

## ARTICLES

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# The Religious Dimension of Lay Leadership in Catholic Schools: Preserving Catholic Culture in an Era of Change

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*This article is a qualitative study of the practice of leadership in Catholic schools in Australia. Within an interpretivist framework, a multiple case study of six lay principals was employed. Findings suggest that successful leadership in Catholic schools is highly influenced by the cultural and spiritual capital that a principal brings to a school, signifying a fundamental importance of appointing principals who are not only professionally competent, but who are spiritually competent as well. The relationship between the lay Catholic principal in the parish and the parish priest emerged as a challenging issue in many contexts. Indeed, it was highly problematic for some principals.*

### Introduction

Within the changing context of Church, society, and school in Australia, the transmission of a special culture must now make explicit what once was known implicitly. If Catholic schools are to carry out the work for which they were established, the processes through which their distinctive ethos or spirit are transmitted to each generation need to be understood better. In consideration of these issues, this study, set in a large diocese in Australia, explored the nature and purpose of Catholic schools, which unlike their secular counterparts, aim to mold a culture that is permeated by Gospel values and Catholic traditions. Specifically, it endeavored to probe the religious dimension of leadership in Catholic schools and the critical role principals, as positional leaders, play in embracing and creatively rebuilding the Catholic vision of life, given that the Catholic school principalship is now a ministry of the laity.

### **Catholic Schools in a Context of Change**

While the nature and purpose of Catholic schools have not changed fundamentally since their foundation, cultural, theological, and ecclesial movements over time have had significant influences on how they are organized and how they function (McLaughlin, 2000). At present, Catholic schools are especially challenged to maintain their overall character and ethos and at the same time integrate into a new context that which is more appropriate to the multicultural and pluralistic dimensions of modern Australian society.

With the Church in the new millennium, Catholicism often appears less united and John XXIII's vision of a new Pentecost seems far away (Treston, 2000). The Roman Curia and papacy appear once again to approach the modern world from a stance of suspicion (Collins, 2004; Duncan, 2003; Greeley, 2004), while in recent years a hesitant Church has been forced to account for the sexual abuse by clergy and religious (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2000). The accompanying denial, hypocrisy, and self-protective actions of some Church leaders have further alienated parishioners ("Church Must Face up to Failures," 2002; Cozzens, 2002). Issues such as divorce and remarriage, birth control and sexuality, and the ordination of women and married clergy are still matters of contention and anguish for many Catholics ("Contraception, Celibacy, Right to Life," 2005). These and other issues compel Treston (2000) to conclude the Church in the new millennium is in transition and as a result faces uncertainty, division, and confusion.

Against this background of change in the Church, Australian Catholic schools have continued to be a major expression of the Church's presence in society. Following Vatican II's emphasis on religious freedom, ecumenism, and openness to the world, Catholic schools have also undergone significant changes in terms of demography and functionality (Flynn & Mok, 2001). Along with freedom came plurality, and issues such as secularism, diversity in beliefs, student enrollment, and staff have challenged the traditional assumption of what the role of schools is in the Church for the communities they serve.

The religious character and mission of Catholic schools are the unique characteristics that distinguish them both as educational institutions and as agencies that help to hand on Catholic religious traditions. However, in an era when change is evident in the theory and practice of education, in its funding and accountability to governments, and even in the composition of school personnel, the Catholic educational ethos is no longer an unquestioned element of school culture. It is now contested from within the Church by

shifts in the spirituality of its members and especially by the tendency of modern youth to reject formal expressions of religion (McCann, 2003).

Catholic schools have been a major component of Australian education for over 185 years. During that time, they have adapted to changing circumstances and changing times; but at a time of profound change in society and the Church, Hutton (2002) observes that the essential role of Australian Catholic schools is “an intentional approach that focuses on identity, mission and community” (p. 54).

Typically, today’s Australian Catholic systemic school is characterized as:

- being staffed predominantly by lay teachers and administered by a lay principal (Canavan, 1999).
- having high levels of parent support and participation (Canavan, 1999).
- having an increasing percentage of non-Catholic, or non-practicing Catholic teachers and pupils (Canavan, 1999).
- being often the only contact with the Church for many of the families it serves as a result of the decline of participation in worshipping communities of parishes and the rejection of formal religion by youth (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Rossiter, 2003; Rymarz & Graham, 2005; Tacey, 2004).
- seeking to espouse the teachings of a Church with a changing ecclesiology (Treston, 2001).
- attending to a multiethnic clientele of European, Middle-Eastern, and Asian descent with the evaporation of an Irish-Catholic, sociopolitical identity (McLaughlin, 1998).
- functioning under the auspices of a diocesan Catholic education office, the parish priest, and ultimately, the bishop (Beal, Coriden, & Green, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000).
- being dependent on government funding to the extent that it could not exist without it (Canavan, 1999).

This means that Catholic schools in Australia are now challenged to maintain their overall character and ethos in a changing religious and social reality. Today, Catholic schools must prove their validity as viable educational institutions, as well as satisfy the requirements of the Church, while simultaneously responding to government accountability and to Church expectations. Their identity as Catholic schools is fundamental to their existence, and when they cease to be Catholic, for all purposes, they cease to exist. As a result, as positional leaders, contemporary lay principals are forced to make regular appraisals of their Catholic school leadership. For lay Catholic school principals, answerable to the multiple constituencies of

government accountability, the school community, parish priests, Catholic education offices, and bishops, the task of developing a genuine Catholic school identity may be problematic.

How then do lay principals in Catholic schools, in this complex and changing context, perceive their role in promoting a Catholic culture and character? While researchers suggest that principals do influence and shape culture within schools in ways that no other individual or external organization can (Deal & Peterson, 2003; Grint, 2003; Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie 2003), researchers are not always unanimous in their views about the conditions that make it so (Foster, 1986; Fullan, 2001, 2002). Despite this, it is widely accepted that principals have an important role in articulating the school's fundamental purpose to a variety of constituents (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2003). Within the dynamic of a Catholic school, such articulation becomes more problematic under the changing contexts noted above.

### **The Research Path: Methods**

Within the interpretivist framework, a multiple case study approach was employed for the research (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998). According to Bassey (2002), Schwandt (2001), and Stake (2003) a case may be described as a bounded system characterized by wholeness or integrity and the integration of its parts. It could be an event, a person, a group, an institution, or a phenomenon (Freebody, 2003; Gillham, 2000; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Yin, 2003) systematically focused "on one particular instance of educational experience" (Freebody, 2003, p. 81). In this inquiry, the bounded system is the lay principal in a Catholic school and the particular educational instance: the generation of professional knowledge through engagement in a process of promoting Catholic identity and building a faith community. The case studies of these lay principals in Catholic schools, therefore, were descriptive and interpretive, and produced a detailed view of their leadership by providing explanatory data from their perspectives.

As the study investigated the role of the lay principal in promoting a Catholic character and culture of a school, the following research questions provided the foundation for the study:

- How do lay principals perceive their role in carrying out the mission of Catholic schools?
- In a rapidly changing educational milieu, how do lay principals actively promote and make explicit their schools' Catholic character and culture to others?

- What tensions do lay principals experience in promoting a Catholic character and culture?
- How do lay principals perceive the appropriateness of their preparation for leadership of Catholic schools, and what professional needs are still to be met?

The research was undertaken with principals in a rural diocese of New South Wales, Australia, all of whom are charged with responsibilities to lead their schools beyond the academic field into the religious dimension in order to transmit Catholic culture to future generations. The criteria listed below were used to select lay principals to participate in the study:

- The lay principal was incumbent in the position for at least 5 years.
- A gender mix of male and female lay principals was preferred.
- The perspectives of lay principals from various school sizes were sought.
- Selections of participants were based on their ability to articulate their thoughts on their experience of being a lay principal.

The principals volunteered to participate in the research project after being briefed about it and the implications of involvement at a diocesan principals' meeting. Table 1 provides a summary description of the participants and their schools. The names of participants were not used in any reporting of the study.

Interviews with lay principals were formally conducted over an 8-month period. Following an initial interview of approximately an hour and a half duration, a follow-up interview with each principal was conducted a week or so after the initial interview. The follow-up interview provided further opportunities for clarification of responses from the initial interview and ideas developed during visitation and observation of the school site.

Data were collected in the form of interviews, field notes, reflexive journals, direct observation, and document analysis. Patton (2002) reasoned that

multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective. . . . By using a combination of observations, interviewing and document analysis, the fieldworker is able to use different data sources to validate, cross-check findings. (p. 244)

Figure 1 summarizes the data collection process.

Making meaning of the data began with the transcription and organization of material contained in digital recordings and field notes that resulted from the semistructured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The

Table 1

*Summary Description of Participants Included in the Study*

Lay principal	Total years as principal	Years as principal in Catholic schools	School type	Number of students
Principal A	8	8	Small primary (K-6)	45
Principal B	31	31	Small primary (K-6)	47
Principal C	7	7	Large primary (K-6)	320
Principal D	14	14	Large primary (K-6)	203
Principal E	12	12	Secondary girls' school (7-12)	685
Principal F	8	8	Secondary co-educational (7-12)	903

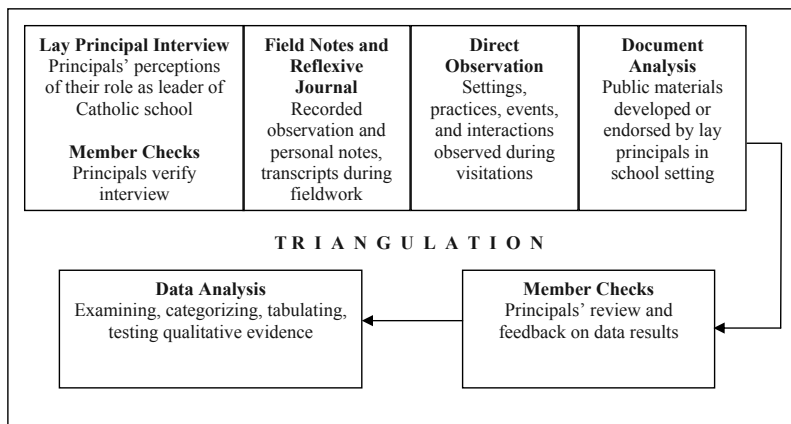


Figure 1. The collection and analysis data process used in the study

transcripts enabled the researcher to “identify the appropriate causal links to be analyzed” (Yin, 2003, p. 107) and therefore, gain a deeper understanding of what had been studied. Using the constant comparative method developed and refined by Bogdan and Biklen (2003), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Merriam (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994), Silverman (2001), and Yin (2003), comparisons within each principal’s case and among the principals’ cases were made. The constant comparative method provided a way to conduct an inductive analysis of qualitative data (Freebody, 2003) and the coding and categorization of data.

### **Key Findings of the Research**

#### ***Leading the Mission of the Church: Promoting a Faith Community***

The data confirmed that lay principals, as positional leaders, play a critical role in embracing and creatively building a Catholic character and culture in their schools. Moreover, the findings highlighted that Catholic lay principals continue to be community gatekeepers, assuming responsibility for fostering the faith development of the school community, promoting the moral and ethical development of the school community, building a Christian community, and developing and implementing the school’s philosophy (Cook, 2001a, 2004b; Flynn & Mok, 2001; Grace, 2002). Though acting as gatekeeper, issues such as the influence of the media, the pressure for academic success, people’s disengagement from the Church, the general secular culture of Australian society, and other external variables may in fact be weakening the Catholic habitus in schools, thereby making the task of preserving the Catholic character of the school problematic and highly challenging for principals.

Principals’ quest for community created a sense of belonging as well as cultivated trust and inclusiveness, a finding consistent with the literature (Schaps, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2001, 2003, 2005; Stoll, 2003; Stolp & Smith, 1995). These principals recognized the importance of the promotion of interpersonal relationships in the school as central to creating an ethos and culture that supported the Catholic view of life. They were able to articulate that a family-like character was sought for their school habitus. All principals viewed an ideal as one where the school operated as an extension of the family where, through the network of relationships, they were able to forge the generation of social capital so advocated by Church authorities (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1988). Central to creating a culture of community, principals identified their schools as exhibiting ideals such as providing a safe and secure environment, together with a sense of welcome, celebration, and hospitality. Individual care and concern, particularly for

those who are struggling to cope with communal expectations, were ideals also identified by principals.

As architects of Catholic school culture and identity, principals identified their prime roles as determining the quality of religious and academic purposes of their schools and building faith communities among members of their schools. The Church and relevant research (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; CCE, 1977, 1982, 1988, 1998, 2002; Flynn & Mok, 2001; Nuzzi, 2000, 2002; Wallace, 1998, 2000) indicate that principals in Catholic schools are charged with creating school cultures that embrace the teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church, central to which is community. In maintaining this special character of Catholic schools, writers such as Cook (2001a, 2004a, 2004b), Grace (2002), O'Donnell (2001), Spry (2004), and Spry and Duignan (2003) propose that it is essential that the building of community be fully integrated into the daily life and activity of the school. The connectedness with parish communities and ministering in the school community in caring and collaborative ways were viewed by all principals as essential to their exercising Catholic leadership. However, when faced with the reality of contemporary Australian society, characterized by a plurality of beliefs and experiences, it cannot be presumed that all students, families, and teachers are fully committed to the Catholic tradition or involved with local parish activities and worship. Given the diversity of faith standpoints, a noncritical awareness of the Catholic school as a faith community may hide a less than ideal reality.

### ***Leading and Building Catholic Character and Culture***

The data affirm the principal is the key leader of the Catholic school. School principals hold the unique responsibility as guardians of a Catholic heritage and play a vital role in determining the quality and the future of Catholic schools. Drawing from their resources of cultural and spiritual capital, principals, through their daily actions, were attending to and safeguarding the Catholic identity of their schools in their leadership role. The principals described experiences associated with encouragement, role modeling, upholding values, and articulating the Catholic faith. In short, they were the symbolic and cultural leaders of their schools. Principals believed they formally modeled their religious leadership to others in a planned and organized way that was integrated into the organizational life of the school. Informally, their personality and disposition transmitted the values, attitudes, philosophy, and norms of the school (Barth, 2004; Lingard et al., 2003; McGilp, 2000).

It was apparent that there was a clear sense of the nature of the religious leadership role of the lay principal in Catholic schools. All principals also



recognized their unique responsibility for Catholic schools where the school was an agent of the Church (CCE, 1988, 1998), witnessing that Christ is present and that his teaching is relevant in contemporary society. In their day-to-day operation in schools, lay principals indicated that while their expectations and responsibilities were similar to those of their colleagues in public schools, they perceived the extra responsibility in understanding and articulating the place of the school in the Church's educational mission. Such findings were also noted by Spry (2004) in the Catholic school leadership framework developed for Queensland schools, where leadership in Catholic schools called for many of the capabilities and competencies that are required of a principal in a state school, with the added dimension of faith leadership.

Principals believed their most significant formation for leadership in Catholic schools began in childhood, where they were imbued with the Catholic faith and its traditions. Principals brought with them much of the cultural and spiritual capital valued in Catholic schools and became familiar with the social environment of these schools. Within the habitus of their family and their own educational experiences in Catholic schools, the principals have embodied the Catholic faith along with its traditions and practices and have, therefore, developed empathy to their cultural environment (Bourdieu, 1977, 2000; Gronn, 1999, 2002; Lingard et al., 2003). The findings here concur with Grace's (2002) notion that success in Catholic school leadership appears to be highly influenced by the cultural and spiritual capital that a principal brings to a school, emphasizing the fundamental importance of appointing suitably qualified and skilled principals.

### ***Preparing for the Principalship***

Despite the critical role they play in their school contexts, principals in this study indicated that they lacked preparation for the position. Principals of small schools in particular found that a lack of formal preparation and experience in managerial and administrative aspects of their role made their transition into formal leadership positions difficult. Further, all principals noted that attention to their ongoing formation was lacking. In particular, principals acknowledged that they had personal needs for their own development in faith, requiring continuing growth in faith and vision. Principals noted that Religious Education Coordinators<sup>1</sup> (RECs) were well prepared for religious leadership in the school, possibly more so than they were as principals.

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1 In Australian Catholic schools, the REC is a member of the school executive and has special responsibilities in assisting the principal in the promotion of the Catholic ethos of the school, the curriculum, and the nurturing of parish-school links.

These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Duignan, Burford, d'Arbon, Ikin, and Walsh (2003) and Duignan (2004) that suggests leaders in contemporary organizations are seen to be ill-prepared for the demands of leadership. The findings of the study are also in accord with the research findings of small school principals in Queensland by Clarke (2003) who concluded that beginning principals in small schools were usually "thrown in at the deep end" (p. 9).

In contrast to principals of small schools, principals of large schools found that prior experience in managerial positions in schools did assist them in the transition to the principalship. Such findings, however, revealed an incongruity with recent research into the preparation of aspiring school executives for the principalship. Studies conducted by d'Arbon (2003), Draper and McMichael (2003), Harris, Muijs, and Crawford (2003), and Ribbins (1997) found that the experience of being an assistant principal was not always helpful in preparation for the principalship because of the lack of direct leadership experience some assistant principals encountered in this role. Ribbins's (1997) study in particular noted how many assistant principals were required to undertake the routine administrative tasks not wanted by the principal, which left them not only frustrated in their role, but unprepared for a principalship role.

Both large primary and secondary school principals recognized that their previous experience as the REC or the assistant principal had offered some insight into the world of leadership in Catholic schools, and therefore, was viewed as a significant stage in their development as a potential principal. In particular, for the Catholic school context, a key finding is that principals who had fulfilled the role of the REC acknowledged a comfortable transition into the religious leader of the school. The very nature and expectations of the position had led them to greater religious and theological literacy.

Besides a lack of preparation for leadership, this research revealed that the religious formation of principals was being neglected. It demonstrated that current principals drew on experiences gained from members of religious congregations, but it appears that, as a new generation of teachers and leaders who have had no affiliation with living out the norms of religious orders, they are unlikely to benefit from the "matrix of sources for spiritual capital" (Grace, 2002, p. 237). This is a major conclusion to be drawn from this research. In examining the current realities and the contribution of diocesan authorities, all principals indicated that Catholic education offices were not proactive in either the leadership of principals or of their faith development. All principals noted that they had had only a minor exposure to formal development programs, even though principals themselves viewed it as a priority for the promotion and maintenance of the Catholic identity in their schools. There

is a major conflict in a system of schooling that exists to nurture the faith of young people, yet fails to realize and address the traditional spiritual capital of its leadership.

### ***Challenges of Leading in a Catholic School***

Consistent with the literature, this research revealed that all principals were in a constant struggle to refocus the energies of the school community on a set of values consistent with the mission of Catholic schools, and therefore, the promotion of its special character. Principals reported the religious dimension of Catholic schools was being marginalized by the pressure for academic success (Flynn, 1993; Flynn & Mok, 2001), the influence of the media on young minds, by people's disengagement from the Church (Rymarz, 2004; Rymarz & Graham, 2005), the general secular culture of Australian society (CCE, 1998; Flynn & Mok, 2001; McLaughlin, 2000, 2002; Treston, 2001), and by other external variables that affect how their schools are constituted and conducted.

In addition, the increasing pluralism of beliefs and values in Australian Catholic schools, reflected in the significant number of non-Catholic students who normally have little or nothing to do with the teachings of the Catholic Church outside the school, nor hold a desire to embrace the Catholic way of life, impacted the capacity of principals to promote a Catholic ethos in their schools. This reality emerges as an important issue because Catholic schools in Australia are experiencing an increase in non-Catholic enrollments. In light of this, these principals, particularly those in secondary schools, suggested it was easier to promote a Catholic ethos in schools where there were higher percentages of Catholic students. Such a situation is in accord with Ryan and Malone's (1996) view that ongoing increases in the number of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools impact the delivery of the religious education curriculum and the liturgical life of the school and so places the Catholic identity of schools at risk. Such a phenomenon also concurs with what is known about school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2003; Schein, 1997; Stoll, 2003). Consistent with the literature (CCE, 1988, 1998; Heft & Reck, 1991), the Catholic school was seen to be a genuine teaching instrument of the Church. The local parish in particular was called to provide ongoing support and solidarity for schools (CCE, 1988), and priests were summoned to support Catholic schools by their words, presence, and actions (Beal et al., 2000; Codd, 2003; Ryan & Malone, 1996; Vatican Council II, 1965/1982). Here it was found, however, that there was general confusion as to the precise nature of the relationship between the lay principal and the local church, suggesting that there was little evidence of a functioning relationship among principals

and priests. Principals reported many priests were authoritarian and perceived a wide diversity of personalities in priests.

The research revealed that some priests might not have changed their expectations of principals from an era where principals were predominately members of a religious congregation living and working in the parish. The “quasi monastic” legacy described by Hansen (1999, 2000) was identified by lay principals in this study, where priests still held unrealistic expectations of lay principals who were usually married and with a family. As such, they could not be expected to be as accessible or visible as their religious counterparts might once have been.

In addition, lay principals identified gender issues as impacting their roles, indicating that it was their perception that priests viewed women in a traditional sense as mothers and caregivers (Carlin & Neidhart, 2004; d’Arbon, 2003; Power, 2002), and thus often had little or no regard for women in leadership positions. At the least, they seemed skeptical of the capacities of female principals.

Also consistent with the literature, this research demonstrated that principals were overwhelmed with an ever-expanding list of duties and expectations (Carlin, d’Arbon, Dorman, Duignan, & Neidhart, 2003; Collard, 2003; d’Arbon, Duignan, & Duncan, 2002; Department of Education and Training, 2004; Duignan, 2004; Scott, 2003). The intrusion into family time and the lack of quality of life relating to the principalship were key issues identified by all principals. There were growing expectations placed on principals that were placing undue stress on personal relationships and in some cases impacting the health and well-being of principals.

In small schools, the increased complexity of their teaching role caused teaching principals to feel guilty and frustrated as they endeavored to cope with the dual roles of teaching and administration. Principals of small schools more fervently portrayed the overwhelming list of duties and expectations. Where large schools tended to rely significantly on members of the executive team to share responsibilities and the workload, in smaller schools the possibilities for sharing of responsibility were not available. This led principals of small schools to exhibit the slipstream syndrome described by Clarke (2002), Dunning (1993), and Murdoch and Schiller (2002), where such schools were forced to adapt to changes imposed with larger school contexts in mind.

### **Implications of the Research**

The findings of this study have a number of implications for lay principals in Catholic schools and for those who prepare them for their role, as well as for

those who administer such systems of schools. While the data are drawn from schools in Australia, it is likely that the following comments are more widely applicable. A summary of implications that relate to this study's findings is presented in Figure 2.

### *Nurturing a Catholic Character*

In nurturing a Catholic character in their schools, lay principals need to specify more explicitly the elements that constitute a Catholic school. With the previous cultural symbols of Catholic schools—namely the presence of religious brothers, sisters, and priests—diminishing, a conscious effort for promoting and preserving the Catholic character of schools appears fundamental. Symbols provide a powerful means of creating a world of meaning for students, teachers, and parents (Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989), and therefore, as Cook (2001a) argues, it is imperative that the principal budget and give close attention to creating and exhibiting a school symbol system that reflects the school's religious mission.

This study affirmed that principals directly impact the Catholic character of their schools by nurturing faith development practices. Since the religious education program is the most visible religious identity present in a Catholic school, lay principals must therefore “walk the talk” (Gallagher, 2003) through their daily actions by giving high priority to religion classes and encouraging prayer and sacramental life within the school. Principals need to be encouraged to take on this prime responsibility and become the leader that provides opportunities for growth in knowledge and faith for the entire community (Catholic Education Office Sydney, 2001a, 2001b; Cook, 2001a; Flynn & Mok, 2001; Grace, 1996, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000; Wallace, 2000).

Teaching principals who participated in this study observed that there was no more effective way to promote the religion program in a school than for principals to teach the subject themselves. In recognizing the significant symbolism conveyed to the school community in this action, there appears no more explicit transmission of a principal's religious leadership than teaching a religious education class. As such, lay principals, in a very practical sense, need to be seen to be involved in the teaching of religious education for it to have the highest priority.

Taking into account the increased number of non-Catholic students as well as Catholic students who are largely unchurched, the principal needs to ensure that the school's mission, shared beliefs, and core values align with the person of Christ and his teachings. To ensure that core values are not lost or diminished over time, commitment and support for mission, values, and shared beliefs of the school should be a touchstone for enrollment of students

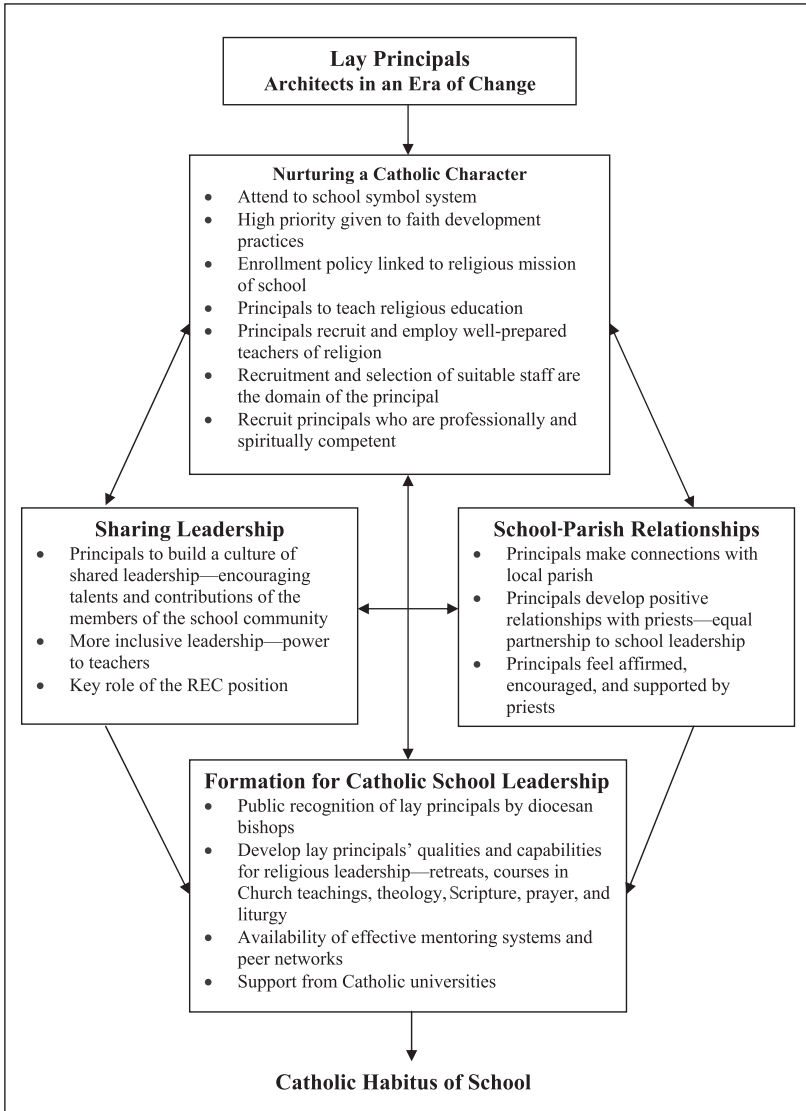


Figure 2. Implications of the study: Preserving a Catholic culture in schools

and their continuing participation. A readiness to engage with the school's values and teachings should be the starting point for the school's educational and religious work. The fact that parents have preferred their children to participate in the life of a Catholic school may be viewed as an encouraging sign of their willingness to share the aims of the mission of the school and the worshipping community.

This research highlighted the importance of recruiting and appointing principals who have the professional and personal qualities needed to lead Catholic schools effectively. If the Catholic character of schools is to be maintained and nurtured, lay principals, as cultural and spiritual capital (Grace, 2002), need to be not only professionally competent, but spiritually competent as well. Individuals who witness to the Gospel and are equipped with leadership skills and abilities need to be recruited and encouraged to assume principalship positions in Catholic schools. The findings found in leadership succession research (Carlin et al., 2003; Collard, 2003; d'Arbon et al., 2002; Duignan, 2004; Scott, 2003), and the disincentive for senior leaders in Catholic schools to apply for principal positions, however, would seem to pose barriers in the future to attracting such competent and qualified people.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of employing well-prepared teachers of religion who can communicate the teachings of the Catholic Church to students. Church documents (Australian Episcopal Conference, 1972; Beal et al., 2000) and other literature (Cook, 2001b; Malone & Ryan, 1994; Raddell, 2000; Ryan & Malone, 1996; Sultman, 2004) identify the critical need for Catholic school religion teachers to be knowledgeable about Catholic doctrine and faithful to the teaching authority of the Church. The recruitment of teachers who have graduate studies in religious education or theology, therefore, needs to be a high priority for principals so that teachers of religion may communicate the Gospel effectively, employ a variety of teaching strategies, and have an understanding of developmental and learning processes.

Attention needs to be focused on recruiting and employing teachers in other key learning areas that share and support the beliefs of the Catholic faith. Church documents (CCE, 1982, 1988, 1998; Vatican Council II, 1965/1982) have constantly indicated the importance of teachers' responsibilities, both as individuals and as a community, in creating a particular ethos in Catholic schools. The responsibility of the principal in selecting appropriate staff to carry out the school's aims, promoting its values and ethos within the habitus of the school, was a key finding of this research. System administrators, such as Catholic education offices, need to become aware that a relatively high level of school autonomy and not a bureaucratically controlled system appears to be the key in selecting committed and suitable staff for the cultural development of a Catholic habitus. The recruitment and selection of suitable staff needs to be predominately the domain of the principal.

Principals in this study noted the commitment of non-Catholic teachers to the mission of the school, but given its aim of developing its special character, particular attention needs to be focused on educating non-Catholic

teachers about the Catholic faith as well as articulating the school's mission and vision. In supporting all of the teachers' efforts for the life and success of Catholic schools, lay principals and systemic leaders must ensure that time, opportunities, and budgets are creatively allocated for teachers to be educated about and updated on the teachings of the Catholic Church. Principals need to encourage staff members to nurture their own spiritual growth and development and support them in this process by making conscious efforts to provide faith formation and development opportunities for all (Shimabukuro, 1998, 2000; Wallace, 2000). Staff formation experiences, therefore, should be a matter of routine and built into staff development occasions. Given that not all teachers are at the same point on their faith journey, it is most important that these occasions be presented in a nonthreatening way and structured in a manner the principal discerns suitable for the habitus of the school.

### *Sharing Leadership*

In an era of rapid societal change and growing expectations placed upon principals, there is a call for educators to rethink the kind of leadership that has traditionally existed in schools and expand these views to include a broader, more flexible, and inclusive model of leadership. Much of the reform literature recommends that leadership responsibilities be distributed widely across educational organizations (Andrews & Crowther, 2002; Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Gronn, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Limerick, Cunnington, & Crowther, 2002). In broad terms, there are implications from this study that have to do with a paradigm shift of leadership, which points to the need to move the focus from the leadership of the principal alone to a more inclusive form of leadership that shares power with teachers and recognizes the importance of promoting positive collegial relationships.

As positional leader, the literature identifies the principal as pivotal in implanting a culture of shared leadership, building the school community with decision making and responsibility that is distributed throughout the organization (Crowther et al., 2002; Duignan, 2004; Duignan & Collins, 2003; Harris, 2005; Hatcher, 2005; Limerick et al., 2002). Principals should provide opportunities for teachers to show leadership outside of the classroom. They should foster school cultures that are collaborative, support an atmosphere of inquiry, and encourage the talents, creativity, and contribution of the members of the school body. In this sense, principals nurture teacher leadership in a new culture characterized by principles of mutuality, interdependence, and individual expression (Crowther et al., 2002).



Building on Cook's (2004a, 2004b) work, the findings of this research revealed that new challenges to develop other models of Catholic school leadership to engender the religious life of school communities will be needed and that these will include shared leadership, especially the REC position. The study revealed a substantial regard for the existence of such a position and what the REC achieves in Catholic schools, particularly in the coordination of the religious education curriculum and other designated religious activities and events particular to the Catholic character of the school. Supporting the research of Buchanan (2005), Crotty (2002, 2005), D'Orsa and D'Orsa (1997), and Fleming (2001), the REC position is perceived as synonymous with, and symbolic of, the different ways that the Catholic school makes specific its religious identity in the school community. Overwhelmingly, the study indicated that not only is there a continued need for such a position, but due to ever-increasing demands and challenges placed upon lay principals, the position is more critical than ever. In small schools, where because of low student numbers a REC is not currently appointed and so principals bear the extra responsibilities and duties of the role, diocesan authorities should particularly consider the position of REC, at least on a part-time basis.

The relationship between the leadership of the principal and that of the REC, however, revealed confusion about religious leadership, especially when the REC can, as Fleming (2001) and Crotty (2002, 2005) contend, be perceived to be better prepared for religious leadership, and therefore, more credible to the school community than principals themselves. Drawing on this understanding, the close linking of the religious leadership to the REC position is conflicting, especially in relation to expectations about the principal's leadership in Catholic schools. Religious leadership focused in the REC position can limit the potential for implementing a shared vision of the central mission of the school. There is potential for the mission of the Catholic school to become associated with the responsibility of the REC rather than the general responsibility of all involved as Catholic educators, and the particular responsibility in a leadership sense of the principal.

### ***School and Parish Relationships***

There is an expectation of the principal to connect with the parish and that an amiable relationship between the principal and priest is developed and maintained. The possibility of a conflict of leadership paradigm, however, was noted by all principals in this study where the collaborative approaches to school leadership espoused by principals often clashed with the priests' traditional understandings of leadership (Holohan, 1999). Principals noted

that the interference and control by some priests was excessive, especially when principals' future careers were at risk (Australian Catholic Primary Principals' Association, 2005). This had a negative impact on the working relationship between priests and principals and thus the building of an authentic educational and faith community.

A key implication of this research is that in an attempt to foster effective collaboration between priests and principals, priests need to step away from their hierarchical beliefs and view the lay principal as an equal partner with regard to school leadership, and in so doing, demonstrate trust in the principal's educational expertise as the school leader. As the one designated by the Church (Beal et al., 2000) with power and authority for the parish and spiritual leadership, it seems that priests have the primary responsibility to build a culture of partnership in this regard. They need intentionally to be aware of their role that seeks to promote trust, community, and shared decision making. They should see themselves as leaders who do not misuse their power, but share it with other members of the community and thus take the lead in affirming, encouraging, and supporting the lay principal in his or her ministry.

### ***Formation for Catholic School Leadership***

Demographic data in Australia confirms the shift in the nature of Catholic school principals from religious to lay. As the responsibility for the Catholic character of schools shifts increasingly to lay persons, diocesan leadership is called to respond in new ways. Findings demonstrated the need for ongoing opportunities for the spiritual growth and development of Catholic school principals. Although principals themselves acknowledged that they had a significant responsibility for their own faith formation, they identified that diocesan agencies, such as Catholic education offices, too, have a responsibility to facilitate and support the spiritual as well as the professional growth of principals. In the past, when the overwhelming majority of principals were vowed religious, spiritual opportunities were provided by religious congregations and inherent in the religious lifestyle. This is no longer the case. Catholic school leaders at all levels should collaborate to ensure that spiritual development opportunities are part of the professional development of Catholic school principals. The continuation of Catholic schools with strong Catholic character necessitates leaders who have high levels of cultural and spiritual capital. For this to occur, Catholic school principals need to keep Christ at the center of their own lives as well as at the center of their schools.

The study highlighted aspects about the transition from religious to lay leadership to suggest it is still occurring and that some lay principals are

concerned that they are being criticized regarding their capacity to sustain the religious identity of the school. As this transition continues, assurance for principals is needed so that future lay principals are capable and willing to preserve and promote the Catholic character of schools. As noted by Hansen (2001), however, the Church seems to have neglected describing the ministry of the emerging dominance of the Catholic school lay principal. While engaging Church authorities at the highest level to rectify this situation may seem improbable, local church leaders need to recognize and acknowledge the leadership role of lay principals assumed in the name of the local bishop and in the mission of the Church. Public recognition and confidence expressed by bishops in lay principals will assume a heightened importance in the principals' work, especially since the literature confirms the Catholic school is the only experience of religiosity and Church many young people encounter (Dixon & Bond, 2004; Engebretson, 2003; McCann, 2003; Rochford, 2001; Rossiter, 2002, 2003; Rymarz, 2004; Rymarz & Graham, 2005).

Preparation and formation for those who are to assume the challenge of leadership in Catholic schools must take into consideration this dimension and seek to develop leaders with the qualities and capabilities that religious leadership demands. In a time of rapid societal and ecclesial change, Sullivan (2000) argues that contemporary circumstances seem to be placing increasing demands on the role of the religious leader, who may need to be prepared better and more skilled than ever before to meet these challenges. As a result, there is a clear need among lay principals for a greater degree of theological literacy. However, this is not something that will happen automatically and without planning. A deliberate and structured formation program that builds the individual's capabilities and competencies should be created. In calling for diocesan offices to facilitate religious formation programs, principals identified formation in spirituality and opportunities for retreats as areas of greatest need. They also valued courses in Church teachings, theology, Scripture, prayer, and liturgy, as well as opportunities for communal prayer and liturgy.

The weight of evidence from current research (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Bush & Glover, 2005; Hean, 2003; Hobson, 2003; Mertz, 2004) suggests that mentoring in leadership, even with its identifiable problems (Bush & Chew 1999), is an effective strategy in preparing and supporting beginning principals. As was apparent in this research, newly appointed principals directly enter the position with little or no preparation and usually have to cope with the new role on their own. All principals in the study identified that in the early years of their leadership they relied on the advice and support of more experienced principals. Mentoring arrangements, whereby experienced practitioners provide advice and support to new principals, could be developed

to provide a means of initiating and enhancing the professional development of beginning educational leaders, and at the same time reduce the level of professional isolation and loneliness. Effective mentoring systems offer a solution to preparing aspiring principals better, such that the focus for school administrators really needs to be on how to implement these best within the context of each diocese.

For more experienced principals, the facilitation of peer networks or mutual support groups with dioceses for long-term practicing principals, which allow school leaders to participate in meaningful exchanges with other principals, may also be considered. Other studies (Bush & Glover, 2005; Bush & Jackson, 2002; Hobson et al., 2003a) found mentoring to be effective in supporting more experienced principals as well.

At a more formal level, there are implications for those institutions with roles in the formation of lay principals such as Catholic universities. The findings of the study suggest that Catholic universities in Australia initiate programs to prepare, form, and support school principals to continue to foster the Catholic character of schools. Efforts focused on assisting present and future Catholic school principals to nurture the skills, knowledge, and capabilities necessary to promote the Catholic character of their schools effectively must be at the center of leadership programs. Such programs must assist principals in becoming more aware of how they can foster the Catholic identity of their schools in all aspects of their leadership roles.

Catholic schools may also benefit from support services provided by Catholic universities. Assistance in curriculum leadership, for example, may support Catholic school principals in their efforts to develop, implement, and assess the curriculum of their schools within the context of Catholic identity.

### **Conclusion**

This study, located in a large diocese of Australia, has demonstrated that lay principals play a prime role in determining the quality and the future of Catholic schools. In an era of unprecedented social, economic, and ecclesial change, their greatest challenge is preserving and enhancing the school's Catholic character and culture for future generations. The implications of this research have shown that, as architects and caretakers of Catholic schools, preserving the Catholic character of a school is not something that will happen automatically. A deliberate and conscious approach to integrate the religious and academic purposes in every dimension of the school is what will be required. There are clearly challenges emerging from this research for Catholic schools and systems elsewhere. Indeed, if the findings are replicated

in these other schools and systems, it could be argued that there are not only challenges in the leadership of Catholic schools in Australia, but that these challenges might be more widespread, requiring an urgent response for the future viability of Catholic schools as we have known them.

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