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Perspectives of primary school principals regarding systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic school identity: An Australian case study

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PERSPECTIVES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS REGARDING SYSTEMWIDE STRATEGY TO STRENGTHEN CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY: AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

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Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the University Ethics Committee.

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Statement of Appreciation

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As an assistant principal religious education, I am constantly inspired by the dedication and commitment of clergy, members of religious orders, parishioners, staff, and community members to express an authentic and lived Catholic identity. These stakeholders continue to encourage my inquisitive nature and inspire me to contribute to enhancing Catholic identity.

To my incredible family – my husband, Scott, and children, William and Ella – deep appreciation for your support and acceptance of my commitment to this research. To my parents, who instilled in me the precious gift of faith, I will be ever grateful.

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Keywords

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Abstract

This thesis explores and reports on how primary school principals were influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools between 2016 and 2020. The SCI strategy was developed, resourced, and embedded by one Catholic Education Office (CEO) in response to the challenge of strengthening the Catholic identity of schools within an increasingly secular, detraditionalised, and pluralised society. The research question which shaped this study was: *In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?*

A review of literature highlighted the construct of identity as the interaction of professional, organisational, and communal influences within a faith-based educational context, with each identity construct relating to and informing the other. The preparation and formation of Catholic school principals was another prevailing theme, assisting school principals in the carriage of their responsibilities. What was not evident in literature were the exact experiences and opportunities that assisted principals to advocate for and enact authentic Catholic school identity.

The research framework incorporated a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology. Data were collected from three key sources: systemwide SCI strategy document analysis, principal questionnaires ($n = 30$), and principal semi-structured interviews ($n = 8$).

The SCI strategy documentation of the CEO provided stakeholders with a blueprint to assist in understanding the context, vision, and expectations of the organisation regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

The findings of questionnaire data affirmed a collective understanding of the urgency of strategy implementation. Participants stated that while adequate progress had been made, the strengthening of Catholic school identity remained an ongoing focus requiring strategic leadership, systemic goal setting, and adequate resourcing. The pivotal themes included the need for increased clarity regarding the mission of Catholic education; the need for enhanced leadership capability of principals to navigate the widening gap between the religious literacy and experiences of current and previous generations; the need for a systemwide strategic response; and that engagement in SCI activities directly impacted principals in their capacity and willingness to strengthen the Catholic identity within their school.

The findings from semi-structured interview data reinforced the essential need for and urgency of an SCI strategy. The three highest ranked themes of identity, people, and focus aptly reflected the imperative for principals to be engaged in planning future strategies for strengthening Catholic school identity.

The collective data analysis demonstrated that to embed the SCI strategy, a clear understanding of Catholic school **mission** was essential, as well as an appreciation of societal **context**, and enacting of leadership **agency** of the principal. These three key constructs were used to develop the *identity alignment model* to assist school leaders and systems to engage in ongoing, purposeful dialogue regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity. The model is summarised and discussed in relation to factors of friction and favour that accompanied the SCI implementation process.

Recommendations from this research include continued empirical engagement for the CEO to establish external partnerships to develop and implement a formation strategy to support deeper understanding of Catholic school mission and identity for all stakeholders; development of a systemwide tool to measure, improve, and enhance Catholic school identity; use of the identity alignment model to support ongoing professional dialogue regarding the mission, context, and agency for strengthening Catholic school identity; and expanding opportunities for the education authority and principals to co-create strategic directions for strengthening Catholic school identity.

List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACU	Australian Catholic University
APRE	Assistant principal religious education
CAQDAS	Computer-aided qualitative data analysis software
CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
CEO	Catholic Education Office
CI	Catholic identity
ECSI module	Enhancing Catholic School Identity module
ELT	Excellent learning and teaching
EORE	Education officer religious education
FRS	Formation Readiness Survey
G.R.A.C.E.	Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education
KU	Katholieke Universiteit
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCEC	National Catholic Education Commission
NCPR	National Centre for Pastoral Research
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
PCBS	Post-Critical Belief Scale
PD	Professional development
PPI	Primary principal interview
PPQ	Primary principal questionnaire
RE	Religious education
SCI strategy	Strengthening/Strong Catholic Identity strategy

Chapter 1: Context for Research

This case study of the perspectives of primary school principals regarding a systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic identity seeks to understand the central research question:

In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?

Informed by the fluidity of a spiralling research approach (Berg, 2009) this chapter presents the context of the research, providing specific details regarding its rationale, contribution, and significance.

1.1   Overview of Thesis

This chapter includes an overview of the thesis in Section 1.1, research in context in Section 1.2, and rationale for the research in Section 1.3. In Section 1.4 the research problem is stated, and Section 1.5 outlines the research aim and objectives and articulates the research questions. A description of the Catholic school context is provided in Section 1.6, and the significance of the research is discussed in Section 1.7. The chapter concludes with a summary in Section 1.8.

A detailed review of literature in Chapter 2 addresses current insights and identified gaps, thereby setting the stage for the research. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, and Chapter 4 presents the research findings. Following, Chapter 5 shares a detailed data discussion. Lastly, in Chapter 6 the research conclusions and recommendations are provided.

1.2   Research in Context

I am employed as an assistant principal religious education (APRE) in a Catholic primary school within one bounded system of schools in Australia, referred to in this thesis as Catholic Education Office (CEO). As an APRE, I share responsibility with my leadership team to embed the CEO SCI strategy as one key tool for strategic goal setting within our school context. As the systemwide strategic plan for 2016–2020 (CEO, 2017) was nearing completion, I was motivated to

investigate how principals were influenced by the SCI strategy implementation across a diverse range of primary schools within the bounded system. To understand strategy influence for principals, I sought to explore the interpretation, uptake, and influence of the SCI strategy for principals.

By understanding my motivation and the context for school leaders, it becomes possible to state the rationale of this case study, as follows.

1.3   Rationale

Catholic schooling systems around the world are placing urgent and critical prominence on articulating and strengthening Catholic identity (CEO, 2015b, 2016; Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010, 2014). Moreover, school systems are pursuing strategies to address what is a growing secular and detraditionalised school community. Therefore, this research investigates the perspectives of principals within one Catholic schooling system in Australia regarding the implementation and influence of the CEO SCI strategy. This focused inquiry seeks to establish which aspects of the SCI strategy most significantly influenced principals to meet a systemwide obligation to strengthen Catholic school identity. Participant insight was also collected regarding any significant factors that are not communicated in SCI strategy documentation.

Current literature highlights the necessity for principals of Catholic schools to prioritise, foster, and promote Catholic identity, leveraging from school leaders who exhibit high levels of spiritual and cultural capital (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Branson et al., 2019; Schuttloffel, 2012). Considerable energy is placed in the domain of strengthening Catholic school identity; however, there is no known research seeking to identify specific strategic influences that assist principals to enact leadership responsibilities for strong Catholic identity.

This research engages primary school principals working within one bounded system of Catholic schools to establish new insights regarding strategies and experiences they perceive assist in articulating and strengthening Catholic school identity. The bounded system of Catholic schools includes 117 Catholic Primary schools within one ecclesial authority, administered by a Catholic Education Office. Each school is characterised by a common vision, mission and strategic intent of the CEO. This diocese is a geographic area of 77 000 square kilometres made up of metropolitan and regional areas.

Included in the research methodology is the collection and interrogation of three data sets: systemwide SCI strategy document analysis, questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews.

1.4   Research Problem

The identified problem that this research addresses is the increasing divide between the secular societal context and the authentic presentation of strong Catholic school identity. There is a myriad of literature that describes these concerns. Debate on the issue is often open to public scrutiny regarding the relevance of a religious-based education in an increasingly secular and detraditionalised society. There is also extensive literature that proposes evidence-based ways to attend to such concerns, generally authored by academics in the field of theology and education. However, what is missing in current literature is a detailed understanding of the practices, strategies, and engagements that principals perceive are most beneficial for empowering confidence and capacity to lead for strong Catholic school identity. Therefore, this research seeks to understand and articulate the perspective of principals regarding the influence of the SCI strategy, particularly the influences that assisted their pursuit of enacting and leading for strong Catholic identity within their primary school setting.

1.5   Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to understand the perspective of primary school principals regarding their personal and professional influence of engaging in the CEO SCI strategy.

The following research objectives facilitated the achievement of the research aim:

- Review extensive literature in the fields of identity, mission of Catholic education, educational leadership, and organisational strategic planning.
- Analyse the systemwide SCI strategy documentation to identify areas of expectations as stated by the CEO, and potential areas of influence for principals.
- Generate questionnaire data to broadly identify the perspectives of principals regarding strategy engagement.
- Code questionnaire data to inform emerging themes.

- Refine interview questions to interrogate the common themes identified in questionnaire data.
- Use Leximancer software to generate ranked themes from interview responses.
- Compare themes from three data sets to discuss data findings and provide recommendations for future endeavours for the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

1.5.1 Research Questions

This research will investigate the following central research question:

In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?

The following series of sub questions are postulated within the questionnaire:

- How do you define Catholic school identity?
- What personal beliefs, experiences and relationship have influenced your actions and understanding regarding Catholic school identity?
- How do you enact your leadership responsibility for strengthening Catholic school identity?
- How do you describe your summative experiences of the systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic identity?

To highlight the rationale of this research, and the importance of posing these questions, a brief discussion about the Catholic school context in Australia follows.

1.6   Catholic School Context

This section provides a brief historical context of Catholic schools in Australia, particularly as to its mission and the identity that follows. The intention is to understand the mission of Catholic schools in response to the changing demographics of the religious affiliations of the Australian population. Particularly evident over the past 25 years, this evolving context has profound implications for the changing profile of staff, families, and students within Catholic education.

In Australia, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) works collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education peak bodies. These peak

bodies are the approved 'Non-government Representative Bodies' under the Australian Education Act. They provide a strategic role in advocating for Catholic schools and systems within the seven archdioceses, twenty-one dioceses and five Eastern Rite dioceses across Australia (National Catholic Education Commission, n.d.). The Catholic schooling system in Australia is the second largest education provider after government schools, educating over 820,000 students in 1,751 schools, including schools run by diocesan Catholic Education Systems and schools administered by religious orders (National Catholic Education Commission, n.d.). The role of Catholic Education Offices is to offer administrative and strategic services for the Catholic schools within their diocese. These services include policy and governance, curriculum and pedagogy, faith formation, staffing and professional development, and funding and compliance (National Catholic Education Commission, n.d.).

The bounded system in which this research was enacted consists of 146 schools across a metropolitan archdiocese, inclusive of 117 primary schools, with a student population of 76,800 students and 10,500 staff. The CEO responsible for the system has implemented two strategic plans 2016-2020 and 2021-2025, showcasing similarities and differences in organisational priorities. The 2016-2020 plan focused on developing a cohesive framework for Catholic education with priorities including, strong Catholic identity; building a sustainable future; and excellent learning and teaching (Catholic Education Office, 2017). The priorities in the 2021-2025 strategic plan include Catholic identity; learning and teaching; wellbeing; Our people; and diversity and inclusion (Catholic Education Office, 2021b). The Strengthening Catholic Identity Strategy was supported by two key documents, the *Shape Paper* (CEO, 2015b) and *Position Statement* (CEO, 2016). The SCI shape paper (2015b) outlines the broad goals of the CEO regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity, and the SCI position statement (CEO, 2016) reflects the internal perspectives, priorities and rationale behind its stated approach.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics data provide insight regarding the Catholic school demographics of the future. Importantly, this context compounds the essential and urgent need to understand which aspects of strategy engagement assist principals in their pursuit to strengthen Catholic school identity.

1.6.1 Catholic Schools in the Australian Context

In the early 1800s Catholic schools were established in the settlement of Sydney Cove and Parramatta, mostly poorly resourced and ill equipped. In the very early times of colonisation, these schools were predominantly staffed by lay teachers for the purpose of teaching children the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, alongside religious instruction including the Catechism of the Catholic Church (M. Ryan, 2002). As more Catholics migrated to Australia, the demand for Catholic schools grew. Ordained clergy and consecrated members of religious orders who had also recently immigrated became the founders of local Catholic schools. The religious leadership and teaching in the schools were undertaken by staff who exhibited a high level of theological knowledge and understood their vocation as advancing the evangelical mission of the Catholic Church. The religious training and ongoing faith formation for those teaching and leading in Catholic schools ensured a lived and relevant enactment of the values and teachings of the Church, thereby providing all schools with an authentic Catholic identity (Miller, 2015).

After the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), many clergy and consecrated members of religious orders were to reimagine their ecclesiastical mission and ministry, with many moving out of the school settings into social work and parish work. This time reflected a change of guardianship for Catholic schools, with increased contributions of lay members of the Church leading and teaching in schools. As these staff were committed members of parishes and Catholic families, they had been exposed to the Catechism, traditions, theology, and practices of the Catholic Church, thereby displaying high religious literacy and the confidence and capacity to act as religious leaders of parish schools. This gap between the formation preparation of members of religious orders and that of lay teachers has been a concern, both locally and internationally, since this time (Buchanan, 2013; Cook, 2001; Madero, 2018; Schuttloffel, 2012).

Current research identifies that the changing context of society provides challenges and opportunities for Catholic schools, in Australia and internationally. These global trends were apparent across five countries including, Australia, New Zealand, America, England and Ireland, as identified in the research conducted by Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (G.R.A.C.E.) (Robinson & Cranley, 2025).

The challenges for Catholic schools include availability and suitability of programs to support teacher formation and faith knowledge development; a disconnection between Religious Education curriculum and lived experiences; secularisation and cultural shifts; school leadership and Catholic identity; and the global trends of increased secularity of students and staff (Robinson & Cranley, 2025). Opportunities for strengthening Catholic school identity include a greater understanding of the distinctive mission for educating students in both academic excellence and faith formation; global engagement signifying a universal collaborative approach to Catholic education which addresses challenges and promotes faith-filled education which support stakeholders to flourish and thrive; and a unified and Christ-centric vision for Catholic education founded in Gospel values (Robinson & Cranley, 2025).

1.6.2 Changing Demographic of Australian Religious Affiliations

Coinciding with the change of guardianship for Catholic school staff, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data displays the changing profile of religious affiliation of the Australian population. The statistics displayed in Figure 1.1 reflect decreased affiliation between community members and the Catholic Church. When the most recent census data of 2021 is compared with the data from 1996, a significant decline in those identifying as Christian is evident, from 71% to 43.9% of the population in Australia. Also noteworthy is the dramatic increase of those who nominate as having no religious affiliation, from 16.6% in 1996 to 38.9% in 2021. There has also been a small rise in the number of other religions, from 3.5% in 1996 to 10% in 2021 (ABS, 2022).

Figure 1.1

Religious Affiliation in Australia 1971–2021

Religious affiliation in Australia, 1971-2021

a. Comprises Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Other Religions.
b. Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation.
Source: Religious affiliation (RELP).
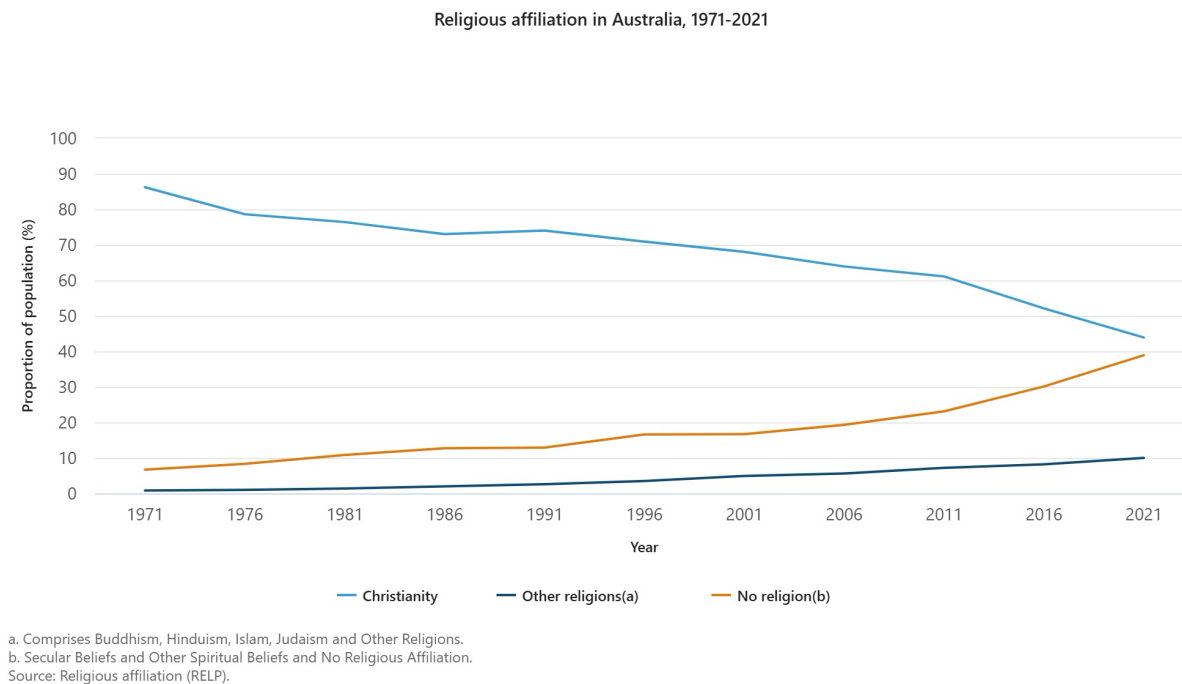
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Religious affiliation in Australia 4/07/2022

Note. From *Religious affiliation in Australia*, by Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022 (https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia). Copyright 2022 by the Commonwealth of Australia. CC BY 4.0.

It can be deduced from the ABS data that due to the age demographic of current principals in Catholic schools (approximately 40–65 years of age), they would have grown up in a society with high religious affiliation to Christianity and the espoused beliefs and values of Catholic and other churches. As members of Catholic families, the principals most likely participated as active and full members of a parish community while growing up. These experiences allowed for the handing on of Church traditions, scripture, stories, rituals, symbols, values, and the social teaching of the Catholic tradition. The questionnaire responses shared by principals, alongside their demographic data, support such assertions. For example, experienced principals refer to religious upbringing contributing to their own identity and the identity they strive to emulate and enrich within their school context).

Data from the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) records the Catholic population in Australia is circa 5,075,791, representing twenty percent of the Australian population (NCPR, 2024). The data confirms that those who identify as Catholic have a weekly church attendance rate of 8.2% (NCPR, 2024). While

accurate church attendance data of staff from Catholic schools is not recorded, the national data would be representative of the attendance data for principals, staff, students and families.

Rymarz (2022) discusses the impact of this changing demographic for the communal dimension of religious affiliation as "affiliation is looser, and although people may still express some type of affiliation with a religious community, this connection may not be strong or enduring" (p. 51). Therefore, it can be forecast that the future teachers and leaders of Catholic schools in Australia will not have the same lived experiences or religious literacy of previous generations.

This concern has been addressed in current literature and most recently in an instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE, 2022), where a key theme is that of dialogue and formation for mission as foundational for strengthening Catholic school identity:

> "The Catholic school depends upon them [teachers] almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programs. They should therefore be very carefully prepared so that both in secular and religious knowledge they are equipped with suitable qualifications and also with a pedagogical skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world. Intimately linked in charity to one another and to their students and endowed with an apostolic spirit, may teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher". Their work "is in the real sense of the word an apostolate [...] and at once a true service offered to society". (para. 14, quoting from CCE, 1965, para. 8)

The emerging leaders of Catholic schools will not come into leadership positions with the same level of religious literacy or experiences as previous generations, thereby presenting an obvious and defined gap that needs to be addressed. This is the concern for Catholic school systems in most developed countries and is exacerbated by the contextual changes and religious profiles of increasingly secular and detraditionalised societies. This gap in religious literacy, knowledge, and skills will significantly impact the strengthening of Catholic school identity if not addressed as a matter of urgency (Boyle, 2010).

This known gap regarding religious literacy levels of stakeholders within Catholic schools, locally and internationally, presents a challenge for Catholic schools; however, it remains the goal that:

> Everyone has the obligation to recognise, respect and bear witness to the Catholic identity of the school, officially set out in the *educational project*. This applies to the teaching staff, the non-teaching personnel and the pupils and their families. (CCE, 2022, para. 39)

To authentically respect and bear witness to Catholic school identity, the religious profile and literacy of staff is to be held in high esteem. Acknowledging this demographic shift, the CCE prioritises the foundational assumption that:

> The work of the *lay Catholic educator* in schools, and particularly in Catholic schools, "has an undeniably professional aspect; but it cannot be reduced to professionalism alone. Professionalism is marked by, and raised to, a super-natural Christian vocation. The life of the Catholic teacher must be marked by the exercise of a personal vocation in the Church, and not simply by the exercise of a profession". (CCE, 2022, para. 24, quoting from CCE, 1982, para. 37)

It is further stated " 'that educators must be willing to learn and develop knowledge and be open to the renewal and updating of methodologies, but open also to spiritual and religious formation' " (CCE, 2022, para. 26, quoting from CCE, 2007, para. 20).

Regarding a maintained commitment to and articulation of strong Catholic school identity, the CCE states, "a *Catholic* school is endowed with a specific identity: i.e. 'its reference to a Christian concept of life *centred on Jesus Christ* ' " (CCE, 2022, para. 20, quoting from CCE, 1977, para. 33). As such:

> The fact that Catholic schools are part of the *Church's mission* "is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission". (CCE, 2022, para. 21, quoting from CCE, 1998, para. 11)

Cognisant of the changing demographics of society, it is important to understand that people are choosing Catholic schools for their children for a variety of reasons. However, these reasons incorporate factors other than prioritising a Catholic education, thereby contributing to a "market driven" rather than "mission

driven" context (Boyle, 2010, p. 99). Boyle describes this as mission confusion, whereby "a lack of clear mission, … [creates] a lack of public support of Catholic schools" (Boyle, 2010, p. 99). This understanding further perpetuates scrutiny of the Catholic school system within the current societal context.

As the demographics of society and those seeking a Catholic school education continue to change and evolve, the CCE clearly argues, "Catholic schools are ecclesial entities. As such they participate 'in the evangelizing mission of the Church and [represent] the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out'" (CCE, 2022, para. 30, quoting from CCE, 1998, para. 11). This affirms Hall et al.'s (2019) prior acknowledgement that "all within the school community are called to be conscious of their privilege and responsibility, their communion in mission and dialogue within the world" (p. 20).

1.6.3 Leadership Responsibilities for Catholic School Principals

Current literature supports that all principals leading within a secular context are called to display certain characteristics which advance their capacity to undertake a myriad of leadership responsibilities. Such qualities include "a clear sense of personal purpose … sense of direction … optimism … and a disposition in which the individual expects favourable outcomes … see adversity as a challenge to be overcome … and failure as a temporary state" (Hilton, 2020, p. 24). Hilton (2020) further states that principals must "possess the knowledge and skills to do the job, along with the interpersonal skills and wisdom to succeed" (p. 24). Arthur et al. (2018) summarise the diverse agendas for leaders in Catholic schools, which demand a comprehensive understanding of administration, operations, curriculum, and management, while also "possess[ing] the ability to strengthen the school's Catholic identity by building a Catholic culture and community, fostering faith development, and integrating the Church's traditions and doctrinal practices into all aspects of school life" (p. 4).

While leadership dispositions and formalised learning programs are widely researched in the field of educational leadership, there is an increasing need to identify which components of professional learning and experiences are perceived by principals as being the most effective for increasing their capacity to undertake all associated roles and responsibilities.

In summary, the mission of Catholic schools and required leadership dispositions for principals have been widely researched and are readily accessible in

literature. These understandings, together with census data depicting a reducing demographic of those who affiliate with Christianity, highlight the widening divide between faith and society. This gap offers challenges and opportunities for leaders in Catholic schools. Bridging this gap requires that Catholic schools respond to the needs of society, while remaining steadfast to the identity and mission of Catholic education, and in turn, the Church. To ensure the strategic response of the CEO is targeted and effective, it is necessary to interrogate the perspective of current principals to understand the future needs, directions, and strategic plans for strengthening Catholic school identity.

1.7   Significance of Research

It is intended that a diverse representation of the perspectives of principals will lead to new insights into the experiences and initiatives that best support their capacity to enact strengthening Catholic identity within their primary school context. Such insight will assist in the development, provision, and resourcing of bespoke and relevant opportunities to prepare Catholic school principals for the roles and responsibilities that are inherent and espoused. In addition, key learnings and findings will be transferable to other Catholic school systems locally and globally. As well, the research will provide clarity and precision for the future preparation and academic pursuits of those aspiring to the role of Catholic school principal.

1.8   Chapter Summary

The focus of this research is to identify engagements and initiatives that have influenced the confidence and capacity of principals to enhance strong Catholic school identity. Document analysis, a questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews provide a research framework to capture the perspectives of primary school principals regarding strengthening Catholic school identity. This research seeks to construct a descriptive narrative which articulates an informed understanding of principal perspectives regarding their capacity and confidence to enact and embed a strong Catholic identity. Furthermore, it aims to provide an accurate description of the strategy engagement that principals perceive as most influential, thereby contributing to a current gap in literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to investigate and describe the perspectives of Catholic primary school principals regarding the influence of the SCI strategy. This chapter presents a review of scholarly works to position this research within the body of relevant literature and to inform the research problem and questions that guide this study.

This chapter is structured in five sections: Section 2.2 expands on the generic understanding of the concept of identity within the literature; Section 2.3 develops the understanding of identity within the field of Catholic education; Section 2.4 discusses the importance of Catholic identity in educational leadership; and Section 2.5 looks at strategic planning in identity for school improvement. In Section 2.6 the research question is explored and advanced through consideration of what is known in the field and any identified gaps in the current literature. Such insight informs the research design articulated in Chapter 3, as it discusses how this research seeks to add clarity and new knowledge in the field of Catholic school identity that is transferable across other faith-based education systems nationally and internationally.

2.2 Concept of Identity

Identity transcends disciplines, levels of analysis, and planes of human experience in ways that bring sensibility and intelligibility to the muddle of human existence. (Hammack, 2014, p. 25)

Identity can be framed within a widely researched theoretical concept with its earliest foundations studied across multidisciplinary fields, drawing heavily on psychology and sociology (Hammack, 2014). The understanding of identity has evolved from focusing on an individual's personal evolution of self-identity, within a socially constructed context, to a more contemporary expression described by Hammack (2014) as a "constant state of identification, or naming or categorising, what or who one is and to which larger categories he or she may belong" (p. 11). As such, identity extends an openness to reflexivity regarding "sameness and difference at the level of social organisation, group affiliation, and intergroup relations"

(Hammack, 2014, p. 12). Identity at its core provides a theoretical framework for understanding how one views, expresses, and makes sense of self, others, and society. This identity is influenced and informed by many identities, as displayed in Figure 2.1 and developed within the literature relevant to the research interest.

Figure 2.1

Identities Influenced and Informed by Many Identities
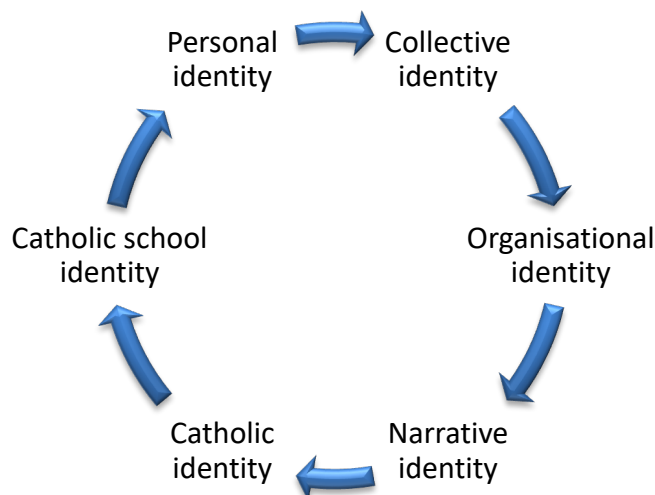
2.2.1 Personal Identity

William James and George Herbert Mead contributed greatly to the cognitive evolution of identity, with James (1890) defining it as a "personal coherence", while Mead (1934) articulated the concept of "self" as a socially constructed phenomenon. Mead further stated that "the self is something which has a development … arising in the process of social experience and activity" (p. 135). These foundational theorists continue to inform contemporary theoretical approaches to identity by way of combining an understanding of interior thought processes (psychology) and the interpretation of interactions with others as instrumental to attributing symbolic meaning (sociology; Hammack, 2014). While early identity theorists and frameworks favoured an individual and internal process of identity creation, now it is a more widely accepted belief that identity construction and expression involves a relationship between developmental conditions and social interactions (Arbuckle, 2024; Korobov, 2015).

The development of identity is difficult to examine as many variables contribute to how "identity is built, shaped, contested, and revised within actual interactional contexts" (Meeus, 2011, p. 211). From a sociocultural viewpoint,

identities are not developmental character types, "but rather reflect the burgeoning social and cultural capacity … to be rhetorically responsive and answerable in the midst of social interactions" (Korobov, 2015, p. 212). Identity, therefore, is created and communicated through a complex interwoven relationship between people, culture, and communities. This is important in the school context as all individuals come to the environment with diverse identities that will become evident in how they engage and respond in social situations. Given that this research is about the identity of a school, and not simply a person, the nature of identity that defines the group is significant.

2.2.2 Collective Identity

Interest in the psychology of organisations has increased over recent years, leading to an expansion of research in the domain of collective identity. Such an expanded theory of identity emerged in the 1970s, expressing a concern that individualistic approaches to identity were falling short in explaining intergroup phenomena (Spears, 2011).

Collective identities result from the process of reflexivity of participants as they seek to understand, explain, and define the groups to which they belong (A. Brown, 2006), while also presenting clarity of unity, purpose, and meaning within culture and context (McAdams, 2011). Thus, collective identities are understood as determinants of social behaviours, and therefore it is essential that they are evaluated through a reflective process of creating shared meanings from society, culture, and participants (A. Brown, 2006; Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Spears, 2011).

Group or collective identity is influential in understanding how participants derive value and meaning from their group membership as experienced through the ongoing process of comparison within and between other groups. This understanding can be readily applied to that of a Catholic primary school setting and its organisational authority, the CEO, as stakeholders not only share their personal identity but also contribute to the collective identity of the group.

2.2.3 Organisational Identity

Organisations portray their identity as an ongoing expression of accomplishments and experiences communicated through a variety of processes, including statements that express what is central, distinctive, and enduring to the organisation (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Arbuckle, 2013; Cooren et al., 2011; Lin,

2004). Such expressions of organisational identity are developed through dialogue with members of the organisation, as well as through interaction with and comparison between other organisations (Lin, 2004; Seidl, 2005). It is in this way that organisational identity shares the common story of what is essential and important to the organisation (centrality), what sets the organisation apart from others (distinctiveness), and what has sustained the organisation over time (durability; Albert & Whetten, 1985). Through reflexive practice, organisations are able to reference and share the distinctive beliefs and claims that conceptualise their self-description (Seidl, 2005).

Organisational identity is constructed through a dynamic process of self-reference, concerned with the development of a self-description (Seidl, 2005). As such, the understanding of an organisation's identity affects the actions, participation, interpretations, and decision-making of the members (Lin, 2004; Seidl, 2005). In this way, organisational identity is the achievement of collective action and expression between stakeholders and within society (Arbuckle, 2013). Organisational identity affords the communication of "shared rules, world views and values, which constitute the deep structure of the organisation" (Seidl, 2005, p. 70). Expressions of an organisation, both written and spoken, largely inform its narrative identities that are created and shared with its members, its key stakeholders, and its potential client community. This is important to ensure authenticity between what is the narrative about the organisation's mission and the lived experiences of others within the school setting.

2.2.4 Narrative Identity

Narrative identity is understood as an internalised and evolving story, constructed through the process of making meaning of life experiences and reconstructed through defining selective stories as understood within cultural norms (McAdams, 2011). These stories assist in the portrayal of accomplishments and experiences and are identified primarily through communication processes (Cooren et al., 2011). As the term *narrative* suggests, these identities are believed to evolve from spoken and written accounts to highlight a particular point of view or motive, and therefore represent a product of human construction (A. Brown, 2006).

While narrative identity construction focuses on past experiences and traditions, it also anticipates an imagined and preferred future (McAdams, 2011). Collective narrative identity surpasses a collection of individual ideals and

understandings, favouring a group expression of how members of the group respond to the world around them (Korobov, 2015). In essence, each group is greater than the sum of its individual members. When combining a collective and narrative identity, it is possible to identify a collection of stories that articulate what is held as central and sacred, distinctive, and in relation to a complex network of participants and openness to others (A. Brown, 2006). In regard to a collective school identity, it is created and shared through experiences and interactions within the community and also communicated through vision and mission statements, handbooks, newsletters, school prospectuses, and social media. Hence, this understanding of narrative identity as experienced and shared by an organisation provides a means to communicate collective identity and can now be applied to that of Catholic identity.

2.2.5 Catholic Identity

Catholic identity has evolved and transpired over time through a comprehensive cultural and theological narrative based upon a reflection on Catholic organisations throughout history (Boeve, 2016). It is a rich and vibrant means for communicating to its members, as well as those outside of the religion, the traditions and experiences upon which Catholic identity has been built (Arbuckle, 2013; Boeve, 2016). Catholic identity communicates the shared purpose, processes, and outcomes that are founded on shared beliefs and values (Sultmann & Hall, 2022). Further affirmed by Arbuckle (2024), "the primary source of our identities is that of the scriptures, [and within the Catholic Church] the ultimate source of [these] identities is Jesus Christ" (p. 90).

Within an overall appreciation of how identity develops, Boeve (2016) states that Catholic identity evolves and grows through a continued focus on dialogue, which is not only concerned with components that draw members together but also facilitates discussion and exploration regarding internal and external difference. This is supported by Arbuckle (2013), who says that a more flexible and genuine dialogue between the Church and other cultures requires an openness to the other, which in turn informs the identity narrative created and shared. Such thoughts are informed by the concept that a truly Catholic identity can only be understood through dialogue with internal and external members of the group, together with a reflexive and adaptive reimagining of possibilities to articulate the mission and ministry of the Catholic Church.

A living, evolving, and organic understanding of Catholic identity is proposed as an increasing focus on "community" rather than "institution" (CCE, 2022, para. 16). Arbuckle (2013, 2024) and Neidhart and Lamb (2016) discuss the value of social

objects and symbols communicating and reinforcing meaning and purpose, thereby creating unique and distinctive identities. This is described by McDonough (2016) as a Catholic meta-identity. As such, Catholic identity is socially constructed and purposefully shaped for the culture and context in which it exists (Arbuckle, 2024).

Arbuckle (2024) adds that to know and shape an organisation's identity, stakeholders must pay close attention to the context in which it is operating, interacting, or engaging. Scholars in the field identify the context to be detraditionalised (Boeve, 2007; Heelas, 2018), secularised (Boeve, 2007; Bouma, 2017) and pluralised (Cousins, 2021; D'Costa, 2011).

A detraditionalised society is one which encompasses a declining influence of established traditions, authorities, and inherited social structures, in the shaping of identities, values, and practices (Heelas, 2018). A secularised society is characterised by the declining role of religion in both public and private profiles, with religion removed from the public realm and shifting to a matter of private conscience (Bouma, 2017). A pluralised society is described by D' Costa (2011) as one that accepts the coexistence of diverse worldviews, values, and cultural traditions. As such, a pluralist society encompasses multiplicity and dialogue among different faiths, philosophies, and lifestyles (Cousins, 2012).

Amplified in Australia by immigration and globalisation (White and Tadesse, 2007), Catholic identity is defined by Lapsley and Kelley (2022) as both personal and collective identities, which Arbuckle (2024) concludes belong to the present, past, and future. This appreciation of identity is registered within the Catholic school context, "as it provides the face and place of Church in service to community" (Sultmann & Hall, 2022, p. 235) and emerges from and shapes an identity that is dynamic and organic.

2.2.6 Catholic School Identity

Because Catholic schools are part of the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church (CCE, 1977, 1997, 1998), Catholic school identity is informed and influenced by the Catholic identity of the Church. The foundational premise is that Catholic school identity draws from its mission to proclaim the Gospel (CCE, 2022; Sultmann & Hall, 2022) in "unity and communion with the Church in order to define the school as 'Catholic' at all levels" (CCE, 2022, para. 54). This understanding raises the expectation that Catholic school principals should attend to the ways in which

religious traditions and truths are integrated within the lived reality of the community (King, 2014).

Catholic school identity is described by Bauer (2011) as a spiritual atmosphere, where Christian morals and values underpin the thoughts and actions of a Catholic school community. Reflecting societal and organisational needs and structures, Catholic school identity can be expressed and communicated in various ways as participants respond to the school context and jurisdiction. Arbuckle (2017, 2024) clarifies the importance of sharing stories to integrate faith, life, and culture authentically. This supports the belief that Catholic school identity is best expressed in how group members respond to societal needs rather than what is said about itself (Arbuckle, 2013; Leonard, 2017).

To authentically enact Catholic school identity, it is assumed that school leaders and teachers would exhibit high levels of religious literacy. Religious literacy is understood as an extension of Hirsch's (1988) construct of cultural literacy (Dinham & Shaw, 2017), which is metaphorically connected to the ability to read and write. Therefore, religious literacy is understanding the narratives, rules, and vocabulary that underpin religion and beliefs (Dinham & Shaw, 2017). Defined by Wright (1993), religious literacy includes the ability to "reflect, communicate and act in an informed, intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomenon of religion" (p. 47). Soules and Jafralie (2021) highlight that the religious background and identities of an individual significantly impact their religious literacy and ability to impart "knowledge, skills, dispositions and context-dependent elements" (p. 47), highlighting that the sharing of lived experiences is an important element for modelling and imparting religious literacy.

Recent literature points to the direct relationship between principal formation and religious literacy, and the ability to foster the accurate development of strong Catholic identity for staff, students and other stakeholders in the school setting. While this thesis is concerned with principal perspectives regarding SCI it is important to understand the 'bottom up' influence of formation for all stakeholders. For instance, Sullivan and Pēna (2019) highlight the relationship between principal preparation programs and their capacity to impact schoolwide influence on the strengthening of Catholic school identity. Haldane, O'Shea, and Giacco (2023) promote the need for ongoing education and formation of teachers at all career stages, particularly for principals and religious education leaders. Importantly, it has been established that mission focussed formation equips principals to influence the identity of teachers,

students, and families (Boyle and Haller, 2016), and the religious culture of the school community (Franchi, 2022). In short, all voices have a place in the development and living expression of identity.

Arbuckle (2024) purports that "there are seven broad pillars as sources of normative Catholic identities: scripture; Jesus Christ; magisterium; sacramental symbols/rituals; Catholic social teaching; inclusivity; and the witness of faith-filled people" (p. 90). Drawing from each pillar, Catholic school identities "form the living Tradition of the church" (p. 90).

To this end, Catholic school identity is inspired by Jesus Christ and founded in an explicit understanding that all people are made in the image and likeness of God and therefore worthy of the innate dignity of the human person (Miller, 2015). Essentially, Catholic schools are sustained by religious conviction and mission, which seek to activate and inspire informed and responsive participants within a global society (O'Hara, 2015). The identified priorities, concerns, and actions of all members within a Catholic school community contribute to the ever-evolving expression and witness of the school's Catholic identity.

Importantly, the Catholic school identity construct has been heavily influenced by theology, psychology, and sociology, as well as dialogue between those affiliated with the Catholic Church and the wider society. As stated by Foley et al. (2022), the opportunity for "diverse religious and non-religious perspectives [to be] brought into dialogue with a Catholic perspective" (p. 166) has led to new or nuanced understanding for all. The integral interplay of life and culture is a dominant theme within the CCE publications (Hall, Sultmann, & Townend, 2018), offering insight into the mission of Catholic education and expression of Catholic school identity. Thus, the next section explores relevant literature that affords further insight about the mission and identity of Catholic education.

2.3   Construct of Catholic Education

As previously mentioned, Catholic education acts as an evangelical outreach of the Catholic Church as it seeks to provide opportunities to educate all people who uphold the espoused values of Church theology, doctrine, traditions and teachings. Simply stated by Horner et al. (2020), as an educational community, the Catholic school provides formative experiences of the Christian faith, thereby providing

opportunities for stakeholders to "live religiously in the modern world" (Scott, 2015, p. 59).

Since their inception, Catholic schools have been seen as meeting places for those who wish to express Christian values in education (CCE, 1977, para. 53). As such, "the Catholic school, far more than any other, must be a community whose aim is the transmission of values for living. Its work is seen as promoting a faith-relationship with Christ in Whom all values find fulfilment" (CCE, 1977, para. 53). The CCE elaborates further on what is meant by "a faith-relationship" by proposing that "faith is principally assimilated through contact with people whose daily life bears witness to it. Christian faith, in fact, is born and grows inside a community" (CCE, 1977, para. 53).

These understandings, as shared in early CCE publications, are privileged with the same degree of importance within the Catholic Church and educational contexts today. The sharing and passing on of faith, as prioritised within the Catholic school, are expected to be modelled and articulated by all stakeholders within the Catholic school community. This is reflected in the official Church documents that describe the mission and purpose of Catholic education, and in particular the mission and purpose of the Catholic school.

2.3.1 Mission of the Catholic School

The mission and purpose of Catholic education is clearly articulated in magisterium documents of the Catholic Church, with the first of these – *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education) – written at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. In the early 1960s the work of the Second Vatican Council produced documentation that addressed the relationship between the Catholic Church and the modern world (Cranton, 2016). This gathering of the Catholic Church in Council promoted an understanding that Church doctrine needed to be more deeply understood by the laity, allowing its effective interpretation to be apparent in the actions and words of people of faith (Arthur et al., 2018). At the same time, Catholic schools experienced an increasing demand for lay leaders and teaching staff as members of the religious orders moved into other areas of Catholic mission and ministry. This absence of members from religious orders increased the demand on Catholic school leaders to assume the roles of providing spiritual and faith formation, sharing theological insight, and attending to Catholic ethos and culture (Buchanan, 2013; Madero, 2018; Schuttloffel, 2012).

The *Declaration on Christian Education* (Pope Paul VI, 1965) established "fundamental principles of Christian education" (Pope Paul VI, 1965, Introduction, para. 4) including the identification of parents as the primary educators of their children (para. 3, "The Authors of Education"); highlighting the shared responsibility between members of religious orders and laity for enacting the mission of the Church (para. 8, "Catholic Schools"); articulating the transcendent mission of Catholic education, as expressed through Gospel witness (para. 8, "Catholic Schools"); and the essential need for faith formation to continue the legacy of previous generations, inform right judgement, foster values, and prepare students for a professional life (para. 5, "The Importance of Schools") (Madero, 2018; Miller, 2015). In keeping with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the *Declaration on Christian Education* also expressed the Church's mission and outreach to include care for those who are poor and for unbelievers, thereby highlighting a profound respect for personal dignity and diversity (Madero, 2018).

The Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE) was established as the Catholic Church authority to publish "certain fundamental principles of Christian education … developed at greater length by a special post-conciliar commission" (Pope Paul VI, 1965, Introduction, para. 4). Therefore, the CCE is recognised for its authority and responsibility for supporting Catholic schools worldwide (Hall et al., 2019). Most recently, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (CCE, 2022) provided an instruction on which all Catholic education, internationally, should operate.

The aforementioned reduced presence of members of religious orders in leadership positions in Catholic schools since the Second Vatican Council posed new challenges, which were subsequently addressed in *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (CCE, 1982). As Miller (2015) shares, "the presence of religious [order] … served as a built-in guarantee of their Catholic [school] identity" (p. 359). As members of religious orders moved away from schools, significant theological and formation demands fell to the lay staff. Hence, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (CCE, 1982) acknowledges the important role of the lay teacher, stressing the necessity of adequate theological training and formation. Such preparation was deemed urgent and essential because "the way in which they [laity] bear witness to the faith will depend on this specific identity, in the Church and in this particular field of labour" (CCE, 1982, para. 5).

More than 20 years after the Second Vatican Council, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (CCE, 1988) described the distinctiveness of Catholic education, stating that in Catholic schools "intellectual development and growth as a Christian go forward hand in hand" (para. 51). This document discusses how it is the Catholic culture and character of a school which ultimately provides "the underlying reason for its existence" (CCE, 1988, para. 66) and necessitates quality religious education to be integrated across the curriculum and consistent with education of the whole person.

Informed by CCE publications, Groome (1996) identifies five distinct albeit overlapping characteristics of a Catholic school: anthropology, sacramentality, community, tradition, and rationality. Such insight highlights the importance of Catholic school communities privileging an understanding that all human life is created in the image and likeness of God (anthropology), thereby cognisant of the ability to see God in all things (sacramentality). A Catholic school community innately values the contributions of all members, expressed through communal interdependent relationships (community), sharing the Christian story and vision through scripture and tradition (tradition), and illuminating a contemporary understanding of faith (rationality). When attending to these characteristics, Catholic schools favour a community in which all members actively pursue insight and the relevance of traditions and culture to encourage and empower personal and social responsibility to self and others (Groome, 1996). This vision and mission for Catholic schools has remained constant since the Second Vatican Council, with Hall, Nestor, and Sultmann (2018) identifying the constants faith, learning, community, and formation.

Influenced by the approach of the new millennium, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (CCE, 1997) provided insight into practical ways to embody new evangelisation and extend an invitation to dialogue with other faith traditions. Catholic schools were urged to extend opportunities for evangelisation, not only for the baptised but also for all people in search of truth and goodwill. Branson et al. (2019) share a contemporary understanding of evangelisation by elaborating that it includes the practice of embracing Catholic mission, informed by Jesus, then accepting responsibility for articulating and enacting how to live, proclaim, and spread the kingdom of God. This invitation to new evangelisation was again extended in the document *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*, as the magisterium documentation

embraced a dialogue of Catholic education in and for communion (CCE, 2007). As stated by Hall et al. (2019), "all within the school community are called to be conscious of their privilege and responsibility, their communion in mission and dialogue within the world" (p. 20). Groome (2014) affirms this understanding by stating that the mission for Catholic education "is from and for faith" (p. 113).

In recognition of the pluralistic context of the developed world and wider engagement of people from multifaith and nonreligious backgrounds, the more recent CCE publications portray a common theme regarding the integral union between life and culture. As an expression of Catholic identity, Catholic schools are now being called to embrace experiences of intercultural dialogue. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* (CCE, 2013) stresses the importance of faith formation for teachers and leaders as they embrace a learning community whereby faith and life are brought into harmonious relationships within current societal contexts (Gleeson et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2019).

The theme of intercultural dialogue continues to be addressed in more recent CCE publications, including *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion:* Instrumentum Laboris (CCE, 2014) and *Educating to Fraternal Humanism: Building a Civilization of Love 50 Years After* Populorum Progressio (CCE, 2017). The CCE situates its attention to intercultural dialogue as an opportunity for Catholic education to address many societal challenges of our time. Catholic schools worldwide have always assumed innate responsibility for the education and transmission of Catholic traditions and teaching, founded on an identity enlightened by faith (Gleeson et al., 2018). Through dialogue with "others that is open, peaceful and enticing" (CCE, 2014, para. 1(c) "The Challenge of Dialogue"), relationships are established and an openness to "God … in the public realm" (CCE, 2013, para. 11) becomes possible. Intercultural dialogue affords formation and inculturation opportunities and is therefore essential if Catholic schools are to maintain and express mission and ministry that is grounded in strong Catholic school identity.

As "anthropology and education are closely linked" (Goldburg, in press, p. 6) the context of Catholic school identity is ultimately informed by a Christian understanding of how the human person interacts within the world. Further highlighted by Sultmann, Brown, et al. (2024) is the need for mission to be "communicated and enacted clearly and consistently and evaluated in practice" (p. 3). Recent publications from the CCE state that there is an ever-increasing need to "humanize education" (CCE, 2017, para 8) so that "each person can develop his or

her own deep-rooted attitudes and vocation" (CCE, 2017, para. 8). This belief highlights a pivotal insight into the mission of today's Catholic schools whereby Catholic education seeks to call those associated with the school to be active participants within their Christian community by understanding the innate value they contribute to the world around them.

2.3.2 Identity of the Catholic School

Despite the extensive array of formal Catholic Church documents describing and refining the mission of the Catholic school, this has not resulted in explicating what constitutes Catholic school identity. Here, it is important to acknowledge the argument offered by both Convey (2012) and Schuttloffel (2012) that there is no predictable and substantiated common language within Catholic organisations with regard to Catholic identity. However, more recently Sultmann, Brown, et al. (2024) have differentiated the two constructs when stating, "mission might be conceived as an all-inclusive or overarching framework; whereas identity is an organic concept that reflects the aspirations of local community" (p. 9). They further purport that "Catholic identity does not stand alone but is responsive to a mission framework that provides a canvas of tradition and purpose" (p. 9).

After completing a large-scale research project, Convey (2012) developed a framework for measuring a school's Catholic identity, informed by key components, as displayed in Figure 2.2. Convey's research established that Catholic school identity is heavily reliant on the religiosity of the *people* within the community, and is also supported by the *content* (religious education [RE] curriculum) and *culture* (religious life of the school). The teaching and learning content is inclusive of both the RE program and the general curriculum, and the culture incorporates the lived aspects of a faith community that emphasises service to others, celebration of prayer, liturgy and sacraments (rituals), and prioritising the presence of religious symbols (Convey, 2012).

Figure 2.2

Components of Catholic Identity
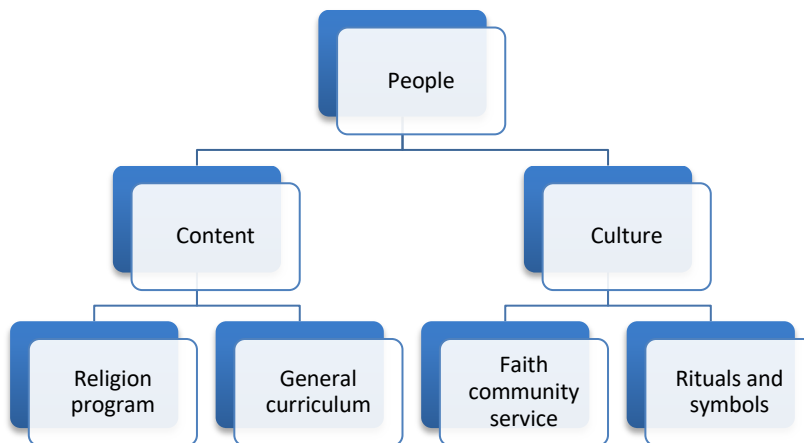
Note. From "Perceptions of Catholic Identity: Views of Catholic School Administrators and Teachers," by J. J. Convey, 2012, *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, *16*(1), p. 194 (https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1601102013). CC BY-NC.

Similarly, the Model for Religious Education (CEO, 2021a) positions the teaching and learning of religion, and the religious life of the Catholic school, as fundamental in teaching religion and how to be religious in a particular way. While this model (Figure 2.3) describes a model for RE, it replicates Convey's framework for identifying and measuring components that contribute to the expression of a school's Catholic identity.

Figure 2.3

Model for Religious Education
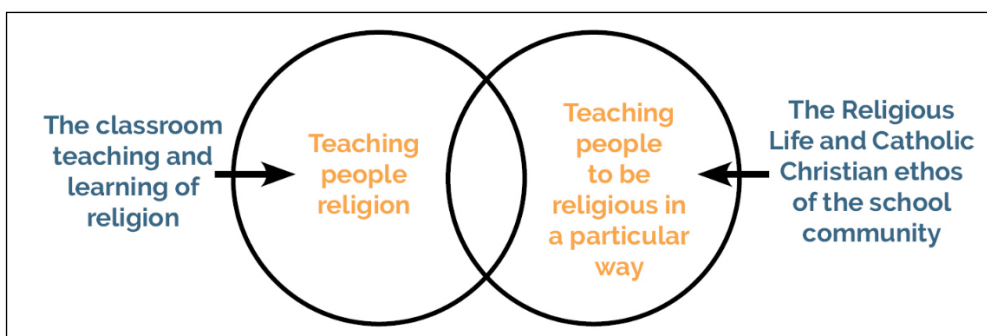
Note. From *Model for Religious Education*, by Catholic Education Office, 2021 (https://catholicidentity.bne.catholic.edu.au/religious-education/SitePages/Model-for-Religious-Education.aspx?csf=1&e=cic4fG). Copyright by Catholic Education Office.

Furthermore, in 2015, Miller completed a review of Vatican documentation regarding education and identified five essential elements or markers belonging to a school's expression of Catholic identity. These elements are believed to inform and inspire the mission of Catholic education, therefore assisting in evaluating the Catholic identity of schools (Miller, 2015). This document review identifies that Catholic school identity should be explored and expressed via the following five principles: inspired by a supernatural vision; focused on a Christian anthropology; animated by communion and community; imbued with a Catholic worldview throughout its curriculum; and sustained by Gospel witness. Such guiding principles are proposed and identified in Papal encyclicals and Holy See documents from the Second Vatican Council until the present day, providing theological wisdom and mission for Catholic schools worldwide. They also express congruity with the model proposed by Groome (1996) and the summary themes identified by Hall et al. (2019). What remains largely unknown is the extent to which this documentation is shared and thereby influential in strengthening Catholic school identity.

What this discussion of identity, and Catholic school identity in particular, highlights is the question about how well principals of Catholic schools have been prepared for their additional leadership responsibilities. Current societal contexts highlight the urgency for leaders in faith-based schools to communicate a common language and understanding regarding exactly what it is that strengthens Catholic identity within school communities (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). If Catholic schools cease to articulate distinctive religious perspectives, it could be argued that their purpose and mission lack authenticity, further questioning the need for their existence. Thus, many current scholars in the field of religious leadership, including Arthur et al. (2018), Branson et al. (2021), Buchanan (2013), Ozdemir (2017), and Treston (2015, 2018), confirm that this additional expectation impacts the diverse and complex demands for those undertaking leadership positions in Catholic schools. The common explanations for these complexities include the understanding that leadership preparation for mainstream education warrants consideration if it is to cater for the additional and unique complexity of leading Catholic school communities.

2.4   Educational Leadership and Catholic Identity

Current research in the field of educational leadership proposes that school leaders are working within an "ever-changing and pressured environment", therefore demanding specific qualities, including "a clear sense of personal purpose … sense of direction … optimism … and a disposition in which the individual expects favourable outcomes … see[s] adversity as a challenge to be overcome … and failure as a temporary state" (Hilton, 2020, p. 24).

To articulate a clear sense of purpose, it is important that leaders encourage all stakeholders to reconnect with the "why", giving rise to the ability to "shape the vision and set the pace … establish[ing] your values to measure and align your decision making" (Hilton, 2020, p. 24). Leadership competence is attributed once other people perceive that the leader is seen to "possess the knowledge and skills to do the job, along with the interpersonal skills and wisdom to succeed" (Hilton, 2020, p. 24). Leithwood et al. (2019) describe four domains of practice for successful school leadership: set direction; build relationships and develop people; develop the organisation to support desired practices; and improve the instructional program. Such is the acknowledged expectation for leaders in all educational settings; however, those in a faith-based system of education take on additional specialised leadership expectancies, as now described.

For the past 30 years, Catholic school leadership has been informed by many theories, including but not limited to servant leadership, ethical leadership, social justice leadership, distributive leadership, virtues leadership, and most recently, contemplative leadership. As Catholic schools seek to respond to societal contexts, as an expression of faith-informed mission and outreach, including that of Catholic identity, components of these leadership models have been used with varying levels of success. More recently, researchers such as Belmonte and Cranston (2009), Branson et al. (2021), Branson et al. (2019), Neidhart (2014), and Schuttloffel (2012) propose that, for Catholic schools to retain their innate ability to foster and promote Catholic identity, it is essential that principal preparation programs build leaders who exhibit high levels of spiritual and Catholic cultural capital. Casson (2018) further highlights the need for these leaders to maintain a high level of religious and theological knowledge so that they are well informed to engage in counter-cultural dialogue, while portraying a strong expression of Catholic teachings in order to enhance the school's Catholic identity.

Current academic literature discusses many attributes and responsibilities for Catholic school principals, as displayed in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Essential Attributes and Responsibilities for Catholic School Principals

Attributes and responsibilities for Catholic school principals	Reference
Commit to active leadership in Church mission	Neidhart and Lamb (2016)
Share story to integrate faith, life, and culture	Arbuckle (2017); Sultmann and Hall (2022)
Engage in ongoing development of capabilities in faith leadership	Neidhart and Lamb (2016); Horner et al. (2020)
Bear witness by displaying a Christian presence that is shown, made explicit, "visible, tangible and conscious"	CCE (2022, para. 28)
View role as vocation	Sultmann, Lamb, and Hall (2024); Hall, Sultmann, and Townend (2018)
Engage staff and families with faith traditions and Church	Horner et al. (2020)
Establish an invitational focus for all stakeholders towards faith formation experiences and readiness	Horner et al. (2020); Sultmann, Lamb, and Hall (2024)
Prioritise initial and ongoing formation for self and others	CCE (2022); Sultmann, Lamb, and Hall (2024)
"Live, study and act in accordance with the reasons of fraternal humanism"	CCE (2017, para. 10)
Engage in formal study and reflective practice to assist in knowledge acquisition, skill development, and attitudinal change	Neidhart and Lamb (2016)
Exhibit capacity to embed three key leadership functions: spiritual leader, educational leader, and managerial leader	Branson et al. (2021)

Note. CCE = Congregation for Catholic Education.

Arthur et al. (2018) summarise the diverse agendas for leaders in Catholic schools when stating that the role of these leaders requires a comprehensive understanding of administration, operations, curriculum, and management, while also "exhibiting an exemplary representation for strengthening the school's Catholic identity by building a Catholic culture and community, fostering faith development, and integrating the Church's traditions and doctrinal practices into aspects of the school life" (p. 4). When both the administrative and spiritual dimensions of leadership are in agreement, it is possible to articulate a learning environment responding to the Church's mission of evangelisation and engagement in the world,

thereby integrating the Catholic school identity by displaying a distinctive context in which faith inspires all interactions, activities, and undertakings.

The need for Catholic school leadership formation to include essential elements of formal education pathways, self-reflection and interaction, dialogue and mentoring with colleagues is featured in the research of Buchanan (2013) and Neidhart (2014). To this end, Neidhart (2014) articulates a theoretical framework that promotes the interdependent nature of increasing knowledge acquisition, skill development, and attitudinal change as the basis of leadership formation. Likewise, the study implemented by Buchanan (2013) complements Neidhart's (2014) faith leadership framework by identifying that academic scholarship alone is insufficient to embrace the role of Catholic educational leadership. Furthermore, his research also calls on the collective understandings, experiences, and wisdom of recent postgraduates (each leader or aspiring leader in a Catholic school setting) to identify the particular needs of leaders working in Catholic schools in Australia. Buchanan's (2013) research identified that leaders require formalised opportunities for mentoring and skill development with other leaders in Catholic schools. As such, Buchanan (2013) and Neidhart (2014) commend self-reflection and interaction with peers and colleagues from Catholic education as essential components for leadership preparation for those in Catholic schools.

Catholic school leaders are also required to develop strong leadership in RE, articulating a climate of strong Catholic identity and thereby illustrating the inherent integration of education and theology within their role. Power (2015) believes that this integration provides authentic and effective links among the narratives of RE, hermeneutics, and catechesis, and such integration is now a required Catholic school leadership characteristic given principals' increasing responsibility for enhancing the faith-informed identity of their Catholic school.

As all schools aspire to educate students to become informed and actively involved participants of the modern world, it is essential for Catholic schools to express actions that the CCE label as the "distinctiveness" of Catholic education. To this end, Stuart-Buttle and Shortt (2018) favour the expression of faithfulness of Catholic education (rather than distinctiveness), as it personifies the "building of a rich whole informed by faith" (p. 9). They view contemporary Catholic school communities as places where the Christian traditions of love, humility, freedom, and relationships are apparent and prioritised. Stuart-Buttle and Shortt (2018) further advocate that faith formation in the Christian tradition can "illuminate and inspire, as

well as disturb and challenge, the work of contemporary education in our schools, colleges, universities, diocese and church institution" (p. 9).

It is apparent that leaders in Catholic schools require specific and targeted opportunities to increase their ability to authentically articulate and promote Catholic identity within their school. As SCI is a current strategic goal and priority for Catholic education jurisdictions locally and globally, it is important to investigate current strategies as perceived by school principals undertaking the specific responsibility for promoting Catholic school identity. These perceptions are most effectively and authentically articulated and described by those holding this position of school leadership.

2.4.1 Leading to Enhance Catholic School Identity

Articulating a strong Catholic identity has become an increasingly prominent priority for all Catholic organisations within the current trend towards a secularised societal context. Indeed, the responsibility to articulate and authenticate the Catholic identity within schools and other Catholic organisations has been well documented since the 1990s (Arthur et al., 2018). Arguably, the urgency of such dialogue and investigation was in response to the priorities of the Church entering the third millennium. Clergy, theologians, educators, academics, and lay leaders had much to contribute to this international dialogue, inclusive of the lived experience of stakeholders. This need is instrumental for being able to articulate the distinctiveness of Catholic education, as compared with private or public education, in the current political and cultural context. However, the notion that Catholic identity is predictable and substantiated by a common language within Catholic organisations is strongly contested by both Convey (2012) and Schuttloffel (2012). Therefore, it has been stated more recently that Catholic schools could be experiencing an "identity crisis" (Gleeson et al., 2018, p. 77).

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) in Australia and local diocesan education authorities have developed position papers to inform all stakeholders of the important and timely imperative to implement strategies that strengthen Catholic identity (NCEC, 2018). While such documents are electronically available to the public, it is nevertheless difficult to gauge distribution and reception of the content. These publications, informed by current literature and prepared in consultation with scholars, are endorsed by Australian Catholic bishops and include *Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools* (NCEC, 2018); *To 2020 and*

Beyond (Archdiocese of Brisbane, 2017); and *Strong Catholic Identity: [CEO] Position Statement* (CEO, 2016). The aim of these publications is to develop a common understanding of Catholic identity with the purpose of enabling dialogue among stakeholders regarding strategic initiatives for Catholic organisations within Australia. It is within this context that the bounded Catholic education system associated with this research adopted SCI as a strategic goal and one of three key pillars for all Catholic schools within its jurisdiction.

The SCI Position Statement (CEO, 2016) communicates the organisation's preferred pedagogical approach for a reconceptualist lens for the teaching and learning of religion and enhancing the religious life of the school. The impetus of a reconceptualist approach preferences a culture of dialogue, a contemporary theology for mission, and a post-critical belief system (CEO, 2016). Therefore, a key position of this bounded system of schools, as identified in the SCI Position Statement, is the adoption of a recontextualised understanding of Catholic school identity (CEO, 2016). While giving preference to the lived expression of a Catholic worldview, founded on the Gospel vision of Jesus Christ, the identity of a Catholic school "is defined by engagement with secular and pluralist contexts" (CEO, 2016, p. 2).

The CEO describes a recontextualised Catholic school context that is distinctive in name and nature and "ensures that the Catholic faith tradition is clearly visible in the contemporary context, fusing the old with the new" (CEO, 2016, p. 2). As such, it is instrumental that principals are leading and embedding practices that support this identity for the Catholic school setting. A culture of dialogue was extensively addressed in Section 2.3.1, and theology for mission in Section 2.3.2. What remains to be defined is what constitutes a post-critical belief system.

2.4.1.1 Post-Critical Belief System

Based on the experience of declining religious affiliation setting the scene for a diverse and changing religious landscape in Belgium, and replicated in other Western cultures, researchers have investigated why "some individuals reject practices and beliefs of an organised religion (i.e., Christianity) but remain interested in religious/ spiritual issues" (Krysinska et al., 2014, p. 264).

Wulff's (1991) two-dimensional approach to religion provided the inspiration to develop the Post-Critical Belief Scale (PCBS). The PCBS measures attitudes towards religion, including a literal or symbolic understanding of religious content, and an inclusion or exclusion of transcendence (Krysinska et al., 2014). The

pedagogy of post-critical belief was positioned as a way to recontextualise religious beliefs in response to scientific criticism of literal interpretation evolving during the 20th century (Szydłowski et al., 2023). As such, disbelief in religious content was rising, resulting from people being unable to substantiate religious content in the light of scientific evidence and thereby deeming religion as lacking credibility and plausibility. Therefore, the need to teach about a symbolic understanding of religious content gained momentum to counter the literal interpretation being at odds with scientific evidence.

Pollefeyt and Richards (2020) advance a position whereby the recontextualised Catholic school identity prepares and forms others in ways where knowledge is theologically legitimate and interpretation is contextually plausible. The teaching of a recontextualised approach, including symbolic interpretation of religious content, and including transcendence, assists in creating an opportunity to bridge the gap between Christianity and culture (Horner et al., 2020). In contrast to this understanding Haldane et. al. (2023) argues that "Catholicism is compatible with diverse cultural dispositions and sensibilities" (p.27). They warn against relying on sociological and psychological methodologies, as promoted by Pollefeyt, as it discredits the authenticity and theological understanding of Catholic identity (Haldane et. al., 2023).

For Catholic schools to retain a deliberate evangelisation of Christian ministry, mission, and purpose, it is essential that lay leaders engage in dedicated faith formation experiences. As faith formation is an essential component for enhancing principal capacity to support Catholic school identity, this domain warrants inquiry.

2.4.1.2 Faith Formation

Formation is understood as an intentional act of forming, and therefore faith formation encompasses any action associated with the development and forming of, in, and for faith. Schein and Schein (2016) state that for employees to authentically belong to an organisation, they must commit to enhancing the organisation's sense of purpose and reason for being. Sultmann and Brown (2014) elaborate on this understanding when stating that within the Catholic school context, developing a true sense of purpose is dependent on a willingness of all individual staff to actively commit to faith formation. By embracing Robertson's (2013) framework for empowering lay Catholic educators, an organisation can focus on empowering others through the process of faith formation. Watkins (2018) believes that such a focus on

faith formation is both powerful and problematic. Powerful as it is a necessity for enhancing Catholic identity and fulfilling the mission of the Church; problematic as it can by its nature be seen as exclusive. Notwithstanding the possibility and challenge, the Code of Canon Law provides the rationale and the priority:

> Lay persons who permanently or temporarily devote themselves to special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation required to fulfill their function properly and to carry out this function conscientiously, eagerly, and diligently. (Pope John Paul II, 1983, para. 231)

The necessity and context for formation is discussed by Robertson (2013), who identifies that staff within Catholic schools are employed without experiencing "organic" formation opportunities, as afforded in the faith communities of past generations. Such realities for employees in Catholic schools in Australia highlight the need for staff to engage in human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation to assist in the development of attributes necessary for faith-inspired leadership. Robertson's research identified that an appropriate formation pathway requires a desire to view one's role as a ministry of the Church, an openness to reflecting on the concept of being "called", and a willingness to engage in discernment practices to respond to this calling wholeheartedly and actively, then celebrate through a commissioning liturgy. Robertson (2013) calls this formation process "from call to commissioning", thereby witnessing "the commitment to ministry of lay people working in Catholic schools on behalf of the Church" (p. 15). As part of this formation, participants are given the necessary time and opportunity to actively participate in guided discernment as they seek to identify their calling.

The importance of formation opportunities for school principals and staff is readily communicated in academic literature. Sultmann, Brown, Lamb, Hall & Diezmann (2024) recently affirmed that "the significance of formation in advancing a shared moral purpose within unique learning communities ideally recognises the integration of system and school expectations that give rise to each Catholic school possessing a unique identity" (p. 12).

2.4.2 Reclaiming Lay Leadership as a Ministerial Vocation

To view Catholic school leadership as a vocation or ministry, the principal is called to act according to the Catholic faith traditions, informed by the mission and ministry of Christ. Such faith demands a willingness to articulate and substantiate

actions as a lived response to bringing about the kingdom of God. To live as witness to Christ in words and actions is understood by Weyel et al. (2022) as enacting a practical theology. For principals to enact this, they are expected to possess sound levels of theology and a clear openness to faith. Horner et al. (2020) agree that staff must be intentionally and explicitly open to Catholic faith. This disposition of an openness to faith significantly contributes to enhancing Catholic school identity and is particularly pertinent within today's society.

Leadership in past generations of Catholic schools by members of religious orders and clergy was primarily tied to the charism of a religious congregation and afforded a unique lens on the nature of the leadership expressed within the school setting. In the opening address, "Leadership – A Catholic Perspective", at the Annual Round Table Discussion in 2015, Archbishop Eamon Martin shared his insight regarding leadership. He identified three key issues for leadership from a Catholic perspective: calling and charism; communicating the Catholic vision and values; and fostering faith formation and mission. While the above sections have addressed the latter two of these proposed common understandings, there remains a need to further discuss calling and charism.

Cuddihy (2018) provides an initial insight into the issue of calling and charism as it pertains to Catholic school leadership by highlighting that faith-informed leadership is ultimately defined by the individual person, their disposition, their way of interacting with others, and their example. Furthermore, Cuddihy emphasises the importance of their interpersonal skills and ability to reach out, to promote and model exemplary leadership, and to develop a community inspired by love. As articulated by Martin (2015), it is essential that all leaders of faith-based schools emulate the reality that they are God's servants, doing God's work, to build God's kingdom. Such insight is supported by Arthur et al. (2018) when stating that authentic ministry is realised when leaders hold true to being formal and active collaborators with Catholic traditions and practices. It is then that their work is viewed as a true vocation and an active form of evangelisation with complete and authentic alignment between soul and role. However, Sultmann, Brown, et al. (2024) highlight that increasingly this may not be the lived reality for all stakeholders, with their recent research spotlighting the construct of mission dissonance. This dissonance is evident when a mission statement, a written document, is not evident and or potentially contrasts a lived expression of Catholic school identity.

A view of leadership as uniquely personal suggests that, when Catholic school leaders view their role as a lay ministry of the Church, they bear witness to the lived reality on which to build a Church community. Informed by scripture and tradition, they lead a community to be the face of Christ to all. This does not happen by accident; rather, it is a measured by-product of faith formation whereby one comes to understand their role as a vocation. When principals perceive a sense of purpose, as expressed through commitment to vocation, they are increasingly able to align work demands with vision and mission, thereby achieving fulfilment within their role.

2.4.3 Role and Job Satisfaction

Role fulfilment is a relatively new area of research that seeks to understand how and why people successfully and seamlessly integrate the demands of their role with other life commitments. Sinek (2014) and B. Brown (2018) have researched the characteristics of leaders who promote role fulfilment through modelling and living the values and attributed behaviours of the organisation for which they work. Their contributions in this field suggest that effective leaders shape and influence close alignment between organisational mission, values, and behaviours. When others commit to this shared vision, their behaviours reinforce the mission of the organisation, resulting in role fulfilment.

Vui-Yee and Paggy (2020) share their research regarding the effect of work fulfilment on job characteristics and employee retention, highlighting "the emergence of autonomous motivation (becoming apparent) when employees internalise an activity's value into their sense of self" (p. 316). This understanding is further confirmed when these authors propose that, "when employees perceive that their task includes the freedom to make decisions (i.e., intrinsic motivation) and that this freedom fulfils their external goals and values (i.e., internalised extrinsic motivation), they become autonomously motivated and display more positive work-related attitudes" (Vui-Yee & Paggy, 2020, p. 317). This insight confirms the beliefs of Sinek (2014) and B. Brown (2018), highlighting that alignment between work tasks, values, and behaviours increases work fulfilment, ultimately contributing to active participation in driving the mission and values of the organisation.

Karatepe and Aga (2016) propose a conceptual framework that links organisational mission fulfilment and perceived organisational support to job performance via work engagement. This research, undertaken within the banking industry, shares interesting findings transferable to other organisations and sectors,

including education. Their research highlights a consistent understanding that positive fulfilment profoundly impacts work engagement, which appears to enhance an employee's motivation to perform well in their role (job performance). When employees perceive that an organisation values their contribution and acts consistently in a manner which displays "fidelity to its mission statement" (publicly and privately), work engagement and job performance are enhanced (p. 369). When employees believe they contribute to something significant and meaningful, they are motivated to actively fulfil the mission of the organisation, thereby greatly assisting the organisation to achieve its objectives. This research highlights that when engaged in dedicated and energetic service, employees are engrossed in their work, displaying elevated levels of job performance and satisfaction. The relevance of job satisfaction to my research is that there is the potential for an inherent benefit to be gained from the SCI strategy. The relationship between increased job satisfaction and leadership agency for those undertaking the role of primary school principal presents as a new perspective on the relationship of agency, motivation, and mission.

2.4.4 Leadership Agency

Agency is defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) as the deliberate, informed actions of stakeholders "to respond to challenges and uncertainties of social life … [so as to] reconceptualise human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement" (p. 963). These actions require stakeholders to distance themselves from the intricacies of the constraints on identities, so as to propose alternative possibilities for the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Within the realm of Catholic school leadership, principals are required to orchestrate secular and ecclesial responsibilities (Branson et al., 2021) in a quest to balance ecclesial and educational concerns (Rossiter, 2020). To assist in developing competent and capable school leaders, they must understand their sense of belonging (Branson & Marra, 2020) as participants in both school and system leadership (Harris et al., 2022; Hilton, 2020). For this to be realised, principals require an authentic voice at the planning table to share their insights and experiences from a school context. Through dialogue between principals, CEO leaders, and external partners, principals are afforded increased agency to co-create plans to address current constraints and challenges within Catholic education.

By increasing opportunities for principals to engage in purposeful dialogue about today's realities and their ideas for the future, they become central agents for

change. As valued and respected leaders, they understand their responsibilities, capacity, and influence in leading others (Branson & Marra, 2020).

According to this research, the successful implementation of this strategy would not only reinforce the school's Catholic identity but also enhance the principal's fidelity to this identity and, thus, their job satisfaction and leadership agency. However, the opposite is possible, too. An unsuccessful model for creating strategic planning could cause some degree of job dissatisfaction and reduced agency for the principal, specifically regarding the concept of strategic planning.

2.5   Strategic Planning for School Improvement

Strategic planning is an embedded practice across educational systems worldwide that provides a framework for school improvement. It is a measure embraced to "harness the motivation of employees in order to achieve the organisation's goals and objectives" (Wood et al., 2016, p. 80). Howes (2018) maintains that the key challenge for effective strategic planning is ensuring that a shared vision, aligned with core values, is shared and actioned by all stakeholders. It is believed that strategic planning, when well executed, can positively contribute to organisational performance as it offers strategies, goals, and plans, inclusive of procedures, tools, and practices (George et al., 2019).

Critical of the strategic planning process, Mintzberg (2000) states that a poorly executed strategic plan can "discourage commitment, impede serious change and encourage politics", as it does not contribute, adapt, or respond to strategic thinking (p. xviii). For effective and motivational strategic planning, goals and priorities must favour improved performance over commercial incentives (Howes, 2018), as well as articulate clear organisational priorities (George et al., 2019). Hence, a tension is held in current literature articulating that strategic planning can be interpreted by employees either as "enabling or coercive practice" (Arend et al., 2015). It is believed that these ideas arise based on the employees' view regarding the plan and whether they deem its content as "a set of rules that employees reluctantly follow" or "a set of challenges in which employees creatively engage" (Arend et al., 2015, p. 1742).

The successful implementation of a strategic plan depends on the commitment of all stakeholders by favouring "integrative stakeholder participation" rather than input only from top policymakers and executive leadership teams (George et al., 2019, p. 812). When school leaders are engaged in creating rather than simply

implementing strategic plans, they have a clear understanding of the purpose for change and are thereby less likely to resist implementation (Branson et al., 2021). This structure inverts the top-down model of leadership, which delivers an authentic and considered approach to strategic planning, proven to be the most effective (Mowat, 2019).

However, when members of an organisation feel that their contributions are disregarded, they may retreat to a position of "participant observer" (Howes, 2018). Howes (2018) maintains that organisations which exhibit "directive, coercive and authoritarian leadership behaviours do not build cultures of trust and are counterproductive to organisational productivity" (p. 453). This contributes to employees feeling demotivated, expressing lower job satisfaction and reducing organisational productivity. While the research of Howes (2018) explores the university sector in Australia, the findings are transferable to the school context as organisations "develop new ways of leading strategic planning" ensuring that "more creative models of planning will excite and inspire" educational communities throughout Australia (p. 454).

A consistent measure of school improvement internationally embraces the practice of a formalised school review process. Current school review procedures in Australia entail a cyclical review of school performance and accomplishments, as identified within nine domains of the national School Improvement Tool (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2023). This tool is applied to all schools within Australia, precluding a measure of religious foundations and Catholic identity per se. Some Catholic education jurisdictions have included expressions of Catholic identity within these domains; however, the focus remains on school improvement applied to a secular and pluralist society. Branson and Marra (2020) attribute the most important outcome of a school review process as providing "the school community, and its educational system authority, with data-informed knowledge that enables the school to restore its professional confidence" (p. 5). As such, a school review seeks to assist and empower stakeholders to embed sustained improvement practices which focus on dialogue, collaboration, and opportunity.

Engaging in strategic planning as an important aspect of the school review process will be possible when there is "meaningful involvement of all stakeholders in the strategic planning and strategy development processes" (Howes, 2018, p. 454). The notion of delivering centralised, top-down strategic planning is counterproductive for assisting organisations to develop vibrant, exciting, and engaging processes that

inspire alignment with the mission, values, and contributions of all stakeholders. Organisations are challenged to pay particular attention to how they implement strategic planning, ensuring the formal and comprehensive processes enhance the performance of the organisation, as actioned by its stakeholders.

The expansive nature of school improvement and strategic planning is commented on by George et al. (2019), who advocate that effective and comprehensive strategic planning encompasses a cross-organisational effort, requiring the careful allocation of human and financial resources. While Arend et al. (2015) assert the need for all stakeholders to experience enhanced employee autonomy, employee system knowledge alongside system transparency in regard to the process of creating and actioning the strategic plan are foundational. This insight exacerbates the identified need for all stakeholders to meaningfully contribute to the planning, preparation, implementation, and review of strategic plans, ensuring commitment and dedicated and decisive action in pursuit of the agreed priorities.

2.6   Research Question Informed by Current Literature and Gap Analysis

Prioritising research in the field of leadership within the Catholic school leads Belmonte and Cranston (2009) to assert that, as architects and caretakers of Catholic schools, we are responsible for ensuring that opportunities are identified to support a deliberate and conscious integration of religious and academic purpose in every dimension of faith-based schools. Belmonte and Cranston (2009) state that such an initiative demands thorough planning to identify strategies which support best practice in this field. As strengthening Catholic school identity is a current strategic goal and priority for Catholic education jurisdictions locally and globally, it is essential to evaluate such efforts, specifically considering the perspectives of school principals.

This literature review has highlighted the essential requirement to define and proclaim an organisation's identity as a measure to unify purpose, clarity, and distinctiveness. Defining and proclaiming a strong Catholic school identity is paramount within the context of an increasingly secular society. Although much has been written by Church and academic sources about Catholic school identity, uncertainty remains regarding best practice for strategy implementation. This uncertainty is problematic for principals tasked with enhancing Catholic school identity within their local context. Moreover, a principal's capacity to enact their faith by building the kingdom of God within a school community is closely tied to their

experiences of formal and informal opportunities of faith formation. Thus, a strategy to help principals to achieve this is worthwhile because it not only consolidates Catholic school identity but also enhances the principal's job satisfaction, fidelity to the Catholic mission, and leadership agency.

Literature regarding the development of organisational identity and successful strategic planning emphasises the benefits of a "bottom-up" strategy. Such implementation confirms the need to involve those tasked with forming and living the identity to be actively involved in the strategic planning and goal setting. Thus, it is implied that the role and engagement of principals in the development of the SCI strategy was pivotal. Hence, any credible evaluation of the strategy must gather, analyse, and report upon the perspectives, experiences, and actions of the principals involved.

By gleaning the perspective of principals, this research acknowledges that religious leadership is most effectively and authentically harnessed when articulated and modelled by those holding this position. Current gaps in research include a lack of analysis of current strategies and experiences that seek to enhance the ability of a principal to strengthen Catholic school identity as they embark on this essential priority. Therefore, further research to clarify the experiences and identify future needs of Catholic school principals will be beneficial in providing insight for future planning, both within Australia and internationally.

The literature review has shared perspectives that underpin the research problem this project seeks to investigate. Cognisant of both the breadth of and gaps in the literature, the research is guided by the central research question: *In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?*

Following the literature review, the methodology of this research is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1   Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design in response to the research question by describing and illustrating the theoretical framework most applicable to the question. Research paradigms provide a set of assumptions on the perspectives of truth and knowledge, and how these understandings are constructed, and therefore will be explored first (Section 3.2). This is followed by the justification of the research methodology in Section 3.3, including methods of data collection and participant selection. The processes for data analysis and interpretation are discussed in Section 3.4. Following this, Section 3.5 clarifies the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research, cognisant of the mandate to adhere to ethical research guidelines as presented in Section 3.6. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the research in Section 3.7 and reflexivity statement in Section 3.8.

Chapter 1 argued that within an increasingly secular and pluralised society, Catholic schooling systems around the world are placing urgent and critical prominence on articulating and strengthening Catholic school identity (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010, 2014). While much has been written about this phenomenon, a noticeable dominance of theory over practice can be demonstrated. In this light, this research seeks to identify which aspects of the SCI strategy were most influential for primary school principals within one bounded system of Catholic schools. Cognisant of this gap in research literature, the literature review in Chapter 2 concluded with the following central research question:

In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?

To investigate this question, the following theoretical framework was constructed.

3.2   Theoretical Framework

Pursuant to this central research question is the design of research based on a theoretical framework to provide a philosophical foundation that affords direction

and structure towards the identification of appropriate data collection and analysis tools (Creswell, 2008). Theoretical frameworks necessitate consideration of the most appropriate ontology, epistemology, research paradigm, and theoretical perspectives for articulating alignment between the purpose of the study, the question to be investigated, and the assumptions embedded regarding how new knowledge is collated and shared (Crotty, 1998).

3.2.1 Ontology: Relativism

The ontology of relativism that informs this research "shows that we can clearly and rigorously understand truth as relative and truth as absolute and see that they are not mutually exclusive" (Hales, 1997, p. 46). Relativism embraces an ontology which values and includes the perspective of others, "to assert that whatever is true is relatively true and whatever is false is relatively false" (Hales, 1997, p. 46). Referring to one's beliefs, moral values, and principles, relativism preferences an ontological perspective whereby the context and situations are investigated through the lens of the individuals involved (Forsyth, 1980). In accord with this ontological perspective, this research examines and describes the perspective of participants regarding the influence of the SCI strategy of one bounded system of schools.

This case study seeks to explore a specific context allowing the researcher to embrace the complexity and uniqueness of this setting to provide generalised findings across the bounded system. Thereby, the ontology of relativism supports the intention to validate and centralise the participants' ideas and experiences. The case study research seeks to explore the lived experiences of participants, therefore relativism provides the potential to capture multiple, subjective realities. Relativism was chosen over positivism, as positivism preferences an objective and measurable reality, which is unsuitable for case study research.

3.2.2 Epistemology: Constructivism

A constructivist epistemology was adopted to guide the development of this research design as it is most suited to research founded upon an ontology of relativism. This epistemology is based on Stake's (1995, 2005) constructivist assumptions, which describe the nature of reality as subjective, thereby demanding a holistic exploration of the phenomena. Thus, this research design has been built on a constructivist approach to reality as described by the experiences and insight of

participants, rather than focusing on a preconceived theory or belief about the effectiveness of a systemwide strategy (Boblin et al., 2013; Kotarba, 2014). By exploring the thoughts and beliefs of participants regarding the SCI strategy through dialogue with principals, new knowledge and insight emerged, which was then collated in a detailed narrative description of the principals' experiences.

However, it is noted that thoughts and beliefs emanate from personal values (Branson, 2008; Hodgkinson, 2002; Wallace, 2003). Axiology attends to the role of values when conducting research and complements a constructivist approach (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016). Attending to the influence of values attributed by participants to the research topic is essential as these greatly influence the level of commitment to and time spent prioritising this systemwide goal. By encouraging participants to articulate their personal and professional influences regarding the systemwide goal of SCI, the researcher is acknowledging the influence of these interpretations. As such, the implementation of the described research is supported by the philosophical assumptions, theoretical frameworks, and constructivist nature of this research.

3.2.3 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

Interpretivism proposes that "truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people's experiences and their understanding of them" (Ryan, 2018, p. 17). As the research explores the perceptions of principals, this is an appropriate paradigm to guide the conduct of the research. Interpretivism informs a theoretical perspective that gives preference to an awareness of the need to explore the interpretation and/or meaning making given to particular aspects within a participant's environment (Hammersley, 2012). The approach recognises that the importance attributed to certain actions and initiatives is informed by the particular culture in which they are lived out. This research complements the application of an interpretivist perspective as it seeks to communicate the perceptions, understandings, and ideas of participants, as experienced and explained in their natural work setting.

The interpretivist perspective endorses qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, applied through questionnaire processes and in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected participants (see Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2).

3.2.4 Theoretical Perspective: Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a distinctive sociological perspective founded in the belief that it is essential to identify and understand the meaning people give to their experiences and how this interpretation of the world affects their behaviours (Dennis & Smith, 2015). This understanding supports the theoretical constructs of a constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist paradigm. Aligning with a relativist ontology oriented towards understanding the diverse perspectives of others (Hales, 1997), symbolic interactionism considers the way in which one's interpretation of social interaction will affect their perception and response. "SI is premised on the idea that adequate understanding requires close examination of the processes of communicative interaction operating in natural social settings" (Dennis & Smith, 2015, p. 352). This concept is applicable to this research as it seeks insight and clarity from principals regarding their perceptions of experiences, opportunities, and systemwide initiatives that have assisted or restricted their ability to lead and enact Catholic school identity.

Blumer's (1937) adoption of the term *symbolic interact*, as expressed in the field of symbolic interactionism, relies on three key premises: people act towards things based on their meanings; meaning is derived through social interaction; and conveying and changing meanings demands that people define and interpret situations (Dennis & Smith, 2015, p. 352). Such insight purports that meaning making is a product of evolving thoughts and understandings and is not fixed or based on a single set of principles. Through experience and interaction, one's understanding of reality evolves and advances. Likewise, meaning is not understood as an individual phenomenon; rather, it is the product of diverse social interactions over time. Symbolic interactionism bases its assumption on the notion that humans use language and linguistics (or symbols) to explore the points of view of others (Dennis & Smith, 2015). Meaning is made by investigating why someone is doing what they are doing, through reflexive and reflective exploration of the meaning they attribute to the phenomenon.

Symbolic interactionism adopts a position of radical empiricism as it privileges the investigation of real-world interaction and experiences, rather than investigating a predetermined hypothesis. Preferential priority is placed on understanding the social world rather than basing predictions on its future (Dennis & Smith, 2015; Fontana, 2015; Kotarba, 2014). Participants are viewed as an expression of their reflexive self, shaped by and shaping social situations. The social context is constructed by the

complex network of interaction with others within their context or setting (Dennis & Smith, 2015). Within this study, value is attributed to the relationship between participants and researcher and consideration is favoured for identifying how new insight is perceived, uncovered, and captured. This research design is based upon a relativist ontology, constructivist epistemology, and interpretivist theoretical perspective, which complement each other and acknowledge that through collating the perceptions of participants within their natural setting, new knowledge is constructed.

3.2.5 Research Methodology: Instrumental Case Study

Informed by the philosophical foundations of this study, the methodology describes, articulates, and explains the paradigm and methods applied in this research. The research draws heavily on identifying the experiences and perceptions of participants, while also seeking to identify a common understanding of a systemwide strategy, therefore lending itself to case study methodology and methods (Pearson et al., 2015). Case study research can be viewed "as a methodology; a type of design in qualitative research that may be the object of the study, as well as a product of inquiry" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96). By using case study as a naturalistic approach to research, the researcher seeks to clarify and gain an informed understanding regarding the insight and perceptions of participants (Boblin et al., 2013). As such, case study methodology complements the function of exploring the perceptions of principals and their instrumental role within one bounded system of education.

An instrumental case study was chosen as the research methodology for this research. An instrumental case study is a credible research methodology used when the research seeks to accomplish something greater than understanding a particular situation (Stake, 2005). As described by Stake (2005), an instrumental case study is one that extends across several sites to enable data to be gained from multiple participants but examined mainly to provide insight into a singular issue. The case becomes a secondary interest, playing a supportive role while facilitating a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, through the detailed scrutiny of the particular context (Grandy, 2010; Stake, 2005). In this research, the phenomenon of Catholic identity was explored through an instrumental case study by describing the perceptions of principals regarding a systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic identity within their Catholic primary school setting. Through an instrumental case study approach, the research focuses less on the complexities of the case and more on the specifics

related to the research question (Grandy, 2010; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). While particular themes may come to light, the purpose of this research is to seek clarification from the experiences and perceptions of participants rather than observations of the researcher, drawing heavily from the methodology of instrumental case study research. As all participants were employed within one bounded system of education, the strategy being explored applied to a community of schools; therefore, the understanding of community participation research can be readily applied to this research. Goodson and Phillimore (2012) refer to the practice of community participation research as that which seeks to "transcend the barriers and hierarchies that separate researchers from researched, and thus elevate situated and communal knowledge" (p. 92). Community participation research highlights the indisputable significance placed on how communities are involved in the production of new knowledge, specific to their needs. Pertinent to this research, a school setting is perceived as a community. Principal implementation of strategic initiatives generates reciprocal influence on the engagement and understanding of stakeholders, in turn influencing the perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs of the principal. Community participation research affirms a case study approach as the experiences and ideas of the participants inform new understandings and potentially underpin future action and areas for investigation. Principals derive insight regarding strategy implementation through the reception, understanding, and participation of stakeholders.

As this research is concerned with the perspectives of primary school principals, the use of an electronically distributed questionnaire for the study population ensured that all principals were invited to share their insights, experiences, and outcomes of SCI strategy engagement. The open-ended questions and responses allowed principals to share as much or as little information as they deemed appropriate. The benefits of offering semi-structured interviews included the opportunity to fact check information provided in response to the questionnaire, and to refine questions for the purpose of expanding insights on any themes that emerged from the document analysis and questionnaire responses. The interviews also provided for a community research approach, whereby the researcher was exposed to the participants' school contexts.

The data collection process included the distribution of a Qualtrics questionnaire (Appendix A - LINK), in which principals voluntarily completed demographic data, then answered open-ended questions with an unlimited word response. This Qualtrics questionnaire was distributed to the entire population pool of

117 primary school principals to elicit maximum participation for principals. The semi-structured interviews provided for a one-to-one interview between principal and researcher. Principals were emailed a copy of the participant information letter (Appendix B), consent form (Appendix C), and interview protocol and questions (Appendix D) ahead of the interview. The collection of principal perspectives through questionnaire and interview responses ensured an empirical focus from those at the localised level of leading the SCI strategy within their primary school context.

This research as an instrumental case study was implemented in a real-life contemporary setting, that being the principals' primary school context. A primary school context is defined as the Catholic primary school (within the bounded system) in which the principal works. These primary schools educate students from Prep to Year Six (4.5-11.5 years of age). Interpretation of themes emerging from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, in constant comparison with each other and the systemwide strategy documentation, became the primary means for constructing a broad yet detailed understanding of the phenomenon within one bounded system (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Grandy, 2010; Yin, 2014).

When engaging with case study methodology, the interaction between participants and researcher is usually developed over time with the intent of establishing positive working relationships, thereby reducing the gap between researcher and participants (Boblin et al., 2013). In this study, as I work within this bounded system in which the research was conducted, it was highly possible that the participants would be known to me already, thereby reducing the need to establish a working relationship. Therefore, within this research an insider perspective benefits the research as I hold insight and experience in the field of educational leadership and enacting the SCI strategy within a school context. In my work as an APRE, I am acutely aware of the organisation's strategic plan and associated goals, particularly the implementation of the SCI strategy. As such, an insider perspective can be understood as encompassing both an adverse and empowering function within the confines of research, a position more fully discussed within the limitations of the study in Section 3.7.

A summary of the research design is presented in Table 3.1. The table presents the embedded research paradigms and research perspectives that informed the direction and structure of the data collection and analysis for this case study research (Creswell, 2008; Crotty, 1998).

Table 3.1

Research Design: Paradigms and Perspectives

Research paradigm	Research perspective
Ontology	Relativism
Epistemology	Constructivism
Research paradigm	Interpretivism
Theoretical perspective	Symbolic interactionism
Methodology	Instrumental case study

3.3   Research Methods

While the methodology of case study research is predominantly informed by qualitative data sets, it demands the use of a variety of socially constructed techniques for collecting, interpreting, and analysing multiple sources of data (Kotarba, 2014; Pearson et al., 2015). Hence, in support of the case study methodology, the research methods for this study were directed at promoting inductive inquiry, open-ended questioning, and flexibility for participants. These methods rely on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of detailed, in-depth data sets from multiple sources of information, resulting in a narrative description comprised of case-based themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Informed by the prior research of Buchanan (2013), Convey (2012), and Gleeson and O'Neill (2015), this research design endorses methodological coherence measures, highlighting the dynamic interplay between the chosen methods for data collection and analysis (Klenke, 2016).

3.3.1 Data Collection

The data collection consisted of a pilot questionnaire (a small number of volunteer participants who occupied a role closest to that of the actual participant pool), questionnaire (entire study population), in-depth semi-structured interviews (purposeful sample of participants), and constant comparison between the emerging themes, the experiences and perceptions of participants, and document analysis of key policies contained with the systemwide SCI strategy documentation. The data collection methods reflect the necessity for multiple sources to generate a trustworthy and authentic empirical investigation (Stake,1995).

3.3.1.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire, generated in Qualtrics, included the following central research question:

In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?

The sub questions were:

- In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the 'Strengthening Catholic Identity' strategy?
- As a principal how do you define Catholic school identity?
- What personal experiences, beliefs and/or relationship have influenced your actions and understanding regarding Catholic school identity?
- As a principal how do you enact your leadership responsibility for strengthening Catholic school identity?
- As a principal how do you describe your summative experiences of the systemwide strategy to Strengthen Catholic identity?
- What are your future needs to enhance Catholic school identity within your school context?

Initially, questionnaire piloting was implemented for the purpose of "debugging" the questions and increasing validity (Munn & Drever, 1990; van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Participants for the pilot questionnaire were assistant principals who had recently worked as acting principals within this bounded system. The questionnaire was electronically distributed to four participants who met this specification. Feedback was sought regarding any ambiguities or difficulties experienced when completing the questionnaire, as well as the time taken to complete it (Munn & Drever, 1990; van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Insights gained allowed for any concerns to be actioned (Munn & Drever, 1990; van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Informed by the pilot study, necessary changes were made to the questionnaire within the digital platform of Qualtrics.

The research questionnaire (Appendix A) confirmed participant consent to participate and gathered demographic data regarding professional characteristics and school context. The questionnaire sought responses to open-ended questions regarding the SCI strategy of the bounded system in which they worked. An open word limit for each response was allowed so that all experiences and perceptions

could be provided at length by the participants. The questionnaire concluded with an invitation to voluntarily participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview with purposefully selected participants. The time allocation of approximately 45 minutes for each interview was communicated in the invitation to participate in the questionnaire (Appendix A).

3.3.1.2 In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews

To further refine principal perspectives and insights, the following statements and questions were posed during the semi-structured interviews:

- Describe your involvement in the Strengthening Catholic Identity strategy.

- In what ways did this strategy influence your leadership and/or your school community?

- How did involvement in the Catholic Dialogue Schools Project affect your school leadership?

- In what ways has your leadership been influenced by an increasingly secular society?

- How does the Church and system expectation for ongoing formation influence your school leadership?

- Did you identify any challenges while enacting the SCI strategy, caused by other responsibilities and accountabilities for principals? If so, how would you describe these?

- What do you do to overcome competing priorities?

- If you were contacted by your employing body to seek advice to improve the Strengthening Catholic Identity strategy, what would you say? And why?

- Is there any other insight that you'd like to share regarding the SCI Strategy?

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews added rich human experience to the data collection process. I used a semi-structured protocol (Appendix D) by providing questions that elicited individual perspectives of primary school principals regarding strengthening Catholic school identity, while using a questioning technique that prompted, probed, summarised, and checked for deeper understanding (Denscombe, 1998). This process offered the opportunity for participants to express themselves and their understanding in ordinary and meaningful ways, sharing their insight, opinions, and experiences (Mack et al., 2005). I assumed a neutral position while

giving all credibility to the principal as expert in the field. Such practice ensured that my insights did not influence the information articulated by participants. The location of the interview was either at the school where the participant worked or via Microsoft Teams (due to Covid restrictions at this time), ensuring that the data collection occurred within a safe and authentic setting.

With the permission of the participants, interviews were voice recorded, and transcripts completed and shared with participants. When starting the voice recording, I acknowledged the start time before asking the participants to offer verbal consent for the interview to be recorded. Appendix D displays the interview guide and proforma that was used to provide a flexible structure for each interview. The semi-structured nature of the interview ensured that a clear list of questions was included in each interview but allowed for flexibility in the order of delivery to enable opportunities for more open-ended questioning, responding to the natural flow of dialogue (Denscombe, 1998).

After each interview, I annotated additional context-specific details and transcribed the recording within 24 hours. Such practices ensured full credit was given to the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, as refined through symbolic interactionism, and consistency with the interviewing procedures shared by Mack et al. (2005).

3.3.1.3 Systemwide SCI Strategy Document Analysis

Central to the SCI strategy were two key documents: *Strong Catholic Identity: Position Statement* (CEO, 2016) and *Strengthening Catholic Identity: A Strategic Initiative of [CEO]: Shape Paper* (CEO, 2015b). While both publications share a similar impetus, their purpose and function can be understood within the development of the Australian Curriculum. Applied to the RE curriculum (CEO, 2021a), these documents were specifically concerned with the religious characteristics of the curriculum and its integration within the mission and identity of the Catholic school.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) explains the centrality of a shape paper and a position statement when developing the Australian Curriculum. The ACARA website states that "a shape paper, developed with expert advice, provides broad direction on the purpose, structure and organisation of a learning area ... [providing] a reference for judging the quality of the final curriculum documents for the learning area" (ACARA, n.d., Shaping section). In

this research, the learning area concerned is RE; however, the document reaches more broadly to also include the religious life of the school, specifically the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

Understood in the light of curriculum development, a position statement provides an internal and generic point of view regarding key undertakings and the rationale for this stance. Thus, the SCI Position Statement (CEO, 2016) communicates the organisation's preferred pedagogical approach to a reconceptualist lens for the teaching and learning of religion, and the religious life of the school. As such, a reconceptualist lens assists teachers to interpret and adapt curriculum content to suit their student, and cultural context of the school. It acknowledges that teachers are not passive transmitters of curriculum, rather teachers are active agents who reshape knowledge to lessen the gap between social, cultural, and institutional expectations (Hordern, 2021). The systemwide SCI strategy document analysis provided the foundational data source for me to understand SCI strategy expectations and engagement opportunities for principals. Through analysing the SCI documents of this bounded CEO, it became possible to thoroughly understand the data generated by the participants, as well as to crosscheck and validate information (Azungah, 2018). Such practices assisted in adopting an interpretative approach to understand the phenomena in a comprehensive and holistic manner by paying attention to the broad context of the phenomena (Boblin et al., 2013).

3.3.2 Participant Selection

The study population identified in this research comprises the "pool of people from which the participants of research will be drawn" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 118). It consisted of all primary school principals within a bounded Catholic education system (CEO). Once ethical clearance was approved by Australian Catholic University (ACU; Appendix E), written permission was sought from the Research Secretariat within the CEO. Following approval (Appendix F), an email was electronically distributed to the entire study population alerting them to expect an email that displayed a link to the Qualtrics questionnaire. This communication also addressed the need for informed consent, understood as an agreement between the participant and researcher to share insight and clarification about the research (Berg, 2009; Mack et al., 2005). The participant information letter (Appendix B) communicated information regarding the purpose of the research, expectations of participants, associated risks and benefits,

voluntary nature of participation, right to withdraw, and contact details of study officials. Such professional research practice is affirmed by Mack et al. (2005) and fulfils the ethical requirements stipulated by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC] et al., 2023). Confidentiality for participants was ensured through the process of de-identifying the data sets, thereby protecting participants' identity and eliminating any benefits or costs for participation. Each participant and their setting is referred to through the use of an individual participant number.

Demographic data gathered via the questionnaire included years of service as a principal; previous leadership roles held (including duration); and enrolment numbers and location of school (inner city, metropolitan, regional, rural, or remote). This information was included to assist in the process of purposeful or purposive sampling of volunteer participants for the individual semi-structured interviews, as advocated by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Silverman (2012). The method of purposeful sampling demanded that I chose participants who could contribute a rigorous, varied, and collective understanding of the phenomenon in study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2005; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). The purposeful sample of participants selected for semi-structured interviews sought to include an early career principal, an experienced principal, and a principal from a rural, a regional, a metropolitan, and an inner-city school. However, at the time of interview confirmation only eight principals had confirmed interview details; therefore, all eight who responded were selected for an interview. Klenke (2016) and Stavros and Westberg (2009) affirm the benefits of using a purposive sample on the basis that it ensures a diverse set of perspectives and broadens insight from a robust representation of the study population, offering a greater degree of trustworthiness and authenticity across the field. The participant pool and participants for each data collection tool are displayed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Participant Pool for Data Collection

Data collection tool	Participant pool	Participants
Pilot questionnaire	4 assistant principals (with recent experience in acting principal role)	2 completed demographic data 1 completed questionnaire 4 provided verbal feedback regarding busyness of work schedule
Questionnaire	117 primary school principals, within one bounded system of Catholic education	48 completed demographic data 30 completed questionnaires
In-depth, semi-structured interview	117 principals were invited to express interest in participation	12 principals expressed interest when completing questionnaire 12 principals were invited to participate 8 principals booked an interview time (therefore negating the need to engage in purposeful sampling of participants)

3.4   Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis was initiated by the implementation of a thematic coding of questionnaire responses, later followed by member checking and Leximancer analysis of interview transcripts. The emerging themes and codes were viewed in constant comparison to other responses, as well as the systemwide SCI strategy documents. Supporting an iterative approach to qualitative data collection and interpretation, constant comparison allows for systematic checking of data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the case (Klenke, 2016). Through the process of constant comparison of and between data, it became possible to identify common themes and experiences as perceived by participants.

As described by Creswell (2014), the benefits of a constant comparative method within an inductive data analysis include the opportunity of "generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories and categories to other categories" (p. 437). Represented by the construction of new insights from the perspectives of participants, analysis and interpretation demonstrated commonality of findings as well as areas of divergence (Gall et al., 1996; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). Implementing in-depth interviews with eight participants increased the probability that the research captured different dimensions of the same phenomenon.

For the purpose of member checking, the interview transcripts were taken back to the respective participants to confirm accuracy (Boblin et al., 2013; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Once the transcripts were confirmed, any statements I made were redacted to create a clean copy of principal-only transcripts. These clean transcripts were used for the Leximancer analysis. Leximancer is a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that undertakes a vigorous analysis of text by using an algorithm to generate a lexical analysis (Harwood et al., 2015). Leximancer uses the inputted text to identify word concepts and themes, based on frequency of use (Wilk et al., 2019). As such, frequent word associations form clusters to identify themes, as displayed visually in a concept map.

The constant comparison between thematic coding of questionnaire responses, Leximancer analysis of interview transcripts, and systemwide strategy document analysis augmented the participants' perceptions (Stake, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Yin, 2014) and allowed for a triangulation of data analysis, bringing an increased "openness to the field of data and willingness to modify initial assumptions and theories" (Klenke, 2016, p. 64).

Analysing the information using triangulation of data provided an opportunity for in-depth understanding of common themes, content, and points of contention (Plano Clark, 2017; Stake, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). The data analysis focused on arriving at plausible explanations (for both commonalities and differences) facilitated through the process of iterative, inductive, deductive, and comparative analysis between data sets (Patton, 2002; Schaab, 2013; Sheffield & Felten, 2018) as displayed in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1

Case Study Data Source, Analysis, and Comparison

Instrumental case study	Participants in case study
Perception of principals regarding systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic school identity	Primary school principals within one bounded system of Catholic schools in Australia

SCI strategy documents → **Questionnaire** → **Semi-structured interviews**

o Comparative data set o Data analysed from questionnaire responses and interviews compared with information stated in SCI strategy documentation	o Deductive data set o Data collected from principal participants o Data analysed by thematic coding of responses o Analysis informed refined questions for semi-structured interviews	o Inductive data set o Probing questions to further explore interpretations and experiences from purposefully selected principals (providing a rigorous representation of contexts) o Data analysed by key concepts and ranked themes of transcripts

Commonalities and differences between case strategy documentation and key perspectives and experiences identified by principals	Constant comparison between thematic coding of questionnaire, and key concepts and ranked themes from interview transcripts

Note. SCI = Strengthening Catholic Identity.

Additional data not displayed in Figure 3.1 are the demographic data and pilot questionnaire. Table 3.3 summarises all data sources and their purpose, participants, collection method, and analysis, as discussed in Section 3.3 Methods and Section 3.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation.

Table 3.3

Data Source, Purpose, Participants, Collection, and Analysis

Data source	Purpose	Participants	Collection	Analysis
Pilot questionnaire	"De-bug" questionnaire Increase validity Seek feedback regarding ambiguities, expectations of participants, points of difficulty	Assistant principals (with recent experience as acting principal)	Open-ended questionnaire responses Discussion with participants	Coding of responses Refining of questionnaire
Questionnaire	To identify themes, experiences, and perceptions of participants	Primary school principals (entire study population)	Open-ended questionnaire responses	Thematic coding Constant comparison with systemwide SCI strategy documents
Demographic data	Purposeful sampling of participants for follow-up interviews	Pool of volunteer interview participants	Responses on questionnaire	Purposeful sample of interview participants
In-depth, semi-structured interviews	To explore themes, experiences, and perceptions of participants	Purposefully selected volunteer participants from study population	Interview voice recording and transcript	Member checking of transcripts Redacting of researcher statements and questions Leximancer coding of transcripts Constant comparison with questionnaire data and document analysis
Analysis of systemwide SCI strategy documents	To ascertain commonalities and differences between documents and insight of participants (triangulation)	Researcher	Document analysis compared with questionnaire and interview data sets	Constant comparison with questionnaire data, interview coding data, and analysed text from systemwide strategy documentation

Note. SCI = Strengthening Catholic Identity.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Authenticity of Research

Community participation research places importance on how communities are involved in the production of new knowledge, specific to their needs and context (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012). Community participation was supported in this study by encouraging all primary principals within the bounded system to complete the questionnaire, thereby inviting participation from all members of the study population. Through the process of purposeful sampling, participants at the forefront of implementing this strategy were invited to engage in semi-structured interviews. Their experiences and perceptions informed new understandings and underpinned the recommendations for future action and investigation, therefore making the research trustworthy, authentic, and applicable to similar contexts locally and globally. The criteria for establishing trustworthiness and authenticity within qualitative research paradigms include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability; each of these is now described to reflect the parameters of this research.

3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility of qualitative research is concerned with the extent to which participants view the results as credible and believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By employing the use of member checking, the credibility of this study was enhanced as all transcriptions were confirmed as accurate by participants. No inaccuracies in the transcripts or omittance of interview content were reported by the individual participants. To further enhance the credibility and authenticity of this research by ensuring a broad representation of different realities (Klenke, 2016), it was intended to implement a process of purposeful sampling of participants interested in the semi-structured interviews; however, as only eight principals booked interview times, it was decided to interview all who expressed a willingness to engage.

3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability describes the extent to which research results can be transferred to another setting or context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As this research was grounded in exploring the outcomes of one systemwide strategy as perceived by primary school principals, Denscombe (1998) would refer to these participants as a typical instance. Identifying the typical instance, defined as the exploration of a

particular or typical element within a case, increases the likelihood of the findings being applicable to other situations or settings (Denscombe, 1998). In this research, the case was defined as principal perspectives of a systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic identity, with participants identified as primary school principals from one bounded Catholic education system in Australia. The use of a typical instance in this research thereby increased the probability and reliability of the findings being transferable to other Catholic schooling systems, locally and internationally.

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability defines the extent to which the same results could be obtained by other independent researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the questionnaire was distributed to an entire study population and followed an established means to provide open-ended responses to the central question and sub-questions, it is likely that an independent researcher would generate the same responses from the participant pool. As the questions were open-ended, the experiences and perceptions of participants were collected, collated, and shared, therefore remaining consistent and dependable regardless of the researcher's personal views.

3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability substantiates the extent to which the results can be confirmed by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The confirmability of this research was greatly assisted by the development of a clear and thorough audit trail, as suggested by Klenke (2016) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). Raw data, in the form of questionnaire responses and member-checked interview transcripts, assisted others to confirm the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data. Analysis notes, including thematic coding, transcript coding, continual comparison with systemwide SCI strategy documents, and researcher's notes, highlighted the development of the results and findings.

Figure 3.2 displays the framework for the data, including source, collection, analysis, and triangulation, to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research.

Figure 3.2

Making Sense of the Data: Source, Collection, Analysis, and Triangulation

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                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │  Making sense of the data │
                        └─────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Questionnaire responses│  │ Systemwide SCI strategy│  │  Interview transcripts │
│                       │  │      documents        │  │                       │
└──────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘

                              Triangulation
                                  and
                              validation of
                                data set

┌──────────────────────┐                          ┌──────────────────────┐
│   Thematic coding     │  ◄──────────────────►    │  Leximancer ranked    │
│                       │                          │      themes           │
└──────────────────────┘                          └──────────────────────┘

        ┌────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
        │ Iterative, reflective, and constant comparison between       │
        │ questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and          │
        │ systemwide SCI strategy documentation analysis               │
        └────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```
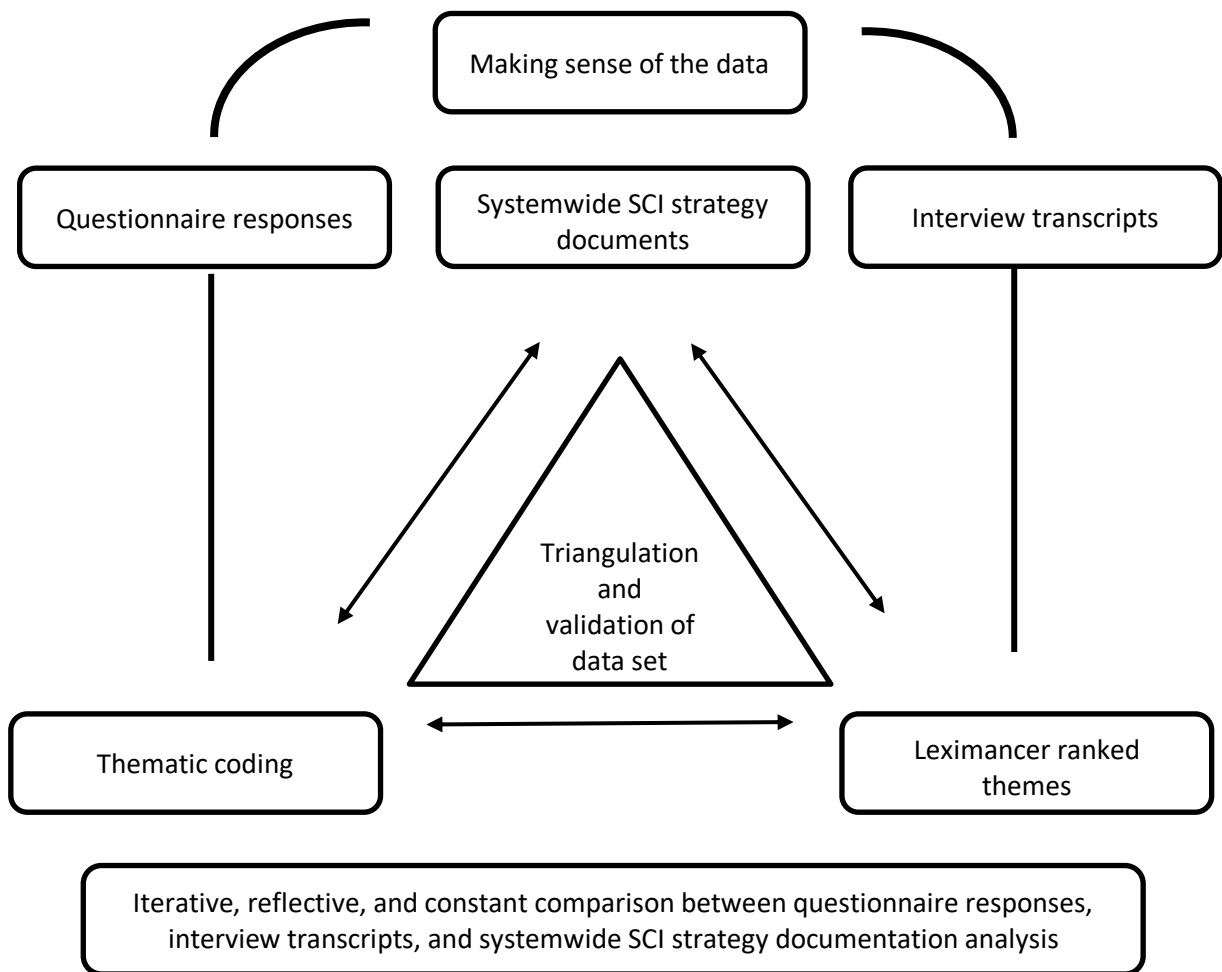
Note. SCI = Strengthening Catholic Identity.

3.6   Research Ethics

Research ethics are primarily associated with the connection and interaction between researchers and participants and identify three non-negotiable considerations: meeting the needs of participants, establishing trusting relationships, and providing clear oversight of the conduct of the stated research (Mack et al., 2005). To this end, the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* articulates clear guidelines for conducting research within Australia (NHMRC et al., 2023), exploring the application of values and principles that underpin ethical research, including merit, respect, integrity, justice, and beneficence. Examination and application of such guidelines provides researchers with a myriad of considerations for adhering to the practice of ethical research. This section further explores each of the guidelines.

3.6.1 Merit

Merit has been attributed to the proposed research design due to the justifiable application of methods. The methods of data collection support this study, grounded in the theoretical understanding that new knowledge is achieved through constructivism and can be shared through interpretation of findings. Potential benefits of the research include contribution to knowledge and understanding regarding the phenomenon of Catholic school identity. This research sought to improve the collective understanding using a case study methodology, within one bounded system. Informed by previous studies (Buchanan, 2013; Convey, 2012; Gleeson & O'Neill, 2015; Watkins, 2018) and explored through a thorough review of relevant literature, this research is perceived to be of merit in the field as it provides further inquiry into the lived reality of principals as they enact Catholic school identity, considering the implementation of a systemwide strategy.

3.6.2 Respect

Respect for participants in this study was held in high regard through the protection of confidentiality, interviews being conducted on the school site of the participants (where possible) and questioning and probing that drew insight from the information identified as important by participants. Confidentiality for participants was ensured through data de-identification measures, including the use of individual participant numbers (Mack et al., 2005) prefixed according to participation in the primary principal questionnaire (PPQ) or primary principal interview (PPI).

Full disclosure of the research topic and aim, together with a clear understanding that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw, ensured that participants felt comfortable with the topic being discussed. The data gathering methods attended to the purposeful use of resources as appropriate to the study (NHMRC et al., 2023). Minimal costs were incurred during the gathering and disseminating of data as I self-funded travel expenses and work absence. In alignment with the guidelines of the NHMRC (2023), respect of participants was ensured, as were the cultural consideration of participants and their communities. All agreed protocols as outlined in the participant information letter (Appendix B) were fulfilled, honoured, and respected.

3.6.3 Integrity

Integrity of the proposed research design was upheld by the acknowledgement that this research sought to construct a rigorous and in-depth understanding of the experiences of principals regarding Catholic school identity. The methodological perspectives complement the methods, empowering me as the researcher to confidently conduct the research. Honesty regarding the data collection procedure was ensured using voice recording and transcripts that were member checked for confirmation of accuracy in transcription. Member checking ensured that the interview transcripts provided an honest and accurate account of the discussion. This practice welcomed scrutiny from participants and added to the integrity of research methods and dissemination of accurate data.

3.6.4 Justice

Justice takes into consideration that, given "the scope and objectives of the proposed research, the selection, exclusion and inclusion of categories of research participants is fair, and is accurately described in the results of the research" (NHMRC, 2023, p. 10). Such elements within this research design included the entire study population being aware of the process of purposeful sampling as a measure of ensuring rigorous exploration of the phenomenon. All participant selection was based on current employment as a primary school principal (within one bounded system of Catholic education), understanding that there was no unfair advantage or disadvantage regarding participation. Participants were de-identified in the collection and sharing of data sets, thereby ensuring no adverse costs or advantageous benefits from participating in the research (Mack et al., 2005). All outcomes of the research were made accessible to contributors and interview transcript data was checked by participants within specified time frames, thereby ensuring justice for all participants.

3.6.5 Beneficence

Beneficence refers to the welfare of participants, seeking to ensure that research is preoccupied with doing or producing good. As such, I ensured I minimised any potential risk of harm or discomfort to participants (Mack et.al, 2005). To adhere to this principle, the questionnaire was distributed via email with a Qualtrics link, the interviews were conducted in each participant's school context (unless prohibited by Covid restrictions) and responded to the lead of the individual

participant, and all participants have been de-identified in the reporting of the research. The pace and depth of interview questioning was adjusted to ensure participants felt comfortable to contribute. Each participant was reminded that they could stop the interview at any stage, that their responses would be shared with them before distribution to a wider audience, and that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time up until the data analysis phase was completed. These statements reinforced to the participants that they were valued and respected and the intention was to ensure they were comfortable and confident with their participation. In this way, I implemented stringent ethical guidelines, ensuring that the benefits of the research outweighed any feasible costs or disadvantage through participation.

Figure 3.3 summarises the measures taken to ensure compliance with all ethical research guidelines, as shared in this Research Ethics section.

Figure 3.3

Methods Adopted to Ensure Research Framework Complied With Ethical Research Guidelines
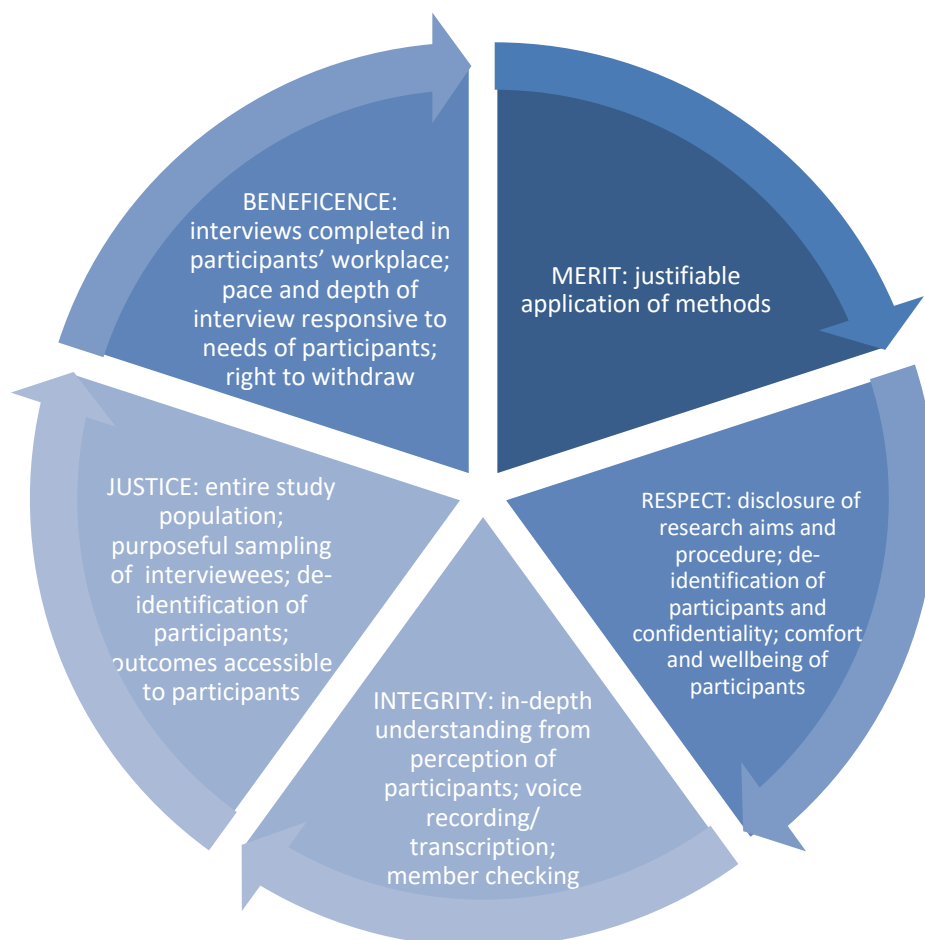
3.7   Limitations of Research

The criticism of case study research is founded in the understanding that an explanation of self (or case) can mean that data results are not generalisable (Zipf, 2016), causing problems with transferability of information to other cases. Such reproaches of case study research also highlight the possibility of observer bias, despite all attempts made through the sharing of reflexive statements (Cohen et al., 2007). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) support this stance by stating that the closed boundedness of the case and the relationship between researcher and participant, together with reliance on a descriptive narrative analysis, may cause issues with maintaining an objective stance. However, they also acknowledge that in case study research such factors are neither feasible nor desirable (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006) as the aim is to generate insight and rich descriptions from the perception of participants (Grandy, 2010).

Although the interviews only identified the perceptions of a small number of principal participants (eight) from one Catholic educational system, saturation point was achieved as no new information was apparent in the final interviews. The principals involved in the latter interviews did not introduce new topics or areas of concern. Category saturation point, as defined by Glaser (1998), is reached when no new ideas, themes, or understandings emerge from the responses, hence defending the credibility and validity of the research data. Small-scale case studies are justifiable as "the qualitative researcher is not preoccupied with numbers of participants or numbers of participant responses as … [it is] events, incidents, and experiences, not people per se, [that] are typically the objects of purposeful sampling" (Buchanan, 2013, p. 22).

Another potential limitation of this research included the discrepancy in articulating meaning when transcribing spoken dialogue into written text. It is commonly understood that written transcription is not able to fully articulate the nuance of verbally constructed dialogue. The inability to capture and describe such elements as intonation, volume, and body language could potentially reduce the meaning made for other readers (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Researcher bias may also contribute to the value attributed to certain dialogue and this can influence the transcription (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Efforts to control such influences included my decision to personally complete the transcription near the date of interview to reduce time-lapse between events, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of data (Davidson, 2009). By engaging in

member checking of transcripts with participants, they were empowered to view themselves as the contributors of new insight, while also offering a "glimpse into the world beyond the research project" (Mero-Jaffe, 2011, p. 244). Such clarification of transcription content by the participants promoted justice and fairness by reducing the likelihood of errors in transcription (Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Yin, 2014).

The notion of researcher as insider brought both opportunities and challenges to this research: opportunity to follow an informed and deliberate path of inquiry through working with participants from the same system, while challenged to ensure objective, honest, and evolving constructs of the phenomenon being studied. Also, my axiological perspective highlights the importance of considering my values and their contribution in influencing the significance placed on this field of research. This concept is further explored in the reflexive statement articulated in Section 3.8. As the insider researcher, I needed to suspend prior assumptions regarding the bounded system to allow for new insights to be generated by principals who were responsible for the strengthening of their Catholic school's identity (Fontana, 2015). This was actioned by entering the research with no preconceived opinion regarding the responses that would be generated by principals.

The practice of suspending researcher knowledge is justifiable in this project as the aim of the research is to generate insight regarding the perceptions of primary school principals. While I work within the bounded system, I do not work in the role of principal, thereby making it appropriate that measures are implemented so that my experiences and understanding do not influence the responses shared by participants. Addressing this matter of the possibility of *authorial influence*, Fontana (2015) advises that the researcher must disclose employment status, interest in the field of study, and possible bias in a detailed reflexive statement. To display objectivity, the researcher should seek to suspend personal insights during data collection, while minimising control, influence, and authority over participants (Fontana, 2015; Patton, 2002).

Hence, while the potential limitations of the research have been identified and articulated, I have made a deliberate and conscious attempt to ensure the research design acknowledged and responded to such limitations, as shared in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Limitations of Research and Response to Limitations

Limitations of research	Acknowledgement of and response to limitations
Case study data draws on explanations and perceptions of participants, so can lack generalisation and transferability	Methodology and methods support the in-depth and rigorous investigation of case study research – seeking a rich description from the perspectives of participants
Observer bias, relationship with participants, reliance on descriptive narrative analysis can limit the objective stance of the research	Reflexive statement Transcripts provided verbatim and annotations shared Complementary of methods and methodology
Small number of participant pool to engage in interviews	Questionnaire distributed to the entire study population pool to seek multiple perspectives Interviews continued until saturation point was established
Transcribing spoken dialogue into written text	Transcripts completed by interviewer in short time frame Member checking for accuracy in transcription and analysis
Insider perspective of researcher	Reflexive statement Neutral position of researcher / Credibility of field knowledge attributed to the participants

3.8   Reflexivity

This field of research is of particular interest to me as I have previously been engaged in a range of professional learning opportunities, including spiritual formation, Master of Educational Leadership study, and an action research project with the Curriculum and Identity team at ACU (McAuley Campus). In my role as APRE, I often reflect on the complexities and potential ambiguities between expressing strong Catholic school identity while enacting a myriad of diverse school improvement agendas. As I am an employee of the bounded system in which the research took place, I am familiar with many of the principals who participated. This assisted in the reduction of barriers between researcher and participants, allowing for an augmented gathering of communal knowledge, further enhanced by dialogue with those within the system (Goodson & Phillimore, 2012). Mercer (2007) purports that while there are many benefits of research conducted by an employee of an organization, there is however increased potential for bias in data transcription and analysis. This constraint was addressed by the researcher beginning data analysis

with a document analysis. The analysis of documents provided base-line information regarding the SCI strategy to inform the questions for the questionnaire, leaving sufficient distance between the researcher's prior knowledge and experiences, and the information that was disseminated within the bounded system.

Regarding analysis of data, it is cautioned that an insider's "prior knowledge of the data can constrain analytic choices and reduce the robustness of findings" (Baldwin et al., 2022. p.1). The questionnaire responses were thematically coded, to present the voices and perspectives of principals were recorded and analysed. It was principal insight that informed the reframing of probing questions posed at interviews. At the time of interviews, the conversations were transcribed verbatim and sent to participants for member checking. Transcribed data was also analysed using Leximancer software to ensure researcher interpretation and identified themes were consistently reliable.

My prior involvement in action research consisted of a two-year partnership between a Catholic primary school and ACU. The purpose of this partnership was to align the teaching and learning of Catholic perspectives across the curriculum within all learning areas (subjects). As the project took effect, the common language of Catholic social teaching was shared in classrooms, at assembly, during whole-school prayer practices, and in school newsletters. Over time it became apparent that such perspectives were being articulated when making faith-informed leadership decisions. Conversation would seek clarity regarding "What is best for everyone?" (common good) or "Who is the person closest to this problem that can make the decision?" (participation and subsidiarity). Such experiences afforded an insight into the centrality and importance of being able to discern and articulate Catholic social teaching while facilitating a variety of complex leadership responsibilities.

Engaging in this action research provided me with increased confidence to lead staff in a process of active, purposeful, and critical reflection. This led to increased willingness of staff to recognise, understand, and reflect on opportunities to articulate Catholic perspectives in everyday experiences, ultimately increasing the school's Catholic identity. A common language was established and used by all stakeholders in decision-making processes, informed by Catholic faith and traditions.

3.9 Conclusion

The research design of this study aimed to elicit the informed understandings and perceptions of Catholic primary school principals, within one bounded system of education, regarding a systemwide strategy to enhance Catholic school identity. Knapp (2017) clarifies the importance of school leaders seeking opportunities to provide insight into their experiences and the effects of these on their leadership. This instrumental case study aims to contribute new insight into the experiences, programs, and initiatives that best support principals to enact their imperative responsibility to enhance Catholic school identity. Therefore, the use of qualitative data sets, generated through principal participation, provided the means to capture the perspectives of those engaged in this practice. As such, this research design chapter, informed by prior chapters, has described the theoretical framework of this research and how the findings were collected, collated, and analysed to answer the central research question: *In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?*

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings presented in this chapter relate to the central research question:

In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?

The chapter begins with a brief review of the data-gathering process in Section 4.2. This is followed by presentation of the findings within each of the three sets of data: Section 4.3 presents the systemwide document analysis findings, Section 4.4 presents the questionnaire responses, and Section 4.5 presents the interview data. Section 4.6 provides a comparison of the findings of each data set, and Section 4.7 provides an overall chapter summary.

4.2 Data Sets

Document analysis focused on the identification of themes regarding strategy; specifically, scope and implementation. The documentation from this CEO precisely defined the context of a secular society, elaborating on a contextualised response for the strengthening of Catholic identity within a school setting. As the central research question was to understand the influence of strategy from the perspective of principals, document analysis highlighted the key priorities within the SCI strategy goal, and the framework for strengthening Catholic identity (CEO, 2016), and activities (CEO, 2015b), as presented in the systemwide material. A summary of these materials is presented in Table 4.1 (Section 4.3.3).

Questionnaire responses were thematically coded by the researcher, with emergent themes representative of the most referenced codes. There were a small number of dissenter comments, which are also presented. Questionnaire findings are presented under the headings of mission, context, and strategy engagement. In addition, interview transcript analysis was generated through Leximancer to identify frequency and validation of themes. The findings of the Leximancer data set are presented according to the three highest ranked themes from the interview data: identity, people, and focus.

Overall, the summative data findings present a progressive development of understanding as shared by the CEO and participants. The system documentation provided principals with a blueprint for engaging in the SCI strategy, questionnaire data detailed what resonated with principals, and interviews facilitated an opportunity to share new developments and support the generation of detailed insights into the research question. The development and implementation of this research is summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1

Timeline of Data Collection

CEO Document Analysis	• 2020, June • Catholic Education Office. (2015b). *Strengthening Catholic identity: A strategic initiative of [Catholic Education Office]: Shape paper* • Catholic Education Office. (2016). *Strong Catholic identity: Position statement.*
Qualtrics Questionnaire	• 2020, October 5, Qualitrix Questionnaire distributed to pilot sample (4) • 2020, October 30, Refine questions based on pilot sample feedback • 2020, Novemeber 13, Qualtirx Questionnaire distributed to all primary school principals within one doicese (117)
Interviews	• 2021, May 21, Interview with Principal 4 in participants school setting • 2021, May 24, Interview with Principal 30 via TeamsMeet (due to Covid 19 restrictions) • 2021, May 26, Interview with Principal 11 via TeamsMeet • 2021, May 26, Interview with Principal 24 in participants school setting • 2021, May 27, Interview with Principal 29 in participants school setting • 2021, June 1, Interview with Principal 10 in participants school setting • 2021, June 2, Interview with Principal 27 via TeamsMeet • 2021, June 4, Interview with Principal 18 in participants school setting

4.3   Presentation of Systemwide Document Analysis

The publicly accessible website of this CEO states that the SCI strategy is supported by two documents: *Strengthening Catholic Identity: Shape Paper* (CEO, 2015b), and *Strong Catholic Identity: Position Statement* (CEO, 2016). While both

documents provided a singular focus, the Shape Paper (CEO, 2015b) described the context of contemporary society, and provided a clear vision and strategic platform for application. Complementing the Shape Paper, the Position Statement (CEO, 2016) offered a concise overview of the CEO's position, scope, and goals pertaining to the SCI strategy. These two documents articulated a point-in-time summary regarding the expectations and scope of the SCI strategy.

The SCI strategy was positioned as one of three key priorities in the CEO systemwide *Strategic Plan 2016–20* (CEO, 2017). Each school was expected to implement annual plans that addressed strategic directions for the key priorities of excellent learning and teaching (ELT), strong Catholic identity (SCI), and building a sustainable future. In addition, the inclusion of a schoolwide goal and target regarding SCI from the CEO to schools added impetus to the SCI strategy implementation. This was an essential inclusion as each school's strategic and annual plans were to provide a direct response to the changing context of society, as well as highlight the importance for each Catholic school community.

The analysis of the two SCI documents examined the commonalities regarding key ideas and components. As this research sought to identify the influence of strategy engagement from the perspective of principals, this document analysis was primarily concerned with identifying the position, priorities, and identified activities promoted by the CEO to inform and influence principals to enact the SCI strategy. As such, the documents were coded according to the themes of context, framework, key priorities, and activities (as labelled in the documentation).

4.3.1 Context

The Shape Paper (CEO, 2015b) and Position Statement (CEO, 2016) positioned the SCI strategy "within an increasingly de-traditionalised and pluralised Australian cultural context" (CEO, 2015b, p. 4), later identified as "secular and pluralist" (CEO, 2016, p. 2). Both papers were aligned in their depiction of a change in demographic make-up of Catholic school communities, including the profiles of staff, students, and families. Specifically, some community members were identified as "having no direct or shared experience of the cultural catholicity of current and previous generations" (CEO, 2015b, p. 4).

Cognisant of these contextual realities, the CEO proposed that a systemwide strategy would be implemented to advance the preferred position whereby "all facets of life in the school and office are Christ-centred, student focused communities of

learning that nurture and are animated by a culture of dialogue; a contemporary theology of mission; and a post-critical belief system" (CEO, 2016, p. 2). To advance this position the CEO committed to "adopt[ing] a re-contextualised understanding of Catholic identity … [whereby] the Catholic Christian tradition is clearly visible in the contemporary context, fusing the old with the new" (CEO, 2016, p. 2)

4.3.2 SCI Framework

Both system documents (CEO, 2015b, 2016) communicated that a common language and shared understanding regarding Catholic identity was necessary for each parish, school, family, and community, and was to be actioned through four key priorities identified as a "re-new focus on the following areas: Mission; Formation; Curriculum; Culture" (CEO, 2016, p. 3). Within each of these key priorities (mission, culture, curriculum, and formation) a concise statement of the strategic intention was provided to serve as process guides endeavouring to strengthen Catholic identity.

The SCI framework is graphically represented in the Position Statement (CEO, 2016, p. 3), as displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4.2

Framework for Strengthening Catholic Identity

Note. From *Strong Catholic Identity: Position Statement* (p. 3), by Catholic Education Office, 2016. Copyright 2016 by Catholic Education Office. Reprinted with permission.

The figure displayed in the Position Statement (CEO, 2016) provided visual clarity for stakeholders concerning the importance of articulating the mission of Catholic education and enacting an authentic Catholic identity. This static graphic provided a blueprint for the CEO to state clearly their expectations regarding strategy implementation at school and office locations. While the organic, interdependent relationships of family, school, parish, and community are difficult to capture in a single graphic, the SCI framework shown in Figure 4. communicates that the interconnection between stakeholders is central, thereby highlighting that their shared engagement and commitment are required.

4.3.3 Key Priorities

As displayed in the SCI framework (Figure 4.), the four key priorities were underpinned by a commitment from the CEO to lead, resource, and support the development of a strong Catholic school identity. Details regarding targeted goals and activities were provided in the SCI documents. A summary of the documentation regarding each key priority is presented in Table 4.1. The table positions the strategy goals, framework, and activities according to the four key priorities of mission, culture, formation, and curriculum. Central to the presentation is the alignment between priority goals and framework definitions, thereby providing enhanced clarity regarding the intended purpose of the listed activities.

Table 4.1

Summary of Key Priorities as Defined in SCI Strategy Documentation

Key priority	SCI strategy goal (CEO, 2016, p. 3)	SCI framework (CEO, 2016, p. 3)	Activities (CEO, 2015b, p. 6)
Mission	That a contemporary Catholic worldview is identifiable in the articulation and lived out mission of [CEO]	Form and sustain leadership for mission which integrates faith, life and culture in a meaningful way	[CEO] Leuven Project Vision, Mission and Values Project Equity Project Masterclass Initiatives
Culture	That a contemporary Catholic worldview is identifiable in the culture of all communities That the rich diversity of Catholic expression is sustained and supported in ways that invite innovation and creative engagement	Sustain and enhance authentic contemporary expressions of Catholic culture	[CEO] orientation and induction programs Religious life of Schools and Office Parent engagement International outreach projects
Formation	That a contemporary Catholic worldview is identifiable in the formation of staff and students That all [CEO] leaders are formed to animate a Catholic worldview	Lead, resource and support a cohesive and contemporary approach to formation for staff and students	Integrating [CEO] leadership and formation programs Ongoing formation including early career, mid career and experienced staff Sponsored formation programs for Senior leaders Scholarship programs for study in theology and in RE

Key priority	SCI strategy goal (CEO, 2016, p. 3)	SCI framework (CEO, 2016, p. 3)	Activities (CEO, 2015b, p. 6)
Curriculum	That a contemporary Catholic worldview is identifiable in learning and teaching That a re-contextualised perspective permeates learning and teaching initiatives	Embed a Catholic perspective across all curriculum areas	Implementation of the RE Curriculum, including the Religious Life of the School Integration of the Vision, Mission and Values in the implementation of the DELT Strategy Development of Indigenous Education Strategy Sustainability Project

Note. SCI = Strengthening Catholic Identity; CEO = Catholic Education Office; RE = religious education; DELT = delivering excellence in learning and teaching.

Further elaboration regarding each of the key priorities was communicated in systemwide SCI documentation (CEO, 2015b, 2016) and is discussed below.

The mission of Catholic education was referenced as "contribute[ing] to the Church's educational mission, promoting a view of the individual and community centred on the human person and the Gospel vision of Jesus Christ" (CEO, 2015b, p. 5). Within this overall mission the CEO elaborated: "Understanding that we are part of the wider participation in God's existence in the world … [and thereby called to] proclamation and witness; commitment to justice, reconciliation and peace; and the integrity of creation" (2016, p. 2).

The key priority of culture was described as proving an authentic representation of this stated mission by "the way in which the Gospel of Jesus is given life and expression …[with] a contemporary Catholic identity borne of the encounter between faith, life and culture" (CEO, 2016, p. 2). Therefore, the culture of a Catholic school would make evident the preferred position in which "communities of learning that nurture and are animated by: A culture of dialogue: Choosing to explicitly emphasise our Catholic inspiration in authentic dialogue with other world-views in the broader culture" (CEO, 2016, p. 2).

The priority of formation was deemed necessary to provide "targeted strategic action [for]: Leadership formation, Parent and community engagement, Staff accreditation and ongoing formation, Student experiential faith formation, and Religious Life of School and Office" (CEO, 2015b, p. 5). Regarding formation opportunities, the CEO committed to resource "various projects that seek to enhance

Catholic identity … include[ing] … Catching Fire Formation Programs; [and] the re-framing of formation and leadership development" (CEO, 2015b, p. 5).

Finally, the curriculum priority was presented with the goal to lead, resource, and support high quality learning and teaching. This was specifically stated as "harnessing energies and engaging in various projects that seek to enhance Catholic identity. These include the implementation of the Australian curriculum and the R.E. curriculum" (CEO, 2015b, p. 5). In addition, "embed[ding] a Catholic perspective across all curriculum areas" was highlighted in the SCI framework, Figure 4. (CEO, 2016, p. 3).

4.3.4 Activities

For the key priorities, several systemwide activities were required to be implemented at each school. These activities included engaging with the Katholieke Universiteit (KU) Leuven methodology, formation programs for school and office staff, scholarships for teachers to complete postgraduate qualifications in RE and theology, alongside other targeted projects for school-based implementation (CEO, 2015b).

One significant activity undertaken by this CEO during strategy implementation was a large-scale engagement in the [CEO] Leuven Project. This project was described in system documentation as a "theologically-based and point in time data-informed framework in which to explore creative and innovative strategies to strengthen Catholic identity" (CEO, 2015b, p. 4).

This systemwide engagement with KU Leuven was defined as an "activity" named "[CEO] Leuven Project" (CEO, 2015b, pp. 2, 6). The Shape Paper stated that the [CEO] Leuven Project provided

> a new empirical methodology to frame the identity structure of Catholic educational organisations …. the theology provides a contemporary hermeneutic to dialogue productively around issues of Catholic identity; and the methodology allows a detailed investigation of the expressions of Catholic institutional identity and profile/s of Catholicity present in our community …. [The Leuven Project] provides … informed dialogue, gap analysis, identification and refinement of specific strategies that further strengthen identity. (CEO, 2015b, pp. 4, 5)

4.3.5 Summary of Document Analysis Findings

In summary, the systemwide documentation addressed the following pivotal points:

- positioning the urgency and importance of this strategy within the context of contemporary society (WHY it is necessary)
- providing clear expectations regarding strategy implementation for all stakeholders: community, parish, family, and school (WHO is to engage)
- explaining the CEO's commitment to resourcing and supporting targeted activities for the strengthening of Catholic identity (WHAT is to be actioned)
- articulating the SCI framework, including the four key priorities of this SCI strategy: mission, culture, formation, and curriculum (HOW to get there).

Thereby, the SCI strategy documentation provided stakeholders with a blueprint to assist in understanding the context, vision, and expectations of the CEO regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity. Importantly, these two SCI documents communicated that such expectations were to be embedded across each school and office community and highlighted the imperative that the strategy required engagement from family, parish, community, and school.

4.4   Presentation of Questionnaire Findings

The total participant pool in this research comprised 117 primary school principals within one bounded system of Catholic education. In total, 30 participants completed the invitational questionnaire regarding the central research question. These responses were thematically coded by the researcher to generate emergent themes of mission, context, and strategy engagement, each presented in the following subsections.

4.4.1 Mission

A summary of questionnaire responses and coded analysis in relation to the theme of mission is provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Summary of Mission Theme and Subthemes

Emergent theme	Subtheme	Number of participants	Number of responses	Example of coded response
Mission		21	23	Our mission and the mission of the church Overcommunicating our mission and vision
	Catholic worldview	10	11	How we engage with and view the world

Twenty-one participants provided a total of 23 responses on the mission of Catholic schools. Six participants articulated their acquisition of greater insight regarding the mission of Catholic education, thereby increasing their confidence and capacity to communicate this with others. Simply stated by PPQ23, "it is the purpose of our schools, our reason for existing; its mission". More precisely, PPQ20 noted that promoting mission assisted "to navigate the balance between learning and teaching and our history and reasons for being established". "Enacting the vision and mission of Christ (Gospel values)" was deemed important by PPQ18; however, no example was provided regarding how this was actioned. While these statements provided some awareness of the mission of Catholic schools, PPQ18 provided an overall mission summary as "building a community of believers".

Further insights into principal perspectives of mission were pursued through a second-order coding of mission responses in terms of a Catholic worldview. For example, PPQ21 stated that the SCI strategy had provided "plans to move forward together as a community in a way that promotes a strong sense of a recognisable understanding and pride in Catholic identity".

In addition, PPQ23 stated they "developed a stronger understanding of recontextualised world views which give a contemporary voice to our faith story". Both participants displayed an openness to sharing a contemporary Catholic worldview, with one participant specifically attributing this worldview to their postgraduate study in theology. Simply stated, these participants aspired to view the world through a Catholic lens.

4.4.2 Context

A second theme identified in the questionnaire data was context, understood in this research as the environmental influences within and outside the primary school setting. Context was described broadly by participants, thereby articulating the realities for those undertaking the role of principal. Statements presented included those coded according to subthemes of identity, culture, contemporary society, and distinctiveness of Catholic education. As presented in Table 4.3, each participant referenced some element of culture, identity, and society as interrelated constructs, with clear boundaries between culture and identity difficult to distinguish. The subthemes of identity, culture, contemporary society, and distinctiveness of Catholic education will now be presented according to the research findings.

Table 4.3

Summary of Context Theme and Subthemes

Emergent theme	Subtheme	Number of participants	Number of responses	Example of coded response
Context	Identity	30	42	Connecting the story of Jesus in word, symbol and action
	Culture	13	17	Promote Catholic identity at every opportunity Who we are at the core … why and how we do things
	Contemporary society	12	15	Families having decreased religious beliefs
	Distinctiveness of Catholic education	17	22	Ensure our school is identifiably Catholic Vital to set us apart from other school systems

4.4.2.1 Identity

Principals reported identity as a self-constructed narrative of what is understood about the organisation and how that is communicated to those within and outside of the school. All 30 principals defined Catholic school identity with the foundational premise that it is informed by the Good News of Jesus. Each participant

referenced the importance of ensuring all stakeholders hear and know the story of Jesus, specifically through living examples. PPQ7 argued for an identifiable Catholic identity "through sharing story", and PPQ13 committed to "bringing the story alive in all experiences". In total, there were 42 responses coded according to knowing and enacting the Good News of Jesus. This terminology regarding the lived expression of the "Gospel of Jesus" was selected by principals as a foundational premise, as stated in the Position Statement (CEO, 2016).

Participants stated that Catholic identity provided "a way to enhance our environment to show Jesus is the centre of our lives" (PPQ9), and "it focuses on the Catholic religious traditions, on scripture and knowing the Jesus story" (PPQ3). PPQ4 stated that they promote "the connection to the story of Jesus Christ in word, symbol and action", and PPQ5 affirmed that it is "weaving the Jesus story into everything we do". PPQ19 specifically defined the importance of "delivering the good news from Jesus". Additionally, PPQ6 described "invite[ing] others to experience our school community as being Christ centred with our culture, curriculum and mission". Further, PPQ17 stated, "CI [Catholic identity] is a school culture that drives the mission and vision, through the support of Gospel values and school charism." PPQ5 confirmed that Catholic identity "necessitated working in ways that reflect and promote Christ". Such responses indicate that the defining constructs regarding the key priorities of culture and identity were difficult to differentiate in their focus and witness to the person and message of Christ.

4.4.2.2 Culture

While responses coded as culture were similar to those coded as identity, Catholic culture responses were increasingly concerned with the living out of identity as an active undertaking. As such, participants defined Catholic school culture in ways such as an "alignment between faith and life" (PPQ20) and "the reason for why we do what we do" (PPQ8). PPQ16 stated it is "who we are, what we believe and how we act and live", and this was affirmed by PPQ11 when asserting it is "who we are – lived out in actions and words". Similarly, PPQ29 expressed culture as "the foundation of faith, at the core of everything we do". Three participants stated that Catholic identity and culture is visible in words, symbols, and actions. Likewise, another three principals highlighted the necessity to "walk the talk".

Articulating responses to mission showcased an opportunity for principals to "take a deeper look at how we present ourselves to the school and wider community"

(PPQ8). Specifically, principals noted that the SCI strategy had enhanced the culture of Catholic schools, with 17 statements coded accordingly. Interestingly, participants indicated an identifiable Catholic identity and culture as mandatory to address the changing contextual profile of society.

4.4.2.3 Contemporary Society

Principals demonstrated an acute awareness of the changing demographic of contemporary society and revealed the importance of promoting the distinctive nature of Catholic education. Today's societal context was portrayed by 12 participants as a significant consideration regarding the SCI strategy, highlighting its prominence for participants. Two principals described their understanding of the SCI strategy as assisting in the alignment of the secular and pluralist contexts. The need for ongoing dialogue was articulated because "as context changes, so too [do] the challenges of how to genuinely be a Catholic school in a pluralist society" (PPQ27).

Increased capacity to understand the challenges and opportunities for Catholic schools within a secular world was a key factor of influence stated by principals. There were six direct comments regarding the changing profile of students and families involved with Catholic education. One participant referred to their school enrolment profile highlighting "an increasing number of students who are not Catholic" (PPQ24). A further three participants referred to the Catholic school as providing the only experience of "Church" for many students and families.

4.4.2.4 Distinctiveness of Catholic Education

Understood and communicated as the "point of difference" between Catholic education and other education sectors, 14 principals articulated the distinctive nature of Catholic schools. PPQ9 stated, "It has caused us to reflect on what makes us different to the local state school"; PPQ8 stated it is "making known the specific things that make our schools unique"; and PPQ27 said, "Our Catholic identity is our point of difference and one we value highly." PPQ4 affirmed that this strategy "provided much food for thought about … What is our point of difference?", while PPQ24 identified, "It is what makes us unique, making sure the Catholic ethos permeates all aspects of school operations." Specifically stated by PPQ25, it is "what separates us from non-Catholic schools". Enthusiasm regarding the SCI strategy influence was articulated as "providing focused language to share insight using life-giving terms about the uniqueness of our Catholic faith and the purpose of Catholic education" (PPQ2), thereby suggesting that the SCI strategy has a sustainable

impetus for engagement and implementation. Furthermore, three principals discussed the sacramental worldview for Catholic schools as being that it "allows us to see God in all" (PPQ27) and that it is "sacred to our schools, based on the values of the Church" (PPQ21). Regarding Catholic identity, PPQ15 stated, "It's how we live and express Catholic faith and spirituality as a school." Similarly, PPQ1 stated, "It is the way we present ourselves to one another, students, parents and the broader community"; and PPQ29 explained, "It is who we are at the core." Participants primarily described Catholic identity as a way of living, articulated as "a visible expression of what is important" (PPQ20). This was further explained by PPQ18: "It's the attributes, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals that we hold and nurture."

The distinctiveness of Catholic education was frequently referenced by participants and articulated as a "point of difference". Such contextual realities highlighted, for principals, the timeliness and effectiveness of the SCI strategy.

4.4.3 Strategy Engagement

The third theme identified in the questionnaire data was strategy engagement. Of the 30 principals who completed the questionnaire, 29 were aware of the systemwide SCI strategy and articulated some understanding of the goals and activities outlined in the framework (CEO, 2016, p. 3; Figure 4.).

Commonality of responses expressed by participants included discussion regarding strategy goals and identified impact. These included professional learning (e.g., Leuven Project, Catholic perspectives, and postgraduate studies), formation, relationships, living as role model, embedding charism, and strategic planning and goal setting. A summary of the strategy engagement theme and subthemes is provided in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Summary of Strategy Engagement Theme and Subtheme

Emergent theme	Subtheme	Number of participants	Number of responses	Example of coded response
Strategy engagement	Professional learning	7	12	Professional learning supported my understand of CI
				Further postgraduate studies at Master level
	Leuven Project	11	11	Leuven module has been an outstanding opportunity
	Catholic perspectives	7	12	Ensure school practices reflect Church teachings
	Formation	10	16	Outstanding opportunities for growth in my own faith
	Relationships and lived experiences	21	32	My work as APRE with fantastic principal mentors
				Grew up in a Catholic family … involved in the Church
	Living as role model	21	36	Endeavour to be a model for students and staff
	Embedding charism	10	11	Commitment to story, charism, and values
	Strategic planning and goal setting	12	23	Clear focus and tool for goal setting
				Focused our goal setting

Note. CI = Catholic identity; APRE = assistant principal religious education.

4.4.3.1 Professional Learning

Principals identified the impact of targeted professional development (PD) opportunities made apparent within the strategy priorities and activity. In total seven principals spoke about professional learning, with five stating "professional learning" had impacted their understanding of Catholic identity, though provided no further elaboration. However, PPQ29 specifically stated "master's study", and PPQ2 specified "ACU subject in ECI [Enhancing Catholic Identity]" as providing significant learnings. This Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) module was the study

pathway undertaken by principals and staff involved in the [CEO] Leuven Project, as communicated in the strategy Shape Paper (CEO, 2015b).

4.4.3.2 Leuven Project

Seven participants nominated the Leuven Project as the most influential strategy engagement, providing participants "with an overview of what is crucial to promote Catholic identity" (PPQ30). PPQ27 affirmed that the "Leuven module has been an outstanding opportunity for growth in my own faith and ways of leading my school", while PPQ12 stated that "interactions and learning from dialogue schools were profound". Similarly, PPQ10 noted that "the learning from European experience – the rejection of formalised religion" was influential in understanding Catholic school identity. This participant described their visit to KU Leuven, Belgium, in 2006: "In fact, it was a case of 'Mind the Gap'. There should have been a bigger focus then [on strengthening CI] and not letting go of what we already had, as commitment to the faith was fast disappearing" (PPQ10).

PPQ12 noted the opportunity to "engage in research based, data informed lens of measuring Catholic identity", and another participant confirmed the SCI strategy had provided "a contemporary voice to our faith story" (PPQ23). In broader terms, PPQ1 articulated the project impact as providing "a plan that gave traction to making and establishing a strong Catholic identity and unpacking what Catholic Identity is and then giving opportunity for staff, students, and parents to engage in experiences".

Four additional principals discussed involvement in the Leuven Project, with PPQ27 articulating that it was about "enhancing opportunities to engage with data and insights to effectively lead a Catholic school in a recontextualised way". Supporting this claim, PPQ28 stated that through gaining "insight from Leuven questionnaire, [school communities were provided with] data and direction to build strong Catholic identity". PPQ12 positioned the project as providing opportunity to embrace "a research based, data-informed lens of measuring Catholic school identity". Finally, PPQ21 simply stated that "through the Leuven surveys we were provided with a lens to look through". Overall, participants affirmed the use of research data to inform direction and priorities at a school level.

Promoted as an opportunity to reimagine sacred texts, teachings, traditions, symbols, and rituals for today's context, recontextualisation is prioritised by KU Leuven as a significant practice for advancing the relevance of Catholicity today. In total, six principals highlighted this preference, with PPQ15 inspired to "bring a

recontextualised approach to the religious life of the school". Two principals discussed leading a Catholic school in a recontextualised way, specifically, "leading to a more contemporary approach to the role of a Catholic school" (PPQ1) by seeking "opportunities to explore a recontextualised approach whenever possible" (PPQ2).

Ongoing engagement with the Leuven Dialogue Schools Project was perceived as a future need for principals, with PPQ29 explicitly requesting "extended engagement with Dialogue Schools Project". Alternatively, the development of a localised tool to measure Catholic school identity was suggested by PPQ28 when stating "it would be great to have some type of research like Leuven, to collect data and influence direction".

4.4.3.3 Catholic Perspectives

Intensification of Catholic perspectives in professional learning became apparent at the end of the system strategic plan 2016–2020 period. Specifically, five principals referenced the importance of articulating Catholic perspectives to enhance interpersonal interactions and shared understandings regarding Catholic identity, culture, and worldview. Three participants stated that articulating Catholic perspectives provided a common language which assisted in faith-informed decision-making. The embedding of Catholic perspectives across curriculum was deemed important by seven principals, due to providing increased rigour of the RE curriculum.

4.4.3.4 Formation

The foundational importance of access to faith formation opportunities was reported by principals. Ten participants made a total of 16 references about faith formation experiences. The high quality of faith formation provided by the system was communicated by two principals; however, a concern was expressed regarding who participated in such experiences. The scenario was interpreted as a case of "preaching to the converted", meaning those with sound religious formation appeared to be the ones readily engaged.

Three principals referred to "knowing the story" as key to understanding the foundations of the Catholic faith. The language of "knowing the story" directly reflects that which is articulated in the *Staff Formation Framework* model (CEO, 2015a). Interestingly, this document was not listed by the CEO as core to the SCI strategy.

Participants understood formation as a way of nurturing the spiritual development of all, with PPQ18 stating: "Opportunities for professional learning have improved and opportunities for spiritual formation of staff is becoming more focussed

and targeted … providing the opportunity for encounter that enables each person to have a meaningful relationship with God."

Three principals further highlighted the different stages of faith formation, specifically stated by PPQ10 as "members of staff are at different stages of their faith journey, [and] many families are disengaged with their faith". PPQ1 identified the importance of "nurturing the spiritual development of all people in our sphere of influence, to meet people where they are". Four principals identified the essential need to ensure relevant faith formation opportunities were planned for all staff and students. Another two participants explained that providing formation experiences for all staff was now an integral priority within their annual strategic plans. Noteworthy, PPQ23 identified the need "to nurture my own personal faith".

Two principals spoke of the importance of the CEO RE Team in assisting with formation for leaders, staff, and students. Specifically, PPQ14 stated: "Principals have been influenced through the work of the RE Team who have ensured that this strategy is kept at the forefront." Furthermore, PPQ27 articulated that their "theological understandings were supported through study as part of my Masters, [and] frequent collaboration with my APRE".

Moving forward, five principals requested continued opportunities for the faith development of staff, students, and families. Poignantly, PPQ2 requested "support to engage the staff in life giving and appropriate professional development". Cognisant of contextual realities, PPQ26 stated that "staff must have the time to develop their faith as most staff do not attend church services".

PPQ18 stressed the necessity for all stakeholders to engage in professional learning and formation opportunities that provide "clarity around the why [mission], then strengthening Catholic identity will flow". PPQ4 identified the need for "further PD linking to present day culture and further sharing and celebrating of traditions past and present". The development of responsive theological and spiritual formation opportunities for stakeholders was identified as a key driver, and area for continued focus, to assist in the strengthening of Catholic identity. As such, one principal understood faith formation as an opportunity to bridge the gap between the religious literacy of current and previous generations. This was considered an urgent and prominent priority for the CEO to action.

The need for targeted formation for staff, students, parents, and community members was articulated by many principals. PPQ1 requested "continued opportunities for the journey of faith development of staff, students and families";

PPQ3 stated that "teacher development in their Catholic faith needs continual attention"; and PPQ17 requested "continued professional development for all".

PPQ29 stated that "the system needs to support teachers coming with a whole spectrum of experiences themselves". PPQ29 affirmed that all leaders need to "look at what we're doing to support all people in understanding what it means to be Catholic and share Catholic perspectives on life and culture". This need for ongoing and targeted formation was further highlighted when PPQ10 stated that "teachers cannot teach what they do not have/know so their education is crucial".

4.4.3.5 Relationships and Lived Experiences

Principals articulated that relationships and lived experiences as active members of a faith-based community were influential in their ability to lead for strong Catholic identity.

Participants expressed that personal relationships were instrumental in their understanding of Catholic identity. The strengthening of Catholic identity was understood by participants as being encountered with others in "an intimate experience" (PPQ13), made apparent in "relationships" (PPQ7), and "influencing every interaction and decision" (PPQ19). PPQ18 said that "it [Catholic identity] is a way of 'being' and living life to the full".

Four participants spoke to the influence of being raised in a Catholic family. In particular, PPQ3 was "brought up in a faith-filled family, where I would see others pray". PPQ5 "grew up in a Catholic family and have always been involved in the Church". Another four participants stated they were raised by Catholic parents, where there was close alignment between the values and traditions within the home, school, and Church.

Participants discussed prior personal engagement within Catholic education as having a significant impact on their understanding of Catholic identity. Specifically, six participants referred to attendance at a Catholic school, and another four participants referred to working for extended periods in a Catholic school. PPQ14 and PPQ23 affirmed that working closely with the APRE influenced their commitment to strengthening Catholic identity. PPQ4 described the SCI strategy as providing opportunity for "re-invigorating a very reflective personal journey for myself, as well as my school community".

Improved relationships with their staff and community members, directly related to engagement in the SCI strategy, was articulated by 13 principals. For

example, PPQ5 stated that "working with other Catholics has strengthened my own faith", PPQ21 experienced "deeper relationship with staff", and PPQ1 celebrated "strengthened relationship with school community".

Three participants referred to a strong association with parish priests and members of religious orders. PPQ27 elaborated by saying that "these relationships provide opportunities to learn more and action my faith". Two participants mentioned active involvement in their parish, and three participants highlighted regular attendance at Sunday Mass as important in their faith formation. Two participants understood Catholic identity through engaging in Church community, and PPQ18 was influenced by "observing a practising community of believers, showing how to develop a deep faith and relationship with God". As such, these religious members acted as role models for participants over an extended period.

While principal anecdotes were affirming, they also indicated the gap outlined in system documentation, whereby the lived experiences of Catholics of a previous generation are vastly different from the experiences of today's community members.

Three participants affirmed the need to embrace school and parish engagement to enact the mission of Catholic education, thereby promoting an evangelical mission of the Church. Such insight was captured in different ways. However, PPQ3 "look[ed] for ways to connect with the life of the Parish" and PPQ8 worked to "develop a positive relationship with the Parish Priest".

Participants spoke about an apparent disconnect between Catholic schools and the Catholic Church. PPQ3 articulated a need for "connection with the wider church by staff", while PPQ13 more broadly stated the need for "connection between all facets of the community and our history". Three principals discussed the lack of engagement between staff and students and the Church, requesting support to bridge this widening divide. Particularly, PPQ4 mentioned this "disconnect between Catholic school and the Church" and said that "the chasm is getting wider".

In summary, principals highlighted the impact of life experiences and relationships as significantly influencing their understanding of Catholic identity.

4.4.3.6 Living as Role Model

It was noted in relationships and lived experiences that principals understood their ability to strengthen Catholic identity was informed by observing others within communities of faith, further affirming the importance for them to act as role models for others. Twenty-one principals identified a responsibility to enact a model of faith-

informed leadership. The development of such insight and awareness assisted principals to further unify their inherent leadership responsibilities to make prominent the Catholic school identity. A common way that principals articulated this was through "modelling" their Catholic faith. Specifically, three principals discussed knowing, articulating, and celebrating their personal faith as imperative in their school leadership. The primacy and importance of this undertaking was recorded in a total of 36 coded responses.

PPQ21 discussed the authenticity of "presence, actions, words, culture – it's who we are! Loud and proud", and PPQ20 sought to "challenge the staff to embed Catholic identity strategy and to model what I'm asking of others". PPQ30 understood "through my actions that Catholic school identity is strengthened", and PPQ2 stated "it is a constant feature of my leadership – in word and action". PPQ3 endeavoured "to be a model to staff and students [by] talking about scripture and how that guides decisions".

Living as witness to faith was articulated by nine principals as providing an authentic model of faith-inspired leadership, with PPQ10 specifically stating that "personal practices are key [in] dealing with issues and people [in ways] that reflect Catholic identity". In similar terms, PPQ5 emphasised "modelling the importance of prayer and leading prayer and talk explicitly as a high priority about Catholic perspectives when running meetings, discussing options, making decisions and reviewing school policies and procedures".

PPQ3 discussed the need for "credible faith leaders" to support and model an openness to authentic dialogue. While this response did not specify if these were Church leaders or CEO leaders, it could be argued that participants were seeking authentic leadership from all faith leaders. PPQ10 stated that "respect for the church and clergy has eroded and increasingly the community is looking to schools for leadership". PPQ26 cautioned that "we have underestimated the damage that has been caused by the Church's handling of sexual abuse, as many staff and parents have lost faith in the Church being a moral institution". Such concerns further perpetuate the need for principals to display authentic faith leadership.

One principal stated that "people have issues with the institutional church, not Christ … I know that the Royal Commission [into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse] has had a huge impact on the credibility of the Church" (PPQ18). Another challenge was articulated by PPQ26:

Developing our faith in a contemporary context is the message from [CEO] but many priests do not seem to have heard this message – this is a significant challenge as the priest plays a significant role in supporting teachers and school leaders. It's mixed messages from [CEO] and Parish Priests.

It was stated that some Church teachings are difficult to understand and justify within contemporary society. This was articulated by PPQ9: "Justifying Catholic teachings in the world we live in can be difficult. The church's response to moral and ethical situation[s] and decision making can be hard to teach. It can be perceived as politicising education."

To enact the preferred position where culture, life, and faith intercept to bring purpose and meaning within today's culture, principals are seeking greater connection with the Church to navigate moral and ethical decision-making and apply this within the context of Catholic primary schools.

4.4.3.7 Embedding Charism

The importance of embedding a charism of a particular saint or religious order was identified by 10 participants as a summative influence of SCI strategy engagement, with PPQ5 specifically stating that "our school charism has been strengthened with professional learning, sharp focus and communication". PPQ6 shared that Catholic identity was gaining prominence by "making known the icons, symbols, charisms in our schools". Three additional principals referred to the school charism providing opportunity to make known the ordinariness of these extraordinary people, thereby inspiring others.

PPQ22 said that by gaining increased clarity of mission and charism founders, "we have a stronger understanding of what has gone before us, who we are, our purpose and our future [and] this learning has been influential in enhancing the prominence of school charism".

Through clarifying charism, participants have increased their ability to share their school's Catholic identity and feel inspired to actively contribute to the mission of the Church.

4.4.3.8 Strategic Planning and Goal Setting

Targeted systemwide and schoolwide strategic planning and goal setting was discussed by principals as another positive impact of strategy implementation. There

were responses coded according to the systemwide strategic planning, shared by twelve principals. Responses included an acknowledgement that the SCI strategy had direct implications for schoolwide and systemic strategic planning. PPQ5 stated the impact as:

> This strategy has focused our goal setting with Catholic identity being one of three important pillars on the strategic plan. The online logging of goals focussed our goal setting and enabled us to identify strategies, actions, and activities at a school level.

PPQ21 defined an enhanced clarity regarding "clear goals and direction … we know where we are going and how to get there". PPQ28 was complimentary when acknowledging "we ended up with a framework for today, tomorrow and into the future". Similarly, PPQ10 described the activity of the Leuven Project as providing "a clear focused tool to tackle the challenge of strengthening Catholic identity. Strategic planning for the future while responding to current needs of community members is essential. Listening, reflecting, and responding while maintaining a clear vision and expectations."

Twelve principals elaborated how the SCI strategy explicitly provided a focused approach regarding school goals, targets, and measures for strengthening Catholic identity. Specifically, PPQ29 stated this strategy had "assisted principals to target improvement efforts, broaden awareness, develop a shared language, honing-in on the issues, setting direction". PPQ16 articulated a personalised response: "I have only positivity from this strategic plan and Catholic Identity goal. I find it vital to set us apart from other school systems and to provide a different context for students and parents to be a part of."

A surprising contrast was PPQ19, who stated, "I couldn't tell you what the strategy was." Such comments affirm the construct of mission dissonance within Catholic school, as shared in the literature of Sultmann, Brown, et al. (2024). Haldane et al. (2023), provide some explanation for stakeholder discomfort regarding SCI attributed to, "lack of confidence; embarrassment about church failings…; relations with non-Catholic or dissenting colleagues, friends and family; and/or fear of disapproval and criticism and censure within schools as well as from secular sources" (p.27). It was also highlighted that some Catholic staff members "may not feel comfortable with the characterisation and adoption of the Catholic School mission in unambiguously apostolic and evangelical terms" (Haldane et al., 2023, p.27).

Another three principals stated that the focus on the ELT priority took precedence over the SCI strategy. PPQ26 reported that "there have been so many initiatives for teachers to implement and this has diluted leadership's focus on strengthening Catholic identity". PPQ25 elaborated that "they [CEO] tried to fit other strategies into the Catholic context", and PPQ13 identified "the ELT project and focus goals to improve [learning] data has reduced capacity to focus on Catholic identity during this time".

Participants were mostly affirming of a mandated approach to goal setting and felt well prepared and supported through the provision of appropriate resources, targeted professional learning, and the faith formation framework. However, two principals stated this strategy had been given less priority due to competing goals.

Principals expressed a key imperative for the CEO to ensure this SCI strategy is kept at the forefront of the organisation. PPQ14 requested "a commitment to hold Catholic identity as key to our mission", and PPQ30 reiterated that "leaders have to maintain their commitment towards preserving that identity". PPQ27 stated that "as this is core business as a Catholic school, I would hope it maintains the focus of communication and development". Similarly, PPQ14 said that "the work that has been happening needs to continue [as] there is still a long way to go especially working with so many staff who do not value the importance". As stated by PPQ30, "this is ongoing – a life journey"; therefore, as PPQ7 said, the "[CEO] needs to believe it's important". PPQ8 requested "support to identify clearer 'landmarks', more defining guideposts". Importantly, it was repeatedly stated that the SCI strategy must remain a priority within this CEO, highlighting an embedded level of sustainable momentum that is valued, respected, and purposeful for principals.

The most frequently articulated need of principals was a systemwide strategy that maintains an ongoing commitment to strengthening Catholic school identity, prioritised as urgent, essential, and evolving.

4.4.4 Summary of Questionnaire Findings

The findings of the questionnaire data affirm a collective understanding among primary school principals of the urgency of strategy implementation and emphasise the need for the CEO to ensure ongoing support to strengthen the Catholic identity of schools and offices. Participants stated that solid progress had been made; however,

the strengthening of Catholic school identity remained an ongoing focus requiring strategic leadership, systemic goal setting, and adequate resourcing.

Aspects of personal and communal experiences and the direct impact on the culture and identity of the Catholic primary school were expressed by principals. While strategy engagement and progress were advanced positively by most principals, the need to further refine an adequate model of formation and provide targeted experiences to engage with members of the parish in meaningful and purposeful ways was also articulated by participants. Principals stated the urgency of prioritising opportunities to engage with the Church to strengthen the Catholic identity of stakeholders and thereby the Catholic school identity.

Each principal shared a key influence regarding the priority placed on increased understanding of the mission and culture of Catholic schools and the need for systemic formation of staff. This reflects three of the four key elements presented in the CEO's SCI Framework (Figure 4. in Section 4.3.2). However, only seven principals made reference to a curriculum imbued with Catholic perspectives, and only one posited the need for ongoing formation for students. Principals articulated that Catholic school identity was enhanced through strategy delivery that highlighted a deeper knowledge of mission, culture, and formation for staff. However, they did not communicate the central role of curriculum delivery imbued with a Catholic Christian worldview, nor formation of students as instrumental for the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

In summary, the pivotal discussions presented in the questionnaire findings included the following main points:

- Increased clarity regarding the mission of Catholic education enhanced the leadership capability of principals.
- The systemwide strategic response was essential.
- Principals were increasingly able to navigate the widening gap between religious literacy and experiences of current and previous generations.
- Engagement in SCI activities directly impacted principals in their capacity and willingness to strengthen the Catholic identity within their schools.
- An expressed need to ensure this strategy is refined to maintain an ongoing focus and priority of the CEO was highlighted.

4.5   Presentation of Interview Findings

Consistent with an interpretivist approach to research, the semi-structured interviews sought to probe deeper perspectives of primary school principals regarding the SCI strategy implementation, influence, and impact.

A refined list of questions was used during the interviews, as displayed in the interview script (Appendix D). These questions were posed to each principal, while time was also prioritised to allow for participants to discuss their own topics, insights, and perspectives.

4.5.1 Interview Participants

Questionnaire respondents, at the time of questionnaire data collection, were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. Twelve of the 30 respondents volunteered. Confirmation of meeting arrangements regarding date and time for interview reduced this number to eight volunteers. Due to the number of confirmed interviews, the purposeful selection process was not deemed necessary. As such, all eight voluntary participants proceeded to the interview phase of data collection.

Interviews were undertaken in May and June 2021, during which time the Covid-19 pandemic was impacting the education sector, specifically placing further demands on the role of principals to ensure all health department obligations were adhered to and implemented. This period also coincided with the implementation of this CEO's strategic plan for 2021–2025 (CEO, 2021b).

Data generated from interview transcripts were analysed in two forms. First, a Leximancer analysis was applied to the aggregated verbal data and high frequency ranked themes and associated ideas were extracted. Second, within these data a more detailed coding of transcript responses was performed, analysed, and reported.

4.5.2 Leximancer Analysis of Interview Data

After each interview was conducted, transcripts were compiled and distributed to participants for member checking. Once the transcripts were confirmed as accurate, the responses were collated to include participant statements only (i.e., researcher dialogue was redacted). Next, the responses were analysed through Leximancer 4.51 software. This initial software analysis identified ranked themes, followed by word hit data. The view presented in Figure 4. highlights the dominant themes, frequency of reference, and association between concepts.

Figure 4.3

Leximancer Analysis of Ranked Themes and Concept Associations
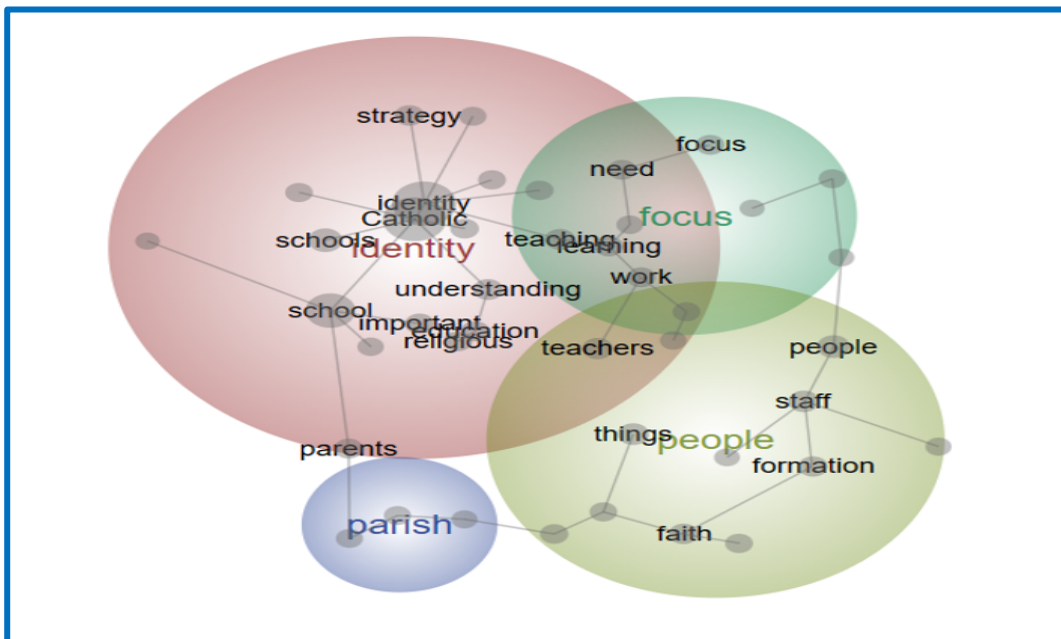
The three highest ranked themes from interview data were "identity", "people", and "focus". The word hits and concept associations (as identified by the grey dots in Figure 4. are presented in Table 4.4. The theme of "parish" was lower ranked, representing that this engagement was not often referenced by principals during interview. One principal stated they were dissuaded by their parish priest from engaging in the [CEO] Leuven Project as the priest was dissatisfied with the methodology maintained by KU Leuven. Not surprisingly, this principal did not focus on parish engagement.

Table 4.4

Ranked Themes, Word Hits, Concept Associations, Name-Like Count, and Name-Like Relevance From Leximancer Analysis

Ranked theme	Word-like hits	Concept associations	Name-like count	Name-like relevance
Identity	328	-	173	100%
		School	141	82%
		Schools	59	34%
People	193	-	62	38%
		Staff	45	26%
		Faith	40	23%
		Formation	37	21%
Focus	79	-	35	20%
		Work	27	16%
		Need	20	12%

The presentation of interview findings, representative of principal perspectives on the SCI strategy, are discussed in the following sections according to the three highest ranked themes and their concept associations.

4.5.3 Identity (Ranked Theme)

During the interviews, principals discussed their engagement and perceived influence regarding the SCI strategy, specifically clarity regarding mission and identity. The ranked theme of identity displayed a word-like hit of 328 and 100% name-like relevance. This was expected considering that the word "identity" was in the strategy name.

A common finding demonstrated that principals understood the SCI strategy. PPI11 specifically expressed this understanding as follows:

> The strategy really was about driving the Catholic identity within our school. That's what we stand for … at the forefront of it. The way of communicating with families and staff, ensuring they understood this as being a key priority in the way that our school would operate.

PPI4 further described their understanding in a general way, simply stating, "Catholic identity is integral, it's first and foremost." PPI27 elaborated that Catholic identity is "knowing that our foundation is the Jesus story. It must be founded there, has to come back to there, if we are going to be true to our mission."

This understanding was shared by PPI18 when stating, "Catholic identity is the essence of why we are here, we bring things back to Christ." PPI27 elaborated: "The mission of a Catholic school is unchanged. It is not static, but responsive and engaging with community. It, therefore, must be evident in all aspects of our work. Not an add on, but central."

Today's societal context was another key point of discussion for three principals. PPI4 clearly stated:

Our challenge in a sense is how we embrace today [today's context] and how we connect that to our own Catholic identity. The expression of an authentic identity and strengthening of that Catholic identity as individuals, as a team in a school context and as a system, is our way forward. With understanding the Australian Catholic identity context, it has changed the way that I talk to parents … [about] where we are as a Catholic school, what that means and what it looks like. Catholic schools are about the Church and for the Church, and relationship between school and Church is critical.

Overall, principals conveyed an understanding of the mission of Catholic education as steadfast within the mission of the universal Church.

4.5.3.1 School and Schools (Concept Associations)

The word "school" was recorded 141 times in the interview data, with a name-like relevance of 82%, and the plural "schools" returned a 59 name-like count displaying 34% relevance. It is important to note that the central research question probed participant insight regarding the ways in which principals were influenced by strategy engagement. Therefore, principals readily shared anecdotes regarding the application within their individual school context. However, the analysis also highlighted that those participants understood that the strategy was to be implemented across all schools within this system. High word hits for "school" and "schools" were attributed to being foundational in strategy implementation.

In summary, Leximancer data identified a sharpened focus regarding the identity of Catholic schools attributed to strategy engagement within schools. This understanding assisted principals to articulate the mission and relevance of Catholic schools, within the context of contemporary society.

4.5.4 People (Ranked Theme)

The second ranked theme of people returned a word hit of 193, with a name-like relevance of 38%. The concept associations of "staff", "faith", and "formation" highlighted that the collective efforts of stakeholders had a tangible impact on strategy implementation, particularly regarding the promotion of faith and formation. The system expectation mandated that all stakeholders were to engage, ensuring a prominent Catholic culture and identity was recognised in each school and office setting (CEO, 2016).

The changing profile of stakeholders was discussed by four participants and understood as impacting the work of principals, with PPI18 stating, "Attendance at a Catholic school might be the only chance for the children to be in a church." PPI10 added that schools are "finding ways for people to engage in their faith, [as] Catholic schools are keeping Catholicism alive in Australia today".

A point of contention was raised by PPI29: "I'm not sure that it [Catholic identity] is as embedded as we'd like to think it is, [as it is] dependent on the people around you and your leadership team."

4.5.4.1 Staff, Faith, and Formation (Concept Associations)

The Leximancer analysis identified three concept associations – staff, faith, and formation – for the ranked theme of people. The concept association of "staff" was recorded 45 times in the interview data, with a name-like relevance of 26%; "faith" returned a 40 name-like count, displaying 23% relevance; and "formation" returned a 37 name-like count, displaying 21% relevance. These data highlighted that the embedding of SCI strategy relied heavily on the efforts of staff and community, while advancing their opportunities to engage in formation and ultimately faith development.

Regarding the concept association of staff, PPI11 shared personal insight: "Holding a previous role as APRE, [I was] confident to lead this strategy when becoming principal … Working as APRE was very beneficial. I believe that principals benefit from coming from [an] APRE background."

Prior experience was also affirmed by PPI29:

Going that pathway of APRE role, [it] really does help you to understand what a Catholic school is all about, what is central to a Catholic school. APREs had a lot better understanding [of this strategy] than principals as they had opportunities for more PD.

The impact of the APRE on identity prompted PPI29 to state: "My message [to the CEO] would be to improve clarity and depth for leadership teams, rather than just APRE. It's the APREs who are getting and sharing the message of Catholic identity, not necessarily the principals."

Two interview participants referred to the impact of CEO staff, particularly Education Officer Religious Education (EORE). PPI30 stated:

> It's that support [of an EORE] that you need in order to improve Catholic identity. Now an EORE is responsible for so many schools, there is reduced access to support in terms of having a go-to person … to help with direction and setting goals.

PPI10 added that "the [CEO] RE staff are doing a great job … [providing] a lot of really good resources". These anecdotes reinforced that experience and relationships play an important role in how one understands, enacts, and prioritises the SCI strategy.

Leximancer analysis identified the ranked theme of people with the concept association of formation. While this association between people and faith and formation is intuitively recognised, further findings regarding formation were made explicit. During interviews, four principal participants stated that faith formation must remain at the forefront of systemwide strategic planning, underpinned by an appropriate model of funding and resourcing. PPI11 expressed concern about new teachers: "Graduates [teachers] are coming from secular environments and schools … therefore there is a lack of understanding or limited understanding and people needing support." Similarly, PPI24 expressed "extreme frustration with lack of support for young teachers", and PPI9 reiterated that there is "a lack of support for young teachers to assist in their personal formation".

During interviews, five principals highlighted the need to look for new models to engage stakeholders in faith formation. Four principals expressed concern that most staff do not seek formation experience but rather just participate in the mandated hours needed for accreditation to teach religion, the policy expectations underpinning some formation provision.

4.5.5 Focus (Ranked Theme)

The third ranked theme generated in Leximancer analysis was identified as focus, with 79 word-like hits, 35 name-like count, and relevance of 20%. Subsequent

name-like counts displayed "work" at 27 with a 16% name-like relevance, closely followed by "need" with a name-like count of 20 and a name-like relevance of 12%. The name-like relevance of work and need aligns with the systemwide priority to enhance Catholic culture, thereby establishing the focused work of principals and other identified stakeholders. Principal perceptions regarding focus, work, and need are presented as follows.

The theme of focus identified in the Leximancer analysis aligned with the SCI strategy as it provided a targeted focus for stakeholders during implementation. PPI24 positioned the SCI strategy as "very overdue because the secular world can be at odds with proudly identifying as Catholic". PPI29 proposed that "the system understood the sense of urgency". Affirmingly, PPI29 added, "This strategy has the potential to have a strong influence over our system." Furthermore, PPI4 commented that the SCI strategy had "positioned what makes us a Catholic school as number one [priority]".

The precise focus of the SCI strategy assisted principals to seek clarity and refinement through strategy engagement and professional learning to ensure the strengthening of Catholic school identity is placed as paramount.

4.5.5.1 Work and Need (Concept Associations)

The two concept associations regarding the ranked theme of focus were work and need. Understood within the scope of this research, work referred to the actions of stakeholders during strategy implementation. Six of the eight interview participants described the profound impact of engaging in the ECSI module undertaken as part of the [CEO] Leuven Project. PPI4 articulated that this engagement afforded an opportunity "to look at how we are travelling as a Catholic community … through the use of data … and actioning any recommendations".

PPI29 experienced

a detailed introduction to this strategy in the intensive program [ECSI, ACU], [which] gave me deeper background and understanding about the context of Catholic education from a local and global perspective. I feel there's something needed to be in this space, to support us as Catholic schools and communities.

PPI4 stated that "the Leuven data influences annual plans and strategic planning, around the real nuts and bolts of Catholic identity and strategies to implement". PPI18 expressed confidence about strengthening Catholic school

identity by "knowing the elements [key priorities] of Catholic identity priority and making sure when we do annual planning, we target each of those areas". Moreover, and poignantly articulated by PPI30, "You change the way you lead in terms of the needs of the school … the Leuven identity project did indicate the way we should move in terms of religious life of the school."

One interview participant articulated that engagement with the SCI strategy enabled "new learning, better teachers, better principals in regard to understanding what makes us Catholic" (PPI4). PPI11 affirmed this:

> The ECSI project enabled principals to bring Catholic worldviews to the forefront … as important as learning and teaching. As a school, we would never be as good as what we potentially could without focusing on Catholic identity.

PPI24 held a similar view and stated that engagement with Leuven University had provided "the most ideal format" to measure and profile Catholic identity, "but if that is going it's something that I think needs to be redone in a different way. I don't think we are in a good place at all, to go it alone [as a system]."

Five of eight interview participants disclosed an apparent concern regarding organisational changes coinciding with the introduction of the systemwide *Strategic Plan 2021–2025* (CEO, 2021b). Specifically, PPI24 highlighted a change in focus: "The huge focus is on teaching and learning and outcomes and NAPLAN [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy] results, enrolments, and finance … the focus is on compliance, academic outcomes, and national School Improvement Tool." Such insight was confirmed by PPI4: "The big priorities at the moment from the system level seem to be around an improvement in standardised testing. And once we start putting that as number one, I think that's very dangerous ground."

This change in strategic direction was impacting the work of principals, as articulated by PPI11: "Prioritising Catholic identity can be difficult with compliance and reporting to non-state school accreditation board and external reviews, along with managing parents, teachers, and students, it can be a challenge." Granting greater clarity, PPI18 made a direct comparison between the two strategic plans: "With the previous strategy there were three pillars. It was simple, it was clear. Every school had a goal for each one. Now there are six areas, it just gets confusing. Now it just seems overwhelming again."

PPI24 stated that since the implementation of the new systemwide *Strategic Plan 2021–2025* (CEO, 2021b), "Strengthening Catholic identity is being driven from afar. It appears to have been put to the side because of other priorities." This understanding was also articulated by PPI9:

> [Some schools] are severely impacted by dropping enrolments and are under the pump the whole time about their NAPLAN results. Here at [school name] we can cruise along to a certain degree, just do the right thing, and hope to fly under the radar.

Regarding participant needs, the foundational premise of principals was the essential nature of sustainable resourcing models and ongoing support for strengthening Catholic school identity. This was specifically stated by PPI11: "It is essential in a large organisation … that we have a clear vision for the future. It has been successful in the past, by having access to credible information."

To enact the preferred position where culture, life, and faith intercept to bring purpose and meaning within today's culture, PPI29 stated:

> The system needs to support teachers coming with a whole spectrum of experiences themselves. We need to look at what we're doing to support all people in understanding what it means to be Catholic and share Catholic perspectives on life and culture.

Principals posited an apparent tension between the delivery and implementation of two cyclical systemwide strategic plans, 2016–2020 and 2021–2025. While the SCI strategy remained unchanged during these two cycles of strategic planning, the priorities of the CEO changed. During 2016–2020 each school was required to develop a localised goal for strengthening Catholic school identity; however, this became optional for the strategic plan during 2021–2025. The option to include a goal was identified by principals as a disconnect, predominantly due to the reduced focus on the SCI strategy, with the implication being that the strengthening of Catholic school identity did not remain as top of mind for some schools during the current plan, whereas it was mandated in the earlier strategic plan.

4.5.6 Summary of Interview Findings

The combined interview findings have been presented according to the ranked themes of identity, people, and focus. The findings from interview data restate the essential need for and urgency of an SCI strategy. The needs of principals for support

in advancing Catholic school identity were made apparent, specifically regarding a collaborative approach to systemwide strategic planning. The ranked themes of identity, people, and focus aptly reflect the imperative to engage all stakeholders in planning the future strategic focus for strengthening Catholic school identity.

4.6   Comparison of Data Set Findings

A process of data comparison was undertaken between the findings from the analysis of systemwide documentation, the emergent themes from questionnaire responses, and the ranked themes from interview data based on Leximancer analysis. The findings from each of the data sets, along with their progressive connections, are presented in 4.4.

Figure 4.4

Summary Findings From Document Analysis, Questionnaire, and Interview Themes and Associations
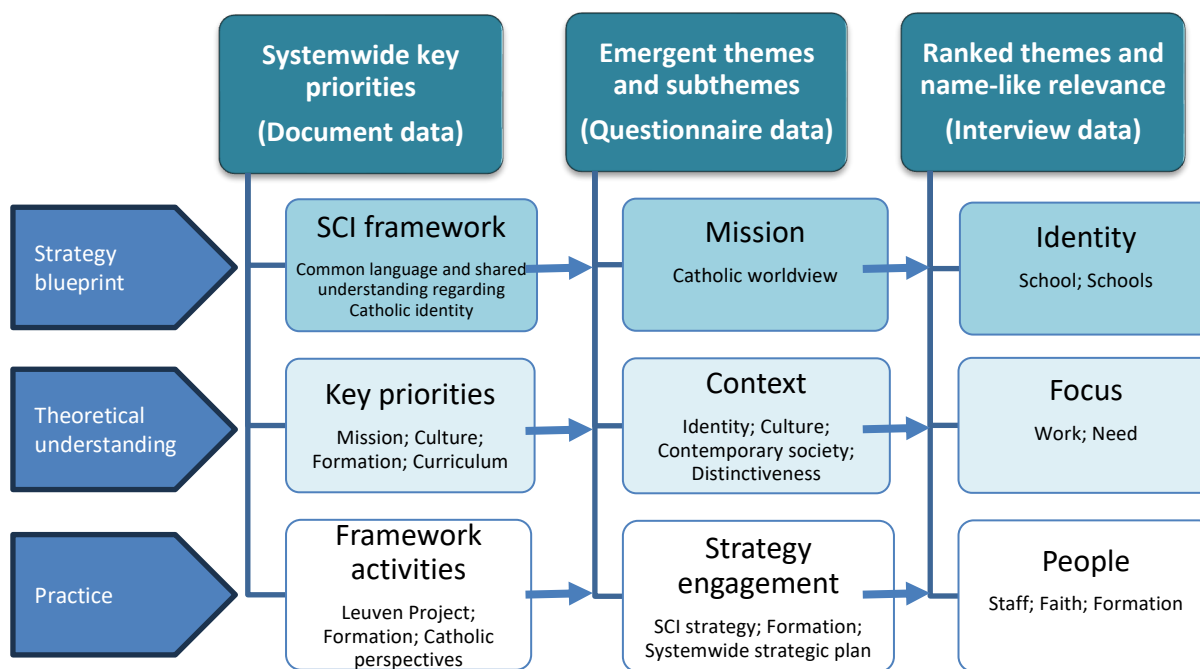
Note: SCI = Strengthening Catholic Identity.

With respect to this display, it is important to understand that two overall observations have been established. First, given the passage of time across which data were collected, the impact of changing circumstances of respondents is reflected in concepts and emphases provided by the participants. Second, the overall nature of the data collection shows that each of the three data sets carries a general

focus. Notwithstanding, each set of data provides a basis for extracting common themes and specific insights relevant to the research question.

A comparative analysis of each data set (document analysis, questionnaire data, interview data) was undertaken according to three stages of application: the provision of a strategy blueprint, theoretical understanding, and practice. At the first stage of analysis for each data set, the predominant themes of SCI framework, mission, and identity shared the strategy blueprint, positioning the urgent and essential nature of this strategy. Next, the key priorities, context, and focus provided clarity regarding a contemporary theoretical understanding for Catholic schools today. Finally, the third stage highlighted application for practice, as identified in the framework activities, strategy engagement, and people. These commonalities between themes identified within each data set will now be discussed.

4.6.1 Strategy Blueprint: Comparing Themes of SCI Framework, Mission, and Identity

When comparing the SCI framework objective of "common language and shared understanding" with the insight of participants, it was apparent that respondents predominantly defined Catholic identity as being the mission and Catholic worldview on which school identity is founded. A small number of respondents also stated that this identity is informed by the identity of the Catholic Church. The most referenced communication regarding the SCI strategy was the "SCI framework" graphic (CEO, 2016, p. 3 and Figure *4*.4.2), thereby reinforcing its perceived importance. Participants readily referred to a common language, which was evident during the strategy implementation. This framework for Catholic identity associated the need for families, parish, schools, and community to engage, and in the process to draw from clear and consistent language.

Specifically articulated in questionnaire and interview data, participants acknowledged that ensuring this strategy was understood by all stakeholders was an essential undertaking for principals. It was stated that through authentic presence, decision-making, and interactions, principals verified practices and processes that emulate Gospel values and Church teachings. As such, the framework shared in system documentation articulated the "mission" of Catholic education (as frequently stated in questionnaire responses), alongside Catholic "identity" (as identified in interview analysis). In this way, the framework assisted principals to understand the mission and identity of Catholic schools and the importance of this SCI strategy

implementation. In summary, the assessment and integration of themes from each of the data sets provided a blueprint for strategy understanding and implementation.

4.6.2 Theoretical Understandings: Comparing Themes of Key Priorities, Context, and Focus

At the next stage of analysis, the prominent "key priorities", as defined in the system documentation, included mission, culture, formation, and curriculum. Each priority provided a reference point for participants. While understanding today's "context" and the implications for Catholic schools, participants highlighted the essential need to include families, parishes, community, and school in the strategy engagement. Likewise, the strategy "focus", as identified in interview findings, prioritised the "work" of participants alongside their perceived "need" for enhancing Catholic school identity during strategy implementation and into the future. As such, these themes provided a theoretical response to the focused work of the CEO and schools.

The interview findings highlighted the practical application (work and need) of activities for strengthening Catholic school identity, thereby aligning with the key priorities articulated in the systemwide documentation. Each data set articulated both opportunities and challenges presented for strengthening Catholic identity. The commonality between key priorities, context, and focus comprised the articulation of strategy priorities, cognisant of the reality of today's context, for the undertaking of focused work.

4.6.3 Practice: Comparing Themes of Framework Activities, Strategy Engagement, and People

Prominently articulated in system documentation were the "activities" that would be undertaken to advance the strengthening of Catholic identity within schools and the CEO. Evident in questionnaire data was the correlation between the level of engagement with strategy and its influence on participants. Those with high engagement identified extensive influence in both personal formation and professional capacity, while those with low engagement did not feel influenced by this strategy. Regardless of engagement, a recurrent point of view was the essential and urgent nature of building capacity in self and others regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

Understanding the importance of "people", as identified in interview findings, reinforces the essential premise that through engaging with activity, resourced to

underpin the SCI strategy, participants become aware of the organic, dynamic, and living ecosystem of interaction that brings life and relevance to the SCI framework as shared in strategy documentation. In short, the strengthening of Catholic identity is only made possible through increased knowledge, awareness, and willingness of all stakeholders. The themes of framework activities, strategy engagement, and people highlight the improved or enlightened practice of working towards the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

In summary, linking and comparing the themes across each level of analysis showed the interconnection of each emergent theme. It also identified that similar, rather than common, language was used by participants to define key concepts, including mission and identity, priority and focus, and strategy engagement and framework activity. While not immediately apparent, the relationship and connection between data themes became more obvious with the closer alignment between subthemes and associated concepts. This data finding supports the conclusion that principals are successfully embedding practices that support the SCI strategy; however, some theoretical knowledge remains on a surface level, and the model of formation preferences a one-size-fits-all measure.

A shared understanding regarding the need to strengthen CSI has been made apparent for principals during strategy implementation; however, the establishment and refining of common language requires further attention. In light of this, maintaining impetus regarding strategy implementation is essential to meet the ongoing and emerging needs of this CEO, school principals, and all stakeholders within each unique school community.

4.7   Chapter Summary

The findings about the perspective of principals regarding the SCI strategy confirm the strategy as an inspired initiative for increasing their capacity as faith leaders within a primary school context. Principals expressed increased confidence to share a recontextualised understanding of Catholic faith traditions. Frequent reference was made to increased understanding of the mission of Catholic schools, together with school culture and identity being influenced and informed by a contemporary societal context. Principals articulated that significant progress had been made in strengthening the Catholic identity of the schools and organisation; however, they stated this was an ongoing priority that requires commitment and refinement as new insights emerge.

Participants understood the urgency and essential nature of this strategic goal to strengthen Catholic school identity. They consistently articulated a willingness and commitment to keep this focus as central to their leadership responsibilities, ensuring the rigour and relevance of Catholic education is underpinned by its mission and identity. However, they also expressed the ongoing nature of this pursuit and the need for support from the CEO and Church, as they are unable to do this work alone.

The comparison of findings from the three data sets showed an alignment between the questionnaire and interview data in relation to the systemwide documentation regarding the SCI strategy. Both systemwide documentation and principal responses addressed the urgency of taking stock of the current context and culture so as to meet people where they are and respond to the needs of community members and the needs of the Church in purposeful, relevant, and authentic ways.

The next chapter discusses the data in detail to further understand the following three summative research findings on the imperative to:

- investigate the potential to reimagine rigorous PD and relevant faith formation opportunities for all stakeholders to assist in fulfilling the mission of the universal Church, while raising religious literacy for current and future generations (MISSION)
- ensure the refinement of the SCI strategy to assist principals to prioritise and position this work in the evolving landscape of Catholic schools within a detraditionalised and increasingly secular context (CONTEXT)
- commit to resourcing and advancing SCI strategy engagement that prioritises the insights of principals and leadership teams to ensure it meets the needs of those undertaking the responsibility to promote a strong Catholic identity within their school setting (AGENCY).

These three summative findings have been identified as providing significant influence for participants during the implementation of strategy during 2016–2020, while also acknowledged as commanding high priority into the future. It is understood by participants that the mission, context, and agency are interrelated constructs that inform and are informed by each other. When there is clear alignment and equivalent priority given to each of these three constructs, the opportunities for strengthening of Catholic identity are made apparent and given life within a dynamic ecology of interaction and engagement.

# Chapter 5: Data Discussion

5.1   Introduction

This chapter entails a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4 regarding the SCI strategy of one bounded system of schools (CEO, 2015b, 2016). Section 5.1 provides an overview of the chapter, and Section 5.2 discusses the key findings within the thematic categories of mission, context, and agency. Section 5.3 further discusses the data and proposes a framework, the identity alignment model, as a conceptualisation of the themes and relationships that contribute to the strategic implementation for the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

The discussion responds to the central research question: *In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?* The discussion aligns the academic literature with insights from the data collection, analysis, and presentation.

Three key data findings for strengthening Catholic identity – mission, context, and agency – were identified in Chapter 4, with principals stating that increased awareness and knowledge within each domain had influenced their capability to strengthen Catholic school identity. These findings are represented in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1

Key Data Findings: Mission, Context, and Agency
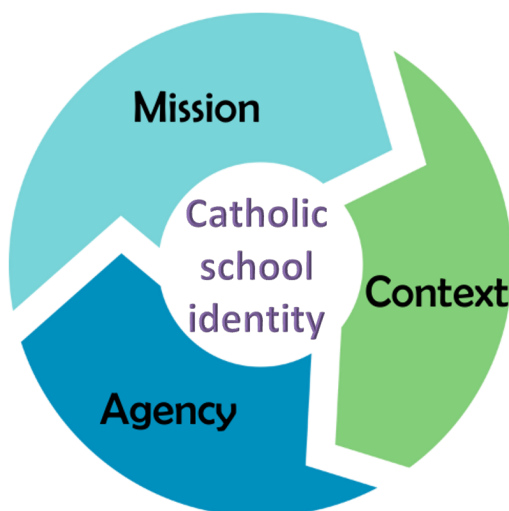
A general discussion of each finding is followed by the associated underlying topics, as displayed in Figure 5.2. This data discussion informs the development of the identity alignment model in Section 5.3 as a basis for advancing the confidence and capabilities of principals to lead Catholic school identity, now and into the future.

Figure 5.2

Key Findings and Associated Subthemes
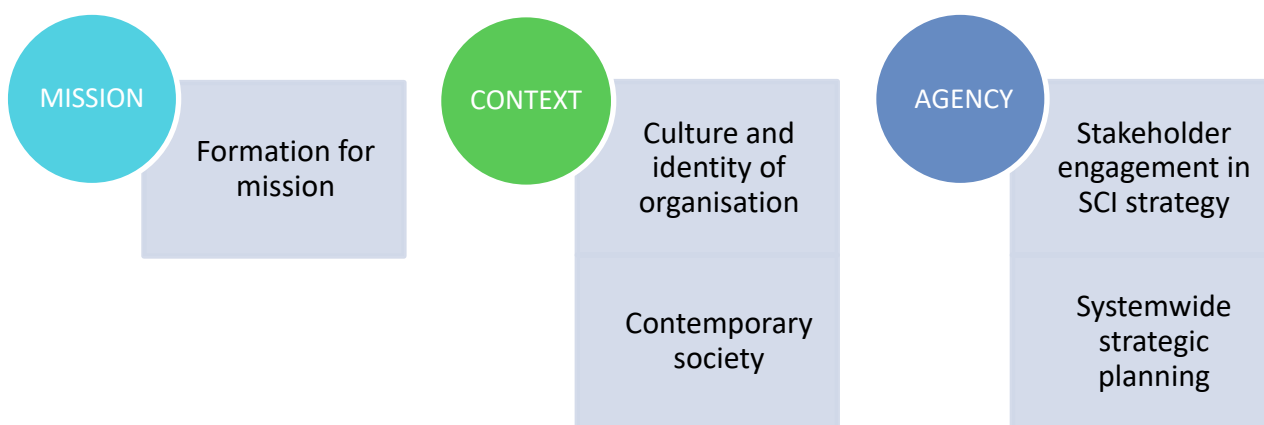
5.2 Data Discussion

The data discussion is structured according to the three key findings of mission, context, and agency as significant to the SCI strategy, viewed in relationship with relevant research literature.

5.2.1 *Mission*

Seventy percent (*n* = 21) of principals referenced "mission" when discussing the fundamental purpose of Catholic school identity, with comments such as "Catholic school identity drives the vision and mission of our schools" (PPQ17), "[Catholic school identity] is based on life values found in the Church" (PPQ21), and Catholic school identity is what establishes the "purpose of our school – it's reason for existing and its mission" (PPQ23). While there was no explicit definition or explanation provided as to what this mission entails, participants expressed a direct relationship between a sense of increased confidence to articulate Church mission, and their responsibility to embed the strengthening of Catholic school identity in pursuit of this mission.

The mission of Catholic education is comprehensively advanced in CCE documentation. The CCE publications communicate insight into the purpose and

nature of Catholic educational institutions internationally and provide core reference points for both national and more local levels of provision.

The mission of Catholic education is positioned as a theologically informed understanding by which "the Catholic school participates in the evangelising mission of the Church" (CCE, 1998, para. 11) and in so doing pursues its deepest identity. Evangelisation was earlier described by the CCE as "the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity; she exists in order to evangelise" (CCE, 1975, para. 14). As a ministry that flows from the heart of being a Church, "the Catholic school forms part of the saving mission of the Church, especially for education in faith" (CCE, 1977, para. 9). In a recent publication of the CCE, it is stated that "the very essence … of the Church's historical presence in the field of education and schooling, [is] in obedience to her mission to proclaim the Gospel" (CCE, 2022, para. 5). This understanding of mission provides a basis for the accountability of Catholic schools and systems to fulfil "the Church's vision of the Catholic school as an educational community offering a formative experience of Christian faith" (Horner et al., 2020, p. 250).

The NCEC in Australia provides a contextualised interpretation of CCE documents. It is within this integrative definition of the evangelising mission of Catholic schools that this research is situated:

> It is from its Catholic identity that the school derives its role as part of the evangelising mission of the Church. Evangelisation is proclaiming and living the Good News of Jesus Christ and is the foremost duty of the baptised and is the task of the entire Church. By word and witness it introduces (or re-introduces) to people, in a variety of contexts, the saving power of Jesus' call to ongoing conversion and relationship with God. The Catholic school is called to participate in this mission in partnership with the wider parish and the local church. (NCEC, 2022, p. 11)

Through the SCI strategy implementation process, participants reported an increased understanding of the mission of Catholic education, thereby assisting them to lead for strengthening Catholic school identity. Principals stated that engagement with the [CEO] Leuven Project run by KU, Belgium, and/or the ECSI module run by ACU had influenced their understanding of Catholic school mission. With this refined focus on the mission for Catholic schools, participants reinforced the importance of understanding mission in order to sustain a commitment to strengthening Catholic

school identity. This is consistent with Horner et al. (2020), who advance that the ECSI methodology collects evidence to generate nuanced proposals which assist in bridging the gap between Christianity and culture. Within the context of this research, participation in ECSI professional learning experiences assisted principals to understand their current context and devise strategies to purposefully target the strengthening of Catholic school identity within their immediate environment.

While principals shared a positive disposition for engaging in the ECSI module, McGregor (2022) criticises this methodology highlighting several theological and practical concerns. McGregor (2022) cautions about the diluting of Church teachings and doctrine by over emphasising recontexualisation and potentially leading to a fluid and negotiable understanding of Catholic identity, through prioritising cultural adaptation over fidelity to theology and doctrine. Notwithstanding, the benefits and limitations of the ECSI methodology is outlined by Rossiter (2020),

> Boeve's approach is continuous with the long tradition since Vatican II, trying to re-imagine how Catholicism might best respond to the modern world. His ideas on recontextualising are both important and challenging (p.48).

It is important to consider the ECSI methodology within local and international dioceses that have implemented this framework for strengthening Catholic school identity. Pollefeyt (2023), one of the key promoters of the methodology, defends its reliability as it draws from a large body of collected data Australian Catholic schools in twelve Australian Dioceses, over a fifteen-year period. Moreover, Pollefeyt (2023) highlights:

> The theologies and empirical models of ECSI have been applied in nearly one dozen countries and are freely available in the form of a 'Massive Open Online Course' (MOOC) on edX, the world's leading university level self-study platform (p.2).

The ECSI methodology has been the prominent professional engagement for principals within the diocese where this research was conducted. Therefore, they positively attribute engagement in this professional learning with their capability and capacity to lead for strong Catholic school identity.

Participants indicated that increased mission clarity provided a particular lens to promote the importance of the SCI strategy, perceiving mission as the foundation from which to build strong Catholic school identity. PPQ22 characterised this as "a stronger understanding of what has gone before us, who we are, our priorities and our future".

This conceptual understanding is displayed in Figure 5.3, which highlights mission as foundational to, and in turn informing, principal agency and awareness of context. It is mission that unfolds within context, guided by the leadership agency of the principal.

Figure 5.3

Key Findings Regarding SCI Strategy

An understanding that mission provides the essential foundation for strong Catholic school identity, influencing both agency and context, is supported by Hall, Nestor, and Sultmann (2018), who state the "vision and mission of the Catholic school remain unchanged" (p. 4). However, they also identify the need for renewed strategies (agency) to assist in responding to the changing dynamics of schools and society (context). The increased and comprehensive understanding about the mission of the Catholic school, as expressed by principals in this research, is consistent with the descriptions articulated in CCE documentation (CCE, 1977, 1997, 1998), where it is stated that the mission of Catholic schools should be in unity and communion with the evangelising mission of the Church. Supported by King (2014), Catholic traditions and truths are to be integrated by all stakeholders into all aspects of the lived expression of Catholic school identity.

Notwithstanding the imperative of mission, research as to mission being expressed in practice presents as complex and with "many faces" (Sultmann, Brown,

et al., 2024, p. 1). This is evidenced in Catholic schools possessing unique identities, differential understandings of meaning for staff and students, variations in implementation across multiple experiences, and noticeable differences in interpretation at the system and school levels. Moreover, the assumption that staff are prepared and experienced to engage with mission in meaningful terms cannot be taken for granted. However, there are elements to mission that remain generic.

Hall, Sultmann, and Townend (2018) describe the unchanged mission as comprising four continuing themes: faith, learning, community, and formation, which constitute "a small but profound group of constants … that have sustained and directed Catholic school mission in light of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church" (p. 39). In this light, the role of the Catholic school is positioned by Sultmann and Hall (2022) as "a face and place of Church within and in service of community" (p. 235), and thereby possessing an identity "that is distinctive in its vision and mission" (p. 231).

Based on an increased understanding of the mission of Catholic schools, principals felt empowered to enact appropriate responses to address an ever-changing context and to "draw from the living Spirit of the Gospel and the traditions of the Church while respecting and being responsive to the social and cultural needs and priorities of the community" (Sultmann & Hall, 2022, p. 233). Given this context, the principals highlighted a two-way relationship between "context" and "agency", displayed in Figure 5.3, reflecting the reciprocal influence of these key findings, while positioning the foundational importance of mission clarity. A reciprocal understanding was also highlighted by principals who said they felt well prepared to act in ways that support the mission of Catholic schools in dialogue with today's context. These relationships will be further discussed in Section 5.3 within the identity alignment model.

Principals shared insights regarding the need to prioritise the mission of Catholic schools, and live and lead as witnesses of Jesus. These commitments were also evident in the research of Neidhart and Lamb (2016), who found that participants were aware of "new expectations being placed on the principal to preserve the Catholic identity and culture of the school and thus ensure the success of its evangelizing mission" (p. 62). In the same light, Sultmann, Lamb, and Hall (2024) state that principals are increasingly aware of the "compelling need to continuously bridge understandings of Catholic school mission and identity with a modern culture" (p. 13).

The participants in this research have highlighted the central role of school principals in advancing the mission of the Catholic school, enhancing the spiritual atmosphere (Bauer, 2011) to authentically express the connection between faith, life, and culture (Arbuckle, 2013; CEO, 2016; Leonard, 2017). For principals to enhance mission, as an expression of faith, they are challenged to attend to their own knowledge acquisition and draw from formation experiences.

5.2.1.1 Formation for Mission

The understanding and expectations of principals as to the significance of formation was explored through the interview question:

How does the Church and system expectation for ongoing formation influence your school leadership?

Each participant understood formation as an essential component for themselves and other stakeholders within the primary school setting. However, three principals expressed deep concern regarding the widening gap in religious knowledge and openness to formation of some staff. One principal stated that families, and increasingly graduate teachers, are coming into the Catholic school context with little religious literacy, and devoid of any personal experiences of Church teachings, rituals, or traditions. The lack of religious literacy and engagement with traditions pose as a challenge for cultivating and sharing mission and identity through modelling of a lived, authentic Catholic identity. This concern is reinforced by Horner et al. (2020), who state that many teachers question their own identity regarding Catholicism, thereby reducing their capacity to engage with faith as a lived opportunity to support the evangelising mission of the Church. The concern is extended to parents who have no religious affiliation and do not see a place for the institutionalised Church (Horner et al., 2020).

Principals identified the increasing divide between stakeholders new to any experience of Church and those who are religiously literate. This reality was perceived as problematic for principals, who thus wished to ensure targeted and specific opportunities that "meet people where they are" (PPQ1) in their religious formation. The need for such diverse experiences for members of the Catholic school is apparent in Catholic school systems both within Australia and internationally. Moreover, the CCE clearly states the importance of initial and permanent formation for teachers that is "very carefully prepared so that both in secular and religious knowledge they are equipped with suitable qualifications and also with a pedagogical

skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world" (CCE, 2022, para. 14). Such a conclusion does not stand alone and is confirmed repeatedly (Arthur et al., 2018; Branson et al., 2021; Buchanan, 2013; CCE, 1982; Groome, 1996; Ozdemir, 2017; Treston, 2018).

As a response to the variability in mission awareness and the associated need to individualise formation, the La Salle Academy, ACU, has designed a Formation Readiness Survey (FRS; Sultmann, Lamb, & Hall, 2024). The purpose of the FRS is to "provide individual and group data pertaining to a range of formation fields and capabilities" (p. 14). Applicable to individuals, groups, and school communities, the tool is proposed to support personalised and targeted opportunities to deliver formation experiences that are specific and timely. The FRS is one data set contained within Wellsprings formation surveys, which endeavour "to go deeper into the nature of formation as a life-giving constant in nurturing the Catholic school" (Sultmann, Lamb, & Hall, 2024, p. 19).

Principals articulated a need for continuous and ongoing formation for mission to facilitate a practical and embedded expression of Catholic identity within the primary school context. Aligned with the research of Neidhart and Lamb (2016), this imperative shines a spotlight on principals viewing themselves as "playing a leadership role in the mission of the church by building Catholic school identity and culture" (p. 54).

The emphasis on formation by 11 principals emerged from their formal academic study, such as the Leuven Project (CEO initiative that included the ECSI module), Graduate Certificate in Religious Education, Master of Theology, Master of Religious Education, and/or Master of Educational Leadership. Eight principals stated that such academic pursuits assisted them to understand the centrality of intentional formation experiences that invite and lead all to an openness towards encounter with God. Horner et al. (2020) reinforce the need to establish an invitational focus to formation whereby stakeholders have a choice to display a disposition of intentionality regarding formation, alongside an openness to the possibility of a relational orientation to God in both a personal and public realm (CCE, 2013; Cuddihy, 2018; Martin, 2015). This ongoing need for formation, as articulated by principals, is also consistent with national formation research (Sultmann et al., 2022) that pointed to effective formation arising from the interplay of the needs of the individual and the expectations of the organisation.

Principals stated that their leadership for Catholic school identity was made stronger by intentionally sharing personal experiences of encounter. Specifically, four

principals identified their role as "vocation". Consistent with the research of Hall, Sultmann, and Townend (2018), this understanding proposes that fulfilling the mission of the Church does not impose additional responsibilities; rather, it creates an authentic environment whereby principals recognise "the gift of the Spirit already present and the subsequent identification of how this reality might be recognised, nurtured, advocated, empowered and supported within self, others, communities and creation" (p. 32). Such an approach, alongside planning for the formation for others – parents, students, and staff – was a key lesson of SCI strategy implementation.

The benefits of engaging in formal academic study, as well as having the chance to experiment with this new knowledge within a school context, facilitated deep learning for principals. Principals discussed academic pursuits, previous roles and experiences, and engaging with leadership team members, school boards, and communities as providing platforms for utilising new knowledge to enhance competency in leading for strong Catholic school identity. The research also highlighted those principals who acknowledged an increasing gap between their experiences and those of other stakeholders, positioning their leadership for formation as essential (Buchanan, 2013; Madero, 2018; Schuttloffel, 2012).

The research concluded that opportunities for leadership preparation, as outlined in the SCI strategy, were instrumental for increasing knowledge acquisition, skill development, and attitudinal change for principals. The model for leadership formation (Neidhart & Lamb, 2016), together with the perspectives of principals engaged in this research, mirror the position of the NCEC, which characterises formation as an "intentional, ongoing and reflective process that focuses on the growth of individuals and communities from their lived experiences, in spiritual awareness, theological understanding, vocational motivation and capabilities for mission and service in the Church and the world" (NCEC, 2022, p. 9). Such exposure to ongoing dialogue and professional learning assists principals to authentically strengthen Catholic school identity.

Principals in this research shared a need to enact their leadership for Catholic identity by sharing and facilitating experiences that promote an openness to encounter the mission of the Church and the person of Jesus through formation. Such knowledge highlights the understanding that Catholic schools are founded and sustained by living as witness to Gospel scripture and expressing fidelity to mission (Arbuckle, 2024; CCE, 1977; Gleeson et al., 2018; Karatepe & Aga, 2016; O'Hara, 2015). In the light of formation advancing spiritual relationships, some principals

articulated the importance of attending to their own formation. Notwithstanding, all participants acknowledged an increased capacity to plan and embed formation opportunities within their school context, including for parents, staff, and students.

Key to the practice of formation is an awareness of what it encompasses. Specifically positioned by the CCE (2017), formation is understood as a humanised approach to education that "urges everyone to live, study and act in accordance with the reasons of fraternal humanism" (para. 10). As such, principals described their learnings from strategy engagement as providing greater capacity to assert the mission of Catholic education, and relevance for ongoing formation experiences. They referred to using Catholic perspectives and Catholic social teaching to inform communication, decision-making, and planning for the religious life of the school. This is consistent with the expectations of school leaders as outlined by Miller (2015) and O'Hara (2015). Meeting protocols, induction of staff, and student enrolment interviews, as well as developing policy and procedures, were examples of administrative responsibilities that principals had refined to reflect, articulate, and connect with a contemporary Catholic worldview. For some principals, the professional learning that they engaged with when working as APRE was instrumental in viewing the world through this lens.

5.2.1.2 Summary of Mission

In summary, principals articulated that the engagement with the SCI strategy provided them with an increased understanding of the mission of Catholic schools within the overall evangelising mission of the Church. Principals stated that increased understanding of mission had resulted in greater confidence and capacity to lead for strong Catholic school identity. Greatly influenced by their knowledge and experiences within formation for mission, principals felt prepared to lead their community in this endeavour. However, principals were less confident in their provision of targeted and individualised opportunities "to meet others where they are" regarding their current religious literacy. As the SCI strategy is positioned and prioritised within the current context of an ever-changing society, it will now be examined through a detailed discussion regarding the second key finding, context.

5.2.2 Context

The SCI strategy documents (CEO, 2015b, 2016) depict Australian society as increasingly secular, pluralised, and detraditionalised. Aware of this context,

principals emphasised that the SCI strategy provided a mechanism for clarifying mission in the light of a changed and changing reality. This view is consistent with Arbuckle (2024), who states, "to know an institution's identities, therefore, and of course to be able to shape them, we must know the context in which it is operating, interacting or engaging now" (p. 87). Such an approach assists principals to understand, explain, and define the context of a Catholic school setting (A. Brown, 2006) through dialogue and seeking to achieve a unity of purpose within the prevailing culture and context (McAdams, 2011).

The Catholic school community was described by principals as being an inclusive community, with a recognisably Catholic environment (symbols and artefacts), where a sense of the sacred provides an openness for opportunities to encounter God. These defining concepts were shared in a variety of ways by all principals and were consistent with systemwide documentation and literature that identifies the Catholic school as "a place of welcome and inclusion. It is founded on shared beliefs and values which shape purpose, processes and outcomes" (Sultmann & Hall, 2022, p. 234). In this light, the CCE (2022) "considers the school not so much as an institution but as a community … a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity" (para. 16).

Principals understood their influence in strengthening Catholic identity. PPQ22 stated that Catholic identity is "sacred to our schools, based on life values found in the church", while PPQ8 articulated a belief that Catholic school culture and identity drives and supports Gospel values. Furthermore, principals spoke of the importance of promoting an environment that is recognisably Catholic where "social objects come together to project a unique identity that is socially created, socially understood, and socially exclusive" (Neidhart & Lamb, 2016, p. 59).

An opportunity that principals noted as influential for enhancing Catholic school identity was the displaying of Catholic symbols. The presence of religious symbols reinforces meaning and purpose and underpins what Arbuckle (2013) describes as social histories, stories, values, rituals, and relationships that contribute to differential circumstances within a shared understanding of mission. Moreover, the differential representations and histories provide a basis for understanding variations in the expression of mission within unique Catholic school identities (Arbuckle, 2024). This construct of multiple identities is supported by McDonough (2016), who makes the point that "the school's Catholic identity should be a meta-identity that nurtures and coordinates many particular identities" (p. 163). These multiple identities are

addressed in the following subsections on identity and culture of the organisation and how this applies to contemporary society.

5.2.2.1 Identity and Culture of the Organisation

The identity of an organisation is presented by Schein and Schein (2019) as the visible and public measures that are communicated in widely accessible documents and websites. In similar terms, identity was expressed by participants as the visible and tangible ways in which they live, with a recurrent reference to the way participants "walk the talk". These statements reinforced what principals understood about the way insiders of the organisation enact their role and have a profound impact on the expression of an organisation's identity (A. Brown, 2006; Korobov, 2015; Shein & Shein, 2019). However, Arbuckle notes that organisations also have multiple identities, which are "socially constructed … shaped in particular cultural and historical contexts" (Arbuckle, 2024, p. 87). The view of a socially constructed identity expressed by principals is consistent with the research of Hammack (2014), Lin (2004), and Meeus (2011).

Organisational culture, as a unique but interrelated construct, is understood as the deeper essence of an organisation, present at an almost unconscious level (Schein & Schein, 2019). It includes the accumulated understandings and learnings of the given group and its shared assumptions, structures, practices, and interactions, also known as an insider's perspective (Korobov, 2015; Schein & Schein, 2019). Catholic school culture was referenced by 13 principals as being a defining feature of the Catholic school setting. While literature and systemwide documentation distinguish between culture and identity (CEO, 2015b, 2016; Schein & Schein, 2019), most participants used these terms synonymously. Notwithstanding, system documentation articulated a clear distinction. Culture was identified as one key priority to scaffold, inform, and express a strong Catholic school identity.

All principals in this research understood that teaching and imparting faith traditions strengthened Catholic school identity and promoted a recognisably Catholic culture. By attending to identity and culture, principals understood the need to align Church mission with today's contemporary community by emulating and making known the story of Jesus Christ in "words and actions". Catholic identity was defined by principals as "living out" and/or "being witness" to Gospel messages and values. According to principals, this leads to the development of an authentic Catholic school identity, and ultimately is manifested in culture. Such an understanding is also

asserted in CCE (2022) *Instruction*, which states: "For the Catholic school, a great responsibility is to *bear witness*. The Christian presence must be shown and made clear, that is, it must be visible, tangible and conscious" (CCE, 2022, para. 28).

Active involvement within a parish community, specifically through family connections, inspired participants to live a life of witness to Gospel values and actively participate in faith rituals and traditions. Principals stated that their personal relationships and engagement with Catholic role models – priests, members of religious orders – and family members and friends who exhibit high religious literacy greatly informed their understanding of Catholic traditions, symbols, and rituals. These people profoundly impacted the religious literacy and experiential understanding of articulating and enacting strong Catholic school identity by principals (Arbuckle, 2013; Branson et al., 2019; Korobov, 2015; Lin, 2004; Miller, 2015; Seidl, 2005). Also, the principals' connections to saints and founders of religious congregations informed their understanding of living as a Catholic witness, highlighting the values and virtues these people modelled. These relationships were frequently highlighted in the data and directly correlated with literature, which draws attention to experiences that influence identity and their integration within the individual: "An individual's Catholic identity can be a personal identity (based on the centrality of religious belief to one's sense of self) as well as a collective identity as a member of the Catholic Church" (Lapsley & Kelley, 2022, p. 165).

Principals enunciated a priority for ensuring an authentic and lived expression of what it means to lead for strong Catholic identity. They also noted the importance of this being actioned by all stakeholders, particularly those leading the organisation. Understanding the importance of Catholic school identity and its lived expression, alongside the urgency to communicate the identity and distinctiveness of the Catholic school context, was deemed an essential and ongoing theme recorded by principals. The argument is reinforced by Neidhart and Lamb (2016, p. 50), who conclude that "the success and sustainability of Catholic schools depends on capable faith leaders in the future".

Enhancing Catholic identity is the result of the processes in which stories are told and re-created in narratives by individuals and organisations who engage within the contexts of the time (Cooren et al., 2011; Groome, 1996; McAdams, 2011). Hence, what is said about identity and how it is enacted are inextricably linked. Arbuckle (2013) affirms this integration by stressing the changing nature of identity:

> Who we are is primarily to be found in the way we live day by day within
> a particular cultural context or environment, not just in what we think or
> say about ourselves. Identity is always a process of "being" or
> "becoming," never a final and settled issue. (p. 24)

This position more recently prioritised by Arbuckle (2024) stresses that "institutions themselves must be in continuous change and reconfiguration, if they are to survive. Identities belong to the present, the future as much as to the profound influences of the past" (p. 87). Such an understanding of a responsive and evolving identity was articulated by PPI11: "The mission of Catholic education has not changed but it, along with the values and vision, how they are enacted and lived, are ever changing as our context and community change. It is not static, but responsive and engaging."

Similar insight is also shared by Sultmann and Brown (2011), who discuss the continuity and discontinuity of identity. This concept affirms that while there are some continuous and fundamental aspects to identity, a lived identity is also exposed to "some level of discontinuity as the organisation engages its context and experiences of continuous renewal" (p. 73). The concept of an identity of the Church that is ever-renewed becomes evident when "personal relationship with Christ enables the believer to look at the whole of reality in a radically new way" (CCE, 2022, para. 20).

Literature, system documentation, and principal perspectives all recognise that Catholic school identity is dynamic, living, evolving and responding to time, community, and context. The CEO within which this grounded case study was conducted promotes a Catholic identity imbued by fidelity to tradition, symbol, and ritual. The SCI strategy documents (CEO, 2015b, 2016), which preference the context in which "school and office are Christ-centred, student focused communities … animated by a culture of dialogue; … a contemporary theology of mission; … [and] a post-critical belief system" (CEO, 2016, p. 2). The preferred state for the expression of Catholic school identity is heavily invested in and informed by the ECSI module of the [CEO] Leuven Project. The CEO states that identity is actioned through the adoption of "a re-contextualised understanding of Catholic Identity … clearly visible in the contemporary context, fusing the old with the new" (CEO, 2016, p. 2). This was similarly articulated by PPQ47 when discussing a key influence of SCI strategy engagement: "This re-contextualising perspective underpins all that we do in our school community."

The identity of an organisation not only expresses past experiences but also communicates the anticipated, imagined, and preferred future (McAdams, 2011). In this research, the preferred future of the organisation includes a dialogical and "authentic experience of Catholic Christian community" (CEO, 2015b, p. 3). A similar future state was also emphasised by principals. They spoke of the importance of embedding the SCI strategy as evident, prioritised, and actioned during the 2016–2020 systemwide strategic plan delivery. An increased precision regarding goal setting and improvement measures for strengthening Catholic school identity was identified by most principals, specifically illustrated by PPQ39: "This strategy has focused our goal setting with Catholic identity seen as being one of three important pillars in strategic planning." The same principal provided further elaboration: "Focused goal setting enabled us to identify strategies, actions and activities at school level." Evident in the insights of principals was the understanding that a shared vision and systemwide goals were effective in increasing motivation for principals to achieve the goals and objectives of the organisation (Arend et al., 2015; B. Brown, 2018; George et al., 2019; Howes, 2018; Sinek, 2014; Wood et al., 2016).

What was emphasised by participants was the need for Catholic identity and culture to be modelled and actioned by all members of the organisation. This closely aligned with system documentation, which states all aspects of the organisation should express an authentic Catholic identity (CEO, 2015b, 2016). Also highlighted by CCE (2022, para. 54), the strategy is "a service that requires unity and communion with the Church in order to define the school as 'Catholic' at all levels, from the school management to the school leadership and teachers". This concept was expressed by PPQ26:

> The moment you walk into a Catholic school, open their website or speak to someone who is a part of a Catholic school community, the spirit of Jesus, supported by the charism of the founding order is evident and part of the vocabulary.

The priority and urgency placed on the SCI strategy by the CEO, principals, and school leaders communicated to stakeholders the importance of leading and resourcing in pursuit of enhancing the identity of the Catholic school. This brought a renewed life to the culture while recognising it is informed within the contemporary context of society, past and present. The ongoing need for resourcing for SCI leads

to further discussion regarding contemporary society, which informs and is informed by an awareness and expression of Catholic school mission.

5.2.2.2 Contemporary Society

Principals shared an informed account of the current context for Catholic schools and related this to their role in enhancing the profile and relevance of Catholic schools, through dialogue with all stakeholders. Participants expressed a strong understanding of the need for close alignment between what is being shared regarding Catholic perspectives and Church teachings, and the words, actions, and priorities that are highlighted, both within and beyond the school community.

Validating the need to address the widening gap between religion and society, principals consistently expressed the foundational premise that Catholic schools must preference their Catholicity while embracing a culture of dialogue and referencing the diversity of family and staff cultures present in the Catholic school community. Regarding a culture of dialogue, Arbuckle (2024) positions an interaction whereby "one aims to give themselves as they are and seeks to know the other as the other is … This relationship happens when there is mutuality, openness and directness" (p. 101).

Principals articulated that a clear and concise understanding of the importance and relevance of strengthening Catholic school identity was essential for them to undertake their leadership responsibilities. Having gained an increased understanding of the mission of Catholic education within a contemporary context, principals said they were better equipped to position Catholic schools as distinctive and relevant for the 21st century. It was significant that most principals referred to this notion as a "point of difference" from other school sectors as expressed in documentation of the Church:

> The fact that Catholic schools are part of the *Church's mission* "is a proper and specific attribute, a distinctive characteristic which penetrates and informs every moment of its educational activity, a fundamental part of its very identity and the focus of its mission". (CCE, 2022, para. 21, quoting from CCE, 1997, para. 11)

Regarding the collective responsibilities of Church, parish, and school, four principals expressed increasing concern that Catholic schools are providing the only exposure to, interaction with, or experience of "Church". They believed this to be the case for most students and families, as well as staff. Principals stated that the Catholic school is primarily the only experience of Church that most students and

families will encounter. Also highlighted in the earlier research by Neidhart and Lamb (2016), the "changing context provides a strong impulse for Catholic education authorities and principals to act to restore equilibrium with respect to the identity of the Catholic school as a faith community" (p. 59). The need to work together in service for the Church is highlighted by the CCE when discussing the concept of school outreach. The emphasis on openness "to an enriching exchange in a more extensive communion with the parish, the diocese, ecclesial movements and the universal Church" (CCE, 2007, para. 50) would assist principals in promoting the common educational mission of the Church.

The changing enrolment trends of students in Catholic schools underscores the significance of nurturing a culture of dialogue, a key driver for embracing strong Catholic school identity (CEO, 2015b). Principals in this research discussed the important influence of dialogue, which is consistent with Sultmann and Hall (2022), who argue that dialogue enables advancing mission in a way "that informs and strengthens the interests and priorities of all within the community" (p. 230). The need for authentic dialogue is advocated by principals and is a key priority discussed in literature (Arbuckle, 2013; Boeve, 2016; CCE, 1997, 2013, 2014; Hall et al., 2019; Pollefeyt & Richards, 2020). The extension of dialogue to include students is also a priority of Foley et al. (2022), who state that Catholic schools are challenged to support students "from a variety of religious/nonreligious perspectives in the learning and teaching of religion, while allowing each learner to bring their perspective to the learning" (pp. 162–163).

The intentional practice of advancing the mission of the Catholic school in a culturally safe and invitational way, specifically within the domain of RE, is an essential undertaking for all who work in Catholic schools. Actioned through a reconceptualist approach to pedagogy, all students are taught about religion, and how to be religious in a particular way. The reconceptualist approach to teaching about religion and how to be religious is also advanced by Pollefeyt and Richards (2020), who encourage the development of a religious worldview that is both contextually plausible and theologically legitimate. As Scott (2015) states, it is providing the opportunity to inform and instruct "students in an integrated manner to learn to live religiously in the modern world" (p. 59). Such a pedagogical approach ensures that "diverse religious and non-religious perspectives are brought into dialogue with a Catholic perspective" (Foley et al., 2022, p. 166), to ultimately result "in new or nuanced understandings" (Foley et al., 2022, p. 167). These

understandings communicate the centrality of what is important in ways which are durable and sustained by communities over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Arbuckle, 2013; Cooren et al., 2011; Lin, 2004).

5.2.2.3 Summary of Context

Through engaging with the SCI strategy, principals declared an informed and contextualised understanding as to its authenticity, vitality, and relevance for today's context. However, while most principals expressed being supported by the SCI strategy during the strategic planning period of 2016–2020, this was not the expressed reality for principals working to implement the current systemwide *Strategic Plan 2021–2025* (CEO, 2021b). In this latter context, principals stated that the SCI strategy should remain an ongoing and responsive strategic priority into the future. Further discussion regarding these strategic initiatives of the CEO, and how they were actioned by principals, is provided in the next section on agency.

5.2.3 *Agency*

The theme of agency has been chosen to represent the integrated perspectives and responsibilities of principals for the implementation of the SCI strategy. The concept of agency is understood as a construct whereby stakeholders take deliberate action to

> respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, [whereby] actors are capable of distancing themselves (at least in partial exploratory ways) from the schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions … [so as to] reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963)

Throughout questionnaire and interview data, principals shared their perspectives regarding SCI strategy implementation at a system, school, and personal level. They frequently made comments regarding SCI strategy engagement with varied levels of enthusiasm, reflective of the level of engagement and uptake of strategy resources. Principals expressed a perceived change in systemwide strategy and priority, as a new systemwide *Strategic Plan 2021–2025* (CEO, 2021b) had

recently been implemented. Responses from interview and questionnaire data that were thematically coded as agency are discussed in the following subsections on SCI stakeholder engagement and systemwide strategic planning.

5.2.3.1 SCI Stakeholder Engagement

Most principals attributed aspects of SCI strategy implementation as informing their understanding of the imminent need to articulate and share an informed and authentic Catholic identity. Opportunities for increased faith formation, to make explicit the mission of Catholic education and its direct connection to the wider Catholic Church, were frequently reported by participants as key learnings. Participants commented on being inspired to reflect and review current practices to identify areas for improvement for leadership teams, schools, and system.

Principals frequently discussed engagement with staff, students, parents, and community, with occasional references to parish and priests, as being prioritised during SCI strategy implementation. Deliberate planning and facilitation at a school level instilled a sense of hope and relevance for continuing the undertaking of providing quality Catholic education, advancing the mission and identity of the school and system. As stated, principals who participated in this research had expressed a passion for promoting the strengthening of Catholic school identity. They attributed their interest as being based on the goal of aligning the mission of Catholic schools with today's secular society. This disposition supports the contention by Sinek (2014), B. Brown (2018), and Hilton (2020), who underscore interest arising from a clear sense of purpose that enhances clarity and willingness to work toward a common goal. In addition, reinforcing the essential nature of having a clear purpose to promote engagement, Branson et al. (2021) provide the reminder that "people resist change when they cannot see and fully understand the purpose for the change" (p. 8). Such a position is consistent with the literature of Wood et al. (2016) and Howes (2018).

Systemwide documentation confirmed that the implementation of the SCI strategy was "applying to all" (CEO, 2016, p. 3). However, one principal stated they did not know about the SCI strategy. Although this presents in the data as an anomaly, only 25.64% of the total participant pool completed the questionnaire, thereby leaving open the possibility that other principals may also have been unaware of the SCI strategy. Notwithstanding, the majority of principal respondents stated that the systemwide SCI strategy had ensured great progress as to the identity and mission question. Aligning with the research of Askell-Williams and Koh (2020),

principals were able to articulate that the success of the strategy was heavily reliant on engagement and that "proven effective programs are unlikely to have impact if they are not sustained beyond start up" (p. 661).

Principals understood that strategic planning was overseen by them as the school leader; however, they stated that implementation of the SCI strategy was often delegated to the APRE. Where the role of the APRE became central to the implementation of the SCI strategy, principals acknowledged the importance of having a close working relationship with the APRE in their role of leading for Catholic identity. Principals also understood their influential role in implementing the SCI strategy by assisting other members of the school leadership team. In this light they reflected on the provision of professional learning opportunities and a clear direction for schoolwide educational improvement. The success of the model of strategic improvement provided a culture in which others were empowered to embed new or refined practices. Branson et al. (2021) underline the point about strategic planning and collaborative practices as integral to program success:

> [It] is about engaging people in creating, rather than simply completing, the necessary change strategies. It is about allowing the school community to be involved in designing its future rather than having it thrust upon them with little understanding of why things need to change. (p. 8)

Outcomes from the embedding of informed, sustainable changes integral to strengthening Catholic identity in practice demonstrated that principals had grown in their ability to lead for strong Catholic school identity. Their comments included reference to identifying improved strategic planning, targeted and focused goal setting, and a schoolwide implementation resulting in greater understanding of the mission of Catholic education for all members of the school community. Principals referred to the use of measurable data to inform action and noted that they had been influenced by the guidance, professional support, and direction from a system perspective, specifically articulated by PPQ22 as "greater focus and alignment across schools".

With a focus on deepening Catholic identity within and beyond school communities, principals referred to SCI strategy engagement as informing their increased ability to lead the religious life of the school, evidenced in the prominence given to religious traditions, rituals, and symbols, and their willingness to engage parents and community members in strengthening Catholic identity. PPQ4 believed it

was the role of principals to ensure "filtering out to wider community" the SCI strategy. PPQ3 stated that Catholic identity was regularly articulated via "assemblies, newsletters, open days, orientation days". Other principals stated that an increased understanding of leading for strong Catholic identity had informed relationships and interactions and been celebrated and referenced often within their school community.

Through the process of constant comparison between questionnaire and interview data, together with systemwide SCI strategy documentation, it is reasonable to conclude that the delivery and content of this strategy has been valuable, inspiring, and engaging for most principals. Only two of the principals who responded were not complimentary about the SCI strategy, describing their engagement as negligible or reduced, due to the intensification of other priorities. The notion of work intensification and diversification of responsibilities for principals is broadly represented in current literature and summarised in the phrase of leadership within an "ever-changing and pressured environment" (Hilton, 2020, p. 24). Providing clarity on this phenomenon, Branson et al. (2021) elaborate:

> Principals are expected to have the confidence and capacity to
> seamlessly blend both the secular and the ecclesial responsibilities, to
> faultlessly attend to the myriad of educational leader roles, expectations
> and accountabilities, as well as the complexities incumbent within their
> faith leadership roles. (p. 2)

The reality of multiple responsibilities mitigating structured change is noted by Neidhart and Lamb (2016), who state that "principals appear to be caught between multiple expectations as they seek to balance an educational agenda with a religious mission" (p. 49). Rossiter (2020, p. 41) proposes that "a constructive, balanced relationship between ecclesiastical and educational concerns" is needed to amend the present imbalance.

Principals who had engaged in the [CEO] Leuven Project spoke of the profound impact the formation had on their understanding of the contextual realities for Catholic schooling in Australia. The experience provided a new lens from which to view the urgency and importance of enacting the SCI strategy. Pollefeyt and Richards (2020) purport that this context provides "an opportunity to recontextualise the Catholic identity of schools in a way that is both theologically legitimate … and contextually plausible" (p. 77). Horner et al. (2020) state that one key benefit of the using the ECSI survey is that "it collects evidence about what is actually taking place

in Catholic schools, and in response, enables a more nuanced proposal for ways in which the gap between Christianity and culture can be negotiated" (p. 236). As articulated by PPI7, engagement in the ECSI surveys provided an opportunity "to see what we are doing well, and what we can do better". Specifically, PPI10 stated: "You really use the information from the Leuven study to understand what a recontextualised school is all about … that concept of evangelisation in the Catholic school, that is ever present and challenging for us." Furthermore, the ECSI surveys provide not only an analysis of individual schools but also a collective analysis of Catholic school systems. Principals understood the ECSI data were to be used by the CEO to identify common gaps in and between schools to devise and allocate resources equitably.

Principals frequently discussed the importance of a developmentally appropriate and incremental formation program that invites all stakeholders to express an openness to encountering God in the ordinary and every day. Aligning with the formation framework model (CEO, 2015a), the principals highlighted the importance of knowing, sharing, and contributing to the Catholic story: "My Story" (personal), "Our Story" (school/organisation), "The Story" (Jesus Christ). This model of formation is closely aligned with the research of Arbuckle (2017), Gleeson et al. (2018), and Hall et al. (2019), who highlight the significance of sharing story to integrate faith, life, and culture. Formation models such as this promote and advance the openness and opportunity to permeate a culture whereby "faith, culture and life are brought into harmony" (CCE, 1997, para. 11).

The commonality of concepts in the formation framework model (CEO, 2015a) and the Catholic identity system documentation (CEO, 2015b, 2016) points to the formation framework being included as an additional key document that underpins the SCI strategy of the CEO. In addition to literature validation, the interaction with leaders within the CEO "who hold significant roles in RE" was specifically stated as being instrumental and influential in the sharing of story, thereby assisting principals to lead for authentic formation experience, which ultimately aids in the development of strong Catholic school identity. However, not all respondents were enthusiastic as to the engagement of consultants. One participant expressed frustration as many of these leaders of RE, formation, and theology had recently left the organisation. PPI9 lamented that "the RE Team was full of real theologians and those with a gift for formation and that's been lost recently".

Principals described the planned and deliberate actions that were implemented through the SCI strategy as Christ-centred and commented on the increased rigour given to the RE curriculum and embedding of Catholic perspectives across subject areas, as well as the religious life of the school. Principals identified the importance of articulating Catholic perspectives and Catholic social teaching to share a recontextualised understanding of Christian traditions, rituals, symbols, beliefs, and values. Also acknowledged was the importance of dialogue with all stakeholders, including those from other faith traditions. Significantly, all principals discussed the innate need to strengthen Catholic identity through relationships with and between staff, families, school community, and parish.

The SCI strategy was prioritised and implemented concurrently with the CEO's *Strategic Plan 2016–2020* (CEO, 2017). While the focus of the research was concerned with the SCI strategy implementation, principals also articulated a change in strategic priorities at the end of this period. As such, the perspective of principals regarding systemwide strategic planning is now discussed.

5.2.3.2 Systemwide Strategic Planning

Across the period of this research, the concerns of principals differed, with the questionnaire responses focusing on the identity of this CEO, and interview data increasingly focused on organisational culture. The change in responses reflects the timing of questionnaire collection and interview participation.

At the time of questionnaire completion, principals were reflecting on the influence of the strategic plan that was nearly completed (2016–2020). At the time interviews took place, principals were beginning to implement a new systemwide strategic plan (2021–2025). In this light, systemwide strategic planning will be discussed within the two periods of implementation: the time of the questionnaire responses, and the later experience of the interviews.

At time of questionnaire distribution, the CEO was at the completion of the strategic plan for 2016–2020. Principals articulated that they had been well supported in professional learning to understand the urgency of prioritising the SCI strategy within individual schools and the organisation more broadly. The school-based goal setting included a mandatory goal for strengthening Catholic identity. This mandate was clearly articulated and well resourced for principals to embed within their individual contexts.

During interviews, new insights regarding system leadership and direction were introduced by each principal. Noteworthy was a shared perception of an abrupt and apparent change of systemwide priority and direction within this CEO. Participants stated that the more recent and current *Strategic Plan 2021–2025* (CEO, 2021b) was developed and implemented with minimal consultation with principals and therefore lacked contextual understanding of school-based needs and priorities. Principals articulated this as a point of frustration. It was perceived to be in contrast with what constitutes successful change. The following emphasis is offered by Harris, Campbell, and Jones (2022):

> School leaders are essentially system leaders, their actions, influence, and presence in the system shape it, define it and maintain it. So, while any national discussion on education might appear to be yet another thing for school leaders to do, on their endless list of things to do, in essence it is drawing upon *their* expertise to inform future improvements in the system. … The voices of school leaders must be heard if that educational future is to be more than just an extension of the present or a re-run of what already exists. School leaders are well placed to inform and shape a future educational landscape. (p. 435)

Referring to the new strategic plan (2021–2025; CEO, 2021b), principals perceived an increased focus on priorities other than SCI. It was frequently stated that there was a change in systemwide priorities, including increased focus on accountability and compliance, school improvement, and academic achievement of students. Collectively, these emphases brought a change in strategic direction and increased intensity and diversification of the work of principals. Such changes were viewed as imposed rather than collaboratively developed, thereby causing confusion, frustration, and reluctance in some school principals. It is not surprising that some principals reacted negatively to what were presented as imposed directions, specifically adding to a workload that was demanding and already focused on the SCI strategy. The phenomenon of the increasing complexity of the work of Catholic school principals is reflected in current literature (Arthur et al., 2018; Branson et al., 2021; Casson, 2018; Hilton, 2020; Neidhart & Lamb, 2016) and points to processes of policy implementation that value collaborative activity.

The culture of this bounded system was understood by participants as an important element for strengthening Catholic school identity. The current contextual

realities of the new plan, however, were thought to impact the emphasis of the principal and ultimately the enacting of strong Catholic school identity. As the strategic plan was perceived as inherited rather than co-designed, principals felt their perspective and knowledge had been disregarded. They interpreted the introduction of the new strategy as creating a culture of distrust and isolation between schools and system administration, and, in turn, influencing their sense of belonging. Branson and Marra (2020, p. 7) reinforce the impact of belonging:

> Research has shown how belonging promotes meaningfulness …
> because it creates a personal positivity through being able to help others, being appreciated and validated by others, gaining access to required resources, and having influence over one's environment. Culture as the manifestation of belonging provides critically important insight about the tenacity of a school's organisational culture and why it plays a dominant supportive or resistant role in any attempt to implement a school improvement strategy.

Mowat (2019) warns against a top-down approach to strategic planning as it tends to promote a "narrow range of outcomes [that] do not meet the needs of contemporary context and diverse needs" (p. 65). The same can be applied to the individual settings and identified needs of each primary school context. Such an understanding further highlights the essential role principals have at the planning table, as co-contributors, to all discussion regarding systemwide strategic planning. Principals believed they are the ones at the "coalface" of Catholic education, deliberately "enacting and prioritising the strategic initiatives to best meet the imminent and emerging needs of their school context" (Hilton, 2020, p. 25). The research confirms that principals who exhibit these traits and dispositions are best placed to lead, inform, and shape future strategic plans to be implemented across the organisation.

The expression of feelings of disconnection with the organisation, a lack of trust, and/or a level of cynicism regarding system direction and priority was evident at the time of the interviews. Such feelings had a negative impact on the energy, willingness, and agency of some of the principals. Hilton's (2020) research on resilient leadership highlighted the fundamental importance of leaders displaying optimism, trust, and character regarding strategic change. Each trait is necessary for developing authentic and sustainable relationships with others. Optimism is

described by Hilton as encompassing a disposition "in which the individual expects favourable outcomes, [and displays] hopefulness, cheerfulness and confidence" (p. 24). Trust is gained and shared through the modelling of "good intentions to carry out any undertakings or promises, [by those] able to inspire trust" (p. 25); and character is concerned with how you and "other people perceive you have the knowledge and skills to do the role … interpersonal skills necessary, wisdom to succeed, [and] believed to want to do what is best for staff and pupils" (p. 25). Such traits and dispositions were clearly evident in the principals who responded to the questionnaire as they felt well supported and engaged during the SCI strategy delivery (2016–2020). However, during the interview phase of the research the pressure of a new set of strategic priorities undermined their confidence. Nonetheless, principals stated that they must work collaboratively with the CEO to co-create an authentic, responsive, evolving educational system which meets the needs of their school contexts at a particular point in time.

5.2.3.3 Summary of Agency

The discussion of findings in the light of literature highlights an encouraging account of the ways principals were influenced by the SCI strategy of this CEO. It also highlights the perspective of principals regarding their willingness and desire to be heavily involved in strategy review and development to co-design an SCI strategy aligned with the preferred futures for each Catholic primary school setting within the diocese. Such conditions give rise to a context whereby the principals are viewed and valued as key influencers and change agents within their Catholic primary school setting.

5.3   Identity Alignment Model

The discussion of principal perspectives regarding the opportunities and challenges in enacting the SCI strategy of this CEO identified three key themes: mission, context, and agency. Each of these themes constitutes a key component of enacting the leadership responsibilities of principals to strengthen Catholic school identity.

The conceptual understanding of the key themes and their integration gave rise to a framework that I have developed and entitled the *identity alignment model*. The model aligns with the research of Branson et al. (2021) whereby the researchers propose that each principal undertakes the responsibility to engage with stakeholders

as a "spiritual, educational and managerial leader" (p. 2) in ways that are interrelated, organic, and ever changing. The identity alignment model acknowledges each of these undertakings and details their associated responsibilities (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1

Identity Alignment Model: Key Components, Leadership Functions, and Principal Responsibilities

Key component	Leadership function	Principal responsibility
Mission	Spiritual leader	To lead the embedding of Church mission within the Catholic school setting
Context	Educational leader	To lead the educational progress and achievement for all students and ensure academic rigour of the approved curriculum/s
Agency	Managerial leader	To actively engage in the administrative and compliance aspects of school leadership

The identity alignment model seeks to communicate the insights gleaned from the systemwide documentation and participant responses to summarise and integrate the understandings as to principal agency in strengthening Catholic school identity. While participants expressed an urgency and sense of responsibility to engage and lead in this domain, they also articulated factors of favour and friction for the embedding of a sustainable SCI strategy.

5.3.1 Identity Alignment Model for Strengthening Catholic School Identity

The identity alignment model is displayed in Figure 5.4. It identifies the interactive nature and interdependence of all three concepts: context, mission, and agency, with the central space displaying the essential focus on Catholic school identity.

Figure 5.4

Identity Alignment Model for Enhancing Catholic School Identity
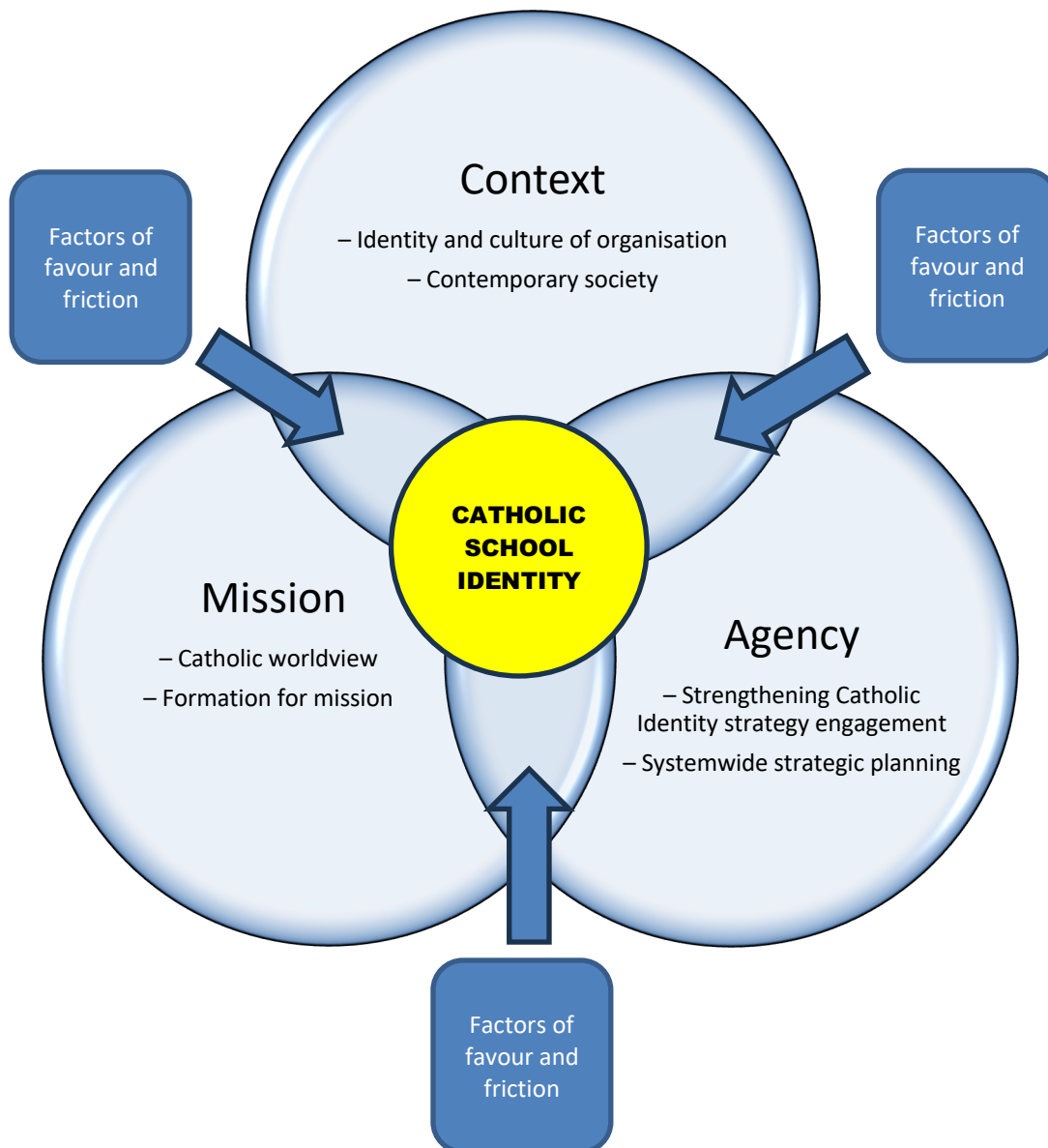
Mission establishes the purpose and function of Catholic schools; context identifies the social and cultural space in which it is nurtured; and agency highlights the significant role of the principal in engaging and facilitating the overall integration of the strategy within the life of the school. Notably, the "factors of favour and friction" are the milestone insights that add value to implementation focused on advancing the ideal while being mindful of influences that impede development. Some literature proposes other labels for such factors, including "supportive and resistant" (Branson & Marra, 2020) and "inspiration and challenge" (Goldburg, 2022), and the systemwide documentation uses "opportunities and challenges" (CEO, 2015b, 2016).

In this model, such forces are described as "factors of favour" and "factors of friction" and are identifiable in the areas of overlap or interplay between each key component.

The central position of this framework represents a point of identity alignment for enhancing and expressing Catholic school identity, understood as a position where each key component is considered in dialogue with the other.

5.3.2 Factors of Favour and Friction

The factors of favour and friction were informed by the experiences and relationships perceived and described by principal participants. Factors of favour are those elements that complement and support the enhancing of Catholic school identity. Factors of friction can be identified in the competing priorities that provoke thought and discussion, and in turn challenge the intersecting themes. These factors need to be acknowledged, discussed, and actioned though authentic dialogue with all relevant stakeholders. Facilitation of dialogue that highlights both types of factors, underpinned by reflective insights, knowledge, and experience of principals, is essential to supporting the systemwide SCI strategy.

Within the data, principals identified lived experiences that supported (factors of favour) and restricted (factors of friction) their efforts in embedding the SCI strategy within their school setting. At the intersection of context and mission, the factors of favour described by principals included increased confidence and capacity to articulate the mission of Catholic schools as informed by Church documentation, with the ability to present a Catholic worldview as being relevant and responsive to today's society. Meanwhile, the factors of friction included communicating the mission of the Catholic school within a detraditionalised society.

At the intersection of context and agency, the factors of favour articulated by principals included a clear and concise SCI strategy to embed and engage with all stakeholders. Meanwhile, the factors of friction included responding to the increasing complexity of the role of principal, which reduced their focus on SCI strategy delivery.

At the intersection of mission and agency, the factors of favour described by principals included closer connections between the work of school and parish to foster and enhance Catholic identity. However, the factors of friction included a lack of formation experiences for engaging stakeholders at a level that was commensurate for their level of religious literacy. Experiences that provided factors of favour and friction were many and varied and have been summarised in Figure 5.5, which displays the collective insights of principals extracted from this research, aligning with each theme.

Figure 5.5

Factors of Favour and Friction at the Intersection of Mission/Context, Context/Agency, and Agency/Mission

Mission/Context

Factors of favour:

Ability to articulate current context, trends and direction in Catholic education

Ability to articulate mission for Catholic schools as informed by Papal encyclicals, Congregation for Catholic Education, and Catholic Education Commission

Confidence to engage in informed dialogue regarding Catholic perspectives and worldview

Ability to view and articulate relevance and contribution of Catholic faith within and for today's society

Factors of friction:

Aligning the role of Catholic education within an increasingly secular and pluralist society

Conflict between today's society and relevance of religious beliefs and traditions

Credibility and reputation of the Church

Church teaching at odds with societal expectations

Awareness of growing numbers of people who do not have any religious affiliation

Context/Agency

Factors of favour:

Clear understanding of current societal context

Willingness to dialogue with those of other faith traditions and/or no religion

Clear direction and focus of Catholic Identity priority to guide and support principals

Resourcing of professional learning and SCI strategy review to co-create ongoing strategy

Co-creating system measures and targets to inform current reality and preferred future in regard to Catholic school identity

Factors of friction:

Accountabilities and demands on principals minimising SCI strategy emphasis

Busyness of school leadership role can mean less time available to discern specific emphasis

Budgeting constraints can limit resource allocation for ongoing formation and professional learning

Authentically planning and resourcing for the great diversity of needs and priorities within school communities

Agency/Mission

Factors of favour:

Understanding that Catholic education derives its purpose as part of the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church

Common language and shared understanding underpins mission, culture, curriculum, and formation to enhance CSI

Formation framework that supports all staff, students, and families

Greater focus on authentic expression of faith

Closer connections and partnerships with local parish and wider Catholic Church

Factors of friction:

Church mission and teaching not perceived to be modelled at all levels of the organisation

Some system priorities lack alignment with faith-inspired decision-making

Tomorrow's leaders may not have sufficient theological knowledge and understanding to lead for SCI

Lack of formation experiences that meet people where they are in faith development

Note. CSI = Catholic school identity; SCI = Strengthening Catholic Identity.

As displayed in the identity alignment model, when school principals are confident and capable to act as spiritual leader, educational leader, and managerial leader through aligning of mission, context, and agency, they consolidate and create an "organisational climate, [whereby] the school fulfills its catechetical mission" (Branson et al., 2021, p. 2), and act as agent for promoting strong Catholic school identity.

In this research, the identity alignment model assists Catholic school principals to enact their leadership responsibilities to strengthen Catholic school identity, in the light of other competing accountabilities. When principals comprehensively understand today's context, articulate and embed Church mission, and promote agency through a co-constructed systemwide SCI strategy, they are increasingly confident and capable to enact authentic leadership for strong Catholic school identity.

5.4   Conclusion

This chapter, the discussion of findings, has positioned the insights and areas of SCI strategy influence from the perspective of primary school principals, integrated with academic and system literature. Principals who were heavily engaged in multiple activities and initiatives reported that increased theoretical and theological knowledge and skills gained through participation increased their confidence and capacity to embed the SCI strategy within their school setting. This data discussion has highlighted the importance of having a co-created systemwide strategic goal for strengthening Catholic school identity that is clearly defined, articulated, embedded, and resourced. Furthermore, the identity alignment model promotes a practical appreciation of the key themes (mission, context, agency) and stimulates dialogue regarding the factors of favour and friction at the intersection of their influence on the SCI strategy of one bounded system of schools.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1   Introduction

The collective findings of this research were discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of literature on Catholic school mission, context, and leadership agency. In Chapter 6, the conclusions are stated in Section 6.2, followed by contributions to knowledge (Section 6.3) and contributions to practice (Section 6.4). Areas for further research are articulated in Section 6.5, limitations shared in Section 6.6, and transferability of findings in Section 6.7. Specific recommendations are articulated in Section 6.8, and an integrated summary of the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations is presented in Section 6.8.5. The conclusion (Section 6.9) provides a summary of the research outcomes in view of the central research question: *In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?*

6.2   Conclusions

This research was undertaken to provide an informed understanding of the impact on primary school principals of the SCI strategy implemented within one Catholic education system. The research methods comprised an analysis of systemwide documentation regarding the SCI strategy; a questionnaire for principals; and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The conclusions are discussed below.

6.2.1 Research Themes

An increased awareness and understanding of mission, context, and agency were identified as the foundations for improving principal capacity and confidence to lead in strengthening Catholic school identity.

The summative findings of mission, context, and agency were identified as providing areas of substantial influence for principals, while also remaining as a continued priority into the future. In addition, the implications of the thematic factors included:

- reimagining rigorous PD and relevant faith formation opportunities for all stakeholders to assist in fulfilling the mission of the Church in education (MISSION)

- refining of the SCI strategy to position this work within the evolving landscape of Catholic education within a detraditionalised, pluralised, and increasingly secular society (CONTEXT)
- resourcing and advancing the SCI strategy to meet the needs of those undertaking the responsibility to promote a strong Catholic identity within their school setting (AGENCY).

6.2.2 *Identity Alignment Model*

The identity alignment model proposed in this research and displayed in Chapter 5 (Figure 5.4) provides a framework to facilitate dialogue regarding the factors of favour and friction between the three key findings of mission, context, and agency.

The factors of favour are those which complement the embedding of strategies for strengthening Catholic school identity, including increased understanding for principals regarding prioritising the mission of the Catholic school within a contemporary societal context (see Figure 5.5). Factors of friction include all competing aspects between context and mission, mission and agency, and context and agency. Examples of factors of friction include points of contention such as accountabilities and demands on principals minimising the focus on SCI strategy (see Figure 5.5). Through ongoing engagement in intentional dialogue, principals may maintain a current understanding of Catholic school identity while being mindful of their context and leadership agency.

6.3   Contributions to Knowledge

The contributions to knowledge identified by this research include the significance of personal and collective identity, specifically Catholic identity, in a changing societal context, and the need to be strategic as to its prominence.

This research has explicitly spotlighted the centrality of a comprehensive strategic framework to strengthen Catholic school identity, one which prioritises knowledge acquisition regarding the mission and context of Catholic schools, alongside skill development through advancing the leadership agency for principals. This strategy would include opportunities for principals to develop a full understanding of the mission of Catholic schools, while remaining cognisant of the current societal context. With increased understanding regarding these two elements

of mission and context, principals are supported to fulfil their role in strengthening the Catholic school identity within their local context.

6.3.1 Understanding the Mission for Catholic Schools

Increased understanding of the mission of the Catholic school augmented principal capacity and confidence to lead the implementation of the SCI strategy. This confidence correlated with participation in the SCI project within their school setting, thereby increasing capacity to lead for strong Catholic school identity. Principals collectively articulated that engagement in KU Leuven surveys and the ECSI academic module were instrumental in developing a deeper knowledge regarding the mission of the Catholic school. Involvement in these programs of professional learning, alongside formation experiences, were instrumental in increasing knowledge, skills, and capacity.

This research has highlighted the need for rigorous academic content; however, the research also identified which knowledge acquisition has been most influential for principals. The new knowledge can be used to reimagine localised professional learning and formation experiences that enhance principal knowledge and skills in the areas of mission, context, and leadership agency. The implication of engaging all current and emergent principals (within this CEO) in this type of professional learning would increase principal capacity to lead for strong Catholic identity.

6.3.2 Understanding Societal and Localised Contexts

Increased knowledge regarding current societal contexts was instrumental for principals to understand the needs of stakeholders, and to intentionally position the relevance of the Catholic school within their unique setting. By considering the reality of the school's demographic characteristics as being increasingly detraditionalised, pluralised, and secular, principals were confident to express the relevance of Catholic schools by prioritising the inclusion of faith traditions, experienced through a recontextualised lens. Principals stated that by engaging in intentional dialogue with a variety of stakeholder viewpoints, they were increasingly able to position the Catholic faith tradition, specifically the example of Jesus Christ, as being counter-cultural. By living as witnesses to Jesus, in word and actions, principals were able to present Church teachings and faith traditions as relevant for those with and without a religious affiliation.

6.3.3 Principal Agency

Principals were professionally supported by engaging in the SCI strategy. They were provided with key indicators to measure, enhance, and improve Catholic school identity. When interviewed, principals identified a reduced focus on the SCI strategy within the strategic plan of 2021–2025, made apparent by competing priorities and leadership demands. Principals therefore sought a commitment from the CEO regarding resourcing and advancing the SCI strategy engagement as essential now and into the future. Principals stated it was important for them to share their nuanced understandings of the SCI strategy engagement. They stated that was essential to co-construct strategic goals for the future and, subsequently, to meet the needs of those undertaking the role of strengthening Catholic school identity within the Catholic primary school context.

6.3.4 Summary of Contributions to Knowledge

In summary, the contributions to knowledge include:

- the identity alignment model, which provides a framework for understanding factors of favour and friction between mission, context, and agency
- principals' insights regarding a comprehensive understanding of the mission of Catholic schools
- principals' perspectives regarding a comprehensive understanding of their school and system societal context
- principals' insights that learning and skill development increases their agency to influence SCI strategy engagement.

6.4 Contributions to Practice

The contributions to knowledge stated in Section 6.3 directly impact the contributions to practice, specifically influenced by leadership agency. The contributions to practice are presented below.

6.4.1 Identity Alignment Model

With increased awareness of the widening gap between Catholic school mission and the context of today's contemporary society, principals described points of opportunity and challenge that were identified during SCI strategy implementation.

To fully understand and respond to these contentions, principals were assisted by facilitated opportunities for open and honest discussion regarding mission, context, and agency. This knowledge was used to construct the identity alignment model as a framework for school leaders and systems to engage in ongoing and intentional dialogue on substantive policy initiatives in the Catholic school.

The identity alignment model (Figure 5.4) is designed to facilitate active and frequent dialogue between stakeholders to accurately identify a point-in-time understanding of the factors of favour and friction that ultimately influence the Catholic school and schooling system. Dialogue is ongoing, in the quest to gauge, plan, and reflect on the ever-evolving contextual needs and changes of society, and the implications for Catholic schools.

6.4.2 Co-creation of Strategic Responses in Advancing Catholic School Identity

The research highlighted the need to establish a framework for co-creating strategic planning for schools and system authorities. Such a framework would include the perspective of subject-matter experts, system leaders, and those at the coalface of implementation and stakeholder influence, the principals. Providing a formalised process for principals to reflect upon and share their learnings, insights, and experiences of strategy engagement was deemed important by principals. Engaging in the co-creation of future strategic planning was the preferred model to refine a targeted strategy for the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

6.4.3 Systemwide Tool to Measure Improvement

Principals emphasised that completing KU Leuven surveys was instrumental in identifying current profiles and recommendations for advancing the Catholic identity of school communities. Moreover, most principals preferred an ongoing relationship with KU Leuven as they did not feel confident to advance this strategy in the absence of other measures, targets, and recommendations for the future. Notwithstanding, three principals proposed the development of a systemwide tool for measuring, improving, and enhancing Catholic school identity that could be implemented locally. This is an area for continued focus as the CEO engages in empirical research to identify emerging tools for measuring and improving Catholic school identity.

6.4.4 Summary of Contributions to Practice

In summary, the contributions to practice include identification of the need to:

- embrace opportunities to implement the identity alignment model
- consolidate opportunities to co-create strategic planning practices
- engage in empirical research to further explore tools to measure, improve, and enhance Catholic school identity.

Each of these practices is deemed essential and urgent to assist principals in their role of strengthening Catholic school identity.

6.5 Further Research

As identified in the contributions to practice, principals were influenced by engaging with data-informed recommendations for implementation to strengthen Catholic school identity. At the time of this research, principals had only engaged with KU Leuven surveys and were unfamiliar with any other tools that could be used to measure Catholic identity. It is therefore proposed that the CEO consider an external partnership with a university to fully understand and assess the tools that are being used in other systems and dioceses. Such tools, which collate contextualised data and identify appropriate recommendations for strengthening Catholic school identity, should be researched to identify an appropriate model for piloting locally within the CEO.

6.6 Limitations

The limitations identified in this research involve the extent of participant engagement, the impact of hearsay, and the singular and prominent reference to the [CEO] Leuven Project.

6.6.1 Participant Pool and Research Engagement

The impact of the findings in this research is tempered by the size and unique demographic characteristics of the participant group.

The total number of questionnaire respondents was 30, from a participant pool of 117 (25.64%) of primary school principals. While this percentage is valid for the purpose of this research, the demographic data of the principal participants (Appendix G) illustrate questionnaire engagement from mostly early career principals (less than 5 years in the role) and long-term principals (more than 15 years in the role).

Of the eight principals who engaged in semi-structured interviews, there was no participation from a mid-career principal (more than 5 years and less than 15 years in the role). The three early career principals (1–5 years) were energised and excited by engagement in the SCI strategy and predominantly focused on opportunities for growth and celebration. These principals frequently highlighted their engagement and professional learning as APREs as strongly influencing their interest in and passion for strengthening Catholic school identity. The five highly experienced principals (more than 15 years in the role) were essentially concerned with the reputation, credibility, and relevance of the Catholic Church, now and into the future. They positioned their strong association and respect for the Church as being instrumental to their personal and collective identity; nevertheless, they questioned if this was the case for emerging teachers and school leaders. Principals also expressed concern regarding increased intensification of the role of principal, compounded by conflicting priorities that now fall within their areas of responsibility, accountability, and influence.

The principals who participated in this research expressed being influenced by the SCI strategy during the 2016–2020 strategic plan implementation period. However, what is not known is the level of SCI strategy engagement of the remaining principals. Gauging by principal responses, it is possible to hypothesise that the level of participation in the SCI strategy had a direct impact on their influence and willingness to confidently lead for strong Catholic school identity.

6.6.2 Hearsay and Insider Perspective

A second consideration with respect to the interpretation of findings is the informal and shared professional accounts of participants.

The narrative account of principals regarding the influence of the SCI strategy includes their anecdotes, experiences, and understandings. During interviews, participants shared stories regarding what they had heard from other principals, school leaders, and/or CEO staff. Some of these influential anecdotes were not from an original source and therefore could be perceived as hearsay. However, as this research aimed to share the perspectives of principals it is important to acknowledge that the implementation of the systemwide strategy was not impacted solely through documentation of expectations and processes.

6.6.3 Prominent Reference to [CEO] Leuven Project

A third limitation of the findings is the weighting accorded to concepts and strategies associated with the [CEO] Leuven Project for enhancing Catholic school identity.

One key influence identified in the findings was the impact of engaging with the [CEO] Leuven Project. It must be stated that not all academics, system leaders, clergy, or principals agree that this methodology is the most appropriate model for bridging the gap between Catholic school mission and social expectations. As such, not all schools within this bounded system have engaged in this initiative. Prioritised as one key activity within the SCI strategy, it is considered by principals as a highly effective strategy. However, it was the only SCI survey tool used by the CEO and schools during strategy implementation. In this case, principals have frequently referenced it as an influential approach, building confidence and capacity to understand the mission of the Church and Catholic schools. This methodology also provided actionable recommendations for how to respond authentically within an ever-changing societal context, and it was these recommendations that principals prioritised. Therefore, principals attributed their successful implementation of the SCI strategy to their participation in the [CEO] Leuven Project.

The refined interrogation of research data uncovered that it was a detailed understanding of the mission of Catholic schools, current societal context, and principal agency that placed them in the favourable position of being able to articulate and lead for the strengthening of Catholic school identity. Principals stated that their success in this domain was due to the implementation of recommendations from the KU Leuven survey responses. Such recommendations were consistent and generalised across schools, and thereby could become the foundation for systemwide expectations regarding the Catholic school environment and curriculum.

6.7 Transferability

The transferability of the research findings is contextualised by the limitations of the research and its overall set of conclusions.

As the Australian societal context is closely aligned with that of other developed countries, the insights provided by this participant pool of primary school principals may typically reflect the experiences of other systems and dioceses, locally and internationally. As such, embedding and implementing a highly scaffolded and

resourced framework for strengthening Catholic school identity is essential for principals and school systems to prioritise now and into the future. Doing so will ensure that Catholic school identity remains authentic, relevant, and responsive to its evangelical mission and to community needs within contemporary society.

Within this study on the impact of a systemwide strategy for enhancing Catholic school identity, the identity alignment model is identified as a conceptual framework from which wider implications can be considered.

6.7.1 Transferability of the Identity Alignment Model

The identity alignment model provides a point of reference to engage in purposeful dialogue between stakeholders. This model can be transferred to any organisation or industry seeking to align their branded mission with the needs of stakeholders within a changed and changing social context. The three key priorities of context, mission, and agency can be explored and personalised to suit any organisation.

To pursue active engagement with the identity alignment model, organisations could use the framework to do the following:

- Investigate **mission** through subthemes identified according to the identity of the organisation and concerns expressed by stakeholders. Organisations outside of Catholic Education would further interrogate notable priorities and areas for refinement and development that are explicit to their mission.
- Gather and interrogate data regarding their **context** through the subthemes of *culture of organisation* (how common beliefs are expressed and lived out); *identity of organisation* (agreed purpose and distinctiveness of organisation); and *contemporary society* (societal expectations, trends, belief, norms).
- Activate **agency** through increased stakeholder engagement and advocacy during strategic planning for organisation-specific pursuits (in this instance, SCI strategy).

6.8 Recommendations

Recommendations reflect the current perspectives of principals regarding their ongoing need to lead a community that expresses and shares an authentic and

relevant Catholic school identity. The recommendations are representative of findings and literature and presented in the context of the system of schools within which data were generated, together with the systemwide documentation that underpinned the SCI strategy.

As the work of all organisations is to identify, articulate, and investigate point-in-time priorities, the following recommendations are applied to the SCI framework and strategy for the CEO. These processes authentically investigate and collaboratively express "identity alignment". Dialogue regarding the factors of favour and friction further informs ongoing engagement and pursuit by stakeholders, seeking to actively and authentically align the identity of an organisation. Such endeavours underline the complementary and competing influences regarding organisational identity, within an ever-changing contemporary society. This process of alignment is deemed essential to re-establish, inspire, and maintain organisational relevance, reliability, and credibility.

The following recommendations arise from the alignment of research outcomes with literature as to the central research question: *In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity (SCI) strategy within one bounded system of schools?*

To ensure alignment of understanding and strategic commitments, the following recommendations are identified.

6.8.1 Recommendation One

That the CEO seek partnership with appropriate organisations to develop and implement a complete formation strategy to support deeper understanding of Catholic school mission and identity

As formation is regarded as a precursor to identity, it is essential that life experiences and formalised opportunities for formation are invitational, intentional, and ongoing. The religious literacy and identity of earlier generations were informed and enhanced by active participation within the Catholic Church and established personal relationships with others in these communities. Today, however, people's engagement with the Church is increasingly limited, creating an urgent need for all stakeholders to engage in developmentally appropriate formation opportunities to support the advancement of spiritual maturity and religious literacy. The one-size-fits-most approach to formation is failing to meet the needs of all stakeholders based on the widening gap between knowledge and experiences. It is recommended that this CEO, together with consultative partners, further explore and consider bespoke and

point-in-time formation experiences which are incremental and span employee engagement from orientation to end of career.

Partnership with an external organisation to explore a measure that identifies religious literacy and formation readiness is deemed essential to ensure stakeholders engage at their current proficiency level and participate with others with a similar religious profile. Such formation opportunities would offer incremental experiences to build upon this knowledge and their disposition towards an openness to faith. By developing a religious profile of stakeholders, those at a similar stage would be grouped together and offered targeted formation experiences according to a religious literacy profile. Thereby, formation experiences would be ongoing and incremental for maturing levels of religiosity.

6.8.1.1 Formation for Teachers

The findings identified that teachers were engaged in formation experiences at varied levels, from completing minimum hours for teacher accreditation through to highly engaged members who seek additional formation outside of school hours. Principals described engagement in additional formation as a case of "preaching to the converted". Principals stated that those perceived to have high levels of religious literacy and spirituality were the ones electing to engage in an ongoing and incremental program of formation. The implication for teacher formation is apparent as teachers have a significant influence on students and families. It is therefore recommended that teacher formation be an integral and aligned process with that provided to principals, specifically in relation to enhancing Catholic school identity.

6.8.1.2 Bespoke Formation for Leaders

Findings showed that principals had different formation experiences, depending on their previous positions. Most principals stated being greatly influenced by their lived experience and formation opportunities provided while working as an APRE. Principals who had not worked as an APRE stated they were guided by their APRE due to their increased confidence and capacity to lead for strong Catholic school identity. Two principals acknowledged that their APRE was highly specialised in their knowledge of the SCI strategy. The implication of this finding is that some current and emerging principals are coming into the role without the lived experience and formation opportunities extended to those who have held the position of APRE.

To ensure a detailed understanding of the mission of Catholic schools and the current contextual realities, it is recommended that all school and system leaders

engage in formation experiences and professional learning that prioritise ongoing dialogue which explicitly explores scripture, Catholicism, and world religions. This will assist leaders to fully understand the mission and vision of Catholic education and commit to the evangelical purpose of the organisation, as described in the publications of the CCE.

6.8.1.3 Formation for New Staff

The findings indicated that graduate teachers and other new employees are coming to the profession with limited lived experiences of the Catholic faith tradition. Principals stated that new employees were coming to the Catholic school context with lower levels of conviction, religious literacy, and/or religious maturity. The implication of this is that principals are employing people who are seemingly unaware of how their interactions and behaviours contribute to the expression of a contemporary Catholic worldview, impacting the identity and culture of the primary school context and ultimately the organisation.

Cognisant of this predicament, it is recommended that the CEO partner with external agencies to ensure all new and early career employees engage in relevant and targeted formation experiences. For this to be successfully implemented, all employees would express a disposition toward an openness to faith, which could be established at the time of onboarding new staff.

6.8.1.4 Formation for Families

The finding regarding low engagement from parents in faith formation and/or participation with the Catholic Church showed that families predominantly rely on schools to engage their children in religious traditions of the Catholic Church. The implication of this reality highlights that Catholic schools are often providing the only experience of Church for most parents and students.

Therefore, it is recommended that the CEO investigate opportunities to co-create and co-facilitate formation experiences with other Catholic organisations to strengthen family engagement and build strong Catholic identity. This partnership would seek to develop formation resources and experiences that encourage parents and families to engage or re-engage with the Catholic Church.

6.8.2 Recommendation Two

That the identity alignment model be used for ongoing commitment to professional dialogue regarding the factors of favour and friction influencing Catholic school identity

The findings indicated that principals were mostly influenced by increased knowledge acquisition regarding the mission of the Church in Catholic schools and the current societal context in which they lead. These learnings were instrumental in increasing principal readiness and willingness to act as agents for strengthening Catholic school identity. The implications of this finding include the need for an established framework that promotes ongoing dialogue for stakeholders that ensures factors of favour and friction are identified and discussed to co-create appropriate responses for schools and schooling systems.

The use of the identity alignment model for schools and system ensures an ongoing commitment to understanding and responding to the needs of stakeholders and society regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity now and into the future. When the identity and actions of the school and organisation align with mission, context, and agency, the authenticity, relevance, and position of Catholic schools becomes more apparent.

6.8.3 Recommendation Three

That a systemwide tool be developed and applied to measure, improve, and enhance Catholic school identity

The findings indicated that participants wanted continued engagement with the KU Leuven Project to ensure confidence and capacity to lead for strong Catholic school identity. However, the development of a systemwide tool to generate localised data collection and gap analysis was also proposed. Such a tool would use contextual data to identify clear goals and targets regarding the strengthening of Catholic school identity, including recommendations for implementation.

One emerging tool to further investigate, for collecting student data, is the Sense of School Catholic Identity Survey (Kowalski et al., 2023). This survey poses 20 questions for students in Year 5 to Year 8, gauging their perception of Catholic schooling according to the following criteria: personal and invitational, sacramental and unitive, and eucharistic. Over time, this data collection may lead to the development of school-based data, assisting to identify similarities and differences

across individual school contexts. This and other such surveys using a school-based measuring tool may be further explored, reviewed, and potentially refined, then piloted within this school system and beyond.

It is recommended that the CEO investigate tools being used within other dioceses and systems for the purpose of measuring, improving, and enhancing Catholic school identity. Identifying and critiquing emerging tools being used in other Catholic school systems in Australia has the potential to help identify, pilot, and review a suitable tool for use within this CEO.

6.8.4 Recommendation Four

That the CEO and principals co-create strategic directions for strengthening Catholic school identity

The findings presented a tension caused by the abrupt change in organisational priorities between the conclusion of one strategic plan and the implementation of the next. Principals were empowered by the prominence placed on SCI strategy engagement during implementation of the 2016–2020 strategic plan; however, they felt less supported in this endeavour during implementation of the 2021–2025 strategic plan. Therefore, they sought to be involved in the co-design of a renewed SCI strategy for this CEO, informed by their experiences and learnings.

Principals positioned their engagement in the SCI strategy as influencing their confidence and capacity to strengthen Catholic school identity. Engagement with the SCI strategy had enabled principals to articulate increased knowledge and capacity for actively and intentionally strengthening the Catholic identity of their school context, and ultimately the CEO. As such, principals perceived themselves as change agents and leaders in the domain of strengthening Catholic school identity.

Therefore, it is recommended that the CEO and principals work collaboratively to co-create a renewed SCI strategy. Harnessing the knowledge, skills, and experiences of principals to renew and further develop the SCI strategy will in turn increase the agency and wisdom of the Catholic school principal.

6.8.5 Summary of Recommendations

Each recommendation has evolved through data analysis to express the perceptions, influences, and needs of principals regarding the future foci for the strengthening of Catholic school identity. Through prioritising and promoting the evangelical mission of the Catholic school, principals have been influenced by the

SCI strategy to lead for strong Catholic school identity in their local context. Principals understood the urgent, timely, and empirical responsibility to align mission, context, and agency through increased knowledge and skills. This helped them to engage in dialogue and respond to factors of favour and friction. Thereby, principals have been influenced through SCI strategy engagement to articulate the relevance of Catholic school identity for their school and school system. In summary, the recommendations identified through empirical findings are as follows:

- that the CEO seek partnership with appropriate organisations to develop and implement a complete formation strategy to support deeper understanding of Catholic school mission and identity
- that the identity alignment model be used for ongoing commitment to professional dialogue regarding the factors of favour and friction influencing Catholic school identity
- that a systemwide tool be developed and applied to measure, improve, and enhance Catholic school identity
- that the CEO and principals co-create strategic directions for strengthening Catholic school identity.

Strengthening Catholic identity is a concern of Catholic schooling systems locally and globally, and therefore it is appropriate to orchestrate a united synergy with and between other organisations and agencies seeking the same goals. As such, it is feasible to suggest the establishment of authentic and sustainable partnerships to collaborate with Catholic universities and agencies within the diocese and beyond. Such partnerships could enhance opportunities to ensure clarity of mission is understood as integral for the strengthening of Catholic school identity.

6.9   Conclusion

Findings of this research highlight that the SCI strategy should remain at the forefront of strategic planning within this bounded system and be prioritised and articulated by all stakeholders. Such a strategy for strengthening Catholic school identity would remain cognisant of the current context and provide a clear and concise roadmap for enhancing Catholic school identity at localised school and systemwide levels.

The strategies underpinning strengthening Catholic school identity are supported by processes and resources. The request for a clearly defined, co-created

strategy for strengthening Catholic school identity that includes identifiable guideposts, data-informed goal setting, and measurable targets for principals and stakeholders requires further investigation. This includes a commitment to internal and external strategic partnerships, as well as prioritising an embedded and sustainable funding and resourcing model for schools to strengthen Catholic school identity.

To further support the strategic planning for the strengthening of Catholic school identity, system leaders and principals could use the identity alignment model to comprehensively understand the societal context, mission of Catholic schools, and opportunities for leadership agency, thereby prioritising the identity alignment of the organisation as true to its core purpose. A renewed SCI strategy would reflect the insight of principals to ensure authenticity, rigour, and relevance for contemporary Catholic primary school communities today and into the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A:
Qualtrics Questionnaire [(LINK)](#)

Research Title: Perspective of primary school principals regarding system-wide strategy to strengthen Catholic school identity.

Research Question: In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the Strengthening Catholic Identity strategy within one bounded system of schools?

I have read and understood the [Participation Information Letter (LINK)](#) as distributed via email and I give consent to participate in this research.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Demographic Data Collection:

Please provide information regarding your current school context. This information will be used to identify potential participants to complete follow-up semi-structured interviews representing a broad range of school contexts.

How many years have you worked as a Principal?

- 1–5 years

- 6–10 years

- 11–15 years

- 16–20 years

- > 20 years

What was your previous role?

What was your previous role?

How long did you hold this previous role?

What qualifications do you hold?

- Bachelor of Education

- Master of Educational Leadership

- Master of Religious Education

- Master of Theology

- Other

Which type of school do you lead?

- Prep – Year 6

- Prep – Year 12

What is the location of your school?

- Inner City

- Metropolitan

- Regional

- Rural

- Remote

What are your enrolment numbers?

- 1–74 students

- 75–149 students

- 150–299 students

- 300–449 students

- 450–599 students

- 600–749 students

- 750–899 students

- >900 students

Questions:

Strong Catholic Identity is one of three pillars which underpin a system-wide strategic plan for 2016–2020. Now in the final year of implementation, it is timely to investigate the perception and experiences of principals regarding this strategy. Responding to the central research question and sub-questions enables insight to be collated from those at the forefront of implementing the strategy.

- o In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the 'Strengthening Catholic Identity' strategy?

- o As a principal how do you define Catholic school identity?
- o What personal experiences, beliefs and/or relationship have influenced your actions and understanding regarding Catholic school identity?
- o As a principal how do you enact your leadership responsibility for strengthening Catholic school identity?
- o As a principal how do you describe your summative experiences of the systemwide strategy to Strengthen Catholic identity?
- o What are your future needs to enhance Catholic school identity within your school context?

Invitation to participate in semi-structured, follow-up interview:

Follow up, semi-structured interviews (approximately 45 minutes) completed at a mutually agreeable location (preferably your school setting), will be conducted in Term 1, 2021.

A purposeful sample of participants will be selected to ensure we collate rigorous perspectives of principals from a variety of school contexts. Interviews will be conducted until saturation point is reached, that being when no new information or themes are articulated by participants.

Please select from one of the statements below:

○ I am interested in participating in a semi-structured interview and agree to be contacted via [CEO] email address to arrange a mutually agreeable location, date and time. Interviews will take place in Term 1, 2021

○   I am not interested in participating in a semi-structured interview

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your responses will contribute to a de-identified data set for the stated research project, contributing valuable insight for Catholic schools and systems. Please feel free to make contact if you would like further clarity regarding the research or wish to add additional information.

Your sincerely,

Kirsten Karey
kirsten.karey@myacu.edu.au

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

PROJECT TITLE: Perspectives of primary school principals regarding system-wide strategy to Strengthen Catholic Identity

APPLICATION NUMBER: (2020- 179E)

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Professor Christopher Branson

CO-SUPERVISOR: Professor Peta Goldburg

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mrs Kirsten Karey

STUDENT'S DEGREE: Doctor of Education

Dear Primary School Principal,

As a member of the participant pool, you are invited to contribute to the research project described below.

Purpose and aims of study: As a part of [CEO] all schools are currently in the fourth year of a strategic goal to Strengthen Catholic Identity. Therefore, it is timely to explore the ways in which Catholic school identity is understood and enacted by principals. By identifying initiatives, learning opportunities, and lived experiences that assist or hinder principals to meet this explicit goal, it is possible to refine best practice within this bounded system as well as provide insight for other Catholic schools and institutes. Importantly, this research project seeks to clarify how Catholic primary school principals define and enact Catholic school identity rather than assess a level of Catholic identity within individual school contexts.

Research Question: In what ways have Catholic primary school principals been influenced by the 'Strengthening Catholic Identity' strategy within one bounded system of schools?

Sub questions:

- o In what ways have Catholic Primary school principals been influenced by the 'Strengthening Catholic Identity' strategy?
- o How do you define Catholic school identity?
- o What personal beliefs, experiences or relationships have influenced your actions and understanding in regard to Catholic school identity?
- o How do you enact your leadership responsibility for strengthening Catholic school identity?
- o How do you describe your summative experience of the five-year systemwide strategy to Strengthen Catholic Identity?
- o What are your future needs to enhance Catholic school identity within your school context?

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by Kirsten Karey (APRE with [CEO]) and will form the basis for her Doctor of Education degree at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Professor Christopher Branson. Professor Branson has a strong background in Educational Leadership, along with several years of experience in Catholic School System and Catholic University contexts.

What will I be asked to do?

- Participants agree to complete a Qualtrics questionnaire providing open-ended responses to the above listed questions (approximately 15-20 minutes). All responses will be de-identified using an individual participant number during analysis and reporting of results.
- Participants may volunteer to engage in a semi-structured, follow-up interview of approximately 45 minutes duration, at a mutually convenient location (preferably in the participant's school).
- Participants will provide honest and accurate responses to the questions posed. Questions are specified above, and follow-up interview questions will seek elaboration on common themes, events and experiences as identified in questionnaire responses.
- If selected for a follow-up interview, participants agree to being voice recorded for transcription purposes. Interviews and transcription will be completed by student researcher, Kirsten Karey. Transcripts will also be de-identified using the individual participant number and data will be stored in password protected OneDrive account.
- Participants agree to make alterations and amendments to their interview transcript as a means of member checking for accuracy of responses (within the specified time frame of two weeks).

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

The perceived risks of participation in this research are deemed to be extremely low as the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts will be de-identified using an individual participant number. The interview questions require an open-ended response and the comfort of interview participants will be enhanced by meeting in a mutually agreeable setting. Participation is voluntary and consent may be withdrawn up until the time of data de-identification, without any adverse implications.

How much time will the project take?

Responding to the Qualtrics questionnaire will take approximately 15-20 minutes. Voluntary follow-up Interviews will take place for approximately 45 minutes and then transcription will be emailed to participants for member checking. This should take approximately 1 hour to complete before returning to the researcher via email, within the specified two-week period.

What are the benefits of the research project?

The benefits of the research include an informed account of the system-wide strategy from the perspectives and experiences of principals at the forefront of strategy implementation. Such insight will enlighten recommendations and future direction to affirm and support principals in fulfilling their role as leader for Strong Catholic Identity.

Can I withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate in the questionnaire and/or interview, you can withdraw from the study up until the time that the data is de-identified, with no adverse consequences. Non-participation in or withdrawal from semi-structured interviews will have no associated costs. Withdrawing from the research will be actioned on receipt of such a request. Please send any request to withdraw from this research to kirsten.karey@myacu.edu.au

Will anyone else know the results of the project?

Results of this study will be published in the final paper submitted for examination for the qualification of Doctor of Education. Data will be used to analyse and interpret common

experiences, events and themes of system-wide strategy implementation and will be stored in a password protected OneDrive account. Questionnaire responses and interview transcripts will be de-identifiable through the use of individual participant numbers, ensuring confidentiality for participants. No participants or settings will be identified in any publications.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?
A summary of the data, analysis and interpretation will be made available to all participants, distributed via email.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?
Supervisor – Professor Christopher Branson – christopher.branson@acu.edu.au
Co-Supervisor – Professor Peta Goldburg – peta.goldburg@acu.edu.au
Researcher – Mrs. Kirsten Karey – kirsten.karey@myacu.edu.au

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?
The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (review number 2020-179E). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Manager of the Human Research Ethics and Integrity Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research). Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.
Manager, Ethics and Integrity
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University
North Sydney Campus
PO Box 968
NORTH SYDNEY, NSW 2059
Ph.: 02 9739 2519
Fax: 02 9739 2870
Email: resethics.manager@acu.edu.au

As an employee of [CEO], you are reminded that you may contact Access Employee Assist Program on 1800 818 728, if required.

I want to participate! How do I sign up?
A survey link will be emailed to all [CEO] primary school principals within 24 hours. You will be asked to acknowledge receipt of this Participant Information Letter, before giving consent to participate in the research. You will be invited to express interest in participating in the follow-up, semi-structured interview at the end of the Qualtrics Questionnaire. If required to participate in a follow-up interview, the researcher will contact you via [CEO] email to negotiate a time and venue for the interview to take place. Alternatively, you will be emailed if your interest to participate in the interview process is not required.

Yours sincerely,

Kirsten Karey

Appendix C:

Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interview Participants

Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interview Participants

(Copy for Researcher / Copy for Participant to Keep)

TITLE OF PROJECT: Perspectives of primary school principals regarding system-wide strategy to Strengthen Catholic Identity

APPLICATION NUMBER: 2020-179E

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR): Professor Christopher Branson

C0-SUPERVISOR: Professor Peta Goldburg

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mrs Kirsten Karey

I *(the participant)* have read (*or, where appropriate, have had read to me*) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes, which will be voice recorded*,* realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time (without adverse consequences). I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: ....

SIGNATURE: .... DATE: ....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR): ....

DATE: ………………………………….

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: ....

DATE: ....

Appendix D:

Semi-Structured Interview Proforma and Questions

Researcher script: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today and for welcoming me to your school. Today we will further discuss the perceptions of primary school principals regarding the systemwide strategy to strengthen Catholic school identity. Your interest in participating in this semi-structured interview is greatly appreciated as the research seeks to gain insight from those at the forefront of implementing the Strong Catholic Identity strategy within the school context.

We will quickly run through the aims of this research project and the expectations of participants. (Read through Consent Form – Appendix C).

Do you consent to participating in this interview? If so, please sign the Consent Form that we have discussed. Do you consent to the use of a voice recorder during this interview?

Thank you for agreeing to share your insight, experiences, and expertise regarding the SCI strategy in an honest and open forum.

When you completed the questionnaire you volunteered to contribute to this final stage of data collection, involving a semi-structured interview with a purposefully selected number of primary school principals. As we are seeking a diverse and dynamic representation of principals you have been chosen to represent a principal: (choose from the following)

> Who has worked in this role < 5 years
> Who has worked in this role > 5 years
> Who has worked in this role > 10 years
> Who has worked in this role > 15 years
> Who has worked in this role > 20 years
>
> From an inner-city school
> From a metropolitan school
> From a regional school
>
> From a school with enrolment number >150
> From a school with enrolment number >300
> From a school with enrolment number >450
> From a school with enrolment number >600

Today we will work through a semi-structured interview proforma consisting of questions refined from the original questionnaire completed by primary school principals within this bounded system of schools. Common themes/statements that emerged from these responses have provoked the refining of questions to prompt further discussion. My advice would be to not overthink the question or responses, rather share your initial thoughts allowing for a conversation to emerge. There are no right or wrong answers.

Questions for semi-structured interview:

- o Describe your involvement in the Strengthening Catholic Identity strategy.

- o In what ways did this strategy influence your leadership and/or your school community?

- o How did involvement in the Catholic Dialogue Schools Project affect your school leadership?

- o In what ways has your leadership been influenced by an increasingly secular society?

- o How does the Church and system expectation for ongoing formation influence your school leadership?

- o Did you identify any challenges while enacting the SCI strategy, caused by other responsibilities and accountabilities for principals? If so, how would you describe these?

- o What do you do to overcome competing priorities?

- o If you were contacted by your employing body to seek advice to improve the Strengthening Catholic Identity strategy, what would you say? And why?

- o Is there any other insight that you'd like to share regarding the SCI strategy?

Thank you for your time today. A transcript of this interview will be shared with you to ensure that what has been included is an accurate reflection of our conversation today. This process is called "member checking" and is a way to ensure that data collection is a credible reflection of this interview. The transcript will be emailed to you within two weeks. You will then have a period of two weeks to inform me of any changes that you'd like to make to the documentation. If I do not hear from you, it will be presumed that you are happy for the transcript to be included in its present state, as a de-identified data source. Once this transcript is accepted as accurate data the voice recording of the interview will be deleted. Your confidentiality and anonymity are assured by the use of an individual participant number.

Appendix E:

Australian Catholic University Ethics Approval Email

Dear Applicant,

Chief Investigator: Professor Christopher Branson
Student Researcher: Kirsten Patricia Karey
Ethics Register Number: 2020-179E
Project Title: Perspectives of primary school principals regarding systemwide strategy to Strengthen Catholic Identity
Date Approved: 10/11/2020
End Date: 30/11/2021

This is to certify that the above human ethics application has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (ACU HREC). The application has been conditionally approved for the period given above, subject to the:

- **Inclusion of information to describe how the data will be protected in the PIL and Consent Form. E.g. Pseudonyms.**

Continued approval of this research project is contingent upon the submission of an annual progress report which is due on/before each anniversary of the project approval. A final report is due upon completion of the project. A report proforma can be downloaded from the ACU Research Ethics website.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that all conditions of approval are adhered to and that any modifications to the protocol, including changes to personnel, are approved prior to implementation. In addition, the ACU HREC must be notified of any reportable matters including, but not limited to, incidents, complaints and unexpected issues.

Researchers are also responsible for ensuring that they adhere to the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and the University's Research Code of Conduct.

Any queries relating to this application should be directed to the Ethics Secretariat (res.ethics@acu.edu.au). Please quote your ethics approval number in all communications with us.

We wish you every success with your research.

Kind regards,

Evshen Okan
on behalf of ACU HREC Chair, Assoc Prof. Michael Baker
Research Ethics and Compliance Officer | Research Services | Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University
T: +61 2 9739 2646
E: res.ethics@acu.edu.au

Appendix F:

Catholic Education Office Ethics Approval Email

From: Research [CEO] <research@[CEO].edu.au>
Sent: Monday, October 19, 2020 3:21:48 PM
To: Kirsten Karey <kpkarey@bne.catholic.edu.au>
Subject: RE: Research Proposal - Perspectives of primary school principals in regard to system-wide strategy to strengthen Catholic school identity.

Dear Kirsten,

Your application to conduct the research titled *Perspectives of primary school principals in regard to system-wide strategy to strengthen Catholic school identity* has been reviewed and endorsed by [CEO].

Please note that participation in your research is at the discretion of the principal. Should they not wish to participate, please advise this office of the names of any replacement schools that you wish to approach before contacting them.

Please be advised that we no longer issue approval letters, please use this email as an approval for your research project.

It is a requirement of all researchers to provide a full final research report to [CEO] within one month of completion of the project or final report.

Reference Number **444** has been allocated to your project. Please quote this when making contact with this office.

If you have any queries, please email research@[CEO].edu.au.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research project.

Kind regards,
Bethany Fitzsimon

[CEO] logo

[CEO] Research Secretariat | Strategy and Governance Team
Office of the Executive Director
[CEO]
[Address]
Phone [redacted] | Email Research@[CEO].edu.au

Appendix G:

Demographic Data of De-identified Principal Participants

De-identified participant code	Years in principal role	Previous role held	Years in previous role	Academic preparation	School location	Enrolment (size of school)
PPQ1	>20 years	Teacher	15 years	MEd Leadership GradCert RE	Regional	450–599
PPQ2	11–15 years	APRE	9 years	MEd Leadership	Metro	600–749
PPQ3	>20 years	APRE	9 years	MA	Metro	300–449
PPQ4 & PPI4	15–20 years	APRE	2 years	MRE	Metro	600–749
PPQ5	11–15 years	APRE	8 years	MRE MEd Leadership	Metro	450–599
PPQ6	>20 years	APRE	1 year	MEd Leadership	Inner city	150–299
PPQ7	5–10 years	APRE	15 years	MRE MEd Leadership	Metro	150–299
PPQ8	5–10 years	APRE	7 years	BEd	Rural	75–145
PPQ9	1–5 years	APA	7 years	MEd Leadership	Inner city	300–449
PPQ10 & PPI10	>20 years	APRE	15 years	GradDip Leadership	Metro	600–749
PPQ11 & PPI11	1–5 years	APRE	5 years	MRE	Metro	300–449
PPQ12	15–20 years	APA	2 years	MEd Leadership GradDip RE	Regional	300–449
PPQ13	11–15 years	Curriculum leader	14 years	MEd Leadership	Regional	300–349
PPQ14	>20 years	APRE	5 years	MEd Leadership	Regional	750–899
PPQ15	1–5 years	Head of campus	6 years	MEd Leadership GradDip RE	Inner city	150–299
PPQ16	1–5 years	APA	15 years	MEd Leadership GradDip RE	Metro	300–449
PPQ17	5–10 years	APA	5 years	MRE	Inner city	75–149
PPQ18 & PPI18	1–5 years	APA	5 years	MEd Leadership GradDip RE	Inner city	150–249
PPQ19	1–5 years	APA	9 years	MEd Leadership	Regional	300–449
PPQ20	>20 years	Head of department	10 years	MEd Leadership MRE	Inner city	300–449
PPQ21	15–20 years	APRE	10 years	MEd Leadership GradDip RE	Metro	450–599
PPQ22	5–10 years	Teacher	7 years	MEd Leadership	Metro	300–449
PPQ23	15–20 years	APRE	14 years	M Theology	Metro	300–449
PPQ24 & PPI24	>20 years	Teacher	12 years	MEd Leadership GradDip RE Dip Theology	Inner city	600–749
PPQ25	1–5 years	APA	15 years	MEd Leadership	Inner city	300–449
PPQ26	15–20 years	APRE	2 years	MEd Leadership	Regional	300–449
PPQ27 & PPI27	15–20 years	DP	8 years	BEd	Regional	600–749
PPQ28	15–20 years	Head of primary	5 years	MRE	Metro	300–449
PPQ29 & PPI29	1–5 years	APRE	8 years	MEd Leadership MRE	Metro	150–299

De-identified participant code	Years in principal role	Previous role held	Years in previous role	Academic preparation	School location	Enrolment (size of school)
PPQ30 & PPI30	>20 years	APA	10 years	PhD MEd Leadership GradDip RE	Regional	450–599

Note. PPQ = primary principal questionnaire; PPI = primary principal interview; APA = assistant principal administration; APRE = assistant principal religious education; DP = deputy principal; BEd = Bachelor of Education; GradCert = Graduate Certificate; GradDip = Graduate Diploma; MA = Master of Arts; MEd = Master of Education; MRE = Master of Religious Education; PhD = Doctor of Philosophy.