

Title of research

Catholic School Ethos - *Ag Seo Ár gCúram.*

Name of researcher

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Brief outline of research idea

From an International perspective the concept of school “ethos” is a contested one within the educational arena. School ethos is regarded by many as an obscure concept, but an important one, (Furlong 2000). Numerous educationalists have linked the ethos of a school with school effectiveness, (Rutter et al., 1979; Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991; SCoTENS, 2010). It is strongly associated with positive outcomes for students, (Putnam, 2001). Furthermore, it can be used to explain why schools react in different ways to national and international policy initiatives. There is general consensus in academic literature and commentary that school leaders have a pivotal role in leading school ethos.

Catholic schools operate within a within a variety of contexts ecclesial, social and educational, all of which inform the school ethos. Moreover, each context is presently undergoing significant change. Plurality in 21st century Irish society is a fact, and the increasing commodification of education is a reality. Catholic educational ethos is no longer an unquestioned element of school culture. In order to respond, Church authorities are attempting to define and construct ‘a new cultural paradigm’ with all its attendant uncertainty and instability. It is within this context that Catholic school leaders must operate, simultaneously accountable to increasing national educational policy and legislative requirements as well as Church expectations as custodians of a particular educative prerogative for the schools which they own.

Summary of research aims

This study explored the reality of a particular social and cultural context namely school ethos from a post primary school leadership perspective. The focus of the study was to investigate school leaders’ understandings of ethos both prescribed and as operative in their schools, and within

the broader context of the local communities which they serve. Catholic schools, unlike their state owned counterparts endeavour to create a school culture which is permeated by Gospel values and Catholic traditions. However, school leaders understanding and experiences of leading a religious ethos are seldom explored. The purpose of research was to examine the distinctiveness of Catholic school ethos both prescriptively and operative compared to the ethos of other post primary non denominational schools from a school leadership perspective. The values, dispositions and educational ideals of those deemed crucial in the translation of school mission into vision, namely school leaders were analysed. This sought to clarify some of the ambiguity pertaining to the centrality of school leaders in creating school vision, ethos and culture. This study also sought to reveal that which has been overlooked by other researchers, namely the stages and manner in which school ethos is negotiated by school leaders as vision, and the importance of various factors conducive to that process.

Outline of methodology used including details of how any ethical considerations were addressed

This research was predicated upon constructionist epistemology which holds as foundational the belief that humans construct meaning and knowledge as they engage with the world which they are attempting to interpret, (Crotty, 1998; Peters, 2000). The theoretical perspective of the research was interpretivism. This places importance upon both the interaction between actors within a social context and also between those actors and their context, (Burgess, 1985). The study of ethos from a school leader's perspective within the context of school and wider society was well positioned within this epistemological and theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of inquiry. Ethical approval was sought and procedures followed. Interviews were conducted with six post primary school principals from a purposely selected sample of schools representative of catholic denominational voluntary and fee paying schools and non denominational schools. They also varied according to gender, size and socio-economic catchment area. One semi structured interview was also conducted with a member of a Catholic School Trust. Interviews were digitally recorded in order to ensure accuracy and safeguard the interactive dimension. In order to minimise bias not every question was asked of each participant but each question was presented in the same way. Moreover, the school where I teach was not included in the sample. Participants' and their schools were assigned pseudonyms to safe guard anonymity and confidentiality. Transcripts of interviews were analysed through a systematic process of coding and re-coding. Cross-case analysis was used to draw forth common and recurring experiences, themes, and patterns. The notion of triangulation was deployed. Data was drawn and statistically analysed from WSE reports where published, and other relevant statistics, school documentation and websites

where available. This provided an objective pre-evaluated educational and socio-economic contextual reference point with regard to each of participant's respective schools. For validation purposes this data was used to support the strength of interpretations and conclusions. While the limitations of the study in relation to its generalisability and replicability are acknowledged, the research provides a range of school leader's perspectives from various school types all of which contribute to our understanding of the concept of ethos, the challenges of leading it, and the importance of it within schools.

Summary of background reading

Ethos is broadly a phenomenon, that resists precise definition, yet exists in all social organisations to serve a variety of different purposes. Ethos may be conceptualised literally as that which is prescriptive, namely the formal expression of the authority's aims and objectives. From an education point of view, the prescriptive dimension of school ethos is the formal expression as documented and articulated, of the goals, values and beliefs, which the founders aspire to, endorse and preserve. Hence, ethos can be conceptualised as custodial. However, where social changes are particularly marked, a custodianship which is austere can become partisan and fails invariably to appreciate and respond appropriately to such changes. The alternative interpretations of ethos place an emphasis on the unavoidable exposure and immersion by all within an organisation to a prescribed set of values and beliefs. In this context, school ethos has been defined as "the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use of images and symbols, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations", (Norman, 2003). The school "atmosphere" or "climate" synonymous with "ethos" refers to the different emphasis towards discipline, the curriculum, and accountability to parents and the local community. Ethos must reflect the wider community which it serves and from which it draws strength. Only when all within the school community have ownership of ethos, can it become a lived reality. Failure to engage in dialogue renders it more difficult if not impossible to subscribe to an ethos which is superimposed. All schools have an ethos and it has "impact". It affects everyone within the school community.

The Catholic school is a teaching instrument of the Church, (CCE, 1988, 1998; Heft & Reck, 1991). In assisting parents, it is regarded as the principle means of providing a Catholic education for their children. The literature affirms that while Catholic schools have a place in the mission of the church, they must first be genuine educational institutions that encourages excellence, the pursuit of learning and the care of all individual students, (Flynn & Mok, 2002). They are much akin to other schools within the education sector internationally. They have a

common curriculum, have similar academic goals, comply with the same rules and programmes and serve students from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. But what makes Catholic schools distinctive pertain to ethos and their particular approach to education. The ethos is enriched by expressions of the symbolic and traditional features of particular schools and the Catholic Church, as well as the liturgical and community celebrations which accompany them, (Tobin, 1987). The Catholic Church's role in Catholic education, includes *inter alia*: to provide theological guidance to Catholics and in doing so asserts the universal right and obligation to preach the Gospel; to define the purpose of Catholic education as holistic, not only developing the academic talents of students but also, their physical, moral and social aptitudes; and that of catechetical formation, which must be transmitted to all, in a manner adapted to the individual's character, capabilities, age and conditions of life. The Catholic conception of education focuses on the spiritual and moral development of each student with a particular emphasis on the dignity of each child. The Second Vatican Council emphasised the education of not only Christians but also non-Christians (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977). Catholic school ethos focuses significantly on the concept of a faith community based on gospel values. A school can only justifiably claim to have a true ethos when any such aspiration is achieved in a way that the resulting ethos is the lived reality of the faith values of the school: 'what is occurring, what is being experienced, what is expected, what is hoped for; it is concerned with the experience of relationships, of structures, of policies, of procedures, of roles, of founding purposes of the school', (Monahan, 2000). The Catholic faith should permeate every facet of school life. A Catholic school cannot adhere to its ethos if there is a dichotomy between precept and practice, (Breen & Donaldson, 1995). In the absence of this, 'religious socialisation' cannot exist, (Flynn, 1979). Nonetheless, the requirement that this places on employees, is an important and indeed controversial theme in the literature, (Paterson, 2001).

Religious ethos is not generic, and may differ not only between religions, but also within religions, (Treston, 1997). Defining a Catholic ethos is a challenge for school patrons such is the breadth of the Catholic churches self-understanding and variations in the different founding congregations' mission statements. There is little consensus about the meaning of community which shapes the Catholic school, (O'Keefe 2003). The concept of community itself is representationalist and as such there will always be a gap between reality and representation, (Kneipp, 1994). The growing disparity between the heritage of Catholic founding congregations and those whom they purport to serve has become a feature of the modern secular and multicultural society, (Gleeson, 2001). It is difficult for patrons to create a single template statement of characteristic spirit that should be adopted and implemented by each and every Catholic school, (Colton, 2010).

The building of a very definable school culture and identity is closely connected to both the role and function of the principal, (Sergiovanni, 1987; Buetow, 1988; McLaughlin & O’Keeffe, 1996). Formally, they are the symbolic and cultural leaders of their schools. Informally, their personality and disposition transmits the values, attitudes, philosophy, and norms of the school, (Barth, 2004; Lingard et al., 2003; McGilp, 2000). Success in Catholic school leadership appears to be highly influenced by the cultural and spiritual capital that a principal brings to a school, (Bourdieu, 1977, 2000; Gronn, 1999, 2002; Grace, 2002; Lingard et al., 2003). However, some Catholic school lay leaders may be described as ‘communal Catholics’, which is defined as being loyal to the Catholic Church collectively and sympathetic towards its heritage, but hold personal and intellectual reservations about elements of the teaching and praxis of the contemporary institutional Church, (McLaughlin, 1997; McLaughlin, 1999). International research suggests that Catholic school leaders are ill-prepared for the demands of leadership, (Duignan, Burford, d’Arbon, Ikin, and Walsh, 2003; Duignan, 2004). Ribbins’s (1997) study suggested that while the religious formation of principals was being neglected, principals drew on experiences gained from members of religious congregations. However, Grace (2002) contends that the new generation of leaders and indeed teachers who have had no affiliation with living out the norms of religious orders, are unlikely to benefit from the ‘matrix of sources for spiritual capital’. The weight of evidence from current international research suggests that mentoring in leadership, even with its identifiable problems, is an effective strategy in preparing and supporting newly appointed principals, (Bush & Chew 1999; Hean, 2003; Hobson, 2003; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Mertz, 2004; Bush & Glover, 2005). It is also effective in supporting more experienced principals, as well as the facilitation of peer networks or mutual support groups with dioceses which allow school leaders to participate in meaningful exchanges with other principals, (Bush & Glover, 2005; Bush & Jackson, 2002; Hobson, 2003).

Overview of research findings and recommendations

Overview of research findings

This study affirms the pivotal role of post primary schools principals as positional leaders of school ethos. The multifaceted and evolving aspects of ethos rendered it difficult for school leaders immersed within it, to define objectively. Akin to education itself, ethos is a personal experience. All leaders perceived the ethos of their school as being uniquely distinctive. The findings endorse the critical importance of ethos in creating an inclusive learning environment and as a means of guiding social interaction conducive to positive relationships within the school community.

The findings also suggest that the distinctive characteristics of Catholic schools compared to non denominational counterparts pertain firstly to their religious patronage, heritage and governance structures wherein lay Catholic school leaders are conferred with custodial responsibility of ensuring that the Catholic educative prerogative is operative and permeates all aspects of school life. Secondly, the mission statements of the Catholic schools sought to provide a holistic education for students with an explicit “spiritual” dimension. Non denominational schools on the other hand aimed to provide an integrated and or broad based education in preparation for good citizenship. Thirdly, Catholic school leaders were acutely aware that they were accountable to the patrons for ensuring that the ethos was operative. For Catholic private schools in particular, it was the school patrons and or respective Trust authorities who guided and maintained control of ethos development thus endorsing the interrelationship between pre-existing conditions of governance and authority. The emergence of greater involvement by the Catholic school authorities in strengthening the ethos of their schools and assisting current lay principals and indeed teacher’s in their understanding of it and clarification of their roles was also evident. However, there was little evidence to suggest how future leadership succession is being addressed, although it was acknowledged as an issue. Furthermore, it was stated that it was the support which was put in place for principals after their appointment, which was crucial in ensuring that Catholic ethos was understood, transmitted, and operative. This study revealed that school leaders in non denominational schools had a greater degree of control and management of ethos. According to them, ethos required that degree of flexibility to inclusively cater for the diverse needs of the students and their individual circumstances. Nonetheless, it was acknowledged that the core values of the ethos remain constant. Fourthly, Catholic school admissions policies mandated respect for the Catholic school ethos by both students and parents and all prioritised Catholic student enrollment in the event of oversubscription.

The distinctiveness of the Catholic school ethos as operative in practice was less evident in this study. Thus the findings were deemed inconclusive. Community school leaders emphasised the importance of positioning their schools within the wider community, “drawing in from and leading out to”, which impacted on their ethos in practice. In serving a majority Catholic student cohort this study revealed that that there was no difference between the Community and Catholic schools with regard to their “connectedness” with the parish community, provision for and the role of school chaplain, the celebration of traditional Catholic feast days and the annual graduation Mass. Moreover, there was no reported difference regarding the provision for religious education on the curriculum. Furthermore, while it was evident that all Catholic school leaders respected the Catholicity of their schools the findings suggest that they had not negotiated all aspects of the

doctrine into their respective vision. This was articulated by one respondent as placing a greater emphasis on what was regarded as the “positive” aspects of the Catholicism, in this case, the promotion of social justice.

From a school leadership perspective this study suggests that the ethos as operative in all schools reflected the cores values, socio economic and cultural characteristics of the students enrolled and the educational ideals of the school leaders. Self-reported leadership styles were unique for all school leaders and there was a strong correlation between leadership styles and self-reported personal educative values and ideals. The ethos as prescribed in the mission statement was a reference point for school leaders which shaped their role. Conversely, it was also evident that the school leaders imported their own distinct personalities, philosophies of education and priorities which in turn shaped the school ethos. It is suggested that when leaders take on the “persona” of ethos they are crossing the boundary between their own personal values, belief systems, and educational ideals, and the domain of that which is formally prescribed by the school Patrons. Although this is necessary in order to create, articulate and model an authentic vision, the process itself can give rise to tensions. Therefore, a school leader’s vision is in fact the “negotiation” of the patron’s educative aims and values into ethos as praxis. This process is not only informed by the values and dispositions of the leaders themselves but also the context of the schools they lead within the local communities which they serve.

The educative purpose(s) of all schools as articulated by their respective leaders were congruent with the mission statements which were broadly similar, namely to provide an education for students; to realise the full potential of each student; and the values underpinning the environment in which teaching and learning would take place. School ethos was regarded as a reference point for personal discernment by school leaders in resolving conflict. The type of conflict pertaining to ethos which emerged for schools differed. This difference reflected their different school ethos; differences in the characteristics of the student cohort; and the socio cultural context in which the schools operated. Moreover the source of conflict also varied and included teachers, students, parents and indeed the ethos of the school itself. Catholic school leaders identified an increasing secular society; an growing cohort of non practicing Catholic students; and an increasingly market led and orientated focus on education with an emphasis on “points” and “academic achievement”, as the main challenges facing the Catholic faith dimension of their respective school ethos and their holistic approach to education. Nonetheless, the importance of academic achievement was a strong characteristic of all Catholic schools.

A commonality shared by all school leaders underpinning ethos was the universal value of care as a prominent child-centred characteristic in their schools. In this context care was interpreted in a variety of ways such as providing a “family-like” school environment where children felt safe and secure; setting high expectations for students and of them both academically and the way they interacted with each other and teachers; provision of extra-curricular activities and participation by both teachers and students; as a value underpinning conflict management in general and student indiscipline in particular; a sense of calmness at school; as a value synonymous with respect for people; a school where all felt welcome; a sense of happiness among students; where respect and hospitality were self-evident from the way all members of the school community interacted with each other and with visitors to the school. Moreover, individual care and concern, particularly for those students struggling to cope with difficulties academic and otherwise was identified by all principals as a leadership aspiration.

Recommendations

It is recommended that further research in post primary schools is required to ascertain the relationship between school ethos and school effectiveness specifically in an Irish context. The extent to which tensions arise for school leaders in negotiating and leading an ethos prescribed by patrons in various school contexts and how they are addressed within the governance or management systems of schools also requires further exploration. The universal value of care underpinning ethos as operative from the perspectives of all school leaders in this study is significant. It is recommended that the child-centred value of care, a principle of emphatic care as operative, should be central to and inform the process of school self evaluation: How do we as educators in this school care for the educational development of all our students in the way we operate and how can we improve?

From a school leadership perspective it is clear that more is expected of Lay Catholic school leaders in particular as it pertains to the spiritual leadership of schools. It is recommended that a better understanding of how this impacts on other aspects of their work and whether the provision of leadership training in the various third level institutions adequately prepare potential Catholic school leaders in particular requires further examination.

How the research contributed to your professional development

Drawing on many theoretical, educational, historical, legal and Catholic theological and philosophical sources, this study afforded me a greater understanding of school ethos from various perspectives. The research methodology provided valuable insights on school ethos from the

perspective of school leaders. Moreover, the research skills necessary to conduct this study have been transferable into other areas of my work within school.

This study has also enabled me to reflect on the values and various experiences and educational philosophies of the school leaders whom I interviewed. In doing so I acquired a greater understanding and appreciation of the vision they aspire to and in practice the work they actually do in leading ethos. This prompted a critical evaluation my professional practice, in light of a better understanding of school ethos, school leadership and my role as a teacher, which in turn has informed my practice. Education and what it means to educate has a care function. It emphasises the person-value and development-value of education in schools. Care is a public good, personal good and contributes collectively to the good of society. It is a reference point for the ethical and respectful practice of teaching. Understanding school ethos premised on the value of care affirms the importance of it as one of the ethical values which underpins the standards of teaching, knowledge, skill, competence and conduct of teachers: namely, teacher professionalism. A teachers' practice is and ought to be motivated by the best interests of all students entrusted to their care. This study has created a greater awareness that it is my role as an educator of children and young adults to endeavour to demonstrate this through positive influence, professional judgement and empathy in practice.

How this research will benefit the teaching profession and the wider education community.

The study raises various issues and considerations that are germane to current developments in education and patronage in Ireland. The provision of education and what that means in the context of schooling is evolving to the needs of contemporary Irish society. The ethos for all schools has a dynamic capacity to change. In this context, regard must be had to the fact that ethos is best expressed, helped to develop and enriched within the school community as the result of the continuing interaction between a shared dialogue on the core values of the school, embracing all the stakeholders, and the daily practice which endeavours to embody these values. The mere imposition of a school ethos risks rendering it ineffective and unauthentic in practice.

Expectations for schools and school leadership increasingly defined by a demanding set of roles are also changing. At a national level, it is important that the core responsibilities of school leaders are clearly defined. Moreover, this study also indicates the desirability of the development of a clear statement of the philosophy of leadership in the contemporary Catholic school which acknowledges the complexities of the role and which pays due regard to the realities of the contexts in which it is carried out and which, therefore by definition, embodies the views of practitioners.

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