

## **Principal Issues: Supporting Ethos in Voluntary Secondary Schools**

In the summer of 2014, a number of principals of voluntary secondary schools applied to the Department of Education and Skills to be relieved of their positions and re-integrated as teachers into the staff of the school. Indeed the sharp increase in the rate of attrition among such principals is becoming a matter of concern for trustee and managerial bodies charged with their appointments. And it raises the question of what can be done to support them as persons and professionals. The need for support applies in a particular way to principals – the leaders of teaching and learning. So much depends on the person of the principal and how they understand the role.

The ability of the principal to provide a contemporary expression for the theological tradition and to empower others to do likewise can distinctly influence the characteristic spirit of a school. This is a theme I will explore later. For the moment, it is necessary to say that when external pressures and bureaucratic demands infringe consistently on the time and energy of the principal, this type of leadership is surely compromised. For instance, in a school where the principal's time is disproportionately engaged in fundraising to make ends meet, the ability to foster a culture of engagement with students in a way that 'draws them out' (*educare*) cannot but be put at risk. This threat is echoed in a key concern which emerged from recent research on voluntary secondary schools conducted by the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP): 'The originality of the initial founding vision may become diluted as a result of the school's administrative tasks.'<sup>1</sup>

In this article I outline what is meant by the term 'voluntary secondary school' and describe the context in which such schools operate in Ireland. I then focus on the importance of upholding the characteristic spirit of such schools, and in particular, the Catholic school. The person of the principal and how rooted s/he is in the theological tradition pertaining to the school is crucial in this regard. There is a significant threat to the characteristic spirit of a school when it is taken for granted or watered down to a bland frosting. Finally I lift up some understandings and practices of how this spirit is upheld, of opportunities grasped and challenges faced. To do this I draw from Catholic Christian theology, recent research and from my own experience working with voluntary second level schools.

### **The Voluntary Sector in Context**

The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) has recently done a lot of work on articulating the nature of the voluntary sector. It outlines how social structure in western democracies can usually be categorised as public sector, private sector, and voluntary sector.

The public sector is run by the state or an agent of the state. It usually covers areas of social action of little or no interest to profit-making groups, not least because there is little or no

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Schools Partnership, *Catholic Education as Second Level in the Republic of Ireland: Looking to the Future*. Dublin: Veritas, 2014, p.30.

hope of generating a profit. Financed by the public finances of the state, public libraries, public parks, welfare provision as well as large scale funding of education and health systems are all examples.

The private sector is driven primarily by the need to make a profit. It is private in the sense that it is not established or run by the state, although western democracies have a history of state intervention to regulate the worst excesses of this sector, ie market driven capitalism.

The voluntary sector is private in the sense that it is not established or run by the state but it is quasi-public in that it is not for profit. Here, citizens with a mission and vision intent on addressing a particular need come together to provide some public benefit. Funding is sought from both the public and private sectors and individual donations. If the link between a voluntary body and its founding vision is severed, that body is likely to evolve into a public or private entity.

CSP advises that 'you should never sever the link between a voluntary body and its founding vision as this is what distinguishes the voluntary body from the public and private sectors. The voluntary sector is, then, a tense space to occupy.'<sup>2</sup> This tension is very clear in the endless efforts to secure adequate funding, from both the public and private sectors.

Of the 723 second level schools in the Republic of Ireland at present, 374 are voluntary - about 52%. The other two main providers of second level education are the Education Training Board (ETB)<sup>3</sup> schools and the community/comprehensive schools.

### **The Funding Gap**

A recent report by the ESRI, *Governance and Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland*, report of 2013 shows that the funding provided by the state for voluntary schools falls significantly short of that given state schools.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the study asserts that 'there is no equity in the way in which secondary schools in Ireland are funded.'<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the capitation grant is the same across the board, this can be misleading as a budgetary measure. Voluntary secondary schools have to pay significant costs from this capitation budget - costs which do not apply to schools in other sectors. For instance, recruitment and plant maintenance for ETB schools is managed and funded by the local ETB. There is no such funding body for voluntary secondary schools. Another major concern for these schools is the spiraling cost of information technology maintenance - costs which unlike other sectors have to be met from capitation funds.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.14-15.

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, the Government agreed a restructuring of the Vocational Education Committee system, involving a reduction in the numbers of VEC's from 33 to 16 through the merger of existing VEC's. Educational and Training Boards (ETBs) have taken over the work of the VEC's and have an expanded role, underpinned by the Education and Training Boards Bill (2012), in delivery of education and training across the country.

<sup>4</sup> ESRI, *Governance and Funding of Second-level Schools in Ireland* (Dublin, 2013), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Summary, p.16.

In other words, schools in the voluntary secondary sector are severely disadvantaged in terms of annual grants from the government compared with the other two post primary sectors. Let's take a practical example: A voluntary school of 400 pupils receives 90 euro per pupil less per annum than a similarly sized community school, and 212 per pupil less than a 400 pupil ETB school.<sup>6</sup> This shortfall, on average over 30% of annual expenditure, must be raised by the school itself through collection of voluntary contributions and fund raising in the local community. Ferdia Kelly, General Secretary of the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS), contends that such fundraising pressure

place a huge burden on school management, made up mainly of volunteers who give willingly of their time and expertise, and in turn reduces the time available for all of the other responsibilities that boards of management must undertake. In particular, there are serious concerns about the workload carried out by principals in Catholic secondary schools as a result of the absence of management and administrative supports exacerbated by recent cuts in funding.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the current climate suggests that such pressure on the principal and de facto on the school and local community are not sustainable.

In addition, severe cuts in finance and personnel in successive national budgets from 2009-2013 and loss of staff through redeployment means that many schools have been forced to reduce their curriculum. When the broadest choice of both subjects and programmes is no longer available in a school, parents and pupils have little choice but to look elsewhere.

### **Financing trusteeship**

The duties of trustees are legislated for in the Education Act 1998, which provides a statutory basis for the whole education system. The Department of Education and Skills has the statutory responsibility to implement the Education Act, including the funding of recognised schools and accountability for such funding.

However, the funding of trusteeship operates differently across the sectors. ETBs, for instance, are in receipt of full state funding. Voluntary secondary schools, on the other hand, receive no funding for this function. The ESRI reports that 'a lack of funding will pose serious problems for the Trust Companies [of voluntary secondary schools] in the future, threatening the sustainability of 52% of all second-level schools in Ireland.'<sup>8</sup> Already the rate of voluntary school closures is disturbing: 48 voluntary secondary schools have closed since the year 2000. The same period saw the number of ETB and community schools up by

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<sup>6</sup> Ferdia Kelly, 'Catholic Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland – The Challenges for the Future', in *Catholic Schools – Faith in Our Future*, ed Maedhbh Uí Chiagáin (Dublin: AMCSS, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>8</sup> ESRI, Summary, 2013, p.8.

21. While many of these closures have resulted in community schools as a result of amalgamation, the impact of this decline means that there are now areas of the country where there is no Catholic voluntary school available to parents.

### **The question of ethos**

The link between a voluntary body and its founding vision, and how that connection is understood and expressed in a contemporary context, is often referred to as ethos. The Education Act 1998 uses the term 'characteristic spirit'.

Although every school has a unique characteristic spirit depending on its own history and context, there are many aspects of ethos that Catholic schools should hold in common. The most central of these is belief in a loving God, whom we best come to know through relationship with Jesus Christ.

The cornerstone of Catholic schools then – the primary reason they even exist - is to bring people onto contact with the God that is self-giving love. This becomes increasingly important as education is more and more commodified. Authentic Catholic education is an antidote to instrumentalisation because at its heart is the person, in and of themselves. An education that humanizes rather than instrumentalises puts things in right order. When we are really loved in and of ourselves, it frees us to genuinely love in return.

With their deep theological roots feeding a positive view of the world and of human persons, Catholic schools are well poised to uncover the potential in every person. Of course, the leader of the school – the principal – plays a pivotal role in this regard. The ability of the principal to provide a contemporary expression for the theological tradition, and to empower others to do likewise, can distinctly influence the characteristic spirit of a school and resist the forces of instrumentalisation. In what follows I explore how this vision of God, of ourselves and of neighbour is expressed in our schools

### **Inclusive attitudes, practices and policies**

Catholic schools have a long history of reaching out to those on the margins. In a 2012 ESRI survey, Catholic schools were deemed the most inclusive school type at primary level and more likely to enrol children from non-Irish backgrounds, from the Traveller community and with special needs.<sup>9</sup> The inclusivity of the Catholic school as it continues to meet the needs of the local community, in particular, the needs of the marginalised in our society, also emerged from research conducted by the Catholic Schools Partnership. At second level this occurs not just through social outreach programmes in Transition Year or the shoe box appeal at Christmas, although these are important. Real inclusion occurs through open, inclusive admission policies and real and sustained care for those at the margins of our communities. Take for example School A.

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<sup>9</sup> Marike Darmody, Emer Smyth, & Selina McCoy. *School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland* (2012). <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/BKMNEXT221/BKMNEXT221.pdf> [accessed 16 Jan 2015].

## **School A**

School A is located in a small, poor, very deprived parish which is host to feuding drug families in a socially divided city. About 20% of the students in School A come from this socio-economic background.

Many expressions of this school's Christian ethos are inspirational. For example, liturgy is understood and celebrated as an important unifying symbolic activity. The idea of a Christian community as a prayerful community is very significant in the school. To my mind, however, the annual trip to Lourdes is particularly striking. An annual highlight in the school calendar, this trip is open to *every* senior student, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. As well as a pilgrimage, it is a wonderful opportunity for the girls to bond, cement friendships and broaden their horizons. Some years ago the chaplain – a Mercy Sister who gives her time and commitment on a voluntary basis - managed to secure a major sponsor who makes an annual donation. The local congregation of the Sisters of Mercy also makes a contribution. The chaplain and staff organise fundraising activities such as bag packing so that every student who wants to go can travel and everyone who travels can contribute towards the cost.

## **Pastoral Care**

If most of the voluntary secondary schools I work with are intentionally inclusive, all are deeply committed to the pastoral care of the students. This is much more complex and resource consuming than it may at first appear. Students sometimes present with complex physical, mental, emotional issues, often emanating from very distressing backgrounds. The issues schools are dealing with are of the most serious kind – child protection, truancy, foster care and social services. There is also the fall-out for those students who now find themselves outside of special education needs (SEN) support. Increasingly, some schools are trying to address the temporal needs of students in terms of food and clothes. In some instances, parents themselves are coming to speak to the guidance counsellors for their own needs.

## **School B**

School B, a city centre school serving a very disadvantaged population, provides quality care through initiatives such as Class Tutors, Big Sister Mentors for first year students, a positive behaviour programme called Thoughtful Together, and staff mentors for Leaving Cert students. All of this is done voluntarily, with staff and some senior students giving very generously of their time and expertise.

Some years ago School B introduced a House System, based on that of the fictitious Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry attended by Harry Potter. Every student and staff member belongs to one of four Houses. Students can earn points for their House through attendance, taking part in competitions and events, winning these competitions,

and by displaying target behaviours identified in Thoughtful Together. The House System has also given rise to a programme of student leadership whereby students apply and are interviewed for the positions of House Captain and Vice-Captain. As a result, student attendance has improved, and their sense of community and belonging has contributed greatly to their enjoyment of learning and engagement with school.

From very limited resources, pastoral care in voluntary secondary schools is done quietly, considerately and frequently relies on the goodwill of the staff and wider school community. It is often most successful where there is active support from a sister in the local convent, for instance a retired sister acting as Home School Community Liaison, available for guidance and counselling, or simply a caring presence among the students. As wonderful as this is, it is also a major concern. With the declining demographics in religious congregations, what does the future hold for pastoral care teams who rely on them, and the children they serve?

### **Quality learning and teaching**

Faith and reason are the two wings of Catholic education. Quality learning and teaching with the aim of helping every child reach their academic potential has always been a key expression of Catholic educational ethos. This expression of ethos is well illustrated in the following report from the Principal of School C which serves a town and its rural hinterland in the West of Ireland:

Over the last few years we have worked to improve the academic success of our students and reputation of our school. This has been very successful, mostly because we had a solid foundation to work on. We have seen a significant increase in our student intake and our state examination results have improved in comparison to national averages. Although we do not rely on school league tables, it is encouraging to see significant improvements of our school in these tables year by year. Most encouraging however is to see each child reach their own potential, whatever that potential may be. These improvements are perfectly consistent with our . . . Christian goal of helping each student to reach his/her potential in all aspects of school life.

### **Mixed success**

Whereas it is very encouraging to see Catholic schools expressing their ethos through inclusion, pastoral care and excellence in teaching and learning, the fostering of habits and practices that help us to build a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and shape our behavior in the world can sometimes prove more challenging. There seems to be quite a spectrum in this regard, for instance around celebrating the liturgical year, and the traditional practices of fasting, praying, and giving alms. Let me give a recent example from a large school in the South West. As an age old practice to mark the beginning of the season of Lent, the school does not serve meat in the canteen on Ash Wednesday. The decision was

made in order to mark the significance of Ash Wednesday in the liturgical calendar and in the life of a Catholic school, just as ashes are given out in the oratory to those who wish to receive them. However, the Principal recently received a complaint about this policy. The Board of Management discussed the issue and agreed that a reminder would be given to students the day before Ash Wednesday, and inviting those who wished to bring a packed meat-containing lunch if they so wished.

In this instance the school could and did stand its ground because the principal is not only experienced in governance but he is also theologically literate. He understands and can explain the value of these habits and practices in and for themselves and as a means of linking us with a tradition, of connecting with others and our deeper selves. The tradition of fasting periodically allows us to stand back from our habitual ways of living and behaving, and identify those which are life giving as well as those which are less so. It provides space and place for reflection – which of course is what Lent is about.

Like the Principals of Schools A, B, and C, this principal is clear and confident that the inspiration behind the attitudes, policies and practices of the school is the person of Jesus Christ – the face of God. What they are doing and why they are doing it is directly linked to the founding vision. These Principals are surefooted theologically and have a deep understanding of the characteristic spirit of their schools. Others need a lot more support in this regard.

Trustees and managerial bodies are attempting to address this reality through various means. Recent changes to the recruitment of senior management personnel include the necessity for candidates to show a faith competency. The ‘Competency Approach’ as it is known, expects candidates to display, among other competencies, the ability to lead the school as a community of faith. Efforts to prepare candidates in this regard range from the very modest such as the Middle Leaders Programme offered by CEIST to teachers who might be considering formal leadership positions in the future. At the other end of the spectrum is the MA in Christian Leadership in Education provided by Mary Immaculate College and Marino Institute of Education. This programme provides the professional qualification in educational leadership and management but it is rooted in the context of the faith school. Many Trust bodies also provide ongoing support for principals and deputy principals through their education offices, and initiatives such as annual conferences and online fora.

## **Conclusion**

All schools have a legal and moral obligation to uphold their characteristic spirit. Trustees have a corresponding obligation to support schools in that regard and the Government has an obligation to fund the Trustees. The person of the Principal, how they understand their role and how they live it out in words and deeds, is hugely influential. Despite the bleak

economic context of voluntary secondary schools, the bigger challenge is for hearts and minds. This is illustrated by the concern that the initial founding vision may become diluted if the traditional leadership role is increasingly compromised by ceaseless fundraising and grinding administrative tasks.

An authentic Christian view of life and of the world has as much to offer as ever, and even more to a world where education is increasingly commodified. What a travesty if the young people whose education has been entrusted to Catholic schools were to leave them without knowing something of the deep enabling power of that ethos - for self, for others and for the planet we call home.