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To cite this article: Roisín Coll (2009) Catholic school leadership: exploring its impact on the faith development of probationer teachers in Scotland, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 1:2, 200-213, DOI: [10.1080/19422530903138184](https://doi.org/10.1080/19422530903138184)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422530903138184>



Published online: 17 Sep 2009.



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Catholic school leadership: exploring its impact on the faith development of probationer teachers in Scotland

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Drawing on empirical data, this paper explores the Catholic leadership experiences of newly qualified teachers in Scotland and the impact this had on their faith and professional development. Set within the context of a longitudinal study that was carried out over a three-year period tracking the faith development needs of teachers, this paper is concerned with 20 teachers in their probationary year, from a mix of both primary and secondary Catholic schools in Scotland. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of the participants' first full year teaching. The findings suggest that particular leadership styles have the ability to powerfully impact on the faith of individuals and contribute to enhancing their overall professional development, giving them a clear sense of identity and purpose within a Catholic education environment.

Keywords: Catholic education; faith development; professional development; symbolic leadership; values; community; leadership capacity; shared leadership

Values-driven leadership and community

Richard Elmore (2005) has much to say about school leadership and its associated changes. In one of his most recent contributions to this topic, he explains that there is a misconception regarding correlations between the changing demands placed on head teachers and their leadership practices. It is widely recognised and accepted that in the last 20 years the educational environment in schools has altered significantly, owing to a variety of factors but including external influences, the increased attention given to target setting and performance based accountability. However Elmore (2005) claims that what has *not* been addressed or focussed upon are the *practices* of school leaders in relation to these changes. Changes in school conditions do not necessarily stimulate changes in leadership practice and, according to Elmore, this is an area worthy of attention.

There is widespread acceptance of the importance of school leadership and the key role it plays in the management of school development and of the promotion of the school environment as a place of positive learning and teaching (Flores 2004; Gold et al. 2003; Day et al. 1998). Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest from the present study alone and indeed from others (Flores 2004; Williams et al. 2001), that leadership styles vary significantly and indeed can have quite powerful results and impact, particularly when the focus – as here – is on the newly qualified teacher.

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Flores (2004), in her study of the impact of culture and leadership on newly qualified teachers in Portugal, observed that schools are not only places where teaching occurs, but they are places where teachers learn and develop and, according to her findings, the key to maximising the potential for this is the direction of the school leader. Gold et al. (2003), when reporting on their exploration of the 'moral art' of educational leadership (2003, 127), identified a number of key features that they claim are synonymous with its effectiveness and success. Their study of 10 'outstanding' school principals in England – as judged by Ofsted – revealed the importance of values-led leadership, where the 'values' being referred to are not those imposed and decided at a political level, but rather the personal, moral and educational values of the school leader; values which may not always be compatible with government policies or initiatives. (It is important to note that these reported findings considered school leadership in general and not just of that in the faith schools' context.)

The study revealed that 'welfarism' as opposed to 'new managerialism' was the predominant focus of these successful school leaders, where the issue of fundamental importance and driving force was the 'educational, social and personal development of *all* pupils and staff', rather than according priority to concerns such as the management of resources, the significance of parental choice and market forces (Gold et al. 2003, 136). Values concerning matters such as 'inclusivity, equal opportunities, equity, justice, high expectations, engagement with stakeholders, cooperation, teamwork, commitment and understanding' were high on the agenda of good school leaders (2003, 136) and therefore having such values-driven leadership was established as being an important feature of these acclaimed principals. However, what was considered even more effective was the manner in which these values were manifested and shared in the wider school environment.

Those teachers working in the schools led by 'outstanding' principals commented on the manner in which they observed their leaders demonstrating their values on a daily basis through their words and deeds, and explained how their personal qualities (such as openness, compassion, accessibility and honesty, to mention but a few) related to this. This echoes Deal and Kennedy's (1982) emphasis, in their book *Corporate cultures* (which applies to different kinds of organisations) on the importance of leaders promoting shared values when attempting to develop an organisational culture. Citing Deal and Kennedy (1982), Johnson and Castelli (2000) in a Catholic context emphasise that good leaders should, 'look for ways to reach into the organisation to establish the importance of the culture and its chosen values' and 'they implicitly communicate key values and inculcate them via day-to-day actions' (78).

In Gold et al.'s study (2003), school staff spoke of transparency and free-flow of information being important in terms of how their leaders' values were transmitted – and eventually owned – by the wider school community. This research highlighted the impact that something as simple as a meeting can have in terms of the transmission of such values:

meetings can be seen as the visible manifestation of a school leader's values system: clear ideals about respecting, transforming, developing and including staff can be evidenced by the importance given to meetings in a school and the way they are run. The amount of information that is accessible to staff is also a values-led decision – notions of secrecy and exclusion from information do not encourage trust and empowerment or even informed decision making. (2003, 132)

Elmore (2005) emphasises the effectiveness of values-driven leadership, but only from a position where these values become accepted, owned and lived by the wider school community. He stresses the necessity for leaders to ensure that their schools have 'organisational values' since this, he believes, moves a school from an 'atomized state to a more coherent and organisational state' (Elmore 2005, 135). This he refers to as the 'alignment of individual values with collective expectations', a concept that he believes can take place if the school leader explicitly reinforces organisational values. He claims that in schools, pupils and staff primarily learn values through their daily work and practice and so, 'accountable leadership ... must focus on modelling common values through engagement in the work of instructional practice' (2005, 141).

This concept of 'living' or 'giving witness to' values through word and action as a method of transmission is one that has been rehearsed repeatedly in literature surrounding the faith schools' context (see, for example, Carr 2000; Grace 2002; Grace and O'Keefe 2007). Indeed, within the Catholic Church there is a vast volume of documentation stressing the importance of this aspect of a Catholic teacher's role (for example see *Gravissimum Educationis* 1965, para. 8). However, the values which are expected to be lived and witnessed are not simply the personal, moral and educational values that the individual leader or school may agree upon, but are also specifically *religious* values – those that are based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and are expected to be shared and lived by all of those within the Catholic school, regardless of who is teaching or learning within them. It could be argued that such values appear to be imposed on schools and school leaders since their origins are from a particular religious tradition, but the difference of this kind of imposition compared with a governmental or political one is that teachers choosing to teach in the Catholic school are aware of these values prior to embarking on a career within a denominational sector and, certainly in the Scottish context (that in which this study is based), these are expected to be aligned to their own personal values. Therefore, certain values are already expected to be a part of the Catholic school's culture, but it is the extent of their promotion and manifestation within this culture that will determine whether they will be transmitted or not. More often than not, the responsibility falls to the school leader to ensure that these values are obvious, accepted by others in the school and, as the Church expects, 'lived'.

Lacey (1996) claims that Catholic schools and their leaders are at an advantage when attempting to establish themselves as collaborative communities or when developing a 'shared hermeneutic' among staff (1996, 260) since specific Catholic philosophies and values already exist for the Catholic school and, from the outset in such locations, would be an expectation that some sort of communal understanding of these values would be present among teachers. However, Grace (1996) – while warning of 'romanticising' the concept of 'community' that may not always produce positive results within a school situation – explains that 'community' as a 'central value and symbol of Catholic schooling' has been under attack from a variety of pressures such as the 'ethic of individualism', narcissism and indeed, market forces (1996, 76).

An environment encouraging collaboration – and which attempts to establish a sense of community among staff – can have an impact on individual teachers' learning and development, and this has been illustrated in both secular and denominational school literature. Lacey (1996) exposes the value of teachers feeling a part of – and respected within – a school community; being able to create or at least

contribute to a school culture by being invited or encouraged to bring their own knowledge and experiences to their place of work and to discuss and interpret ideas with others. She explains that 'through this kind of communal work, from *within* the profession, teachers realise the power of what they know from experience and gain the courage and desire to challenge and change practice' (1996, 259). She advises of the dangers of neglecting or failing to build community in school, since teachers will 'run the risk of uncritically accepting the canon of others' and simply complying with the status quo (1996, 259). According to McLaughlin (1993, 99), the school should be viewed as a 'workplace community' in which professional efficacy and professional community should be constructed. (For the religious school it could be argued that this should include 'faith community'.) Hargreaves (1998) supports this, highlighting the importance of community when establishing a school culture. He argues that schools that are community orientated and have naturally 'collaborative' cultures are associated with places that stimulate teacher learning and development, are more supportive environments, resulting in better staff 'morale, commitment and retention' (Flores 2004, 300). Flores (2004), when referring to empirical work carried out by Fernandez (2000), claims that 'developing a sense of self-efficacy and self-worth amongst teachers is a common trait in school leaders who support and promote the building of professional communities within schools' (Flores 2004, 301).

Remaining within the secular context, Elmore (2005) echoes this principle of establishing cohesive communities and writes about the need for schools to have high levels of 'internal accountability' if they wish to become effective learning and teaching establishments in today's educational climate. By this he refers to schools that operate as a coherent whole where individuals' work is 'shaped by collective expectations, values and commitments' rather than organisations where work is 'the sum of the work of individuals' (2005, 136). Essentially schools where high levels of internal accountability exist are places of *community*, where values are discussed and agreed upon in a culture of inclusion and transparency, where people are valued and positively encouraged to contribute to the life of the school. This kind of environment, it is claimed, will encourage improvement in learning and teaching and overall school performance. Elmore (2005) stresses the need for leadership training in order for educators to learn how to lead and manage schools effectively in order to establish such levels of internal collaboration. This, he argues, has been lacking. He claims that there is evidence to suggest that educators tend to look to their existing knowledge and skills and try to make better use of this rather than accessing the new 'knowledge they need and assimilate that knowledge into their practice' (2005, 138).

It appears then that there is general agreement that one of the overarching influences in nurturing a sense of community within schools is the relative of the educational leadership.

A Catholic case study

The concern of this paper is with the leadership experiences of a new generation of Catholic teachers in Scotland and how this impacts on their own faith position and development. The findings presented here are located within a larger study that tracks the faith experiences and development needs of teachers from the time of study on their chosen initial teacher education (ITE) programme through to being

fully registered in the teaching profession (see Coll 2007). This paper focuses on the probationary period within that time-scale.

Twenty Catholic teachers from a mix of both primary and secondary backgrounds were interviewed,¹ and all had chosen to embark on a career in the Catholic sector in Scotland. The interview data were coded in order to elicit emerging concepts and to develop categories. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open coding took place resulting in the researcher grouping similar happenings and responses under a common heading or classification.

Symbolic leadership

Many participants articulated a positive reaction to the way in which they felt the school was being led, and referred very often to non-tangible experiences, using phrases – similar to those recorded in the last section – such as ‘ethos’, ‘atmosphere’ and ‘spirit’. However, when inviting them to explain what contributed to or created this, their accounts were similar in that they spoke of strong visible Catholic leadership. When analysing this further, it emerged that what they were referring to was the *symbolic* nature of leadership.

‘Leadership’, according to Hogan et al. (1994), can be considered as ‘persuasion’. Leaders therefore have the difficult task of persuading or influencing others but this is most effective when it occurs within a spirit of collaboration and without resorting to coercion. But how is this achieved? Vickery (2001) claims that leadership is essentially a ‘social interaction’ and that the process by which it is exercised is through symbolic interaction – that is, *communication*. He explains that ‘leaders cannot *not* communicate’ (2001, 315) and gives an example: when a leader refuses to make a decision about something then that in itself *is* a decision! He argues that virtually everything that leaders say or do, that others are aware of, *is* communication. ‘For every symbol – verbal or nonverbal – stimulates meaning in people who encounter it’ (2001, 316). Indeed, this ‘meaning’ may differ from person to person since what is being transferred in any interaction are symbols and not meaning. Meaning is created *within* individuals as they interpret the symbolic, communicative interaction that is taking place (Hackman and Johnson 2004). For this reason, leadership has been called a ‘language game’, in the Wittgensteinian sense, since good leaders ‘manage meaning’ and have the ability to give those they are influencing an understanding of what they are doing and an ability to explain why they are doing it (Vickery 2001, 316). Leadership and communication are therefore inextricably linked.

Vickery shares his concern about a lack of awareness of the concept of leadership as a symbolic communicative interaction often found in commercially produced literature on the subject:

... too many of the latest additions to the estimated 10,000 published works on leadership continue to treat communication as something leaders merely engage in (or not) at their peril, rather than something inherent in the nature of leadership itself. (Vickery 2001, 317)

He argues that this difference in perspective affects leadership success and this can be seen in the responses of those whom leaders are attempting to influence. Indeed, the findings from this research support this concept of symbolic leadership

and the influence it can have on individuals and groups of staff in schools. These will now be presented.

Verbal and non-verbal (words and actions)

The teachers interviewed for this study were asked to comment on the leadership in their school. There were both positive and negative experiences amongst the probationers.

Francesca discussed the ways in which the leadership of her school was very 'Catholic'. She spoke of how her head teacher was very strong in her faith and she based this assumption on what her head teacher said and did:

... on a Monday morning we have our Assembly and ... we start with a prayer, she'll often frequently talk about what happened at Mass the day before. What was the theme from Mass the day before? Em. And then we'll always finish with a hymn and we'll always finish with a prayer ... everything is underpinned by these morals and these values. Why is it we're going to keep our school tidy? 'Cause we look after our property and we love the world that we've been given by God, you know, everything is phrased very carefully like that. The head teacher is very very strong.

She continues by talking about how this has affected her:

I've noted how my head teacher's come across on a Monday morning. Yeah I did go to Mass yesterday and this is what the readings were about and the Gospels about ... that's been quite striking for me cause I didn't know, I didn't expect that or I didn't know whether to expect that or not but I felt that it's been quite prominent. Quite obvious. And I've felt like she started off our week in a very Catholic way and a very clear Christian Catholic way. You know putting across the message from nine o'clock on a Monday morning. This is how we run our school and this is what we want our school to be like and quite often we go back to the week before, what happened and this wasn't very good and that doesn't reflect the values of such and such and ... It just gives you the sense that you're working together and it's easier to do what you're trying to do because you've got a role model like that to show you a way of putting yourself across to children.

Francesca demonstrates a positive reaction to the symbolic interaction of her head teacher and her analysis of what this form of communication has meant for her in her probationary year. She comments on how she has 'noted' the words and actions of the head teacher and how this impacts on her. She speaks of the 'message' that she takes from her leader's behaviour and how this has made her feel a part of a community as there is a 'sense' that she's not alone in what she is doing. The meaning she has given to her head teacher's behaviour, and indeed the impact that it has had on her, is not a result of coercion or brainwashing, but rather a result of her own interpretation of the symbolic interaction of her leader. The head teacher did not tell Francesca what to think but she conveyed through her social interactions, both verbal and nonverbal, some of her values and expectations and the result – certainly in Francesca's case – is that the school leader is viewed as a role model, and her words and actions will be imitated.

Denise's experience of leadership in her school was also positive. She commented on how the head teacher and senior management team were visible in Church every morning before school, during the season of Lent. She explained, 'all throughout Lent the head teacher and the senior management were at mass ... it sets an example and shows a strong connection with the Church'. She continued by giving other

examples of what she considered was strong, Catholic leadership in her school. These included the visibility of the priest in the school, the regular celebration of the Church's sacraments such as reconciliation and the Eucharist on the first Friday of every month. In addition she commented on the head teacher creating a school oratory, a space for prayer in the school – something that would be more common in secondary schools than primary schools. When asked if this had affected her in any way she responded:

It just, it makes me very aware that although even though my parish is far away, I still have to be there regularly in order to come in here and be able to speak because the children, most of the children in this school regularly attend and I like to go in and say well what did your priest say at mass and things so that for me is quite important and I feel that I have to keep going and really pay attention to what's being said on a Sunday so that I can come in and I've got a strong understanding to then pass onto the children because I think that is expected throughout the school.

Denise's interpretation of the words and actions of her school leaders had an impact on her, insofar as she concluded that there was an expectation for her and her colleagues to be attending mass regularly in order to teach her children appropriately. Again, this was not communicated directly to this teacher but rather it was her own analysis and interpretation of her leaders' behaviour. Her reaction to this, in terms of her faith, was positive and she even spoke about being more proactive outside the school environment by volunteering to take the Children's Liturgy Group at mass on a Sunday, a parallel liturgy during mass that caters for children and their understanding of the Scripture readings for that day.

Seventy-five per cent of those interviewed spoke positively about the Catholic educational leadership that they had encountered during their probationary year but the remaining 25% were critical of the school leadership and, in particular, of the head teacher. Laura's experience was quite unique in that she criticised her head teacher for being *too* Catholic. She referred to him constantly pushing the Catholic faith via RE lessons and continually speaking to children about it but, she argued, this was done in a very academic manner that was 'way over their heads'. Mass was being celebrated in the school on a weekly basis during the school day and the children and staff were all forced to attend. She spoke of him doing things in an 'old fashioned way' and how he turned religion and God into something 'scary'. She commented, 'to be honest with you the leadership in this school just makes you think of how you wouldn't do things ... no wonder they don't go to mass!' Laura gave examples of how her school leader treated the children's parents like 'idiots' when they came to the school to discuss First Holy Communion. Working in an area that is exceptionally socially deprived, Laura believed that there was a lack of Catholic ethos in her school, despite that fact that religion and faith were pushed in a particular manner.

Eileen revealed that she was 'disappointed' with the Catholic leadership in her primary school. She revealed that while prayers were said, Holy Days of Obligation were observed (certain days in the Catholic liturgical calendar requiring members to attend mass) and that a crucifix was visible on the wall, there was not much else in terms of promotion of the Catholic faith. She spoke of a lack of opportunities being provided for the children and how the head teacher should be blamed for not giving children this 'exposure'. Eileen mentioned that something positive came out of this

situation in terms of her having to be proactive to ensure that her expectations are being met:

It's made me more aware that if I go into a school that maybe doesn't have the same support as I've experienced [in previous placements] ... you can try organise and take it upon yourself to try and develop it [faith dimension in the school] and then that's your own CPD as well.

What is interesting in this instance is Eileen's own emerging Catholic leadership capacity, albeit within a classroom situation. This is sometimes referred to as 'leading from the middle.'

'Shared' Catholic leadership, or distributed leadership

When asked directly about the leadership in their schools, many of those interviewed referred instantly as one might expect to the head teacher. However, interestingly, a large number also spoke of other members of staff's Catholic leadership. Even more significantly, this seemed to occur in the schools where the teachers were most positive about the faith and religious dimension of their working environment. Gemma, when asked about the Catholic leadership in her own school, did not refer directly to the head teacher at any point but spoke of much wider Catholic leadership;

Everything is celebrated. You know feast days are celebrated and em you know prayers, we encourage others to say prayers for people doing exams. There's been a couple of kids in this school who've lost their parents and stuff so we got a bulletin round as well we've all been asked to pray for their family and you know kids have asked and been allowed to go out to the funeral to support them and this kinda stuff.

She continues:

I feel as though they always encourage you to think of the other person and that's very much a line that the senior management go down.

In this instance, the responsibility for promoting the school's Catholicity is not simply that invested in the head teacher. Here a wider range of staff – and indeed the children – appear to have been given some encouragement in promoting the faith dimension of the school. Gemma also refers to a staff retreat that took place during the year and this was predominantly at the request of – and organised by – non-promoted staff in the school, demonstrating leadership capacity among others.

Others alluded to this concept of shared Catholic leadership in their own school context. Some referred to the school's RE department, its pastoral care group and the role of the chaplain in terms of Catholic leadership. They even spoke of their own leadership role in terms of working with the children within the context of their classroom. Such experiences align with Bolland's (2007) assertion that leadership is not a simple reality since 'every Catholic teacher is called to be a *leader* [sic]' (2007, 91). Interestingly, it was from amongst those in the secondary Catholic school sector that this was most evident – although there were some indications that leadership responsibility had been devolved to some non-senior management members of staff in the primary sector.

This concept of 'shared' or 'collective' leadership is one that has been championed by many commentators for some time, and not just by those interested

in the faith school context. Grace (1995) has highlighted the merits of having a 'community of leaders' in a school as opposed to one hierarchical leader and argues that such leadership is considered 'educative' as well as 'managerial' (1995, 54), where members of staff would be empowered in certain areas and given opportunities to grow and develop. Gold et al. (2003, 134) refer to this as head teachers paying attention to the development of 'leadership capacity' in their schools.

The development of leadership capacity in a school is also highly symbolic. This, arguably, sends a message to staff about the value placed on them and on their colleagues and has the potential to challenge and stimulate motivation among staff including, in particular, those new to the school. Of course, such development or commitment to this area will be subject to interpretation by any staff member. Perhaps not surprisingly however, those interviewed for the purposes of this study who had experienced such devolved leadership, interpreted this positively and the meaning that was taken from observing this in action was that teachers and children in the school were valued and of worth. Indeed, this experience of Catholic leadership capacity being developed amongst staff, most often in an implicit manner, stimulated positive reactions and some interviewees revealed the impact that this had on their own faith. Mary gave a very personal testimony:

Well I was thinking well that my own faith had just kinda dwindled away really and at that point I thought well I don't want to go into that you know some sort of an ethos for people that are very religious and I feel outta that then or feel under pressure to take more part in it. So it has made me think again. Actually the opposite happened. I just felt very included when I came in and there was no pressure on me as a teacher you know. I have chosen to become involved in the kind of spiritual life in the school. You know by helping out if there are retreats or I've approached, I've gone and sat in the RE classes just to see what goes on ... [Being here] has actually changed me and I think it definitely has changed my faith. You know I think I grew up with a feeling of guilt that if I wasn't really practicing. Now it's just a feeling that if I go to mass it's because I want to be there. That's really liberating for me. And that I actually really love that ethos and kind of direction within the school. And I do feel that it has a major impact on me and then on the pupils.

Community

The concept of 'community' emerged as an important part of the teachers' experience in their first year of their career, both from those who experienced a strong sense of this in their working environment and conversely, from those who did not. What was revealing from the interviews was the evidence provided by the respondents of the impact that 'community' could have on their faith.

Faith development

Those who had given examples of poor Catholic educational leadership in their schools also, for the most part, spoke of a lack of community within the school and presented a correlation between this and the nature of the leadership. Pauline commented:

It doesn't feel like a Catholic school ... there's not much unity in the school ... it's full of individuals. It's not like a community. I think we need to have a community. We need to have a whole school feel ... like the Church is all about community. It's about doing things as a community. Not necessarily praying but actually doing things as a

community ... and this is supposed to reflect community and the Catholic ethos is supposed like sort of prevail throughout. But em this school isn't a community therefore the Catholic ethos is just lacking completely. It's been lost somewhere. I don't know if it was ever like that. I don't know ... I mean the children aren't seeing the teachers getting on so if the teachers aren't getting on, how are they supposed to? ... if there was more whole school things and more community things based, they'd probably get on better.

She believed that working in such an environment had no impact on her faith:

Anything that I have had, any impact that has happened was in other placements. Either up to here or University. This has not had any impact. I'm actually really disappointed ... and for the children. I feel as if they're lacking so much.

What is striking here is Pauline's clear understanding of what the institutional Church has to say about the role of the Catholic school and its role in representing the Church. In addition, it is apparent that she is confident in articulating her analysis of the situation in her school with regard to the promotion of the Catholic faith and in her ability to suggest a solution. Pauline spoke of how her interpretation of the situation she was in, impacted on her own faith.

For those who considered that they had encountered a positive experience in terms of the promotion of the Catholic or faith dimension in their school, there was evidence to suggest that this was synonymous with an established sense of community within their working environments.

Joseph valued the fact that he worked in a faith community-orientated environment. Completing his probationary year in a suburban primary school, a range of examples were given that conveyed that members of staff in the school were working towards a common purpose and were supportive of one another when doing so. Again, the leadership in the school was considered responsible for establishing this. He gave an example of a decision taken by those leading the school which sent a clear message to him about the kind of values being promoted in the school:

On Ascension Thursday [a holy day of obligation for Catholics], we had an in-service day and there was like a few discussions throughout the authority that going to mass wasn't really an appropriate CPD activity. But the senior management team stuck to their guns and were like well it's part of being a Catholic teacher, so it's not you know often that we do get a chance to share like a mass together, without you know like going with the kids. They said it was really important.

Joseph gave other examples of symbolic interactions from the senior management in the school that he claims sent a strong message to himself and others regarding the school's culture:

They show like you know reverence for anything that we're about. They don't you know come in the middle of morning prayers or you know if they've got something to say they wait you know outside until everything's settled down ... they were an excellent support as well in the lead up to my interview, even just the wee kinda comment oh well like in assembly you know we'll all be praying for you and stuff. But, you know that they mean it. It's not just that, you know they're not just saying that so em ... they do a lot and they always send around, well I've only been here a year and don't really know, but like such- n-such's dad or mum, if it's been an ex-member of staff or something, or they always send around notes you know if there's anything that they're wanting you know to pray for especially. Em and they are really handy with the church over the road as well. The priest's always in here talking to them and they're always coming round with the priest.

Joseph conveyed how that kind of leadership impacted on the rest of the staff and how a strong sense of community was present, where communal values were lived:

... the senior management team are really supportive and everyone's supportive of each other. We support each other and just use each other's kind of strength and stuff and em even if someone's not feeling great one day, they'll be like well you know if you're wanting to you know maybe want us to do something else with them or well it's my own time but if you just go home and I'll you know cover your class for half an hour an stuff. I'm not brave enough to say that yet but (laughs) em you know that's the kinda thing they do and like you know they really look after each other.

In terms of the impact that this had on Joseph's faith, he shared:

It's just really consolidated my faith because I've always you know been fairly quite a strong believer but its quite similar to my own home environment where it's like a close knit community ... it's just like the staff's really close knit as well ... I do feel at home with the ethos that it's got.

Commentary

The results have focused primarily on the behaviours of the school leaders, particularly with regard to the values that are promoted within the schools and the manner in which these values are transmitted to others. The impact of this was also analysed. Communication became a primary focus along with the symbolic interactions of school leaders on a daily basis. What became apparent very quickly is that individual teachers *do* attribute meaning to the actions and words of others and, in particular of their leaders, and that this can have a significant impact on their own practice. Participants' examples illustrated this: some were not told directly what was expected of them but their interpretation of their leaders' words and actions within the working day nevertheless led them to certain conclusions and influenced their future behaviour. What was most interesting was the impact that this could have on their engagement with, or development of, their faith. As exhibited earlier through the example of Denise, the manner in which the head teacher projects him/herself in their daily interactions in school can result in, for example, a commitment from staff to ensure that they attend mass as regularly as possible. The powerful nature of this is striking and it raises questions as to how aware school leaders are of the impact of their words and actions. Indeed, the values of leaders are transmitted and interpreted in such a way, as illustrated in Joseph's example, that it would be important for all leaders – and indeed others – to be made aware of the impact of their behaviours, if and where this is not already the case. Recognition by leaders of this influential power is required since teachers – and in particular those that are newly qualified – very quickly attribute their own meaning to what has been heard and observed. In addition, however, a measured response is required on the part of those being led – an awareness of, and ability to interpret, leaders' behaviour should perhaps be a skill upon which newly qualified teachers should focus. The danger exists, of course, that this kind of interaction can become contrived, resulting in leaders, and indeed others, becoming unduly self-conscious about everything they do, thereby stifling creativity and natural, spontaneous behaviour – which will of course also transmit particular values. While this outcome must be strenuously avoided, it would nonetheless be considered important for Catholic leaders to receive significant input on symbolic leadership, in order to raise their awareness of its power.

Shared leadership and leadership capacity in Catholic schools

It emerged from the data that, in the schools where probationers were most positive about the promotion of any Catholic or faith dimension, it was not perceived as the responsibility of the head teacher alone, but rather that of a number of people in the school, working towards a common goal. Participants spoke of being aware of Catholic leadership from members of different subject departments, from the RE department (in secondary schools), from members of the senior management, from the Chaplain and even, in one instance, from children. While it is recognised that this devolved responsibility was, most often, ultimately guided by the head teacher, the commitment from members of non-senior management staff, and the impact and sometimes knock-on effect that this had on some of the probationers was revealing. Three of the probationers indicated that they had become involved in faith-related initiatives in the school while others were more proactive in terms of attending voluntary religious services or being involved in parish based ministries, all of which demonstrate ‘witness’ – arguably a leadership quality in itself. The effect of this shared leadership appeared to be the contribution to a wider sense of community in the school, where shared values were being promoted throughout their working day by a variety of people in different positions. Indeed, the interview data indicated a correlation between this shared responsibility and the establishment of a sense of community and some participants referred to this directly. Interestingly, the concept of devolved Catholic leadership was most evident in secondary schools, which is perhaps unsurprising when the ability to direct and instil Catholic values in a much larger environment may be considered more of a challenge.

While the development of Catholic leadership capacity amongst staff was predominantly associated in the schools where the probationers were *satisfied* with the direction of their head teacher and of the promotion of the Catholic faith, it was not confined to these environments and it also appeared in schools where the probationers were *less* than happy with the direction of their head or senior management. Two illustrated how they took on leadership roles, albeit within the classroom situation, when they interpreted the behaviour of their head teacher and others in the school to be inadequate or less than effective in the promotion of the Catholic faith. Recognising a deficiency in this area, and assessing the influence that this was having on the children in their classes, there was evidence to suggest that teachers were proactive in taking it upon themselves to update themselves and give witness to their faith in their classroom situations as much as possible. Additional lessons with appropriate resources were introduced in an attempt to raise an awareness of central features of the Catholic tradition and engage the children with their faith.

This paper has said little about the formal faith development opportunities in which these probationers were or were not engaged. This has been intentional. Indeed, some concrete examples – admittedly very limited – *were* given by probationers, detailing courses that they had attended or retreats that they had embarked upon that had a specific focus on their own faith. What has emerged from these interviews, however, is the impact that informal opportunities can have on the faith of staff and that have contributed to their overall professional development. There may be some difficulty for this to be labelled as ‘professional development’, but this research suggests that such opportunities and experiences for staff can have a significant impact on their overall development and, in the case of these probationer

teachers, contribute to establishing them as competent and confident teachers with a clear sense of identity and purpose within their immediate educational establishment and beyond.

Note

1. When the first data collection stage commenced, 27 student teachers were interviewed and tracked over a two-year period. By the final data collection stage (when the participants were in their probationary period) some participants had withdrawn from the research and the total number of participants had fallen to 20. At the final stage, there were five men and 15 women remaining in the sample group. In total, 11 were employed in the primary sector and nine in the secondary. This gender imbalance (which is representative of the teaching profession, particularly in the primary sector) is reflected in the selection of the quotes used in this article.

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