities were not in favour of what they perceived as the potential destruction of their unique, local school communities through closure, amalgamation or sharing of leadership across schools (principals, boards of management). Their responses demonstrated that they saw the small school as an important resource for their local community and one whose value should be measured and considered educationally, socially and culturally rather than solely by using crude economic measures. It was clear that there was very little support for the shelved recommendations of the VFM report in the Protestant small school communities that participated in our study. It would be interesting to follow up on this survey and study given the apparent change in State policy represented by the 2019 Symposium on Small Schools which recognised the value of the small school to rural and environmental sustainability. There seems much greater congruence between the State and local focus on sustainability represented by this policy shift. Perhaps this policy shift represents a move away from the desire to centralise or regionalise service provision of education for small children and return to a modern-day equivalent of children being able once more to 'go to school through the fields' in their own localities. Ideally, however, State policy and thinking about small schools should include the voices of those most impacted by evolving policy – the principals, teachers and other education and support personnel, parents/guardians, the local community (including minority faith and cultural groups with their own schools) and, in particular, the children themselves.

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