

May 2016

# Australian Catholic Schools Today: School Identity and Leadership Formation

Helga Neidhart PhD

Australian Catholic University, [helga.neidhart@acu.edu.au](mailto:helga.neidhart@acu.edu.au)

Janeen T. Lamb PhD

Australian Catholic University, [janeen.lamb@acu.edu.au](mailto:janeen.lamb@acu.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>



Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), and the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Neidhart, H., & Lamb, J. T. (2016). Australian Catholic Schools Today: School Identity and Leadership Formation. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1903042016>

This Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu](mailto:CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu).

---

# Australian Catholic Schools Today: School Identity and Leadership Formation

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Dr. Gayle Spry.

## Australian Catholic Schools Today: School Identity and Leadership Formation

Helga Neidhart and Janeen Lamb  
Australian Catholic University

*This article focuses on the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools. In particular, it reviews Australian research that has aimed to understand how principals conceptualize and enact their role as faith leaders. Consistent with American research, Australian research found that principals saw themselves as playing a leadership role in the evangelizing mission of the church by strengthening Catholic school identity and culture. At the same time, they were mindful of their limits with respect to their faith leadership capabilities. Moreover, the principals worried that the next generation of school leaders might lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to engage faith leadership in a changing social and cultural context. Consequently, they recommended faith leadership formation for teachers as well as principals, their deputies, and assistants. By situating these findings within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, this article argues that, together, the current interest in Australia in Catholic school identity and leadership formation represents a positive development. However, there are also inherent dangers to the imposition of a generic Catholic school identity and a "one size fits all" approach to the leadership role. This article concludes by suggesting a way forward with the promotion of a new model for leadership formation that seeks to avoid these dangers.*

### Keywords

Leadership, secular, formation, identity, Australia

For some time, Church leaders and Catholic Education Authorities have noted the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools and, consequently, researchers have been drawn to the practical issues surrounding the faith leadership role of the principal. Principals appear to be caught between multiple expectations as they seek to balance an educational agenda

with a religious mission. In pursuing this research agenda, Australian researchers were aware that there was also significant American research into faith leadership, Catholic school identity, and leadership formation (e.g., Convey, 2012; Schuttloffel, 2012, 2013), and Australian researchers since Ciriello's (1993) early work have been influenced by the American experience. This article offers an account of the Australian research and, in doing so, seeks to contribute to a two-way conversation around the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools. Here there is a matter of urgency as research suggests that the success and sustainability of the Catholic school depends on capable faith leadership into the future.

In preparation for the turn of the new century, the Vatican document "The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium" (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1997, para.1) situates Catholic education within the macro context of sociopolitical and cultural change. Among other things, this time of extreme pluralism and secularism has resulted in the breakdown of traditional religious culture (Rossiter, 2013). In Australia, this breakdown has been evidenced in lower levels of commitment to Catholic beliefs and practices (Dixon, 2003, 2005). Society projects an identity that is far more responsive to the needs of individuals than to those of the community or collective (Dixon, 2003). Indeed, the whole notion of a Catholic *worldview* continues to be challenged. Principals in Catholic schools certainly appreciate that one can no longer assume that school, families, and staff are connected to the parish and unquestioningly supportive of church teaching.

Acknowledging this breakdown of traditional religious culture, "Ecclesia in Oceania" (John Paul II, 2001) calls for re-evangelization and the enculturation of the gospel message with special attention to youth involvement in the Church. This document also addresses Catholic schools, with particular reference to the role of teachers:

The great challenge for Catholic schools in an increasingly secularized society is to present the Christian message in a convincing and systematic way. . . . The identity and success of Catholic education is linked inseparably to the witness of life given by the teaching staff. . . . School staff, who truly live their faith, will be agents of a new evangelization in creating a positive climate for the Christian faith to grow and in spiritually nourishing the students entrusted to their care. (Pope John Paul II, 2001, par. 115–117)

Consistent with this understanding of the new evangelization, Ranson (2006) has argued for a new form of “pastoral leadership [in Catholic schools] that is committed to invigoration of community discipleship and dedicated to a new impulse in evangelization” (p. 418). Thus, “leadership [in Catholic schools] begins with a profound sense of mission” (p. 419) and presupposes a “community marked by Trinitarian qualities and at the service of fostering ever widening circles of that community’s relationships” (p. 420). However, in presenting this understanding of leadership, Ranson (2006) has reminded us of the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools:

In all of this, the new generation of Australian Catholic school leaders is recognizing that [faith leadership] is exercised in a liminal period where the past is known but is no longer instrumental and where the future is intuited but has yet to be realized with effective agency. (p. 421)

The challenge of faith leadership came to the attention of Australian researchers during broad studies of principalship (e.g., Mellor, 2005; Slattery, 1998). In addition, there was a series of studies around the issue of leadership succession across various Australian states. In New South Wales (d’Arbon, Duignan, Duncan, & Goodwin, 2001), Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania (Carlin, d’Arbon, Dorman, Duignan, & Neidhart, 2003), researchers found that aspiring principals considered the expectation of faith or religious leadership to be a “disincentive” (p. 29) to taking up a principal’s position. Not only were principals in Catholic schools accountable to governments for all the same aspects of schooling as their colleagues in state schools, but they also had responsibilities to the Church through system authorities. Over the years and up to the present time, the religious role of the principal has continued to expand as a result of the decrease in the number of parish priests, the consequent amalgamation of some parishes, and the fact that, for an increasing number of students and their families, school is their major experience of Church. “It now includes articulating and advocating the religious identity of not just the school community, but often of the parish community, and this is an overwhelming responsibility” (p. 19).

In response to research such as the above, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) convened a forum to consider the practices and issues surrounding faith leadership. The report that followed identifies three themes (NCEC, 2005). The first theme focuses on authentic catholicity and “the ‘person’ of the leader as central to matters of Catholic identity

and authentic practice” (p. 2). The second theme addresses leadership in the “ecclesial identity of the Catholic school” (p. 2). Here the emphasis is on “the historical and cultural foundations of Australian Catholic schools, changing parish-school relationships and new models of organization, and implications for the pastoral leadership role of school principals” (p. 2). Finally, the third theme presents “a synthesis of issues and opportunities” (p. 2), including system priorities.

Policy and program development followed as various diocesan education authorities sought to strengthen Catholic school identity and support faith leadership. For example, the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory promulgated a document titled *Catholic Schools at a Crossroads* (2007) to address the confusion around Catholic school identity by clearly stating that “genuine” (p. 10) Catholic schools were primarily “centres of new evangelisation” (p. 12), with the whole school community understanding and reaffirming the Church’s “commitment to the Catholic identity of our schools” (p. 11). On a more practical note, Catholic education authorities launched frameworks to guide school leaders as they sought to strengthen Catholic school identity. For example, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) published a leadership standards framework titled “Development Framework and Standards of Practice” (CECV, 2005a), as well as a “School Improvement Framework” (CECV, 2005b). In addition, new school leadership roles, such as “Director of Catholic Identity,” and “Assistant Principal Religious Education, Identity and Mission” (Rossiter, 2013, p. 5), have been established.

Parallel to the development of these policies and programs, research studies have investigated the faith leadership role of the principal in Australian Catholic schools. This article reviews this body of research and, in doing so, highlights principal perspectives on the relationship between leadership and a strong Catholic school identity, as well as alerting us to the importance of leadership formation. A discussion follows that seeks to interpret these research findings through the lens of symbolic interactionism. This theoretical framework is appropriate to the study of human activity such as schooling, as it serves to challenge existing understandings of how human beings create social agreement and social action. Our article argues that, using this particular lens, the current interest in Catholic school identity, leadership, and leadership formation represents a positive trend. However, there are also inherent dangers that need to be addressed.

### Faith Leadership: From the Principals' Perspective

There has been a comprehensive investigation of principalship in Catholic schools. Three studies involved secondary principals (Davison, 2006; McEvoy, 2006; Thompson, 2010), two looked at primary principals (Coughlan, 2009; Neidhart & Lamb, 2010, 2011), and two others included both primary and secondary principals (Belmonte & Cranston; 2009; Neidhart, Lamb, & Spry, 2012). This body of research was informed by a pragmatic concern for the role of the Catholic school principal, and it was expected that research findings would inform both policy and practice. Each study focused particularly on the perspectives of the principals themselves. As Davison (2006) explained:

Given the uneven and partial development of a clear theology of ministry in the Catholic educational context, it seems appropriate to explore the understanding and experience practising principals have of their role . . . and by so doing, add to the collective understanding of the role as it currently is, and as it might become, in the future. (p. 36)

### Faith Leadership and Catholic School Identity

In reviewing this research, we found that principals seemed to identify a strong link between Catholic school identity and faith leadership. Research characterized faith leadership as about creating “an ethos and culture that support[ed] the Catholic view of life” (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009, p. 300). To this end, principals described their faith leadership role in terms of an explicit “faith-based approach” (Neidhart et al., 2012, p. 1) to school leadership. Here there is general agreement that faith leadership involves “standing up for the Catholic religion,” “meeting people where they are at,” and “welcoming” or “inviting” (p. 33) the children, staff, and parents of the school into the community of faith.

On a practical note, principals described the enactment of their faith leadership role as an amalgam of leadership behaviors and faith leadership capabilities, as well as personal motivations and values. Faith leadership behaviors clustered around four interrelated themes: teaching religious education, leading prayer and liturgy, evangelization within the school community, and community building. Faith leadership capabilities included knowledge of scripture and Catholic theology, leadership skills in communication and

interpersonal relations, and staff management and development. These principals also appreciated the intensely personal nature of faith leadership. They linked faith leadership behaviors and capabilities to an intrinsic motivation and personal values reflecting Gospel values. In conceptualizing their faith leadership role in this way, principals spoke with passion and conviction, suggesting motivations beyond mere employers' expectations. For example, in research conducted by Neidhart et al. (2012), principals referred to faith leadership flowing out of their "vocation" (p. 33) that appeared to be much more than mere professionalism. For one principal, this vocation was "too hard to turn off," as it flowed out of the "core of who you are," and "is related to baptismal commitment" (p. 33).

### **Faith Leadership as Ministry**

Related to this sense of vocation, principals conceptualized faith leadership in terms of a "ministry of leadership that is in harmony with other ministries as exercised within the general church community" (Davison, 2006, p. 84). In such a conceptualization, principals saw themselves as playing a leadership role in the mission of the church by building Catholic school identity and culture. This responsibility involved spreading the Gospel message and helping others to develop a relationship with God. For one principal, this meant creating "an opportunity for students, staff and parents to see and hear the message of Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 30). For another, faith leadership was about "provid[ing] an environment where young people have the opportunity and feel safe to learn about the richness of a relationship with our loving God" (p. 30). Principals generally agreed that faith leadership as an urgent priority should be "given more time" (Neidhart et al., 2012, p. 32) in order to initiate "conversations about faith" and "open up the faith topic" (p. 32).

### **Faith Leadership and Personal Faith**

At the same time, it should be noted that the principals in the literature did not always fully subscribe to all the teachings of the Church and that there was "some angst" (Neidhart et al., 2012, p. 33) regarding standing up for particular church teachings. They believed that they were mostly able to stay "true" to what they considered the "core teachings of the Catholic church" (p. 33). However, they found "talking about a personal faith challenging and confronting" (p. 35). Moreover, they often felt "inadequate about their theo-



logical understanding” and “questioned their knowledge base” (p. 35). Consequently, recognizing the limits of their professional and spiritual competence, principals consistently recommended a more systemic and deliberate approach to leadership formation than existed at the time (Thompson, 2010; Neidhart et al., 2012). It is significant that principals recommended leadership formation, rather than professional development. Formation is a nebulous term and, from a Christian perspective, is a lifelong process leading to “a new [religious] consciousness for people who seek a richer understanding of what is happening in their lives and in the world” (O’Leary, 2008, p. 73). This formation is a spiritual and religious activity that “begins with the heart” (p. 129) and provides knowledge, skill, and ritual to support heart experiences. The deeper consciousness that follows is ultimately expressed in discipleship and a particular vocation.

### **Faith Leadership and the Next Generation of Faith Leaders**

Mindful of the next generation of faith leaders, principals recommended offering leadership formation opportunities for teachers as future leaders (Thompson, 2010; Neidhart et al., 2012). They were anxious that future faith leaders could lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to take up the challenge of faith leadership in Catholic schools. According to one principal, “Even religious education teachers are unsure about Catholic identity” and find it difficult to “balance the inclusive and the exclusive nature of the Catholic school” (Neidhart et al., 2012, p. 36). In addition, “Staff are increasingly less confident about leading staff prayer,” as evidenced in their choice of “secular orientated reflections over prayers” (p. 36). Many also “seem reluctant to invest in faith study,” as they are “not necessarily committed to staying in Catholic schools” (p. 36). More often than not, staff members did not feel they needed to participate in parish life. Based on this assessment, principals recommended a diocesan approach to working “bottom up” to build faith leadership capabilities by providing formation for teachers as well as principals, their deputies, and assistants.

### **Formation of Faith Leaders--For Today and Tomorrow**

Thus, research findings suggest that principals have already started the process of rethinking leadership formation in ways that integrate spirituality and religion (e.g., Neidhart & Lamb, 2010, 2011; Neidhart et al., 2012; Thompson, 2010). They have already alerted us to the complexity of faith

leadership by identifying the way in which certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes come together to support faith leadership behaviors. For example, principals have linked faith leadership to theological knowledge acquisition, as well as confidence and skill in leading the school community in prayer and communicating a personal faith position. There seems to be a real interest in developing more effective faith leadership behaviors, together with moral and ethical frameworks for decision-making and communication. To this end, these principals recommended that educational authorities clarify role expectations, and supervisors help aspirant faith leaders to focus on identifying “gaps” with respect to professional and spiritual competencies. Education authorities are also encouraged to make leadership formation a strategic goal with more “targeted” programs to meet the individual’s learning needs. It is also thought desirable that such programs include academic work. In particular, there should be formal academic programs in theological, spiritual, and educational leadership, as well as informal learning opportunities for “conversation,” “networking,” and “personal reflection” (Neidhart et al., 2012, p. 36). All in all, there was a strong emphasis on being more deliberate and systemic about faith leadership formation.

Encouraged by this research, Catholic education authorities in Australia now identify strengthening Catholic school identity and leadership formation as strategic goals. To this end, there is significant financial support for further research around Catholic school identity. The “Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project” (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2012) is one such example. It arose out of “a fruitful partnership between Professor Didier Pollefeyt from Catholic University, Leuven and the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria” (Sharkey, 2013, p. 158) and at the time of this study was being used by many dioceses across Australia. There was also a strong interest in designing religious and/or spiritual formation programs for current and future generations of faith leaders. While it may be argued that this interest in Catholic school identity and leadership formation represents a positive development, inherent dangers become apparent if we view Catholic school identity, leadership, and leadership formation through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

## Symbolic Interactionism

### A Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework based on three foundational premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward people, events, and objects “on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). The second premise alerts us to role that “social interaction” (p. 2) plays in determining these meanings, and—related to the first two premises—the third premise accepts that “these meanings . . . are modified through an interpretive process” (p. 2) that individuals use in dealing with the people, events, and objects they encounter. Noting the relevance of this theoretical framework to the changing world of today, contemporary theorists (e.g., Charon, 2010; Hewitt, 2003; Stryker, 2003) have presented a more nuanced account of these foundational premises by alerting us to the symbolic and complex nature of human activity and cultural identity, and the need for leadership to help us address issues around role identity and role-making.

This theoretical framework assumes that human beings operate within a symbolic environment of “social objects” (Charon, 2010, p. 49) including language, gestures, perspectives, and human activity. These social objects provide a shared meaning and pave the way for social agreement and social action. Per this framework, without shared meanings and symbols, society and institutions such as Catholic schools would be unsustainable, as these symbols or social objects “are used to socialize us; they make our culture possible; they are the basis for on-going communication and cooperation and they make possible our ability to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next” (Charon, 2010, p. 62). When it comes to symbols, “people make them and people agree on what they stand for . . . the person who uses symbols does so for the purpose of giving a meaning that he or she believes will make sense to the other” (Stryker, 2003, p. 56). Each society, group, and subgroup develops its own set of symbols and shared meanings in the context of social interaction within a unique environment.

In this way, symbols and shared meanings represent the “glue” that holds society, institutions, and groups together, and it is possible for these entities to be altered radically or to disappear altogether if symbols and meanings are no longer shared. This is a problematic situation, a point of “disequilibrium” (Charon, 2010, p. 122) that demands human activity. Here human activity is

described as a “continuous stream of action, overt and covert, influenced by on-going decisions along the way (Charon, 2010, p. 135). This activity starts with an “impulse” or a vague “disposition to act” in a time of “disequilibrium” (p. 120). In short, human activity begins in a state of “disequilibrium,” resulting in “discomfort and disruption” (p. 120) forcing human activity in the form of a meaning-making process. Often without a direction or clear goal in mind, the meaning-making process proceeds rapidly through stages of “perception and manipulation” (pp. 121–122). During the perception stage, the emphasis is on learning, and actors come to appreciate different points of view, including traditional viewpoints and emerging ideas. Shared meanings emerge, and there is general agreement around the direction and goals. In the manipulation stage, the focus is on social action, with shared meanings being the basis for ongoing communication and cooperation. Finally, actors reach the “consummation” stage “when the goal is achieved and equilibrium is restored” (p. 122). Clearly, symbolic interactionists see human activity as a meaning-making process leading to social agreement and social action.

### **Human Activity as Meaning Making**

This understanding of human activity, in turn, suggests a particular approach to leadership that recognizes the need for human agency and social interaction. Leadership is reframed in terms of influencing others as they “confront, utilize, manipulate and remake structures” (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003, p. 144) and, in doing so, move from disequilibrium to equilibrium. On a practical note, leaders recognize points of disequilibrium and are proactive in initiating meaning-making processes. They encourage personal and communal agency through visioning and goal setting, decision-making, and social action. There is also a coordination role as leaders recognize that human acts are not individual acts but rather “social acts requiring the coordinated efforts of several individuals (Hewitt, 2003, p. 30). Moreover, there is a leadership role with respect to maintaining the social setting: “[Social action] is sustained not just by individual capabilities but also by the maintenance of the social setting” (Hewitt, 2003, p. 30). Finally, symbolic interactionism reminds us that creative social interaction involves “taking the role of the other” (Charon, 2010, pp. 105–107). Accurate role taking underpins all social interaction and involves “imagining the world from the perspective of another” (p. 105) or “social intelligence” (p. 106). Here leadership can play its part by modeling role taking and facilitating participation and communication.

## Role Identity and Role Making

Finally, symbolic interactionism offers a useful account of role identity and role making and, in doing so, explains role expectations and offers a way forward for leadership formation. According to this account, “Roles provide us with a set of rules . . . governed by negotiation” (Charon, 2010, p. 162). While, traditionally, roles are deemed to be “a set of expectations – or a script – that tells the individual what to do” (p. 162), symbolic interactionism offers an alternative role theory. In this view, roles offer guidelines that influence individuals and groups as they engage in social interaction, make ongoing decisions, and take social action. Roles should not be “treated as an objective reality [a fixed entity] confronting the individual entering the organization” (p. 162). Rather, “roles are fluid, vague and contradictory” (p. 162) and up for negotiation.

### Through the Lens of Symbolic Interactionism

Viewing research findings on faith leadership through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we can begin to appreciate the symbolic nature of identity. Catholic school identity is characterized by a unique symbolic environment made up of a variety of social objects including language gestures, perspectives, and human activity. These objects are identified through social interaction and deemed to be valuable as they provide shared meaning and underpin social agreement and social action. In this way, in the Catholic school, social objects come together to project a unique identity that is socially created, socially understood, and socially exclusive.

Through this lens, we also appreciate that Catholic school communities have reached a point of “disequilibrium” (Charon, 2010, p. 122) with the breakdown of traditional faith communities. Catholic school identity has been weakened by a diminution of shared meanings and commitment to religious beliefs and practices. This disequilibrium demands leadership and human activity in the form of a meaning-making process intent on social agreement and social action. This changing context provides a strong impulse for Catholic education authorities and principals to act to restore equilibrium with respect to the identity of the Catholic school as a faith community. Consequently, education authorities have identified strengthening Catholic school identity as a strategic goal, resulting in significant resource allocation to support new policies, programs, and research. Similarly, principals have accepted their faith leadership responsibilities. As one principal explained it:

Deliver[ing] diocesan expectations in Catholic faith and cultural development within the school, I believe that my role is to lead a vital aspect of the Church, i.e. the Catholic school. I believe that I have the responsibility to ensure that each aspect of school life is authentically Catholic and that the culture developed through curriculum, policy, practice and environment – reflect[ing] the Gospel and the Catholic Tradition. (Neidhart et al., 2012, p. 30)

While this focus represents a positive development, symbolic interactionism alerts us to an inherent danger regarding the construction of Catholic school identity. Disequilibrium is a sorry state, where there is a growing sense of “discomfort and disruption” (Charon, 2010, p. 120) forcing human activity. In these circumstances, authorities and principals could be forgiven for rushing to a solution by imposing a generic identity across the whole system of schools. However, symbolic interactionism reminds us that Catholic school identity, as a symbolic cultural expression, is socially created, socially understood, and socially exclusive. While there are many commonalities across different school communities, each community develops its own set of symbols and shared meanings in the context of social interaction within a unique environment. A Catholic school identity cannot be imposed as a generic entity—as education, a social action, must be underpinned by shared meanings and social agreement.

Symbolic interactionism also alerts us to an inherent danger with respect to faith leadership formation. There is a danger that education authorities might expect principals to “take up” a highly specified, “one size fits all” leadership role in support of a generic Catholic school identity. Symbolic interactionism reminds us that we can no longer assume that the role holder is a passive recipient of a role, or “script” (Charon, 2010, p. 162), that must be followed to the letter. According to this view, the role statement offers a general outline of expectations that will need to be further negotiated in practice by the role holder. We are reminded that principals freely admit that they experience “angst” (Neidhart et al., 2012, pp. 33–34) with respect to some church teaching and see the need to negotiate their role at the local level. In this instance, leadership formation is about informing the negotiation process by providing professional learning opportunities for knowledge acquisition and skill development. However, such programs transcend mere knowledge acquisition and skill development by encouraging attitudinal change. Individuals, through self-reflection activities, come to a deeper self-knowledge of

the inner world of beliefs, motivations, and values. Moreover, through social interaction, they become aware of the expectations of others and begin to see themselves and the situation through another’s eyes.

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we come to appreciate that efforts to strengthen faith leadership formation represent positive developments in a changing context. Formation programs can go beyond developing leadership competencies to become opportunities for individuals to “make” their role by applying their learning to the practical challenges of leadership within their sphere of influence. Duignan (2007) has argued, “Many contemporary competency-driven leadership development programs do not prepare educational leaders for decision-making involving contestation of values and ethical tensions” (p. 142). Instead, formation can become an educative process for the “development of capable, authentic educational leaders” through “personal formation and transformation, leading to a deep understanding of [their] personal values” (p.143). Further, Ranson (2006) focused on leadership in a Catholic context, positing that aspirant leaders need to possess not only administrative capacity but also “spiritual maturity, a vocational sensibility and the awareness of ecclesial responsibility. Such persons obviously don’t come ready packaged! Such persons, identified as having this potential, require sustained formation and requisite education. Both focused theological *and* spiritual formation are required” (p. 421).

Nevertheless, there are inherent dangers to the imposition of a generic school identity across a system of schools, as well as a “one size fits all” approach to leadership formation. To avoid these dangers, we recommend a program of leadership formation that is designed around symbolic interactionist principles. These elements and their relationship are illustrated in the following figure.

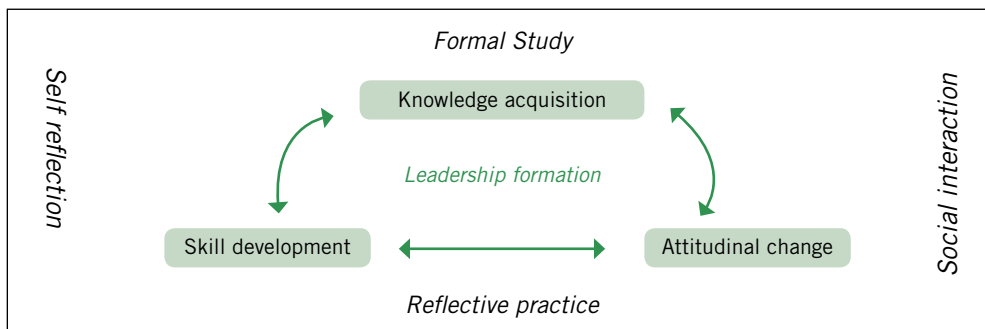


Figure 1. A model for leadership formation.

In this model, leadership formation is framed as a deep form of consciousness raising and role-making for aspirant faith leaders, including teachers, principals, deputies, and assistants, and is designed to meet the needs of both current and future generations of faith leaders in Catholic schools. Here there is an emphasis on knowledge acquisition, skill development, and attitudinal change within a learning environment that encourages formal academic study, self-reflection, social interaction, and reflective practice. On a practical note, a formation program based on this model would begin with the identification of the problem situation, points of disequilibrium where there are few shared meanings regarding matters of faith, and little in the way of commitment to religious belief and practice. Mindful of the problem situation, there would also be opportunities for prayerful self-reflection. In addition, there would be facilitated academic study with an emphasis on religious education, theology, and scripture; social interaction and opportunities to take the role of another; as well as reflective practice with an interest in creative problem solving. In this way, the practical knowledge and theoretical insights coalesce to point a way forward toward a new equilibrium of shared meaning and social action that not only responds to individual and local community needs, but is also consistent with Catholic tradition and teaching.

### Conclusion

This article recognizes that the macro context of social, economic, and ecclesial change has left no institution, including the Catholic school, untouched. The very purpose of the Catholic school, namely its evangelizing mission, is under threat as Catholic identity and culture are undermined. Consequently, attention has shifted to faith leadership in the Catholic school, and there are new expectations being placed on the principal to preserve the Catholic identity and culture of the school and thus ensure the success of its evangelizing mission. Recognizing this development, Australian researchers have sought a more informed and sophisticated understanding of faith leadership from the principal's perspective.

This article reviewed this body of the research and offered insight into how principals have conceptualized and enacted this role. In particular, this review highlights the relationship between Catholic school identity, faith leadership, and leadership formation. In doing so, we argue that this contemporary concern for Catholic school identity and leadership formation represents a positive development. At the same time, there are inherent dangers



in the imposition of a generic Catholic school identity and a “one size fits all” faith leadership role.

Consequently, this article concludes by offering a model for faith leadership formation that seeks to minimize these dangers. As in more traditional professional development programs, there is an emphasis on knowledge acquisition, skill development, and attitudinal change. However, this model suggests a practical approach to leadership formation that begins with a real life faith issue and involves equal measures of prayerful self-reflection, academic study, social interaction, and reflective practice. In conclusion, we recommend that Catholic education authorities continue to grapple with the challenge of faith leadership and consider this model of leadership formation as a possible way forward. This is a matter of urgency, as research suggests that the success and sustainability of the Catholic school depends on capable faith leadership into the future.

### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Dr. Gayle Spry.

### References

- Belmonte, A., & Cranston, N. (2009). The religious dimension of lay leadership in Catholic schools: Preserving Catholic culture in an era of change. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 12(3), 294–319. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol2/iss3/10>
- Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. (2007). *Catholic schools at a crossroads (Pastoral letter)*. Sydney, Australia: Catholic Education Office and Bishops of NSW and the ACT.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspectives and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Carlin, P., d'Arbon, T., Dorman, G., Duignan, P., & Neidhart, H. (2003). *Leadership succession for Catholic schools in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania (The VSAT Project)*. Strathfield, Australia: Flagship for Catholic Educational Leadership, Australian Catholic University.
- Catholic Education Commission of Victoria. (CECV). (2005a). *Development framework and standards of practice*. Retrieved from <http://web.cecv.catholic.edu.au/publications/leadership/wholebook.pdf>
- Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV). (2005b). *School improvement framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au/our-schools/SIF/>
- Charon, J. (2010). *Symbolic Interactionism: An introduction, an interpretation, an integration* (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Ciriello, M. (Ed.). (1993). *The principal as educational leader: Formation and development for Catholic school leaders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference.
- Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE). (1997). *The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium*. Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul Publications.
- Convey, J. J. (2012). Perceptions of Catholic identity: Views of Catholic school administrators and teachers. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 16(1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol16/iss1/10>
- Coughlan, P. (2009). *The mission of the Catholic school and the role of the principal in a changing landscape* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Australian Catholic University, Strathfield.
- d'Arbon, T., Duignan, P., & Goodwin, K. (2001). *Leadership succession in Catholic schools in New South Wales: A research project on behalf of Catholic Education Commission*. Sydney, Australia: Catholic Education Commission.
- Davison, L. (2006). *Lay principals under contract: Going down for the good turf. An exploration of the perceptions of selected secondary lay principals in relation to the religious and spiritual dimensions of their role* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.
- Dixon, R. (2003). Mass attendance trends among Australian Catholics: A significant challenge for the Catholic church. *South Pacific Journal of Mission Studies*, 28, 3–8.
- Dixon, R. (2005). *The Catholic community in Australia*. Adelaide, Australia: Openbook Publishers.
- Duignan, P. (2007). *Educational leadership*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hewitt, J. (2003). *Self and society: A symbolic interactionist social psychology* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- John Paul II. (2001). *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation: Ecclesia in Oceania*. Strathfield, NSW: St Paul Publications.
- McEvoy, F. (2006). *How is religious leadership understood and practised by principals in Catholic secondary schools in South Australia?* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.
- Mellor, G. J. (2005). *Reimagining the Catholic school: An exploration of principal responses to changing contexts of the contemporary Catholic school* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Australian Catholic University, Sydney.
- National Catholic Education Commission. (2005). *Leadership in the religious domain, leading in Catholic schools*. Report of the Forum for Directors and Heads of Religious Education in Catholic School Systems, Melbourne.
- Neidhart, H., & Lamb, J. (2010). Faith leadership and the primary principal (Part 1): An expanding role in Catholic schools. *Journal of Catholic School Studies*, 82(2), 13–28.
- Neidhart, H., & Lamb, J. (2011). Faith leadership and the primary principal (Part 2): Both religious and spiritual. *Journal of Catholic School Studies*, 83(2), 52–61.
- Neidhart, H., Lamb, J., & Spry, G. (2012). *The Faith leadership role of the principal. Project report*. Strathfield, NSW: Centre for Creative & Authentic Leadership, Australian Catholic University.

- O'Leary, D. (2008). *Begin with the heart: Recovering a sacramental vision*. Dublin, Ireland: Columba Press.
- Pollefeyt, D., & Bouwens, J. (2012). *Identity in dialogue: Assessing and enhancing Catholic school identity. Research methodology and research results in Catholic schools in Victoria, Australia*. Melbourne, Australia: Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.
- Ranson, D. (2006). Forming a new generation of leaders for Catholic schools. *Australasian Catholic Record*, 83(4), 415–421.
- Rossiter, G. (2013). Perspective on the use of construct “Catholic Identity” for Australian Catholic schooling: Sociological background and literature – Part 1. *Journal of Religious Education*, 61(2), 4–16.
- Sandstrom, K., Martin, D., & Fine, G. A. (2003). *Symbols, selves and social reality: A symbolic interactionist approach to sociology and social psychology*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Press.
- Schuttloffel, M. J. (2012). Catholic identity: The heart of Catholic education. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 16(1), 148–154. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol16/iss1/8>
- Schuttloffel, M. J. (2013). Contemplative leadership practice: The influences of character on Catholic school leadership. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 17(1), 81–103. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol17/iss1/5>
- Sharkey, P. (2013). Hermeneutics and the mission of the Catholic school: ECSIP as a case study. In J. D'Orsa & T. D'Orsa (Eds.). *Leading for Mission: Integrating life, culture and faith in Catholic education*. Mulgrave, Vic: Vaughan Publishing.
- Slattery, M. (1998). *The role of the Catholic school principal in the face of modern day challenges and demands: Key behaviours, issues, perceptions, challenges and dilemmas facing Catholic school principals in the late 1990s*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Australian Catholic University: Victoria.
- Stryker, S. (2003). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural vision*. Caldwell, NJ: Blackburn Press.
- Thompson, C. (2010). *Catholic secondary school principals as faith leaders: A study of the Diocese of Lismore* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Australian Catholic University: Brisbane.

*Helga Neidhart is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne. For correspondence regarding this article, she can be contacted at [helga.neidhart@acu.edu](mailto:helga.neidhart@acu.edu).*

*Janeen Lamb is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane.*