

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL BOARD OF MANAGEMENT AND THE PRINCIPAL: AN EXPLORATION OF PRESCRIPTION AND PRACTICE

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Research Overview

The research examines the implementation of the prescribed functions of the board of management and the principal in the Irish Catholic primary school. It compares the intended and the actual implementation of the duties and responsibilities which are officially assigned to the board and the principal drawing on material from the author's experience as a principal and from research involving the systematic and in-depth interviewing of a randomly selected group of board representatives.

Methodology

The research used individual and focus group interviews to elicit insights and opinion from seven randomly selected board members. These were two chairpersons, one clerical and one lay, two principals, one administrative and one teaching, and three board members appointed as representative respectively of teachers, parents and community. The individual standardised open-ended interviews dwelled on a number of issues that included suitability, training, contribution, volunteerism, interpretation, and contemporary developments. The focus group interview with six of the seven individual interviewees examined in more depth information gleaned from the earlier interviews and also probed particular issues that arose. These included the trend towards lay chairpersons, parental influence, the authority of the principal and aspects of election or selection of board members. Interviews were voice-recorded and analysed.

Ethical procedures were followed and participants' identities and schools were disguised to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Overview of Findings

The research set out to explore the intended and the actual implementation of the prescribed functions which are assigned to the board and the principal of the Irish Catholic primary school. While the limitations of the study in relation to its generalisability and replicability are acknowledged, the responses of those interviewed provide a range of perspectives that seem likely to be reasonably representative of board members in a relatively broad sense. The research points to certain discrepancy between what is intended and what actually occurs as for example in regard to the election and selection of board members where, it is suggested, orchestration is necessary to ensure that sufficient volunteers are obtained to serve as board members. Diminishing volunteerism and reluctance are described as significant obstacles to what are perceived as officially intended outcomes. The research suggests that the intended and the actual implementation of board functions are at odds. It is suggested that a major overhaul of the training for board membership is essential. Difficulties are noted in regard to delegation while the issue of undue power resting with the principal is raised as an issue of concern. Interestingly, common sense is regarded as the most desirable characteristic for board members, over and above qualifications and education. Those interviewed for this study made it clear that they accept and are accustomed to low expectations for active, participative involvement. The research suggests that there is a disparity between the intention and the reality, or between theory and practice, in the Irish Catholic primary school board's

functioning and that this may be enduring especially in the context of emergent change both societal and church-related.

Conclusion

This research points to what are deemed the shortcomings of the current training regime for board members and suggests that improved, fit for purpose training might be of benefit. The research suggests that Church control of primary schools is rapidly diminishing in the face of pluralism, declining volunteerism, fewer vocations, shared-management and amended legislation. The research suggests that the teaching profession and wider education community will be held more and more responsible and accountable for the future management of the Irish Catholic primary school. The research uncovered little by way of suggestions for alternative models for management and governance of the Irish Catholic primary school.

The study raises various issues and considerations that are germane to current developments in educational management and patronage in Ireland.