

Investigating the impact of a Church school ethos and leadership on student character development

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Abstract: The study investigates how the ethos, leadership and structure in a particular Catholic school affect character development. A well-balanced character is important as it will direct one in life. This direction is driven by values that are culturally normed and represent the 'ideal' way of acting. Literature on the apparent effects of church schools on pupils is sparse, except in the field of student performance outcomes. The study goes on to describe a small scale investigation that was carried out with a number of students from different year groups within the same school. Methodologically, the study adopted the phenomenological approach. Focus group discussions elicited the pupil's experiences on how relationships within school and with staff effect their character development. One question also focused on how the school and the family complement each other. The study indicates that the interactions happening in school influence individual ethos and values which ultimately aid in character development. A critical analysis of the findings attempts to highlight similarities and differences to what is reported in the relevant literature. It was evident that literature which focuses on other aspects such as psychological development, achievement, community and leadership, complements the findings of this research; that rather than formal teaching, community life and individual care enhance pupils' self-esteem and support their personal and social development further. Indeed, contrary to the perception of authors who are opposed to the concept of faith schools, this study argued that values are not internalized through indoctrination, but rather through healthy community living.

Keywords: Character formation, Catholic schools, school leadership

Introduction

There is a raft of literature on how families impact children and their development (Bowlby, 1988; Pritchard, 1998; Glaser, 2000; Schore, 2001a; Howe & Fearnley, 2003; Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004; Abela *et. al.* 2012). However, it is interesting to note that although children spend almost half of their childhood at school, literature which explores the personal experience of pupils and on how the school affects their development – intellectual, moral and social – is rather scarce. This research investigated how the ethos, leadership and structure in a Catholic school affect character development. Its intention was to shed light on practices and their impact on students' lives.

Why this research?

Various studies have shown how school climate affects 'values, social beliefs and social norms' (Sackney, 2000). Pupils imbibe the values and morality structures through inter- and intra-personal interactions happening in school (Berkowitz & Beir 2005 in Langer *et. al.* 2010) as well as through the curriculum (Milson, 2000). This study focuses on the personal experience of the pupils, therefore seeing things through their lens. According to Hoy and Miskel (1987, in Sackney, 2000) the internal characteristics of schools distinguish them from each other and influence how pupils act. These internal characteristics are referred to as school culture or ethos. Deal and Peterson (1998) define ethos as:

the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools (p.28).

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

Whilst all schools recognise the importance of forming pupils as active citizens able to converse with society (Milson, 2000), this notion takes on even greater importance for Catholic education, which is central to this research, and seeks "to be an agent of transformation and change while recognising the on-going challenge of holding together the concerns of both this life and the 'beyond'" (McGettrick, 1999, p.345).

The school under study in the Maltese School Scenario

The school under study is a Catholic school – a minor seminary – with a history of over 300 years. The aim of the founder was to open a place of formation for pupils who wanted to prepare themselves for Priestly Ministry (Bonnici, 2003). Over time, this evolved into a Catholic secondary school (Zammit Mangion, 1992). In the past four years the school has opened a primary section. Similar to other Catholic schools in Malta, the school enjoys a considerable amount of autonomy (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007) and can design its own curricula as long as the national minimum is met.

The Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), indicates that it is the mission of the church to promote the wellbeing of the whole person in the light of one's heavenly vocation (*Gravissimum Educationis: introduction*).

In this light, the church therefore has a part to play in the development and extension of education (ibid.). There is a vast history of faith-schooling dating back to medieval times. Both the Catholic Church and Reformed Churches saw schooling as a means of faith and value development, along with academic achievement.

To remain relevant with the times, Church schools run the risk of providing teaching that is purely technical and practical with the consequence of eliminating any reference to religion. Nonetheless, to be able to transform hearts and minds (Twelves, 2001) the Catholic school must not lose sight of its mission and give in to market demands (Grace, 2003).

Church Schools in Malta

In Malta there are three main educational stakeholders – state, church and independent (MEE, 2012). Church schools in Malta, as other private schools on the island, have to abide by the Education Act and the National Minimum Curriculum (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007). Usually, these schools have a member of the same congregation as their head – who is also approved by the state's education authorities. This aims to ensure that the congregation's ethos is passed on to the pupils. Church Schools in Malta are state-subsidised (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005).

Dating back to the 14th century (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007; Zammit Mangion, 1992), church schools in Malta were a means by which members of different congregations used their specific charisma to educate the young. Every congregation worked independently from the other. However, the common aim

of these schools was novitiates, where “young people willing to joining the orders were instructed and trained” (Zammit Mangion, 1992, p.10). By time, church schools have evolved into primary and secondary schools giving a broader instruction, not just religious formation (Zammit Mangion, 1992). In 1984 the Secretariat for Church Schools was founded, where these schools, although remaining autonomous, were brought together under the direct administration of the Bishops of Malta and Gozo (Zammit Mangion, 1992).

The National Curriculum Framework, published by the Ministry of Education confirmed the autonomy of Church schools (MEE, 2012). This degree of autonomy leaves the delivery of the educational programme “subject to the ethos of each individual school” (ibid., p.36). In such a scenario the school’s ethos and leadership would impinge not only on the effect which the school’s leave on character (Schaps, 2002) but also on academic achievement (Morris, 2005).

The Nature of the Investigation

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

Research Methodology

Genre

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of individuals and was thus concerned with real people and their experiences. The study was also based in a bound context, placing it in the category of case studies (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001). According to MacDonald & Walker, 1975, in Bassey, 1999) a case study includes the examination of an ‘instance in action.’ Through this study the researcher aimed to explore the experience of children as affected by present structures in the school.

A Phenomenological Base

In context, a phenomenological approach was deemed to be the best choice over ethnography, grounded theory, field work, and heuristics. After exploring these methods of data collection, phenomenology was selected as the underpinning

methodology for the study, employing focus groups to collect data. The aim of this type of data collection is:

to determine what an experience means for the person who has the experience and is able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essence or structure of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p.13)

In this sense, the phenomenological approach strives to extract meaning out of experience without the interface of any *a priori* assumptions (ibid.). This freedom from suppositions, called *epoche* by Husserl (1931, p.110 in Moustakas, 1994), allows space for the formulation of new knowledge (Moustakas 1994). It allows the phenomenon to be what it is (ibid.) without taking any position (ibid.). Moreover, one had to keep in mind that the focus of the study was the pupils themselves, and the researcher's task was to perform a reflective structural analysis of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Husserl, in his *Logical Investigations*, indicates that one should go 'back to the things themselves' (Farber, 1940). This is what Moustakas (1994) calls phenomenological reduction – that is to look at the phenomenon and describe it with the aim of arriving at its essence without altering it; 'each angle of perception adds something to one's knowing of the horizons of a phenomenon' (ibid., p.91). One has to empty oneself from the knowledge that one already has – the subjective content of the phenomenon (Farber, 1940).

Focus Groups

Focus groups were chosen as the research tool for this study. This method of data collection was considered the best in view of the circumstances – that of the power issue between researcher and the subjects. Moreover, it provided the data needed for a phenomenological approach. To collect data, the study analysed the content of the focus groups, doing this through content analysis.

After examining the literature, a series of questions to be asked during the focus group sessions were drawn up. There were questions focusing on how the school affects character. There was also one question which explored how the family complements the school. A second set of questions focused on leadership.

A pilot session was conducted with a number of pupils from year 7, the middle ground between primary and secondary school. During the pilot session it transpired that the pupils did not fully understand the questions, however the problem was more in how the questions were posed rather than their content. As a result, the questions were re-worded into more student-friendly language.

Post Focus Groups

Following participation in the focus group, each participant was given an envelope containing two questions which the students were asked to answer anonymously. The pupils were also asked to write any other comments which they might see as pertinent to the study and note down any comments which they did not have the chance to voice during the focus group session. The content of the returned envelope was kept confidential and anonymous. The pupils had to return the envelope in a designated letter box to protect anonymity.

The Narrative

Focus groups produced data through a discussion of a specific topic under study. The data is a result of first-person narratives which emerge from memory and is selective (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002, in Robson, 2011). Nevertheless, they indicate that “the remembered events, as well as experiences people choose from their vast store of memory, focus on the significant aspects of their social reality” (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002, in Robson, 2011, p.374). Narrative is thus the vehicle through which the narrator engages in a self-exploration of his personal experience of the world.

In fact, narratives can be seen as a convergence between the social influence and the person’s inner life, environment and history (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, in Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). Referring to Dewey’s ontology, Clandinin & Murphy (ibid.) indicate that three things are important when trying to perform epistemological investigations; namely: the emphasis on the social dimension; temporality of knowledge generation; and continuity.

The narrative is thus a cognitive schema, through which the person recounts his/her experience by storytelling; this explains how the person relates oneself by creating meaning (Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010). The narration helps to explain one’s relation to events and as such opens a window into the internal world of the person (ibid.). This research used the narrative to explore the way in which pupils perceive that the school affects their values and ethos and leads them to transform their present ethos.

All happenings may be regarded as text. The main task of a researcher is thus to produce a verbatim transcript of the discussion to produce a narrative and then proceed with data reduction (Robson, 2011). During the study an attempt was made to explain the studied phenomenon theoretically by analysing hyper-themes of each story and of all the stories collectively (Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010). As indicated by Propp (1968 in White & Taket, 2000, p.701) “the process involves

analysing surface structures then deep structures which are 'value' or 'belief systems imbedded in the narrative, followed by interpretation and reflection."

Reliability and Validity

The research sought to understand the internal processes of the school and how they affect character development. Thus, an internal type of validity was required (Bush, 2009). Internal validity measures "the extent that research findings accurately represent the phenomenon under investigation" (ibid., p.98). Validity also relies on the accuracy of the description being made (Scott & Morrison, 2006 in Bush, 2009). "In narrative-based research, validity is more concerned in the research being well grounded and supportable by data that has been collected. It does not provide results that produce generalizable truths, 'prescribing how things are or ought to be'" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.90). Narrative research does not try to prove how things ought to be (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000, in Webster & Mertova, 2007)

Guba and Lincoln (1981 in Azham *et. al.*, 2011) indicate credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability as criteria that help to achieve trustworthiness. In this sense there should be descriptive validity (factual accuracy) and interpretative validity (grounded in the language of the participants), which call for an accurate recording technique (Chionchel *et. al.*, 2003). The researcher had to keep in mind the ages of the participants and their meaning-making according to age, while trying to avoid interpretation by also bracketing his own meanings.

Since there was no interference in the discussion during the focus group, and the only questions asked were to prompt the students to encourage a deeper discussion, this increased reliability. Chionchel *et. al.* (2003) indicate that if the moderator stimulates the active participation of all to obtain a broad range of facts and arguments without controlling the discussion, it will enhance reliability. In this sense small numbers of participants in focus groups are better as it gives time and space for each participant to contribute (Chionchel *et. al.*, 2003).

Generalizability

Yin (1994, in Bush, 2009, p.99) indicates that "the problem of generalization can be minimised by replicating the study in another similar setting." Nevertheless, since the questions are not standardised and could differ according to the individual situation (Vicsek, 2010), problems could emerge as to the limits of generalization beyond the specific group (ibid.). The dynamics of the group itself can never be repeated (ibid.). Another limitation could be posed from participants who do not participate actively in the study - they may adhere to important points of views that due to their lack of representation will not be

represented in the study (ibid.). However, as Stake (1995) argues, in studies which focus on a particular specific setting, the issue is not generalization but getting to know the particular situation well.

Sim (1998) illustrates two problems with generalizability: firstly, that during such studies only the most confident pupils will remain till the end; secondly, that focus group data is 'contextualised to a specific social situation... [where] there are situated accounts tied to a particular context of interaction'.

Given the strict nature of such studies, one would have to move beyond and towards theoretical generalization where the data gathered from one study will provide insight to projects towards other contexts and situations (Sim, 1998). In fact, Strauss and Corbin (1994 in Fook, 2002) distinguish between two types of theories – substantive theory which is built from one context, and formal theories which are developed through numerous contexts. A theory holds if it can be transferred from one situation to another. In this way transferable theories become more generalizable. This leads to the "variations between theories in terms of their 'content', 'purpose' and 'application'" (ibid., p.84). Fook (2002) indicates that to generalise from practice one has to minimise the influence of formal theories that already exist, and to maximise the number of perspectives that one could gain. This is why the researcher chose focus groups as a research tool grounded in the phenomenological approach.

Bassey (1998) indicates that, on its own, a fuzzy generalisation – coming out of one research – has little credibility, but supported by a research which explains the context and justifies the evidence, 'it provides a user-friendly account of research findings.' He indicates that such generalizations invite replication of the research which, with the necessary modifications 'contributes powerfully to the edifice of educational theory' (Bassey, 1998). He also claims that in similar cases ' x may lead to y '; one has to clarify what x and y really are. If in replicating the research, more studies lead to y when studying x , findings will lead to statistical generalization which ultimately leads to theory building (Bassey, 2001). The author concludes that there should be a 'best-estimate-of-trustworthiness' meaning that the predictions - 'fuzziness' - are built by educational backing; in such cases such predictions are a powerful tool in the creation of educational theory (ibid., pp.19-20).

The Sample

The study used a random systematic sampling (Robson, 2011) of pupils from classes in Years 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 of the school, aged between 8 – 13 years. This was done to have a better representation of the population. Four focus groups were held:

	Intended population (n)	Actual participant population (n ¹)
year 4&5 pupils	n=12	n ¹ =8
year 7&8 pupils	n=12	n ¹ =9
year 9 pupils	n=6	n ¹ =5
year 10 pupils	n=6	n ¹ =5

Table 1: The intended and actual population sizes of the focus groups

The difference between the intended and the actual turnout is because some of the students opted out of the study. Having the older group separately was a decision based only on logistical school time-tabling reasons. From a total population of 350 pupils, 27 pupils were interviewed in the focus groups making the groups a sample size of 7.7% of the population under question.

Data Collection

The collected data was transcribed using the phenomenological method, meaning the whole conversation was transcribed - including what could be considered as unwanted material (Parker, 2006). After transcription, a table was drawn out to sort out the collected data under various headings or clusters of meaning representing themes and hyper-themes. The themes were then explored in light of the literature.

Generating themes and hyper-themes

After transcribing the focus group discussions, the notes were transformed into "concise phrases which aimed to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text" (Smith, 2008, p.68). Themes happened to link easily with the theoretical background but the chosen themes were still grounded to what was actually said (ibid.). Themes considered as relevant were those which were mentioned more than 3 times in the focus groups. It was here that the researcher had to be very careful in not interpreting issues or topics brought up by participants, but to be as true as possible to the respondents when categorising their responses under hyper-themes and themes. The importance of such a stance is to stick to the phenomenon of what was actually experienced (Willis, 2001). Connections were then found between the themes, and clusters were formed (Smith, 2008). The last stage was to connect these clusters of hyper-themes to the theoretical background (ibid.). In the data analysis, these hyper-themes were then translated into a narrative account (ibid.) to explain the themes. It is important that when narrating the themes one has to keep in mind that "the experience is represented in each theme, which presents more like different windows on the whole experience." (Willis, 2001, p.19).

Data and Discussion

Four focus group discussions were conducted: one with year 4 and 5 pupils, another with year 7 and 8 pupils and two with year 9 and 10 pupils respectively.¹ The narrative of the focus group was transcribed and data was extracted from it and presented in tabular form. No data, even though it might have been initially considered as being of questionable relevance, was omitted. Themes and hyper-themes were then extracted from this data. The same was conducted for the literature review – themes tackled through the study were listed in tabular form. Hyper-themes, that is clusters of themes (Smith, 2001), were then compared and contrasted. The following table illustrates these hyper-themes.

	Year 4&5	Year 7&8	Year 9	Year 10	Totals
Care for the individual	2	15	6	11	34
Community	10	23	20	9	62
Curriculum and achievement	37	16	24	14	91
Religion	5	2	14	2	23
Leadership	4	5	4	3	16
Socialisation	28	25	11	8	72

Table 2: Illustrating hyper-themes and counts of mentioning the theme per focus group

The themes at a Glance

Care for the individual

Most stakeholders commented that in the school one feels a family atmosphere where every pupil is seen as an individual (S2). This changes one's outlook of the school, it becomes their second home (S2). In the younger years, although there were no direct comments that centred on the care for the individual there was a comment which illustrated individual care. Respondents from the middle School (years 7 and 8) made comments that can be sub-divided into three categories: teachers who teach the individual rather than the whole class (S7), the leader

¹ The primary section opened in 2011 and admitted pupils in years 1 and 4; at the time of the study there were year 1,2,4,5 pupils. Another point of entry is in year 7.

who takes personal care of the pupils in school (S9), and the curriculum which helps the pupils to take personal care of themselves (S8, S9). On the other hand, the Senior Students linked academic achievement to individual care.

Community

The theme of community and its subthemes was the most mentioned in the focus groups. This theme was linked to most aspects of school life. Light was shed on the notion given by Berkowitz & Beir (2004) who indicate that character education is built upon the social relationships found in schools rather than specific programmes or the curriculum *per se*. One could see a progression through the three ages with the younger students being apprehensive to any kind of group/team-work (S23, S24, S27) to the extent of an individualistic proposal (S23). Teachers were also seen only on the level of rule keepers (S22). As they progressed in school peers and the relationship with became more important, all members of the community can have an impact on communitarian life (Twelves, 2001). Pupils pointed to simple attitudes or relations with peers and staff members which influenced their lives. This relation was seen through strong comments such as 'people with disabilities are as one of us not as different' (S19). Such arguments agree with McLaughlin's (2005) line of thought, who indicated that the school ethos shapes the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and dispositions.

Curriculum and Achievement

This hyper-theme includes all instances where pupils spoke about any type of the curriculum. Most of the students referred to extra-curricular activities. Only a few discussed the actual taught content. The formal curriculum was tackled in more depth by the younger students, where they discussed issues such as lesson delivery (S21), the mode of assessment (S22, S23) and also school rules and regulations (S23). The emphasis of middle school students was more on extra-curricular activities rather than on the formal curriculum where they discussed school clubs and other sports activities and the impact these left on their school life. The senior students than integrated these two areas together where they discussed quality teaching such as lesson length and the impact this has on processing of information (S15) and also celebration of success (S17) while commenting that extra-curricular activities help in team work and in the acquisition of soft skills (S11).

Religion

Although one of the least mentioned themes, this theme was chosen for the fact that the school under study is a Catholic school. The fact that it was not as mentioned shows that there is no indoctrination on faith but rather that Christian values are passed through other areas of the curriculum, in a more integral and

holistic way. The younger pupils in years 4-8 spoke from their personal experience while discussing daily mass (S23) in that it 'gives you a way of life' (S2) and bible studies 'help you reflect on the bible and illuminates your life choices' (S9). On the other hand, older pupils went on a more personal level indicating with comments indicating that at school they managed to get a new perspective of issues of belief: 'because of school I see sin as something wrong and how it's going to affect myself and others not just I know that its sin because I was told that it is a sin' (S13).

Leadership

Leadership was referred to while discussing themes such as care of the individual and community. This section focuses on instances when leadership was mentioned in relation to authority and vision. Talk on leadership by the younger pupils (Years 4 and 5) revolved more on academic achievement and discipline; however, there were instances where the pupils spoke on what they would like to see from the school leadership. Conversely, the older pupils discussed more the managerial role of leaders (years 7 and 8) and the human relations (years 9 and 10) where they indicated that the leader must know oneself to lead others.

Socialisation

Socialisation was one of the terms most discussed. School could be seen as a training ground for society (Pritchard, 1998), and one can see that the group dynamics at school are the same as those of society. This section focuses on areas that help pupils to see that they are part of a larger group; it tackles those statements through which the pupils spoke about interactions with others. Discussion by years 4 and 5 revolved around discipline, although this issue is not usually associated with socialisation, it shapes one's boundaries as to how one acts in society. Peer group formation was the main topic mentioned by years 7 and 8, school was seen as a place where pupils get to know other people (S1) and make new friends (S7). Break times were mentioned as the actual time to form friendship groups (S7). Relations with outsiders especially during open days and activities where the pupils represent the schools were mentioned as exercises in socialising by the older pupils; they indicated that one should 'be friendly with every character type not choosing between characters to change your attitude in order to reach others.' What O'Keefe (1999, p.22) calls "communal ethos".

All these themes show a progression that goes parallel to the personal development of pupils and one could clearly see that although the school community is one and the same, pupils read these happenings through their present cognitive abilities. They then integrate aspects that impact on their lives in their character.

Discussion

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety and belonging are two of the basic needs needed by individuals to function well (Maslow, 1943). It is thus of utmost importance that pupils feel safe at school. According to Schaps (2003) this safety results in better bonding between individuals. An interesting fact is that pupils see the school as their "second home" (S2) showing that it has the safety which one associates with home. In fact, the same student also mentioned that in school bullying is limited. A sense of belonging was also emphasized when pupils indicated that this school lets them in earlier when compared to others (S24). This is even corroborated by Schaps (2002) who indicates that along with safety, the caring environment will help pupils see self and others positively and reduce misbehaviour. Such positive outlook is one of the missions of church schools (Brick, 1999).

Such an environment helps to nurture values. Hitlin & Piliavin (2004) see values as ideal attitudes (*ibid.*) and guiding mechanisms (*ibid.*). Values such as equity and justice can be drawn from the fact that there is a healthy relationship between pupils and teachers. Teachers are seen as "friendly" (S15) and "caring" (S8, S9), which helps to "boost self-esteem" (S2, Schaps, 2002, p.3). It is this personal touch which makes the school environment different (Twelves, 2001) to the extent that pupils perceive a "family atmosphere" (S2, S14). These statements corroborate the findings of authors like Morris (2005) who indicates that the small student population in church schools support individual care which is a result of the school's management and the school processes, this goes on to the extent that teachers and SMT know pupils by name and also had quality time discussions with parents extending this individual attention to the family household. The school also supports other social and health needs of the family. Bandura (1977, 1989) states that pupils cognitively think about such happenings in a way that will affect behaviour (Grusec, 1992). It will also affect their character development, "knowing that teachers will tackle a problem to the end until it is solved" (S7). Such situations will ultimately help them to gain not only perseverance but also righteousness.

Schaps (2002) identifies supportiveness as a means of community building. In fact, pupils have identified small classes as an aid to know and trust more each other (S16). They have envisaged the 'house' system as a means of continuation between year groups (S14), also as a means where they can work together as a team - "a family which can trust each other" (S14). The motive was not competition but cooperation and mutual help resonates with what Berkowitz and Beir (2004) indicate that effective character is built on social relations. Since students internalize the culture in which they are raised (Grusec, 1992), a culture

of trust helps them care for others. In fact, one commented that “when training it is normal to get rough ... at school there is no need to get rough.” (S7) Such statements indicate that community does affect the individual.

Most students when speaking about values which they get from home indicated that there is a continuation between home and school. Values such as discipline (S7, S21, S26), respect (S3, S13, S27), academic achievement (S12), study (S22), a sense of communion (S11, S17, S19, S23), honesty (S14, S27), mutual help (S5) and appreciation (S16) all transpired from the discussion. One can state that these are the basis of a community which influence a positive outlook (Brick, 1999), a vision of a good life (Parks, 1993, in Langer *et. al.*, 2010) and of a communal ethos (O’Keefe, 1999). It provides a holistic approach to teaching (ibid.) with bilateral interactions (Block, 1982). In fact, students corroborated Pritchard’s (1988) notion by stating that teachers help them to achieve more (S11, S13). They also indicated that the leader would want them to achieve more (S22, S24, S26). The emphasis on achievement was made more explicit from the youngest focus group. They perceived achievement as a means to better themselves, to the extent that their discussion revolved around exams. (S21, S23, S27) The older pupils made a link with other higher institutions of education (S15) and with their future aspirations (S16, S17). This could be another acquisition of the school ethos where one perceives personal intellectual growth as a means through which one can help others (O’Keefe, 1999).

Another interesting development between year groups was seen through the discussion on discipline. The younger students perceived the school as one which lacks discipline, to the extent that there was a cry for stricter disciplinary measures (S20, S22, S23, S24, S26, S27); whilst as the pupils progressed through the years discipline was seen more as a mutual agreement between those in authority and pupils. An insightful comment was that of student 1 who indicated that the school ‘teaches you the way through fear.’ As indicated by Kroger (2004) such perception will not lead to truly moral decisions. Nevertheless, older pupils indicated that “when you break school rules the authorities help you to see what was wrong so that next time round it will not be repeated” (S13). Student 13 also spoke of this fraternal correction and accompaniment when speaking about sin. The way of dealing with pupils helped him to see “sin as something wrong and how it’s going to affect myself and others not just because it is a sin” (S13).

Another interesting aspect is that this comment on sin was the only direct comment on spirituality. Although one would presume that in a Church school pupils would talk more about spirituality, this was not the case. The only other mention was made to daily mass as imparting a way of life (S2). One pupil discussed the fact that mass should be given greater importance due to the

nature of the school. When speaking about mass he stated that “since we do maths on a daily basis why not do the same with religion” (S23). Such a discussion indicates that values are passed to the pupils through daily living and not through indoctrination. In fact, Pritchard (1988) discusses the danger of indoctrination through curricular decisions when the curriculum and the school ethos are used to impose a certain way of thinking and acting. Possible aspects that could have contributed to this lack of indoctrination were the facts that the school is open to other faiths. Lessons and outings to sites connected to other religions are held within the religious education programme. Moreover, in the past years the school started catering for a number of children of irregular immigrants who have a different faith belief.

The school is seen as a means to pass on future skills to the pupils (Eisner, 1979). It transpired that the pupils see the effect of enquiry based, hands-on teaching. In fact, when discussing science pupils indicated that they learned to be “more inquisitive” (S20). This resulted even in pupils “starting to like the subject” (S5). The interesting fact is that such pedagogy was mentioned only when speaking about science.

Through the focus group discussions it transpired that the school leadership is not perceived as aloof but reachable. Pupils indicated that leaders take personal care of them (S13, S3, S5). Pupils also called for a democratic style of leadership (S10, S12, S13) that is “alert to accountability” (S3). All this shows what Belmonte *et. al.* (2006) indicate that the school leader should promote ethical and moral development. They continue to stress that it is through his knowledge of the institution that the leader will influence and shape the culture (*ibid.*). This calls for a style of leadership which is more in touch with the people and a move from management to leadership (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007).

Conclusion

In the introduction, it was indicated that there is ample literature on how families impact children but literature was limited on how schools affect the pupils’ development in relation to the intellectual, moral and the social development. This research investigated how the ethos, leadership and structure in a Catholic school affect pupil character development. Focus groups and a phenomenological approach were used to explore the personal experiences of the pupils.

Through the study it was evident that the daily interactions were a means to help pupils in their value development. Many of the respondents made important comments about this area. Most of the pupils spoke about a healthy relationship

with staff members which promotes socialisation, whilst the personal care given by the teachers resulted in the pupils' feeling safe. This sense of safety helped pupils to boost their self-esteem and to improve their academic achievement. These statements give strong support to those authors who indicate that the school environment affects the pupils socially (Grusec, 1992; Pritchard, 1998; Schaps, 2002; Berkowitz & Beir, 2004) and academically (Morris, 2005; Sander, 1997). In terms of personal and character development such interactions were seen as promoting a sense of justice (O'Keefe, 1999), respect and dignity (O'Keefe, 1999; Brick, 1999, LG 23), as well as a holistic outlook towards life (O'Keefe, 1999).

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

The interaction between the pupils forms another pillar of school life. Pupils spoke about the relationship between themselves; there were comments which indicated that the small student population in school and in classes helps them to know each other better. This small population fosters a sense of community which encourages the students to mutually share their talents for the good of the community. A forceful comment was that diversity was seen as an important ingredient and not just as an add-on (S19). These persuasive statements by pupils are great advocates of the literature which states that the school ethos shapes perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and dispositions (McLaughlin, 2005) and that when people feel safe they will not only achieve more - academically and character wise - but also help each other (Schaps, 2002; Berkowitz & Beir, 2004; Langer *et. al.*, 2010). A healthy relationship between the pupils sustains the growth of values as they internalize the culture in which they are raised (Grusec, 1992) thus they imbibe values such as trust, diversity and tolerance (O'Keefe 1999), as well as self-confidence (Schaps, 2002).

The study illustrated that the school is a community which sustains community life and has a communal ethos (O'Keefe, 1999). As indicated by Schaps (2002) supportiveness is a means of community building, and from the study it was evident that the pupils perceived a triad of support from peers, staff and the

leadership team. From the pupil's discussion, it clearly transpired that school is a community which promotes learning where they indicated that the hands-on learning helps them to be more inquisitive. Learning, especially character development, was evident even when the pupils spoke of extracurricular activities. Confirming Doud's (1995) statements that the informal curriculum imparts beliefs, a number of students named extracurricular activities as aiding character development. These statements illustrate that it is important for the school to uphold a holistic approach to teaching (O'Keefe, 1999) which cultivates respect for others while it creates independent beings (Brick, 1999).

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

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