

# Chapter 15

## Getting Embedded Together: New Partnerships for Twenty-First Century Catholic Education

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**Abstract** The educational landscape is undergoing a level of change unparalleled since the 1960s. The creation of ‘Free Schools’ and ‘multi-academy trusts’ (MATs), coupled with the changing demographic of urban populations and fiscal constraints, are requiring schools and dioceses to strategically address how to maintain and sustain a successful Catholic educational offer for future generations. In this chapter, we will argue that a cohesive approach between Catholic Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), schools and dioceses affords the best opportunity for delivering success and maintaining Catholic educational distinctiveness. Within a theological framework, we contend that this is realised through the paradigm of the sacramental perspective which interweaves the sacred and the secular and calls all to be ‘embedded together’.

**Keyword** Multi-academy trusts

### Getting Embedded Together Structurally

‘A Multi Academy Trust is where a number of schools join together and form a single Trust with a Board of Directors answerable to the Trust’s members. The members will be senior leaders in the Diocese including the Bishop, Members of the Board of Finance and the Chair of the Board of Education. The members of the Trust are responsible for the strategic oversight of the academy. They are the conscience of the Trust, ensuring that the objectives are upheld’ (<http://www.thegoodshepherdmat.co.uk/resources/faqs.html>). This extract from the website of the Good Shepherd MAT in Cumbria outlines the structure and purpose of a Catholic MAT. Whilst they can vary in size and composition of schools—primary,

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secondary and special—Trusts work on the basis of pooling certain central functions such as Human Resources, procurement and estates maintenance in order to allow individual schools to focus their energies more exclusively on school improvement. This is achieved through school-on-school joint professional development work which supports ‘the execution of a ... strategy that develops and improves the workforce, builds succession and enables the strongest teachers and leaders to influence outcomes for more children’ (DfE 2016, p. 5). Effective MATs are those that have a board of trustees with a wide range of professional experiences and expertise, a strong executive leader, a shared vision of excellence and an agreed operational strategy as to how this will be realised. The structural positives of ‘getting embedded together’ seem clear.

However, there are also challenges inherent in the MAT approach both operationally and culturally. A successful Catholic MAT is dependent upon a robust diocesan infrastructure with the administrative capabilities to support a centralised ‘back office’ function for potentially hundreds of staff and thousands of pupils. Developing systems and processes to ensure this connects to the local needs of schools is critical. Locality is also an issue. MATs are geographically dependent and this can lead to a lack of choice as to the alliance that an individual school is part of. However, the significance of geographical proximity cannot be underestimated, and the creation of *hubs* of schools which allow for a collaborative network of interaction and accountability between schools is seen as a model of good practice (DfE 2016, p. 25). Conversely, in this context issues of autonomy and identity also come to the fore. Autonomy around an individual school’s ethos, finance and staffing can be challenged by the MAT formation and therefore the relationship between the executive leader and the headteachers and principals is critical to its success. Furthermore, the ability of the executive to create a shared vision for the MAT without losing the individual identity and ethos of schools is a particular challenge for Catholic MATs, especially for those schools founded by Religious Congregations. For example, how does a school with a strong and successful tradition such as the Ursuline ethos become assimilated into an overarching ethos driven by the executive leadership and the Trustees? Clearly, it will take a number of years for potential issues around ethos to emerge and be resolved. Religious Congregations are monitoring the evolving situation closely but informal conversations reveal that many feel the emergence of MATs brings a new challenge for the successful transmission of their charism. Some suggest that it presents a similar challenge to that occasioned by the exponential decrease in the number of religious in teaching and in leadership roles in schools over the last 30 years, however in this instance, the charism has continued to be transmitted effectively by the lay leadership (Lydon 2011).

Thus, what is required is a coordinated approach in order to move effectively, purposefully and authentically towards a more strategically visioned and collaborative realisation of Catholic education. In negotiating this transition, the sacramental perspective draws us into an ecclesially faithful, theological understanding of the MAT context.

## Getting Embedded Together Theologically

The *Declaration on Christian Education* of the Second Vatican Council encapsulates the notions of witness, sacramental perspective and community in its encouragement to teachers to recognise:

...that the Catholic school depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programmes... Intimately linked in charity to one another and to their students and endowed with an apostolic spirit, may teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher. (1965, par. 8)

The imperative to bear witness is extended to all members of the school community in *The Catholic School*, published 12 years later:

Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school. His revelation gives new meaning to life and helps man to direct his thought, action and will according to the Gospel, making the beatitudes his norm of life. The fact that in their own individual ways all members of the school community share this Christian vision, makes the school “Catholic”; principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the school then has them as its internal motivation and final goal. (1977, par. 34)

This statement defines the meaning of the sacramental perspective in so far as it places Christ at the centre of the school and confirms that the way in which members of the school community share in that vision is integral to the distinctive nature of the catholic School. In broadening the paradigm to embrace groups of schools, one can see how this might then provide a theological underpinning within Catholic educational teaching for the disposition of a MAT. Indeed, this quote from the 1977 document could be rewritten in the following way:

Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic MAT. His revelation gives new meaning to life and helps man to direct his thought, action and will according to the Gospel, making the beatitudes his norm of life. The fact that in their own individual ways all school members of the MAT community share this Christian vision, makes the MAT “Catholic”; principles of the Gospel in this manner become the educational norms since the MAT then has them as its internal motivation and final goal. (MAT insertions by authors)

Thus, the unifying *value* of the MAT is Christ: schools within a MAT should provide different and individually distinctive means through which to come into relationship to Christ but all roads will lead to the same destination. In this way, the sacramental perspective constitutes a permeating presence through all aspects of the business of a MAT and, in essence, deepens the principles of Catholic education. In the context of the Catholic MAT, the sacramental perspective can be seen as a dominant paradigm within the theological framework set forth by the Second Vatican Council. By engaging in the ministry of teaching, the individual Christian, school and MAT is responding to his/her/its primary call to be a disciple of Jesus in a distinctive manner, reflecting the notion of charisms being a concrete realisation of the universal gift of God through Christ to all the baptised (The Catholic School 1977, par. 80ff). This fundamental calling demands that all teachers, schools and

MATs model their ministry on that of Christ and are, in effect, signs of the presence of Christ within their educational community.

As ever, the challenge for Catholic education is to have one foot in the sacred, one in the secular and both in God. This is nothing new.

In a Christian institution, in the light of a sacramental perspective, ultimately there can be no separation between the sacred and the secular, no divorce between the human and the divine, no opposition between having a vocation and being a professional.

All the tasks of education, together with all the support roles that help create the conditions such that education can proceed, seen with the eyes of faith, may be considered as elements in the pathway of discipleship.... (Astley et al. 2004, p. 153)

Many documents have articulated both the educational aspect and formational aspect of teaching in a Catholic school: teachers are called to educate young people in the faith by articulating the Christian message. More importantly, however, teachers proclaim the Christian vision by the way in which they are witnesses to the Good News, expressed memorably in the following statement by Pope Paul VI:

Modern men and women listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. ... It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelise the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus. (1975, par. 41)

Building on previous documents, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (RDECS), consistently emphasises integral human formation reflecting the programmes of formation espoused by the Salesians and the Sisters of Mercy among other Religious Congregations (Lydon 2011, p. 111f). By making a connection with an emphasis on the call to seek perfection, formation is rooted firmly in the context of the sacramental perspective since the teacher is called to model his or her life on ‘*the living presence of Jesus the “Master” who, today as always, is with us in our journey through life as the one genuine “Teacher”, the perfect Man in whom all human values find their fullest perfection*’ (RDECS 1988, par. 25).

In this context, the RDECS makes clear that the personal example of teachers is crucial in modeling what integral human formation will look like. Furthermore, the document emphasises that such formation is central to the promotion of a distinctive Catholic culture or *habitus* and therefore once again, this is a signifier for the professional disposition of a MAT. There is a powerful assertion that *prime responsibility* for creating and maintaining the distinctive atmosphere of a Catholic school rests with the teachers, both as individuals and acting collegially. This call to collaborative unity is crucial to the success of a MAT in which schools are required to cease to work as individual units and become part of a corpus. The way in which MATs create such a culture will be through their daily witness, to the extent that, without such witness, ‘there is little left which can make the school [MAT] Catholic’ (RDECS 1988, par. 25).

What has been stated thus far on the sacramental perspective could be applied, to a large extent, to all stakeholders involved with Catholic education, specifically

dioceses and HEIs, who in the case of the former are and in the case of the latter should be, key collaborators with MATs.

## Getting Embedded Together Culturally

The sacramental perspective constitutes a key theme in wider literature on Catholic education. Sullivan, in his extensive writings on Catholic education, maintains that the integral formation of the human person and Christ as the foundation of the whole educational enterprise constitute two of the five key themes permeating the documents emanating from the Congregation.<sup>1</sup> Sullivan insists that developing a relationship with Christ should be real rather than virtual, the relationship being ‘embodied and witnessed to by the teachers in order to ensure that children receive an appropriate formation’ (Sullivan 2001, p. 77).

Sullivan takes up the theme that witness forms a constituent element of any programme of formation in *Living Logos*. Building on the incarnational theme of the first chapter of John’s Gospel, that Christ is the Word (Greek *logos*) of God who became flesh in order to reveal God’s nature. Sullivan suggests that school leaders ‘embody the key meanings of the school and the significance of its work’. He then goes on to address the role of teachers, suggesting that the character, habits and attitudes of the teacher are of equal significance to the roles they perform in the context of the formation of pupils (Sullivan 2002, p. 2).

In his more recent writings,<sup>2</sup> Sullivan places the vocation to teach in the context of discipleship. While recognising that several types of educational vision would claim to promote the holistic development of students,<sup>3</sup> placing such development in the context of discipleship makes Christian education distinctive. In order to be able

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<sup>1</sup>In *Catholic Education: Distinctive and Inclusive* (2001), Dordrecht, The Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publications Sullivan lists three further recurring themes:

1. Maintaining a synthesis between faith and culture
2. The autonomy of the various disciplines
3. The development of the critical faculties of pupils.

His extensive treatment of the first two principles compared with the last three would indicate the relative significance he attaches to the former.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Astley et al. (2004), *Vocation and Profession in Teacher Education* in Elford, R.J., (Editor), *The Foundation of Hope*, Liverpool, Liverpool Hope University

<sup>3</sup>The secular meaning of vocation has a prominent place in John Dewey’s philosophy of education. John Dewey (1859–1952) was an American philosopher and educator whose writings and teachings have had profound influences on education and, in particular, vocational education. While for many of his contemporaries, vocational education meant education in the ‘blue collar’ sense, Dewey spoke of a person’s vocation as that which makes that person distinctive and gives life-direction. Dewey described teaching as a distinctive and noble calling, retaining an element of the Reformers’ theology of vocation when using terms such as servant and prophet to describe the teacher’s role in transforming lives. See Dworkin (1959) (Editor), *Dewey on Education*, New York, Teachers College Press

to demonstrate to students what discipleship looks like, it is essential, according to Sullivan, that there should be no distinction between having a vocation and being a professional, both being essential components of the pathway of discipleship.

In the context of MATs and the wider engagement with dioceses and HEIs, there is much here to inform and direct the creation of new educational structures. The identity of MATs must be characterised by their relationship with Christ as only this will allow for an authentic Catholic education to be experienced by all participants—pupils, teachers, administrators, executive officers, trustees. How is this to be realised? Through a generosity of spirit that is open to the challenges of collaboration and sees a closer working relationship not as a deficit model, a diminution of independent autonomy and control but as an enhancement of it. This is easier said than realised but living discipleship is seldom without its challenges.

Nuzzi (2004), writing on the 25th anniversary of the publication by the USA Bishops Conference of *To Teach As Jesus Did*<sup>4</sup> (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1972), focuses on servant leadership as a practical application of the sacramental perspective. While Nuzzi makes it clear that he is focusing primarily on school leadership, his article is replete with references to the term *witness*, particularly in the context of *servant leadership* which models that of Jesus the servant as opposed to secular counterparts which appear to colonise religious language while claiming to be original.<sup>5</sup> Modeling one's life on Jesus as servant is, therefore, not rooted simply in the desire to serve others, however empathetically, but, rather, 'in response to hearing Christ's command to serve' (Nuzzi 2004, p. 264). Nuzzi then goes on to make similar claims in the context of modeling the school community on that established by Jesus accompanied by his first disciples.

Reference to *servant leadership* in the context of the Catholic MAT is especially apposite. There is a deeply embedded tradition within many Catholic schools of teachers engaging in extracurricular activities, thereby building relationships with students beyond the classroom which lead to an enrichment of the dialogue between teacher and student in formal classroom contexts. This same 'broadening' of the professional relationship is required in order to enrich the dialogue between schools and stakeholders to build the cohesive, unified structure that a MAT demands. This dialogue is not just school to school but school to diocese and HEI. In a MAT, each partner has a role built upon their purpose and tradition but it is realised in a new way: in our experience this can lead to a defensiveness as relationships are renegotiated and the new role that one is being asked to play begins to be comprehended. For example, from the perspective of the HEI sensitivity may need to be displayed when working with a MAT that houses a strong teaching school alliance which is a competitor in terms of recruitment to Initial Teacher Training courses,

<sup>4</sup>This document, in essence, spoke of the ministry of teaching in terms of a ministry modelled on the life of Jesus the Teacher, resonating with the concept of the sacramental perspective articulated in this paper. The document does not, however, use the term sacramental perspective.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Greenleaf (1977), *Servant Leadership*, New York, Paulist Press. There is no reference to the person of Jesus in the 'Ten Principles of Servant Leadership' listed by the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership. See [www.butler.edu](http://www.butler.edu)

particularly given recent governments' attempts to marginalise the role of HEIs within teacher training. Experience has taught that what is important is to realise that in this context, the role of the HEI is to complement and support that which already exists within the MAT. For example, working together on teacher training and recruitment<sup>6</sup>; developing joint academic and professional career progression pathways to support the retention of teachers and formation of leaders within the MAT; collaborating in subject-specific joint professional development with research outcomes emanating from it; considering how back office functions—HR, facilities—can be supported by the HEI. This concept of complementarity and support needs to be accepted by all partners in the MAT and built upon mutual trust and an understanding that the most positive outcomes for pupils can be best realised through the collaborative approach espoused within the MAT vision.

At the heart of this vision is the authenticity of the relationship between the stakeholders which must be informed by faith. The *business* of the MAT should form part of this foundation of faith leading to deeply empowering relationships between administrators, trustees, teachers, pupils, lecturers and executives founded upon the inspirational nature of the teamwork modelled by Jesus and the apostles. This resonates with the importance of 'adult solidarity around the department and school mission' (Bryk et al. 1993, p. 58), a central feature of Bryk's inspirational ideology of Catholic schools and provides an institutional realisation of the holistic approach to education that Catholic educational teaching has at its heart.

## Getting Embedded Together Sustainably

In today's post-Vatican II Church what it means to belong to anything has changed. In her seminal work *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (1994) Davie suggests that Europe is marked by a culture of 'believing without belonging', characterised by a profound mismatch between religious values that people profess (believing), and actual churchgoing and religious practice (belonging). At the same time, Kerkhofs spoke of a shift away from the tradition as the yardstick by which to interpret the meaning of life and to define moral rules with identity being found through flexible adaptation (Kerkhofs 1993).

More recently, Boeve (2007) described the situation in Belgium as, in a relatively short period of time, having secularised and evolved from a culture and society with a nearly total Catholic horizon of meaning to a situation where this horizon determines to a much smaller and lesser degree the identity construction of individuals and groups. Boeve's description has been replicated in several other European countries to a greater or lesser extent including the UK and Ireland. Hession (2015), reflecting on Boeve's work from an Irish perspective, speaks of the

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<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, in-house unpublished research has indicated that students have a preference for a particular model of teacher training therefore there may be less 'competition' between providers than others would have us believe.

complex nature of identity formation in a context influenced by the forces of modernisation and globalisation. Hession describes the way that people integrate multiple perspectives and contradictory rationalities into a more reflexive, contextual and plural identity.

In the context of England and Wales, especially in the context of Mass attendance, Christopher Jamison speaks of a ‘not wholly mythical golden era’ when ‘every Catholic boy and every Catholic girl would, at some stage of their education, consider becoming a priest or a nun’ (Jamison 2010, p. 224). He describes this era as a totally Catholic culture strengthened, in the context of Catholic education, by the 1944 *Education Act* which, building on previous Education Acts, enabled every Catholic child to attend a Catholic school free of charge. Jamison suggests that this total Catholic culture (embracing church youth clubs, sports teams as well as Catholic schools) underpinned by strong family cultural support, began to die in the 1960s and had disappeared by the 1980s. Jamison cites the statistics for Mass attendance which halved between 1980 and 2000 to around 1 million as evidence of this disappearance. This reflects a transition, described by the sociologist Douglas (1982), from a group (tightly-knit Catholic identity) to a grid mentality religion: God is less a revelation to be obeyed than a source of comfort for the self and a more individualistic, ego-based experience. In this grid mentality, faith becomes a matter of individual needs with religion becoming privatised, merely a part of a person’s need for self-fulfilment. The fact that people opt out of formal structures of belonging is of particular relevance to the spiritual challenge for Catholic school leaders going forward. As George Weigel points out in his book *Evangelical Catholicism* (2013), our postmodern culture is toxic to the Christian message. We can no longer expect the faith to be passed on by cultural osmosis. He writes that ‘the cultural Catholicism of the past was comfortable because it fit neatly within the ambient public culture, causing little chafing between one’s life ‘in the Church’ and one’s life ‘in the world’” (Weigel 2013, p. 19).

In this grid culture, the witness of the teacher is essential if Catholic schooling is to make any real impact. We contend that the commitment of a core group of Catholic teachers who articulate their faith *and* witness to that faith is essential. This contention is supported in Rymarz and Belmonte’s (2014) life history narratives of religious education coordinators in Catholic schools, again in an Australian context, who found that strong religious commitment, manifested by taking leadership positions in Catholic schools, was becoming increasingly contested. They speak of the importance of a strong element of witness and cite Morey and Piderit (2006) insistence on the capacity to animate religious identity rather than just acquiesce to it:

The vibrancy of organizational culture requires knowledge about content, its beliefs and its shared assumptions and norms. Cultural knowledge alone, however, it is not enough to sustain the vitality of organizational culture beyond the present generation. Cultural inheritability in a group or organization requires significant levels of commitment from the community of cultural catalysts and citizens in order for there to be any chance it will appeal to the future generations required to sustain it. Commitment connects what a person wants to do with what he or she is supposed to do. (Morey and Piderit 2006, p. 271 in Rymarz and Belmonte 2014)

The challenges of recruiting teachers who can witness to and animate religious identity are well known. The most recently available *Catholic Education Service* (CES) data for England and Wales reveals the following:

- Primary Schools
  - 4% headships vacant (up from 3.8% 2016)
  - 62% Catholic staff (declining trend)
  - 24% hold Catholic Certificate of Religious Studies.
- Secondary Secondary
  - 4.3% headships vacant (up from 1.5% 2016)
  - 42% Catholic staff (declining trend)
  - 5% hold Catholic Certificate of Religious Studies (CES 2016).

These statistics expose the decreasing staffing pool from which need to be drawn witnesses and animators of faith who also have the capacity to be leaders in Catholic education. If this challenge was not sufficient, a recent report emanating from the *Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life* (CORAB) (2014) raised further issues that are worth noting. The report focused on the fact that schools with a religious character are not only permitted to select pupils on the grounds of religion, but are also exempt from aspects of employment legislation, in that they may use religion as a criterion when hiring staff. The CORAB report also raised concerns about the extent of this privilege and the justification for it and advised that the government should ensure the practice of exemption is monitored effectively and correct processes observed; whilst, if it is abused, it recommended that the law should be changed to restrict its application in the future. The report has not been taken further by the government and we are not suggesting that its questioning of the processes as to how reserved posts are appointed should be used to inform the strategic approach to MATs and their structures. Nevertheless, this further indicates that in the context of the MAT, the ability to pool elements of staffing and to work across and between schools in terms of recruitment and career progression is an obvious advantage. Additionally, the role of an executive head who oversees the leadership of a number of schools within a MAT could present a solution to the challenge of securing appointments to reserved leadership posts. Instead of each school having a head who meets the requirements of a reserved position, a group of schools could function with leaders who may not meet these requirements overseen by an executive headteacher who does. Whilst this type of leadership structure may not be welcomed by some parents, significant stakeholders in all Catholic schools, who see the involvement of *their* headteacher in the management of other schools

as potentially detrimental to their children's academic achievement,<sup>7</sup> it does provide a solution to a recruitment problem that is likely to become ever more prevalent in the next 10 years if the declining trend of the CES statistics is not reversed. It would also mitigate the risk against any change in government policy with reference to reserved posts. As previously mentioned, similarities can be drawn with the anxieties raised when Catholic school leadership moved from being the sole province of the religious and ordained to a lay leadership model. The success of this transition should provide reassurance that where there are committed, engaged, faith-enthused, *witness-leaders* re-visioning models of leadership can be very successful. It is hoped, therefore, that the formation of MATs and their potential to create innovative models of leadership might provide a similar haven for the future.<sup>8</sup>

## Concluding Reflection

The words *commitment* and *engaged* are of particular significance in the context of building sustainable MATs within the Catholic vernacular, taking into account structural, cultural and theological considerations. Cardinal Hume, speaking about spiritual development, insisted that:

I do not believe that an adult can awaken in a young person a sense of the spiritual if that adult is not at least well on the way to discovering the spiritual dimension of his or her own life. I do not mean that a teacher has necessarily to have found the spiritual meaning to their life, but that spiritual questions must have become real for them. Indeed, in this as in other areas, the best teachers are those who are still learning. (1997, p. 83)

Cardinal Hume is basically stating that *you cannot give what you have not got*. Students are acutely aware of the extent to which teachers and leaders are committed to their faith and actually believe what they are teaching, reflecting the centrality of witness inherent in the sacramental perspective. With Cardinal Hume's words in mind, the challenge moving forward revolves around the extent to which all key stakeholders place Catholic identity at the forefront of their deliberations, notwithstanding the cultural and strategic pressures inherent in the development of MATs. The manner in which these new structures evolve should reflect Hume's words at a macro level, with each school bringing its unique identity to the trust in order to create a structure focused on the common good and the educational mission

<sup>7</sup>The potential of a decline in academic standards consequent upon the involvement of the headteacher in the leadership of another school was cited was most frequently as a challenge in a parental survey carried out recently in a Catholic secondary school.

<sup>8</sup>Several staff engaged in a recent 360° review of the headteacher in the same school cited his involvement as an executive head in another school as a negative factor in the context of the maintenance of the school's distinctive ethos. A similar concern has been raised by a Local Governing Committee in terms of the diminution of the school's ethos since its incorporation into a multi-academy trust.

of the Catholic Church that ‘all should have life and have it to the full’ (John 10:10). In this manner, and borrowing terminology from *The Distinctive Curriculum of the Catholic School* [National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors (NBRIA) 2009], the Trust will convey and inhabit a positive anthropology. It is this that ‘gives time and resources to support the personal and professional development of its *stakeholders*, to help them know what they bring of themselves and their gifts to the work of the *Trust*’ (NBRIA 2009, p. 7). Within this vision, leaders and future leaders will be empowered to embrace their vocation to Catholic education, leaving all stakeholders in no doubt about the unique contribution they make to the life of their MAT and to the common good. For this to happen, there must be a renewed focus on a sacramental vision by all involved—pupils, parents, schools, Dioceses, Governors, Trustees and HEIs and this will authentically encapsulate the notion of *getting embedded together*.

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