

ESSAY TITLE: Faith and character formation in Catholic schools: A view from Ireland

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The involvement of the Catholic Church in schools is deeply rooted in Irish educational and political history. Even before the foundation of the national system of education in 1831, Catholic schools dominated the Irish educational landscape. Established mostly by religious orders such as the Christian Brothers and Presentation Sisters, these schools evolved into a system of education that continues to benefit generations of children. Whereas approximately 89% of primary schools are still under Catholic patronage,¹ in the case of second level schools this figure has fallen to approximately 50% and is in steady decline.²

This paper draws from both the primary- and second-level sectors to identify one intentional approach to faith formation and two more general approaches to supporting Catholic ethos (to include faith formation). The paper is in two parts. Part I outlines the background and impact of *Joining the Dots: A Programme of Spiritual Reflection and Renewal for Educators*.³ This programme is an initiative of a trust body responsible for the Catholic ethos of many second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland. Part II explores two quite different approaches to supporting and evaluating Catholic ethos more generally.

Part I: One recent development in faith formation in Ireland

The challenges for faith formation in Irish Catholic schools echo those of the U.S. context, as well as those of society at large. Bill Mattison lists these as: (1) growing secularization, (2) the decline in number of vowed religious and ordained, (3) the decline in the number of Catholic schools, and (4) a significant decline in knowledge of the content of faith. He goes on to highlight school culture as a vital vehicle of faith that has formative and transformative potential.⁴ Elsewhere in this volume, Tiernan specifies some challenges urgent for the Catholic sector in Ireland. He identifies, first, the erosion of the capacity of the Catholic school patrons to operate schools that are intentionally and expressly Catholic in character and culture, and, second, the need to find and form the next generation of Catholic school leaders, as among the most pressing. ‘Creating this pipeline of faith-filled school leaders is a matter of growing urgency in an increasingly secular society.’⁵

Under Irish law, the Board of Management (Board of Governors) of a school shall ‘uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school.’⁶ In other words, the patron has a right and responsibility, albeit delegated, to uphold the school characteristic spirit (ethos). Historically in the Catholic sector, the patron was typically either

¹ See J. TIERNAN, “Contextualizing Catholic education in Ireland,” in this volume.

² M. DARMODY, E. SMYTH, “Governance and funding of voluntary secondary schools in Ireland,” *The Economic and Social Research Institute*, Research Series Number 34 – 2013, (<https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2015-07/RS34.pdf>).

³ A. MEEHAN, *Joining the dots: A programme of spiritual reflection and renewal for educators*, Veritas, Dublin 2012.

⁴ See W.C. MATTISON III, “Faith and character formation in Catholic schools: A view from the United States,” in this volume.

⁵ See J. TIERNAN, elsewhere in this volume.

⁶ OIREACHTAS ÉIREANN, *Education Act 1998*, § 15.2.(b) (<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/section/15/enacted/en/html>).

the parish priest, bishop of the local diocese or a religious congregation. With the introduction of lay trusts, patronage of second-level Catholic education in Ireland has changed quite dramatically over the last decade. For instance, the establishment of Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST) in 2007 saw patronage responsibility passed for the first time to a lay body.⁷ Similar trusts representing other religious congregations followed.

The establishment of these trusts was intended as a significant step towards addressing some of the concerns outlined above. Intentional faith formation is a challenge that CEIST identified and took seriously from its inception. The five founding religious congregations planned for an executive with a Faith Development team at its heart. Having listened to concerns regarding staff faith formation from Headteachers, this team developed the program *Joining the Dots*.⁸

Joining the Dots emerged as a response to a specific request from teachers and school leaders themselves for something that would offer time to reflect on their own spirituality and questions of faith. It provides them with an opportunity to bring their own spiritualities into conversation with the richness and wisdom of the Christian tradition.

Between 2009 and 2012 with the cooperation of a second-level school in Co Kerry,⁹ *Joining the Dots* was designed, piloted, and eventually published. *Joining the Dots* offers time and space for reflection and renewal in the busy and challenging work of education. Through connecting how God is revealed with the deep desires of the human heart, it hopes to deepen participants' own faith, praxis, and relationships – with God, with themselves, and with others – especially in the context of the school community. The programme is an invitation to people to explore their spirituality and connect it to their lives, including their work lives, and to come to know for themselves the Christian ultimate value that is a personal, lived relationship with God through Jesus Christ.¹⁰

Regular internal evaluations of the programme produced very positive results. In a series of confidential surveys, an average of 95% of participants said that *Joining the Dots* enhanced their understanding of Christian faith and their own spirituality. For instance, one participant remarked that it gave 'an appreciation of what we have inherited here in this school and a determination to continue the ethos;' another valued 'finding the spiritual side of myself, looking at my relationship with God and relating this to students that I teach. I reflected a lot.'¹¹ However, it was not until more recently that the programme was independently

⁷ CEIST was set up in 2007 by the Presentation Sisters, the Sisters of the Christian Retreat, the Sisters of Mercy, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, and the Daughters of Charity to carry out the patronage responsibilities for the 112 schools under their remit. The founders of CEIST wished to pass the stewardship of their rich heritage in Catholic education to lay colleagues, so that Catholic education will be an option in the Irish education system of the future. See CATHOLIC EDUCATION, AN IRISH SCHOOLS TRUST (CEIST), "About us," *CEIST.ie*, (www.ceist.ie/about-us/).

⁸ It is worth noting my own involvement in the project, as I was part of the CEIST executive team for nine years from the foundation of the trust.

⁹ This school is Mercy Mounthawk Secondary School in Tralee, Co Kerry. See the website "Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk," (<http://www.mercymounthawk.ie/>).

¹⁰ MEEHAN 2012.

¹¹ CEIST, "Joining the dots: Holy Rosary College," January 2018, (https://www.ceist.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Joining_the_Dots_evaluation-HRC.pdf).

reviewed and analysed and the internal evaluations verified.¹² In 2018, Emer Maguire set out to examine the value of *Joining the Dots*. Her results echoed those of the internal evaluations regarding the appeal and effectiveness of the programme: Maguire too found that participants' experiences of the programme were overwhelmingly positive.

Participants reported both personal and professional impacts of the programme. At both levels, impacts were quite diverse:

For some it was gaining a different perspective on their lives, a change in priorities. For others it was related to their connection to God and 'Joining the Dots' between the faith passed on to them by their parents and the person they are now. Professional impacts included acknowledging inclusion and equality as 'Every Child is made in God's Image', the importance of 'The Word' and words in our professional lives, carrying God's message as role models, realising that 'We Teach who we Are' and 'Joining the Dots' between our faith and our teaching. Through their participation, some teachers also reported that their self-esteem and confidence in their teaching had been enhanced and replenished.¹³

Maguire's analysis concluded with a set of recommendations to Catholic schools to foster wider access for both incoming and in-service teachers to such programme, including:¹⁴

- Part or all of the programme could be incorporated by Initial Teacher Training colleges under a module of personal growth and self-care.
- One or more modules of the programme could become part of the Droichead¹⁵ programme for Newly Qualified Teachers.
- Part or all of the programme could be incorporated into Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training for new curricula such as the new Primary School Religion Curriculum, Wellbeing for Junior Cycle or Junior Cycle Religion.

Part II: Two approaches to supporting Catholic School Ethos in Ireland

This second part of the paper highlights two quite different approaches to supporting/evaluating Catholic school ethos in the Irish context. The first emanates from the primary sector; the second was developed initially for post-primary schools. The scope of the paper does not allow for an analysis of these approaches or a debate of the pros and cons of each one. Rather, the aim is to lift up these recently developed practices as illustrations of approaches to foster Catholic school culture and thus the faith formation of students and staff. Readers may see advantages and disadvantages to each as they pertain to their own educational settings. The approaches include:

¹² E. MAGUIRE, *Teachers and their spiritual well-being: Investigating the contribution of the CEIST 'Joining the Dots' programme of Spiritual Reflection and Renewal for Educators*, MA Christian Leadership in Education (MACLE) dissertation, Mary Immaculate College, University Of Limerick, Limerick 2018.

¹³ MAGUIRE 2018, p. 46.

¹⁴ For what follows, see MAGUIRE 2018, p. 52.

¹⁵ Droichead is an integrated school-based professional induction framework for newly qualified teachers. It is grounded in the belief that those best placed to conduct the formal welcome and induction of new teachers are experienced colleagues who have relevant and in-depth knowledge of teaching and learning in their respective schools: see the webpage "Droichead: The Integrated Professional Induction Framework," The Teaching Council, (<https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Teacher-Education/Droichead/>).

- A. The School Ethos Annual Review and Development Plan, developed by St. Senan's Education Office, Limerick,
- B. Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Voluntary Secondary School, developed by the Catholic Schools Partnership, Maynooth.

A. School Ethos Annual Review and Development Plan

St. Senan's Education Office is a joint initiative of the education offices of the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly and the Dioceses of Kerry, Killaloe and Limerick in the Midwest region of Ireland.¹⁶ It helps with providing resources to support Boards of Management¹⁷ of primary schools in the discharge of their responsibilities. Some years ago it developed the 'School Ethos Annual Review and Development Plan (henceforth, Ethos Review). The purpose of this instrument is to help Board members fulfill the responsibility delegated to them by the school patron to uphold the school ethos. It is not intended as a test or inspection, but rather as an aid to the Board to assess and support the Catholic life of the school. Another intention is to highlight that ethos, similar to any other area of school life, for instance finance or staff recruitment, requires ongoing attention. In order to have real meaning, ethos cannot languish at the bottom of the agenda, or worse, slip off the agenda altogether!

The Board of Management is required to complete the review annually, fill in the review form and hand back the hard-copy to the St. Senan's Education Office after it has completed the process.¹⁸ The review identifies five areas of ethos as follows:

- a) Celebration/Living Ethos
- b) Ethos Maintenance and Development
- c) Religious Education
- d) Relationships
- e) Community

Each area details a number of indicators. On a simple scale of one to five, the Board rates the veracity of these indicators as they pertain to that particular school.

Rating Key

- 1. This is true
- 2. This is true but could be better
- 3. We need to do better
- 4. This is untrue of our school
- 5. We would like help with this

¹⁶ See the webpage "St Senan's Education Office," (<http://www.stsenansed.ie/>).

¹⁷ Members of Boards of Management of Catholic schools at both primary and post-primary levels are drawn from the stakeholder spectrum and are appointed by the patron. They serve on a voluntary basis.

¹⁸ See Appendix A.

For instance, the opening section, ‘celebration and living the ethos’ includes twelve indicators such as ‘the school has a sacred space.’ If the Board believes that the statement is true, it gives itself a rating of 1. If the school realizes it could do better, the rating is 3. If the Board decides ‘we will need help with this’ it awards itself a rating of 5.

Other examples of indicators in this area include ‘the board of management meetings commence with an opening prayer,’ and ‘Christian symbols are displayed.’

The second area, ethos maintenance and development, lists six indicators. These include ‘ethos is a criterion for all job interviews;’ ‘members and staff are encouraged and facilitated in participating in ethos-related continuing professional development (CPD);’ and ‘members of staff are provided with opportunities for their personal spiritual growth and faith development.’ Again, the task of the Board is to rate themselves honestly in each regard.

Religious education is the third area. Indicators here include ‘the school has a written policy on religious education that is incorporated in the School Plan’ and ‘a child-friendly Bible is available to every class, and there is a copy or copies available in the school library.’

Relationships is the focus of the fourth area, for instance ‘the contribution of parents and guardians and the wider community to the life of the school is encouraged and welcomed.’

The final area, community, details four indicators such as ‘the school identifies strongly with its parish and engages in parish and community activities on an on-going basis’ and ‘the school participates in and supports social justice initiatives.’

Having completed the review, the Board of Management undertakes to prioritise and plan for a number of ethos initiatives in the following school year (to a maximum of 5 objectives). Undertaking an annual review helps Board members to understand the myriad ways of expressing ethos and to manage the school in a way that allows ethos to flourish.

B. Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Voluntary Secondary School

The second approach ‘Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Voluntary Secondary School: A Process Centered on Conversations’ (henceforth, *Living the Ethos*), is quite different.¹⁹ While the previous instrument is aimed at the primary sector, *Living the Ethos* targets the second-level sector.²⁰ It was developed not by a group of dioceses, but by the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP). The CSP is an association established in 2010 by the Irish Bishops’ Conference and the Conference of Religious of Ireland. Its aims are to:

1. foster coherence in Catholic Education at a national level;

¹⁹ CATHOLIC SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP, *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: A process centred on conversations – School manual*, Catholic School Partnership Columba Centre, Maynooth 2016 (<https://www.catholicschools.ie/useful-publications/useful-publications-for-catholic-post-primary-schools/secondlevelprocess/>).

²⁰ CSP is currently adapting this process for use in the primary sector.

2. provide a unified voice for Catholic education in the public forum and with educational bodies and the Government;
3. support Catholic educators in the core activities of learning and teaching in order to foster high quality lifelong learning and faith development for all learners;
4. support the roles of governance, trusteeship and management.²¹

Taking the view that ethos is a whole-school concern, the CSP devised Living the Ethos as a whole-school process. Whereas the Board of Management takes a leading role, as a process ‘centred on conversations’ it goes beyond the Board to involve all stakeholders. Parents, staff, and students, in addition to Board members, are invited to take part in a series of conversations over a three-year period. It involves a 5-step process over three years as follows:

- 1) the patron/trustees invite the school to undertake this process;
- 2) the Board of Management (BoM) begins the process using the manual and resources;
- 3) the BoM decides on how to continue the process so that conversations extend across the school community;
- 4) the school publishes a pamphlet giving expression to its reimagined founding story;
- 5) the school chooses three targets from the manual regarding developing and supporting the Catholic ethos of the school.

The Catholic Schools Partnership recognizes the right and responsibility of the Board of Management, on behalf of the patron, to assess and support how the Catholic ethos is being lived in the school. Thus, the first step occurs when the patron invites the school via the Board to undertake the process. The first conversation begins at Board level, and then the Board decides on how to continue the process so that conversations can spread across the school community. However the Board rolls it out, it must involve all partners, including students, staff, and parents.

The Board receives a resource pack to include a step-by-step manual guide. This manual offers very practical advice, for instance, how to get the conversations off the ground, who to involve and when, what kind of questions to ask, and what prompts/additional resources to use. As a result of this conversation-centred process, the school produces a pamphlet giving expression to its reimagined founding story. Rather than simply reiterating the historic foundation, the story of the school is reimagined in a way that is relevant to that particular school in its contemporary context. Finally, the Board chooses three targets from the manual to support the school in understanding and living its ethos. In succeeding years, three other targets are selected

²¹ CATHOLIC SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP, “Catholic Schools Partnership: About us,” CatholicSchools.ie, (<https://www.catholicschools.ie/csp/>).

as the basis for conversations. Thus, the school has an ongoing process for understanding and living its ethos. Targets fall under three headings as follows:

1. Our school's identity and distinctiveness are rooted in its founding story, and the life of the school reflects the inspiration and values of that story, for instance:

- a) the school's identity and distinctive founding are clearly articulated on its website, in the mission statement and in all school policies and publications. The founding intention and ethos of the school is integrated into relevant self-evaluation and policy documents.
- b) opportunities are provided through continuous professional development for all staff to deepen their understanding of the school's ethos.
- c) new students are introduced to the school's identity and founding vision by senior students.²²

2. Our school continues the ministry of Christ.

- a) The school provides opportunities outside the classroom for student faith formation, participation in liturgical and communal prayer, and action in service of social justice.
- b) At school assemblies there is ongoing reflection on the Christian way of life. Opportunities are provided for students to learn about being a Christian in action today.
- c) Members of staff are provided with opportunities to develop their understanding of Jesus Christ.

3. Our school is in dialogue with the Church and the world around us.

- a) Catholic social teaching informs all aspects of the curriculum, with its emphases on the dignity of the human person, the importance of family life, solidarity with those in need, promotion of peace and justice, and the stewardship of creation.
- b) The school invites all its members to draw from the vast Christian spiritual tradition of twenty centuries with its vision of authentic freedom, not based on satisfying immediate desires, but on developing responsible relationships and an openness to God.
- c) Dialogue with students of other faiths and more humanist and secularist beliefs is supported. We seek common ethical values as the foundation of justice and peace between peoples of various faiths and cultures. We celebrate our diversity and nurture a sense of mutual respect at our school assemblies.²³

The manual suggests that schools compose a short, annual report on targets to the Board of Management and acknowledge these in various conversations. Schools are also free to compose their own targets based on the conversations that form part of this process. Trustees might also recommend targets to schools.

²² CATHOLIC SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP 2016, p.31.

²³ Ibid, p.31-33.

Conclusion

As the energy behind *Joining the Dots*, 'Ethos Review,' and 'Living our Ethos' demonstrate, Catholic ethos with its emphasis on faith formation is currently the subject of some attention in Ireland. Echoing the insight of Mattison, all three approaches seek to address the issue of faith formation through school culture and relationships.²⁴ Together they suggest that in Catholic schools it is through community and culture that faith formation occurs.

²⁴ See Mattison, in this volume.