



## VISIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

4-6 November 2014

NCTL Learning and Conference

### Report of Conference

#### Introduction

The Visions for Educational Leadership (VfEL) project, led by a team of researchers at Heythrop College, University of London with the collaboration of the Catholic Education Service (CES), seeks to build the theological and ethical capacity of existing and emerging leaders in Catholic schools in England and Wales. Over the past two years it has been participated in by more than one hundred school leaders from seven dioceses: Westminster, Southwark, Plymouth, Menevia, Birmingham, Lancaster and Hexham & Newcastle. School leaders have reflected individually and collectively on theological, ethical and spiritual aspects of their practice, drawing upon lived experience to develop greater theological fluency.

#### Aims

The VfEL conference, hosted by the Learning and Conference Centre of the National College for Teaching & Leadership in Nottingham, brought together school leaders, diocesan commissioners, representatives of the CES, academics and other individuals concerned for the future of Catholic school leadership. Building on the conversational, action research methods of the project, the conference was envisioned as a continuation of reflective conversation. Delegates formed a working party of 45 to build upon the research of the VfEL team, identifying the key challenges of leadership in Catholic schools and determining what is needed to build the theological, ethical and spiritual capacity of current and future leaders in schools.

#### Proceedings

In the period preceding the conference, the VfEL team prepared a set of five papers on themes emerging from the data collected from school leaders during the course of the project. The five themes were as follows:

- School leadership as a vocation;
- The relationship of leaders' experiences to existing normative and policy positions;
- Schools and the church;
- The formation of leaders; &
- The evangelisation of culture.

The opening session of the conference provided an opportunity for delegates to reflect upon the papers in small groups, considering the ways in which the data and theological analysis presented resonated with personal experience and contained implications for practice. A lively plenary discussion followed, focused on the role of school leaders as the practical and spiritual heads of faith communities.

Day 2 opened with a plenary discussion for the identification of critical issues requiring further attention and reflection. The following questions were identified as important:

- Whom do Catholic schools serve?
- Are schools counter-cultural or sacramental?
- What makes a Catholic school distinctive?
- Is there such a thing as a Catholic philosophy of education?
- How do school leaders provide pastoral care for staff?
- How do school leaders manage tensions in schools?
- What is the relationship between school leaders and priests? How might it be improved?
- What is required for the better formation of leaders?

The conference resolved to focus on two overarching topics:

- The aims, purposes and distinctiveness of Catholic education; &
- The formation of school leaders.

On the first topic, delegates noted a lack of clarity among different stakeholders about who and what Catholic schools are for. For example:

- Should schools be defined as Catholic according to the number of baptised Catholic children on roll or by other criteria, including their distinctive pedagogy and wider service to society?
- Are Catholic schools counter-cultural or 'sacramental' (i.e. embodying an approach to culture from a 'sacramental imagination')? Or both?  
It was suggested that Catholic schools are distinctive – though not 'inherently better' – than other schools because of the journey of faith they offer pupils, in an environment where Christ is the foundation for everything that follows.
- This raised the question as to whether a clearer account of specifically Catholic pedagogy might be given, in particular relating to faith assumptions concerning the nature and 'ends' of the human person.  
The question of a 'philosophy of Catholic education' – or a 'Catholic philosophy of education' – was discussed. The Catholic school sector, it was added, can and must exert an influence on a fast-changing national educational landscape.

On the second topic of formation of school leaders, delegates drew upon their own experiences and those captured by the research data to make a number of observations.

- Formation for leadership, they agreed, does not end when one is appointed to a senior leadership post but is an ongoing, career-long process.  
The seeds of leadership must be sown among newly-qualified teachers; nurtured in middle leaders; and consistently watered thereafter, particularly with regard to its theological and

spiritual dimensions. Indeed, there was sympathy with the idea that the vocation to schools leadership might be something for which people are being 'formed' in earlier life, with particular implications for schools and the wider church.

- Formation, it was recognised, should be supported through formal study and qualifications but also, crucially, within schools, where it can be related most directly to practice. The significance of Teaching Schools and their alliances to the provision for leadership development was noted, and the growth of professional networks for communication and support between leaders was considered essential.
- Delegates suggested the importance of recognising and sharing the good formational practices already existing in dioceses and beyond; and indeed of considering where, in relation to formation, diocesan boundaries might be bridged.
- Residential retreats, mentoring and coaching were identified as significant current practices to be encouraged further. One very striking intervention which struck a chord with many present was the need for ongoing spiritual direction and support for those in school leadership – people who are, after all, in significant ecclesial and faith leadership positions, and having to navigate remarkably complex pastoral and professional terrains in the service of their school community.

## Outcomes

In the closing session of Day 2 and the first session of Day 3, delegates assembled into five constituency groups – School leaders, Teaching School leaders, diocesan officers, academics and representatives of the CES – to determine the concrete, practical steps required to build the theological capacity for leadership in schools. From these discussions the following major proposals emerged:

- The introduction of an induction programme for all new head teachers, to include a residential component, drawing upon the expertise of head teachers and academics. Ideally, the design and oversight of such induction should transcend diocesan boundaries and politics.
- The development of mentorship programmes: access to mentoring and spiritual direction for all head teachers, perhaps accessed through the drawing up of appropriate mentors and directors available for taking on such a role.
- The maintenance of an online collection of resources for leadership formation; and a directory of national formation provision, particularly mapping what provision is available through Higher Educational Institutions.

Representatives of the CES then proposed the following:

- The foundation of a Centre for Catholic Leadership Formation, to serve as a focal point for the leadership development activities of Teaching Schools, higher education institutions, diocesan education services and the CES.

Such a centre, it was suggested, could work with existing HEI providers in the area of schools leadership, and the Teaching Schools, to develop key training resources, and - potentially - accredited qualifications, ownership of which could be recognised across the dioceses of England and Wales. The rich content of the VfEL project, only a small amount of which could be discussed at the conference, would have a significant role to play in shaping the content and culture of such a Centre.

The proposal to found the Centre was warmly received by delegates. All agreed that it is important for Teaching Schools and higher education institutions to work closely together in the future, with the endorsement and support of the CES and Bishops' Conference. In his closing remarks at the conference's end, the Chair of the CES, Archbishop Malcolm McMahon, voiced his support for the emerging plans and noted the concern of the Bishops' Conference for the development of school leaders.

### **Future steps**

The VfEL team is offering its support to the CES for the realisation of plans outlined at the conference, and planning a summative theological reflection on the event and the research project.

The question of how to coordinate leadership development across dioceses will be discussed at the next CES/Diocesan conference. Diocesan education officers are planning an audit of existing training and formation opportunities to identify areas where provision is lacking, encourage cooperation between diocesan education services and establish closer partnerships with Teaching Schools.

### **Contact**

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