

Investigating ethos and values: in what ways do students feel that the school impacts on their personal formulation of ethos and values in a church school environment. ¹

Rev. Fr. Mark Ellul

B. Ed. (Hons.) *Melit.*, B.A. *Melit.*, SThB. *Melit.* MSc Ed. Lead. *Leicester.*

The research problem

Students spend most of their time in school. Schooling happens during the period while they are growing and developing their personality, schools can thus be considered as agents affecting the molding of one's character. Even though this is a very important aspect in student's life and will practically impact all life events, literature on the apparent effects of church schools on pupils is sparse, except in the field of student performance outcomes. The study investigated how the ethos, leadership and structure in a Catholic school affect character development. Its intention was to shed light on present practices and their impact on students' lives.

Why this study?

The school climate affects 'values, social beliefs and social norms' (Sackney 2000). Pupils imbibe the values and morality structures through inter and intra-personal interactions happening in school (Berkowitz and Beir 2005 in Langer *et. al.* 2010:355) as well as through the curriculum (Milson 2000:91). This study focused on the personal experience of the pupils through their lens. According to Hoy and Miskel (1987:225 in Sackney 2000) the internal characteristics of schools distinguish them from each other and influence how pupils act. These internal characteristics are referred to as school culture or ethos.

School life prepares pupils to become active citizens, helping them to delve deeper into education and to become life-long learners (DeRoche and Williams 2000:xv). Since schooling affects the way in which pupils think and act, it also affects their character development (Milson 2000:89-90). Nevertheless, one needs to differentiate between student actions and character development.

Whilst all schools recognise the importance of forming pupils as active citizens able to converse with society (Milson 2000:90), this notion takes on even greater importance for Catholic education, which seeks 'to be an agent of transformation and change while recognising the on-

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going challenge of holding together the concerns of both this life and the ‘beyond’ (McGettrick 1999:345).

The national context

In Malta there are three main educational stakeholders – state, church and independent (MEE 2012:xv). Since this study investigated the school environment in a Catholic school only this sector was discussed. Dating back to the 14th century (Cauchi Cuschieri, RA. 2007:66; Zammit Mangion 1992:10), church schools in Malta were a means where members of different congregations used their specific charisma to educate the young. Every congregation worked independently from the other. However, the common aim of these schools was novitiates, where ‘young people willing to joining the orders were instructed and trained’ (Zammit Mangion 1992:10). By time these have evolved into primary and secondary schools giving a broader instruction, not just religious formation (Zammit Mangion 1992:287-292). In 1984 the Secretariat for Church Schools was founded, were these schools, although remaining autonomous, were brought together under the direct administration of the Bishops of Malta and Gozo (Zammit Mangion 1992:287).

In the past year Malta saw the publication of the National Curriculum Framework. Through its publication the Ministry of Education continued to strive for the autonomy of church schools (MEE 2012:16-17, 42). This degree of autonomy leaves the delivery of the educational programme ‘subject to the ethos of each individual school’ (ibid.:36). In such a scenario the school’s ethos and leadership would impinge not only on the effect which the school’s leave on character (Schaps 2002:3) but also on academic achievement (Morris 2005:326, Sander 1997:2).

The international context

A brief historic synthesis indicates that the notion of forming a person with an integrated character has always been at the forefront of many educational systems (Jeynes and Robinson 2010:297). Elias (1995:41 in Jeynes and Robinson 2010:296) indicates that ‘since antiquity the development of the moral or virtuous person has been the primary aim of education’. Indeed, Jeynes and Robinson (2010:296-7) posit that although character education was important for the Greeks and the Romans it was viewed exclusively as a means to educate leaders. On the other hand, they illustrate that the first Christian education focused on equality; all could be educated. According to the same authors, the Bible remained the central inspiration for Christian schools for all levels of schooling providing a triad link between home, school and church. Moral education was taken to be the norm during the 15th Century with institutions such as Harvard College being founded for the formation of ministers. Indeed, it was natural that colleges train for character (ibid.:296-7). However, due to industrialisation this Christian character development was lost to a number of electives, where students would choose what subjects to specialise in. Thus, seminaries became a counter current to uphold this character development (ibid.:322). This kind of formation, prepared the pupils according to the needs of industry and society, through electives.

The same scenario could be found in Italy and Europe, where a number of religious orders in the 16th and 17th century opened a number of schools (Sangalli 2007:816) to educate children in the Christian belief (ibid.:818). Some schools took the form of seminaries and were especially

geared for the formation of priests (ibid.:820). The author indicates that not only were seminaries educational institutions but they ‘became the most important ones for the nobility and the middle classes’ (ibid.:820).

While this research acknowledged the importance of academic education, and recognised that church schools have broadened their horizons from just training camps towards priesthood, it also strived to get to the core of how the school’s ethos and leadership vision affect students’ characters. Through the research this balance was taken in consideration hence the following research questions were poignant.

Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What does research tell us about the effect of schooling in shaping individual ethos and values?
- How do pupils perceive that the Catholic ethos of St. Paul’s School affect their development – intellectual, moral and social – through their daily interactions in the school?
- What leadership actions does St. Paul’s School need to take in order to aid in the development of persons in line with the school ethos as indicated through its mission statement?

The nature of the investigation

This research was a case study that used focus groups to collect data from a number of pupils. It was carried out to explore the experiences of individuals in the School. The main focus was the exploration of the perceptions of students on how the school impacts their character development. Four focus groups were held with different age groups to provide a snapshot of the pupil’s experiences at different stages in their school life. The research used the phenomenological approach to extract themes from data. It then critically reflected on phenomena which the pupils thought as relevant for their experience. This reflection led to recommendations for the school administration.

The Conclusions

Through the study it was evident that the daily interactions were a means to help pupils in their value development. Many of the respondents made important comments about this area. Most of the pupils spoke about a healthy relationship with staff members which promotes socialisation, whilst the personal care given by the teachers resulted in the pupils’ feeling safe. This sense of safety helped pupils to boost their self-esteem and to improve their academic achievement. These statements give strong support to authors who indicate that the school environment affects the pupils socially (Grusec 1992:781, Pritchard 1998:471, Schaps 2002:2-3, Berkowitz and Beir 2004:78) and academically (Morris 2005:326, Sander 1997:2). In terms of personal and character development such interactions were seen as promoting a sense of justice (O’Keefe 1999:26-27), respect and dignity (O’Keefe 1999:24, Brick 1999:93, LG 23), as well as a holistic outlook towards life (O’Keefe 1999:22).

Importantly from a school's point of view, it was also evident that the pupils perceived the leaders as caring and as going down to their level. Supporting scholars the pupils perceived the interactions with the school leadership as a means to instil accountability (Grace 1993:358), justice and order (O'Keefe 1999:26-27). These powerful statements on leadership corroborate Belmonte *et. al.* (2006:5) who indicate that the leader should promote ethical and moral development. Through the discussion it was evident that the students perceived a sense of democratic leadership and they asked for such leadership to be enhanced. Students were adamant on this point and saw this type of leadership as the proper way forward (Brown 2006:777-8).

The interaction between the pupils forms another pillar of school life. Pupils spoke about the relationship between themselves; there were comments which indicated that the small student population in school and in classes helps them to know each other better. This small population fosters a sense of community which encourages the students to mutually share their talents for the good of the community. A forceful comment was that diversity was seen as an important ingredient and not just as an add-on. These persuasive statements by pupils are great advocates of literature which states that the school ethos shapes perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and dispositions (McLaughlin's 2005:312) and that when people feel safe they will not only achieve more – academically and character wise – but also help each other (Schaps 2002:2-5, Berkowitz and Beir 2004:78, Langer *et. al.* 2010:349). These statements also corroborate the findings of authors like Morris (2005:316, 326) who indicates that the small populations in Church schools support individual care which is a result of the school's management and the school processes. A healthy relationship between the pupils sustains the growth of values as they internalize the culture in which they are raised (Grusec 1992:777) thus they imbibe values such as trust, diversity and tolerance (O'Keefe 1999:24), as well as self-confidence (Schaps 2002: 2-3).

The study illustrated that the school is a community which sustains community life and has a communal ethos (O'Keefe 1999:22). As indicated by Schaps (2002:3-4) supportiveness is a means of community building, and from the study it was evident that the pupils perceived a triad of support from peers, staff and the leadership team. From the pupil's discussion, it clearly transpired that school is a community which promotes learning; they indicated that hands-on learning helps them to be more inquisitive. Learning, especially character development, was evident even when the pupils spoke of extracurricular activities. Confirming Doud's (1995:181-2) statements that the informal curriculum imparts beliefs, a number of students named extracurricular activities as aiding character development. These statements illustrate that it is important for the school to uphold a holistic approach to teaching (O'Keefe 1999:22-4) which cultivates respect for others while it creates independent beings (Brick 1999:102).

Pupils also made direct reference to religion and spirituality. Being a Catholic school, it was deemed pertinent to evaluate the pupil's perceptions on this area. Pritchard (1988: 475,483) and Callan (1988:368-75) indicate that the curriculum can indoctrinate values; nevertheless, pupils clearly illustrated that there is a healthy balance between the curriculum and the passing on of values. Through the discussions within the various focus groups, it was evident that in the School values are passed on through the daily interactions without the need of brainwashing. Although the pupils mentioned mass and bible studies as a means to help them form a way of life and to reflect deeper on their choices, they did not see this as imposing values. Rather, this helped them to integrate religious values and norms in a healthy way of life and not just viewing them as a series of rules (O'Keefe 1999:22-27). Indeed, the students expressed that this helped them to experience religion rather than it being forced on them. This research illustrated that community

life and individual care enhance the pupil's self-esteem and support their personal and social development further.

Recommendations

The research illustrated that the school mission statement is being lived. It proposed the following recommendations to help the school further live its mission statement.

- The personal care given by teachers is commendable, however, further training in the area will help teachers to deepen and extend this care.
- Since it was made clear that the school ethos effects the character development of pupils, newly appointed staff should be inducted in the school's mission statement and ethos.
- Smaller group teaching, the house system and micromanagement increase interaction on a personal level and should be enhanced as they build of the community and aid in value development.
- There should be a clearer explanation of the disciplinary system especially in lower years so that pupils will better understand the philosophy behind this disciplinary system.
- Care should be given to the fact that both the formal and the informal curriculum are a strong means to pass on values. It is thus recommended that all staff members receive enhanced training on how they can impact on character development.

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