Evaluating the Ethos in Our Spiritan Schools and Colleges

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Ethos is a term that has been variously explained. For some it means the mission or the identity of a group; however, I tend to favour describing ethos as “the characteristic spirit”\(^1\) of a group. Using terms like ethos, mission, identity or the characteristic spirit of an institution or school is one thing, explaining precisely what ethos means as applied to the day-to-day living in a school community is another. In this brief article I will strive to address the overall implications contained in this seemingly simple word, ethos, and then explain why I believe we Spiritans should at this juncture evaluate our schools.

**Ethos**

So, what is the meaning of ethos in real living terms for our school communities? Is the ethos of a school the espoused way of living within the school community, a way of living that is normal and natural and everyday; a lifestyle that the whole community takes for granted and even unconsciously expects? I believe it is. What we are dealing with here, as the researchers and educationalists Canavan and Monahan\(^2\) explain, comprises the inherited values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, norms and symbols of defined groups, and in this case, our schools. Let us consider one by one the six terms just mentioned.

Firstly, the *inherited values* of a school normally refer to all that represents and expresses what is considered important to the school group or community. There is a story of a lion that visited a Government department and ate one of the people working there. It caused little stir. A few days later he ate another member of the institution, and again little stir. However, the lion decided that he needed more tender meat and ate the person who served coffee. There was an immediate uproar and investigation. In schools, it could be achievement in games or studies, or something more mundane like prestige, or a mixture of all the above, that the school community in practice really feels are important. I have heard professed educationalists explain that since the academic results were good, all was well; it was probably only partially meant but it still represented a gut-feeling. In another school it was remarked that since the football team was successful in a given year, it was a good year. Again, this might be announced with tongue in cheek but again some real emotion and belief are involved. Then how do we find out what is really in fact important to the group? We might begin by asking what it is that the school community deeply cares about in...
real terms. The answer will be complex but I might recommend searching through the accounts and timetables of the schools to see, besides necessary maintenance and core salaries, what area or areas are given the major funds, time, thought and personnel. We might also inquire as to which areas elicit most effort and tend to cause both the deepest heartbreak and the greatest celebration.

The **beliefs**, the second issue to consider, can be defined as the *cognitive* views of the community about truth and reality. So long as beliefs do not greatly impinge on the gut-feelings of the group they might easily be discovered through anonymously-answered, well-prepared and piloted questionnaires and discussion. However, if the beliefs do relate to deep emotional realms, self-identity and such areas, they can be very difficult to uncover since to discuss with any individual or group their deeply-held beliefs can be very threatening indeed. Oftentimes in this latter situation the responses we end up with are mere defensive clichés or politically correct responses, abstract concepts or conceptual constructs, not reflecting the real truth and beliefs that actually inspire the group. Some suggest that a way to find out the truth at this level might be to ask the individual or group to suggest what “others” of their group believe and think and do.

Moving to our third issue, **assumptions**, we can say that assumptions are a wider area for consideration than what has gone before since assumptions include cognitive beliefs together with perceptions and values that guide behaviour. The Lord said: “By your fruits shall you know them” (Mt 7: 20). Oftentimes, if behaviour is watched it might clearly point to what an individual or a group assumes; however, sometimes it might not. Individuals, young and old, when in groups often act differently compared with when they are on their own; they also can act differently in school as compared with when they are at home or ‘on the town’ or elsewhere. Looking at behaviour individually and collectively in the different places, one might ask whether it is the behaviour at school, at home or elsewhere that reveals the true assumptions by which the group lives or is the reality an amalgam of them all. From a school’s perspective, if the education in the school is to bear fruit that will last, it will have to strive to make sure that the assumptions of the ethos of the school are deeply held so that they won’t disappear at the touch of ‘reality’ after school and into the future. Yes, we all are affected by our surroundings, by ‘the birds of the air’ and the ‘thorn-bushes’, peer pressure and the Zeitgeist of society, and much else; we can all be left floundering. But that truth being a given underlines even more the need for an ethos in our schools that is ‘pro-active’, strong, deep and dynamic.
The fourth issue within the schools is the in-built school expectations; these arise from the values, beliefs and assumptions of the group. These expectations can be defined as the hopes of the group that stem from all their shared understandings. I have seen two schools within a few hundred yards of each other. In the first school many of the children hoped to become lawyers and doctors, and practically all wanted to go to Third Level, and practically all went. In the second school, a few hundred yards away, going to Third Level for the many seemed a step too far; and few went. How can this be? It comes down to expectations that can stem from many areas especially from the home and the school. As far as the school is concerned, the ways of achieving their expectations might be to set up certain norms, standards and principles that are ‘acceptable’; and then these are followed up with varied pressures. It can be hard to understand how in one school excellence in all things could be the norm while in another ‘to get by before joining real life’ is taken for granted.

Finally, added to the above, as a constant reminder of what the group holds dear, their real values, beliefs, assumptions and expectations, are the symbols used by the school. The symbols which are used by a school are probably the easiest of the six areas to discover. All over the school there will be symbols. It might be Christian artifacts or general works of art that deck the walls and spaces; it might be a long list of photographs of winning individuals and teams and/or portraits of “important” or “successful” alumni; it could be the taken-for-granted notices on notice-boards, revealing hidden agendas; it also might be blank walls and empty spaces since they too symbolise a school’s general ethos. What symbols are there and what symbols are not there sends its own message. More probably it will be an amalgam of all of the above. In Colonial times in Ireland, displaying a crucifix in a classroom or public area was forbidden. The then Government obviously saw the importance of symbols. If we study the symbols that are extant in our schools they could give insights as to what the group really believes, assumes, hopes and stands for at their gut or deep personal level. We ignore the awareness and evaluation of symbols at our peril.

In brief, the whole human process of living in school communities, as stated, is indeed very complex to understand or evaluate even if what is happening seems entirely natural. It would be folly, I believe, to consider that we will ever fully understand or exhaustively evaluate any school’s ethos, but we can strive to do our best.
Ethos Statements in Our Spiritan Schools

The stated and hoped-for ‘characteristic spirit’ or ethos of each Spiritan school can normally be found on the school’s website. Some of the statements from our schools speak of: ‘a Catholic school’; ‘A Christian community’; ‘A community of faith and learning’; ‘A united family of God known for excellence in the formation of the human person’; ‘A religious and moral education is fundamental’; ‘A concern and care for others, especially the underprivileged’; ‘Encouragement and affirmation of all’; ‘Provide the boys with the skills, knowledge, values and adaptability’; ‘Fosters idealism’; ‘Inspiring hearts’; ‘ Enables people to know and do what is right’; ‘Independence of mind’; ‘Holistic educational environment’; ‘Fosters the spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional and physical qualities of the students’; ‘Conscious of its own unique Holy Ghost traditions enhanced by Irish, European and world-wide educational experience’; ‘Cultivate respect for God, the Church, God’s creation and for our cultural heritage’; ‘Independence of mind’; ‘Be responsive to the needs and aspirations of both parents and students’; ‘Offer a focused and directed religious education and pastoral care programme’; ‘Who are motivated to live their lives in accordance with Gospel values’, et al.

These statements and others not quoted are inspiring and insightful and most helpful; but I suppose the question we have to ask ourselves is whether the schools are actually living up to their ideals or are they merely aspirational or exercises in political correctness. Interestingly, the artistic side of the schools is not mentioned in these declarations of ethos, but probably more remarkable is the fact that the name of Jesus, our Teacher and Model is not mentioned. Neither is love of God or neighbour, with one’s whole heart, soul and mind. Nor is it clear that the striving for Jesus’ kingdom in the school involves the whole school community: teachers, administration staff, domestic staff, catering staff along with the students, so that all the school community are supported in striving to follow the Gospel way of life and to perfect all God’s gifts within themselves as individuals and the community as a whole. Nor is it clear that within the ethos of each school there would be the unstinting practice of expending significant thought, time and money in affirming, teaching, practising and integrating the way of living taught by Jesus into every aspect of school life, so that the world vision of Jesus would affect all relationships both inside and outside the classrooms, the offices, the dining rooms, the playgrounds and all the meeting places.

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Regarding commitment to concern for the poor, the disabled and the marginalised, so well emphasised in the ethos statements, it might need to be asked if this elemental aspect of the Spiritan ethos is a quintessential practice for all or only for the few in our schools. Furthermore, does this concern apply beyond the ‘servicing of wounds’ to fundamental questioning, fighting for and, where possible, helping to implement improved societal structures? Even more, is it understood that this commitment and concern is more than a mere school-time pursuit but a way of life choice meant to continue when staff and students are outside the school environment, such as when they go home each day or go on holidays or graduate or change jobs etc.? Finally, is it clear that all the above includes supportive and close relationships with the parents, families and local communities, so that the school, the home and the local communities would all be giving the same messages, the same example, the same theology of life? Yes, this is what ethos is all about in Spiritan education.

**Evaluation: Are Our Schools Living Up to Spiritan Ethos?**

There is no doubt that in the Spiritan schools that I have visited and known in three continents, one can find: both very good and broad academic programmes, games programmes, pastoral care and social outreach programmes that include retreats and outreach to the poor and marginalised and this last mentioned in some cases includes not only the students but also the alumni and parents. Nevertheless, going a little deeper into the question of ethos, we might ask ourselves whether today in our schools there is sufficient reflection, meditation, prayer, on-going group study, searching of the scriptures, social and religious debate, well-attended and well-prepared liturgies and para-liturgies and up-to-date symbols that project effectively the message of Jesus in ways that resonate with our modern school communities, both adults and children. And is there significant thought, time, personnel and money being put into this? Ultimately we know that the integration of Jesus’ message into the deepest inner life and heart of the schools is primary. And if this is not happening today in our schools, then what is being achieved to justify our involvement in education, even if our involvement is reduced to mere ownership?

**The Primary Movers and Shakers**

There is no doubt that in any school the primary movers and shakers are the administration and the staff, beginning with the Principal. The Boards of Management or Boards of Governors will have some input but their input will be more regulatory than ethos building. There will indeed be leaders in the student body...
but being immature they too, in the normal course of events, will pick up the school ethos from those adults by whom they are influenced day in and day out. “But we teachers only teach our subjects in class or meet the children casually in the halls or on the playing fields!” This may be true for many but still all adults in the school have a very significant role to play. Something, too, that is not often understood is that a teacher does not merely teach what the teacher wants to teach or is qualified to teach or what the teacher thinks he/she is teaching, but the teacher teaches by who he or she is. Yes, teachers carry a heavy burden of responsibility in making sure that the ethos of any school is as good as it can be. With this in mind, we also might ask whether, in the practice and policies of our schools, commitment to or compatibility with a school’s ethos is a criterion in the selection and evaluation of school staff.

Should We Evaluate our Schools?

It is reported that at each gun position at the beginning of the WWII a soldier stood some yards away from the actual gun. When finally someone asked what these soldiers were doing, it transpired that their job was to hold the horses. Of course there were no horses at gun placements in WWII since the guns were transported by motorized vehicles, but horses were used in World War I and so the practice continued. This phantom horse-holding ceased when the right observations were made and the right questions were asked. The same can apply to our schools.

All things considered, having lived in two of our Irish schools for the past twenty-four years and before that for seventeen years in the West Indies and Africa, I do believe that all our schools should be involved in on-going, serious and rigorous self-questioning, analysis and fresh articulation of their ways of living and educating. I feel that this is needed if constant growth and evolution to a better God-centered future is to be achieved. And it is noted in research that when the majority in any community agree to implement and live by a shared ethos, there is a great unity of meaning, purpose and harmony. Further, it has been found that if such an environment exists in a school the students learn better, the teachers teach better and there is less need for tight control structures by the school management team.

In Conclusion

I believe, as outlined above, evaluating the day-to-day living of a community is very complex but certainly much that is great has been achieved in our schools and by our staffs, our students and our alumni. But that being said, if there are only ageing...
groups in given Spiritan schools, I feel that before finally handing over the running of those schools to others, while retaining ownership, it might be important to know as well as we can, that the knowledge and love and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is the central concern and indeed integral to every aspect of those schools; and that an outreach to the poor and marginalized will be our special Jesus-taught, Spiritan legacy in education into the future. As I stated in an earlier work, the structures needed to support our alumni, serving Church communities as lay or clerical leaders, after inevitable detailed discussion and evaluation, could also be put firmly in place in view of the future needs of the Church. In this way, priests, deacons, catechists, teachers, lawyers, doctors and alumni in all areas of expertise, including both the married and unmarried, could be encouraged to enlist as helpers or associate members in our Congregation, to give either part or all of their working lives to the service of spreading the Good News of Jesus’ Kingdom, especially in favour of the destitute and powerless poor. Connections with the Spiritan worldwide network might fairly easily be established for such a project. However, meanwhile, let us fearlessly and critically evaluate in depth the ethos of our schools as they are today with an eye to the future.

Endnotes

1 Government of Ireland Education Act 1998
4 Vatican. (1988), The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, Dublin: Veritas
“In today’s world the Catholic school pursues cultural goals and the natural development of youth to the same degree as any other school. What makes the Catholic school distinctive is its attempt to generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love. It tries to guide the adolescents in such a way that personality development goes hand in hand with the development of the baptised ‘new creature’… It tries to relate all of human culture to the good news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine everything that the students will gradually come to learn about the world, about life and about the human person.”
5 DEA Mission Statement: “It nurtures and develops the abilities, talents and interests of each person in ways that promote and champion active citizenship and solidarity with people who are marginalised.”