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Reading the signs of the times. Design of a communal discernment practice in Catholic schools

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Societal developments and phenomena such as diversity, secularisation, individualisation and the marketisation of education challenge Catholic schools in their striving for good education. Issues related to these developments and phenomena put their distinctive articulation and interpretation of values and ethical commitments to the test. It is by no means easy for Catholic schools to take on these challenges and decide what to do regarding their educational endeavour. By taking an educational design perspective, this article aims to contribute to the issue of how Catholic schools act by presenting an intervention for communal discernment. Through reading the signs of the times, looking inwards, deliberating and then coming to decisions, Catholic schools will be able to take on the challenges and continue purposefully in their striving for good education. Based on an academic study of Christian spirituality, a generic design for a communal discernment practice is presented, consisting of four clusters of strategies for action, and reflective questions to activate these strategies. Suggestions for further research are included.

Keywords: Catholic schools; educational endeavour; interruption; communal discernment practice; educational design research

Introduction

As their calling is to educate and ‘form’ all students, every student and the whole student with a view to their future and that of society, Catholic schools strive for good education. However, nowadays Catholic schools are faced with various challenges in their striving for good education. These challenges arise from societal developments and phenomena such as diversity, secularisation, individualisation and the marketisation of education; but they also include internal issues, such as the motivation of students and the recruitment of new teachers and school leaders (Grace 2002; Miller 2007; Lydon 2018; Pring 2018). These and other challenges prompt Catholic schools to reevaluate their educational project and come to important decisions; but they also make schools unsure of how to proceed. What are their options going forward, taking into account their calling to educate?

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This article explores the issue of how Catholic schools act regarding their striving for good education, and aims to contribute to a solution by taking an educational design perspective. The issue of what action to take concerns the discrepancy between the current situation (unsure, not knowing what to do) and the desired one (coming to decisions, knowing what to do). By understanding that this discrepancy is crucial, we aim to design an intervention that would support Catholic schools in overcoming it by re-evaluating and deciding on the form of their striving for good education.

The design of the article is as follows. First, the issue of the actions is introduced. To explore the issue further, theoretical considerations are presented regarding Catholic schools as educational communities, reading the signs of the times and communal discernment. In order to contribute to a solution, an educational design perspective is taken to lay out an intervention for Catholic schools. This intervention aims to support Catholic schools in making wise and purposeful decisions regarding their educational endeavour. Based on design requirements and a design proposition, a generic design for a communal discernment practice is presented. A conclusion and a discussion complete the article.

Challenges facing Catholic schools

The issue of how Catholic schools act today is firstly presented by means of an example. A Catholic secondary school of around 700 students in the southern part of the Netherlands has a long-standing tradition of good education. By offering students a broad curriculum of various subjects and activities, the school strives for the education and formation of the whole student. Due to such societal developments as individualisation and such phenomena as the use of social media, the school now finds itself unsure how to motivate students. Unlike their predecessors, students today do not appear to be motivated very much by the broad curriculum, or feel that it applies to them. School leaders, teachers and other staff ask themselves whether they should attempt to change study and learning by setting more tests, prohibiting mobile phones in school, or expanding the curriculum with more popular subjects and activities. None of these approaches seems to be very successful. In short, this well-known school's approach to education and formation doesn't appear to be effective anymore, and new approaches have not yet been announced.

As it is for every school, the calling of Catholic schools is to endeavour to instil good education. But the endeavour of Catholic schools is closely connected to the Church's mission, and her concern for schooling. The Church considers Catholic schools 'as a privileged means of promoting the formation of the whole man, since the school is a centre in which a specific concept of the world, of man, and of history is developed and conveyed' (Sacred Congregation, cited in Miller 2007, 453). As they are intrinsically connected to the Church's mission, Catholic schools understand their endeavour in terms of the humanisation of man and the world, and the formation of the whole person. By striving for good education, Catholic schools deliver a public good to society, and are valued as institutions where one can learn what it means to live well together (Grace 2000; Hermans 2017). Thus, they enrich the public debate on good education, and contribute to the common good of society.

In the contemporary context of West European liberal societies, which can be characterised by diversity, secularisation and individualisation, Catholic schools are faced with various challenges in their striving for good education. 'Diversity' refers to the fact that people differ in their opinion of the good life and what it means to live well together,

‘secularisation’ means that people make sense of the good life and living together in terms of worldly connections, and ‘individualisation’ refers to the relation between the individual and the community being reduced to something in or of the individual (Beyer 1994; Bruce 2002; Sullivan 2018). Although their impact differs in different countries, phenomena such as diversity, secularisation and individualisation influence the way that public opinion, policymakers and governments gauge the contribution of Catholic schools to the common good. Catholic schools appear to be sensitive to societal scrutiny, which affects how they perceive themselves (Browne 2018; Miller 2007; Wilkin 2018). Being receptive to societal developments and phenomena also encourages schools to ask themselves questions about their project of good education, as we saw in the example at the beginning of this section (Pring 2018). However, there is little knowledge of how Catholic schools could durably and effectively re-evaluate and decide on their educational project, taking into account the humanisation of man and the world, and the formation of the whole person.

Unmistakably, the marketisation and instrumentalisation of education are also having a huge impact on how Catholic schools understand and strive for good education. ‘Marketisation’ refers to the striving for visible, measurable academic success as the almost exclusive criterion for judging a school to be a ‘good school’ (Grace 2002). Shouldn’t education in Catholic schools aim for ‘a person who is open to solidarity with others in the search for the true meaning of existence?’ (Pope Benedict XVI, cited in Miller 2007, 461). The Roman Magisterium repeatedly emphasises that the educational project of Catholic schools should concentrate not only on knowledge transfer, but be oriented towards an integral formation of students that is founded on a Christian anthropology. ‘Instrumentalisation’ refers to society’s impatient quest for learning outcomes, performance and accountability that has driven schools into the arms of a technical and instrumental rationality (Biesta 2010; Buchanan 2015). Following this rationality, the educational praxis is scrutinised through the lens of statistics and performance data. The intention is that the failure of a perfect match between input and output should be fixed and overcome by the application of strong, secure and predictable methods and procedures. However, the exclusive use of a technical rationality and of strong methods is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what education is about. From a pedagogical point of view, the educational endeavour should also be understood in terms of weakness, vulnerability, receptivity and grace (Biesta 2013). The endeavour of Catholic schools covers not only the integral formation of each and every student and the whole student in the light of her or his transcendent destiny, but is also guided by principles as the complementarity of the natural and the supernatural, the loyalty to the given and the dedication to existence (Giussani 2019). There are few guidelines as to how Catholic schools can deal with or oppose the now-widespread and one-sided emphasis on visible, measurable academic success, and the strong belief in the predictability and enforceability of education and its instrumental rationality.

In terms of their educational endeavour, Catholic schools are faced with serious challenges connected not only to societal phenomena such as diversity, secularisation and individualisation, but also to the marketisation and instrumentalisation of education. However, they appear to lack strategies to deal adequately with these concepts and re-evaluate the realisation of their educational project in terms of the humanisation of man and the world, and the formation of the whole person. The issue of how Catholic schools act is of an existential nature: who are we, *as* Catholic schools, that we aren’t able to re-evaluate our educational project and achieve our agency?

Theoretical considerations

With a view to understanding why the issue of actions is problematic, we now explore the widely used but scarcely explored metaphor of Catholic schools as educational communities; what it means for these communities to read the signs of the times; and how the Christian practice of communal discernment can help to deal with the issues these signs portend. Based on these theoretical considerations, we conclude this section with the research question.

Catholic schools as educational communities

Closely connected to the Church, Catholic schools are educational institutions that contribute to the common good in society. By describing educational institutions in figurative and imaginative language – more specifically, by using metaphors – we are able to understand their ethical components, behavioural manifestations, structural characteristics and political dimensions (Beck 1999). The use of the metaphor of a Catholic school as an educational community is based on a symbiosis between Christian sociology and ecclesiology (Groome 1998, 171–214). From a Christian perspective, the community is the primary context for being saved and becoming human. The Second Vatican Council encouraged the Church's new self-awareness of being a 'communion', which has led to the transition of the school as institution to the school as educational community. Catholic schools 'are charged with the mission of handing on and reinforcing a sense of community, mutual concern, and the acceptance of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity' (Miller 2007, 468). Being educational communities, Catholic schools endeavour in a distinctive way to contribute to the well-being of the other – both known and unknown – and to the mutual reciprocity of individual persons and the community: 'As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (1 Cor. 12: 12).

Using the metaphor of educational communities, Catholic schools bind themselves to values and ethical commitments. They are educational communities insofar as individual members share certain values and ethical commitments, articulate and interpret them, orient their educational project to them, and express them in collective practices. Through the metaphor of educational communities, they can thus make sense of what it means to be a Catholic school. A metaphor 'can open up new ways of thinking, new avenues for action, and extensions of thought heretofore unconsidered. (...) inform and constrain our thoughts and actions' (Beck 1999, 40). As parts of a community, school boards, school leaders, teachers, students, their parents and others involved in a Catholic school can interpret their educational project beyond the instrumental rationality of input and output, and their relationships beyond a systemic understanding of roles and responsibilities; and rather see them in terms of values and ethical commitments such as human dignity, solidarity, assisting the weak, and responsible participation.

While the notion of community is complex and multifaceted, the concept of the Church as a basic sacrament is helpful in interpreting the Catholic school as an educational community. From a sacramental perspective (Lydon 2011; Healy 2021), school leaders, teachers and other staff are called to model their ministry on that of Christ as primordial sacrament. By reflecting on their ministry, they can be committed to the building of a Christian educational community, and establish a course of action. Catholic school can then approximate the ministries of the Church regarding its educational endeavour as a welcoming community, a word-of-God community,

a worshipping community, a community of welfare and a witnessing community. By reflecting on these ministries, a Catholic school can make sense of being an educational community and decide on a course of action (Groome 1998, 171–214).

Catholic schools are faced with serious challenges, because they themselves are under scrutiny as educational communities of shared values and ethical commitments that find their ultimate foundation in Christ (Fincham 2021). Societal phenomena such as diversity, secularisation and individualisation, as well as the marketisation and instrumentalisation of education, put the distinctive articulation and interpretation of values and ethical commitments of Catholic schools to the test. This cannot be ignored, put aside or glossed over. Because a sustainable future as an educational community is at stake, the test is of an existential nature for Catholic schools. Therefore, the issue of how Catholic schools act is extremely problematic.

Reading the signs of the times

The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council marks a significant shift in the understanding of the relations between the Church as community and the world, and the way to carry forward the work of Christ. According to this constitution, a crucial hermeneutical principle to carry out the task to evangelise and to humanise mankind and the world is that of reading the signs of the times:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognise and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics. (Pope Paul VI 1965, 4)

The hermeneutical principle can be described as the ‘hermeneutics of recognition’, which involves among other things that the world is a *locus theologicus*; that is, constitutively part of the event of the Gospel. In order to understand her task to evangelise and humanise, the Church must not only be aware of world events, but must also interpret the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, to discern and judge. The encounter with the present times is crucial for carrying out the task in which the whole community of the Church is involved: to listen before making a judgement and deciding what to do in order to proceed into the future (Faggioli 2016).

The new awareness of the relation between the salvific message of Christian faith and the modern context is understood as a critical correlation (Boeve 2007). Christian faith brings to the surface and motivates what is already at work in the world. However, through societal developments such as detraditionalisation and pluralisation (among other factors), correlating the Christian faith with contemporary culture has become very problematic. Instead of maintaining the naïve presumption of a factual overlap between Christian faith and contemporary culture, or repeating a fossilised past, Boeve (2007) urges us not to consider the world as a *locus theologicus*, but as an encounter with the other and its irreducible otherness. To reveal potential traces of God and to understand the task of the Church, the Church should engage with the encounter with others and being interrupted by their irreducible otherness. Boeve argues that:

Imitatio Christi thus calls for a praxis of both being interrupted and interrupting – respecting the very otherness of the other while at the same time becoming the other of the other, questioning, challenging the other, criticising him or her when he/she tends to become hegemonic. (Boeve 2007, 304)

In the contemporary context, reading the signs of the times can therefore be best located in the praxis of being interrupted and interrupting. Interruption occurs ‘where discontinuity and continuity meet each other, the one not without the other’ (Boeve 2007, 304), for example when something unforeseeable, ungraspable or unexpected happens. At such moments, the task of the ecclesial community to read the signs of the times involves listening to the other, enduring the otherness of the other, interpreting the encounter in the light of the Gospel, and discerning and judging what is to be done. In order to strive for her endeavour to evangelise and to humanise mankind and the world, the Church is called to enter into the dialogue, especially at moments of interruption.

Communal discernment

Because they are (and should be kept) open to what is yet to come, Catholic schools too are called to read the signs of the times, and to interpret them with a view to their educational project as a contribution to the common good of society. They will be able to read the signs of the times by participating in the praxis of being interrupted and interrupting. In this section we will explore *how* Catholic schools can participate in the praxis – namely, by communal discernment.

Catholic schools in West European countries face many issues; for example, students’ declining motivation to study and learn, repeated requests to permit the wearing of headscarves, falling attendance at religious services in school, and insistence on a personalised educational curriculum. Events to do with these issues interrupt both the daily praxis of Catholic schools, and even more so their carefully constructed narratives of good education. From a systemic perspective, schools may deal with these interruptions in an instrumental way, by shrinking back from the issue and attempting to apply the current narrative (Bakker 2016). They may try harder by using ‘repair’ strategies, for example by insisting to students and others that attending religious services is obligatory. They could also opt for strategies to develop or extend the current system further, for example by expanding the school protocols on student behaviour or clothing. Through these instrumental strategies, interruptions are set aside, and the issues may well be solved in the short term. However, this approach can hardly be understood as a pedagogically (Biesta 2010) or theologically (Boeve 2007) responsible solution, and will not lead to any serious investigation into the educational endeavour. It is akin to ignoring or glossing over the interruptions. What better strategies could Catholic schools employ to listen, interpret, discern and judge, in order to strive purposefully for their endeavour of good education?

The Christian tradition includes various practices that contain activities for living well, with and for others, with a view to the ultimate good. In this tradition, ‘discernment’ means the paradigm of receptive and critical reflection, deliberation and judgement in a specific situation in order to strive for the ultimate good (Waaajman 2002, 2013). Although the Christian tradition encompasses various forms of discernment practice, they can all be characterised by four core qualities, each containing various strategies for action (Waaajman 2002; Hermans 2021; van der Zee 2022).

- Firstly, to look outwards. Discernment starts with seeing differences, and involves attentive receptivity and openness to what emerges, allowing it to draw one's attention, and wondering about it. To look outwards aims not only to see different positions or perspectives, but also to sense the good that emerges in what others bring in, or in what happens.
- Secondly, to look inwards. Discernment proceeds with reflection and self-examination. Reflection is aimed at interpreting an event to discover which values and ethical commitments are at stake or about to emerge. Self-examination aims to investigate our involvement with these values and commitments in what happens, what we find desirable, and what our motives are. Being attentive to emerging deep feelings is very important to reflection and self-examination.
- Thirdly, to deliberate with others. Discernment is not conceivable without critical deliberation. To discover possibilities to strive for desirable values and ethical commitments, discernment must involve genuine deliberation with others. Insights and arguments should be placed in the 'critical middle' to come to a new, possibly unexpected, but shared understanding.
- Finally, to decide what to do. Possibilities should be judged well, and in two ways. Discernment involves a principled judgment – not so much with a view to 'solving' an event as a problem, but so as to act in an contemplative way; that is, with a view to the ultimate good – and a pragmatic judgement, in order to choose the most desirable option in this situation. The desirable option should then pass the test of justice and fairness.

In the course of history, Christians have developed various practices that have these qualities, in order to discern what to do in specific situations or events that occur so as to endeavour to achieve the ultimate good in God's eyes.

Although much attention is paid to individual discernment (often in consultation with a spiritual companion), communal discernment practices also have a long history in the Christian tradition. Religious orders and congregations in the Church acknowledge practices of communal discernment that have the various qualities mentioned above (Waaïjman 2002, 2013). Communal discernment in the early Church took place mainly in times of ambiguity, crisis and transition, when a religious community was challenged to find out what to do next (de Villiers 2013).

Communal discernment has a few noteworthy characteristics. As the Acts of the Apostles (Ch. 15) reveal, discernment was first and foremost a matter for the community: the presence and participation of the entire community was required. Taking an inclusive approach to judgement and decision-making, communal discernment was driven by an awareness of unity and togetherness. A second characteristic of communal discernment in the early Church was that of the leadership and influence of the church in Jerusalem. In the early Christian community, when a dispute could not be settled, the practical wisdom of the older, more experienced apostles and elders was sought. Their experience was based not only on knowledge, but also on maturity; which is 'characterised by integrity, by a willingness to share and an openness to listen carefully, but is, most of all, driven by a sense of unity and belonging' (de Villiers 2013, 141). Leadership should embody the core characteristics of the communal discernment. A third characteristic was the presence of discussion, debate and dialogue. Communal discernment was essentially dialogical in nature: insights, behaviours, memories, expectations and arguments were tested through critical interaction. And finally, communal discernment in the early Church was moved to reflect on

the divine presence around which the community was centred. The investigation of discernment was ‘accompanied by the desire to seek their significance [of situations or events] from the perspective of God’ (de Villiers 2013, 148). Through perceiving the difference between the present, factual situation and the desired, ultimate situation in God, communal discernment sought ‘a passable way which bridges this difference, and assists others in actually going this way, knowing that it is God who moves them to go this way’ (Waaijman 2002, 563).

It can be hypothesised that Catholic schools could effectively read the signs of the times by using strategies that arise from discernment practices. However, there is little information available on how Catholic schools may activate communal discernment strategies to find out what to do when confronted with an event that interrupts the course of their educational endeavour, and sidelines their narrative of values and ethical commitments. The question that orients our research reads: what would the design of a communal discernment practice for Catholic schools look like in order for the school to re-evaluate their educational project?

Methodological considerations: educational design research

From an educational design perspective, the development and implementation of a solution could contribute to a reduction in issues regarding how schools act (McKenney and Reeves 2019). A possible contribution to resolving some of the issues that Catholic schools face would be the generic design of an intervention in the form of a communal discernment practice. Using a generic design, Catholic schools should be able to create specific ways and practices to discern what to do with a view to their educational endeavour in their context. In order to develop such a design for an intervention, we present the design requirements and propositions below.

Design requirements

Design requirements describe *what* the intervention will address, and give guidance regarding what is to be accomplished in the context of a school (McKenney and Reeves 2019, 126–160). An intervention consisting of a communal discernment practice would address the educational endeavour of Catholic schools and aim to enable them to effectively re-evaluate and make decisions regarding the future of the project. Put differently, the intervention will guide Catholic schools as educational communities towards making rightful and just decisions for the realisation of good education.

Theoretical and functionality design requirements must be included. Based on the theoretical considerations listed above, the following elements must appear in the intervention: the coming to a decision, the shared values and ethical commitments, the participation of the whole educational community, the role of leadership, and the contemplative gaze. They are introduced below.

- *Design Requirement 1: enable participants to come to decisions regarding the realisation of the educational project.* The intervention is not particularly intended to produce a ‘good’ conversation; it aims mainly to enable Catholic schools to re-evaluate and decide on their educational project. The intervention should therefore consist of practices that empower Catholic schools to effectively come to decisions in order to act (Delbecq et al. 2004).

- *Design Requirement 2: include shared values and ethical commitments.* As educational communities, Catholic schools are characterised by a distinctive articulation and interpretation of values and ethical commitments. In fact, the educational endeavour is characterised by teleological ethics as a source of reliance (the good) (Hermans 2017). While values and ethical commitments orient the educational project, the test of justice and fairness should be included to find out whether decisions on the project actually lead to the good life with and for others in rightful institutions (Ricoeur 1992). By making rightful and just decisions, Catholic schools should be better able to provide an educational experience that enhances the present and future lives of students and that contributes to the common good of society.
- *Design Requirement 3: enable participation of the whole educational community.* Next, the intervention should enable the whole educational community to participate in the discernment process, including the students, their parents, other stakeholders and any other people involved in the community (de Jong 2007).
- *Design Requirement 4: clarify the role of leadership.* Special attention is paid to leadership in terms of maturity, in order to share past wisdom, listen carefully and make sure that everyone is involved and heard. Leadership therefore does not refer only to formal structures, but is also related to the issue of whether enough people are wise and involved in or familiar with the Catholic tradition (Wilkin 2018; van der Zee 2022).
- *Design Requirement 5: enable the practising of a contemplative gaze.* To generate new possibilities the intervention should address the use of a contemplative gaze; that is, the desire to make sense of events or a situation from the perspective of the Kingdom of God (Delbecq et al. 2004). A possible way to enable practising a contemplative gaze is to introduce utopian narratives that mediate a draft for a possible world as it would be if the future was in God's hands. A utopian narrative is one which interrupts the present situation: 'The result of reading an utopia is that it puts into question what presently exists; it makes the actual world seem strange (...) [and] introduces a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious' (Ricoeur 1986, 299).

Functionality requirements may be set regarding practical and formation constraints and opportunities. Catholic schools should consider constraints and opportunities when elaborating a generic design into specific solutions for their context, for example the availability of time, resources and space to deliberate. Discernment is time-consuming work that asks for pauses before proceeding to the next step (Delbecq et al. 2004).

Design propositions

Design propositions provide guidance on *how* the intervention will help effectively to achieve decisions on the realisation of the educational endeavour. They are primarily determined by theory and expertise, and secondarily by empirical testing in the context (McKenney and Reeves 2019, 126–160). Following the CIMO logic (Denyer, Tranfield, and van Aken 2008), design propositions provide details for which Context the use of which Intervention induces which Mechanisms in order to achieve which Outcomes. We first explicate the various elements, and then

present a design proposition for a communal discernment practice for Catholic schools.

First, the context. In a societal context of diversity, secularisation and individualisation, and the marketisation and instrumentalisation of education, Catholic schools strive for good education but are confronted by events that interrupt the course of their educational endeavour and sideline their narrative of values and ethical commitments. Catholic schools want to know what to do in order to continue their educational endeavour when interrupted – not in an instrumentally systemic way, but in a pedagogically and theologically responsible way. The context of interruption can be understood as a continuum; from a general challenge to come to decisions regarding the realisation of the educational project, to a specific event that generates a decision that is related to the educational project. Catholic schools should be able to discern their position at some point on the continuum.

Second, the intervention. The intervention involves a communal discernment practice consisting of various kinds of dialogical interactions in which discernment strategies are used. Dialogue is the main avenue to discernment and involves not only the exchange of insights and arguments, but above all a sensemaking conversation to generate new, sometimes unexpected possibilities. The core dialogical interactions correspond to the four core qualities of the Christian discernment practices: to look outwards, to look inwards, to deliberate with others, and to decide what to do. Each core quality involves several strategies for action that can be activated by raising reflective questions. It is important that these questions are raised in such a way that a diversity of answers is encouraged. Dialogical interactions are on the look-out for variance, not for a mean or median. It is in a dialogue that various divergent and convergent insights, beliefs and ideas come to the fore and can generate new, unexpected possibilities. It would be good to pause between the various interactions to incubate the new insights and possibilities that emerge. A promising example of this kind of dialogue is *collatio*, a convergence of reading, telling, listening and silence, in which a community critically deliberates by exchanging various perspectives on an issue without the intention to convince one another (Waaijman 2013). By implementing an intervention of various dialogical interactions and reflective questions, Catholic schools are able to use discernment strategies appropriately.

Third, the mechanisms. The intervention aims to activate four groups of discernment strategies, to be used consecutively to come to decisions on the realisation of the school's educational project: to look outwards, to look inwards, to deliberate with others, and to decide what to do. Each of the four groups consists of various strategies for action.

Finally, the outcomes. The intended outcomes are not only one or more decisions regarding the realisation of the educational project of the school, but also ways to turn these decisions into action. By using discernment strategies, Catholic schools achieve agency, and are able to act practically with a view to their educational endeavour.

Design Proposition: When confronted with the occurrence of an interrupting phenomenon or event (context), Catholic schools are able to re-evaluate and decide on their educational project, and act practically regarding their educational endeavour (outcome) by using reflective questions in various dialogical interactions (intervention) that activate discernment strategies (mechanism).

Core features of a communal discernment practice

The core features of a communal discernment practice are presented here. Catholic schools should expand them into specific solutions for their context. First we offer some general remarks on the discernment process; we then aggregate the various elements in [Table 1](#).

The discernment practice is an amalgamation of various dialogical interactions of members of the educational community of a Catholic school over a certain period of time. However, performing dialogical interactions is not only a matter of activating the right strategies in the right order. Having a dialogue isn't an instrumental or mechanical operation; and it involves a risk, because the outcome is not foreseeable or enforceable. In order to take the risk wisely and purposefully, 'soft' aspects should be taken into account. The Catholic secondary school that we met at the beginning of this article decided to have a dialogue on the formation aspect of the educational endeavour; and invited not only teachers, members of the staff and school leaders to participate in the dialogue, but also students, parents and stakeholders. *Everyone* was included and heard, and matters such as the distribution of power, dissensus and consensus were dealt with. Students, in particular, brought in new and fresh ideas by stating that knowledge is only half of what they learn, and that they would like to be invited to make sense of newly acquired knowledge. In their opinion, good education is not only about the broad curriculum, but should be more explicitly aimed at a sense-making personal formation. Other participants embraced the students' ideas and explored them further. In short, a communal discernment dialogue asks for careful preparation, and the discipline of learning and practice.

[Table 1](#) aggregates the various discernment strategies and reflective questions into a cohesive whole: a communal discernment practice for Catholic schools that consists of four components. The list is not extensive, but consists of well-chosen questions.

Conclusion and discussion

As educational communities, Catholic schools face serious challenges related to their narrative, which is based on a distinctive articulation and interpretation of values and ethical commitments. They are called to read the signs of the times, to re-evaluate their educational project and to retell their narrative, with a view to contributing to the common good of society. By means of a generic design for a communal discernment practice that emerges from the long-standing Christian tradition of discernment practices, we offer a way to answer this call wisely and purposefully that appears to be very promising.

We present a generic design for a communal discernment practice that must be expanded by Catholic schools into specific solutions for their context. By expanding and then implementing a communal discernment practice, Catholic schools are able to come to the decisions that are necessary to adjust, complement or transform their educational project. To carry out their mission now and in the future, Catholic schools should not perceive themselves as a plaything of societal phenomena or developments, but achieve agency regarding their educational endeavour. Practising communal discernment is a promising way for Catholic schools to achieve such agency.

Research into the communal discernment of Catholic schools is necessary not only to validate our design, but also to establish how the expansion and implementation could best be executed. The requirements should be refined, by indicating

Table 1. Discernment strategies and reflective questions.

| Discernment strategy | Reflective questions to activate the strategy |
|--|---|
| <i>To look outwards</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - become sensitive to different positions, experiences and perspectives - be able to wonder | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do we observe of what happens in the direct environment of our school? What is the issue? How are we taken by what we observe? Can we find variance in our observations? - Do we interpret it as a worthwhile or inconvenient interruption? What do we sense in what emerges in the environment? What kind of appeal is made by what emerges? How does it relate to the coming of the good? |
| <i>To look inwards</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discover which values and ethical commitments are at stake or are about to emerge - investigate how we are involved with these values and commitments, what we find desirable, and what our motives are | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which deep feelings can be traced? On which appraisals of values and ethical commitments are they based? Are core values and commitments of our school at stake? In what sense? - How are we to reach out to the values and ethical commitments at stake? If we entrust ourselves to them, can we make sense of our educational project? What motives drive our actions: are they from the coming of the good or from the motives of our ego? |
| <i>To deliberate with others</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discover new possibilities to strive for good education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do practical, wise people sense and interpret the issue? What would they like to contribute to the case? What kind of variance in interpretation appears? Which insights, beliefs and ideas come to the fore in an open space? What is revealed to us as the possibility to strive for values and ethical commitments that are open to constant transcendence of the current ones? How do the possibilities converge with the school's educational endeavour? |

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

| Discernment strategy | Reflective questions to activate the strategy |
|--|---|
| <i>To decide what to do</i> | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - make a pragmatic and principled judgement - pass the test of justice and fairness - rise to action | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the Kingdom of God can be shown to already be emerging in our situation, what do we do? Or would we refrain from action? Which possibility for action is judged as the most desirable option for our school in this situation? What small steps can be taken consecutively to achieve progress? - Are the possibilities just and righteous regarding improving and maintaining not only our well-being but that of each individual (future) student in an appropriate way and to promote education and formation? - Do we have the courage to rise to action? What else is needed in order for us to act? Are we able to take up our agency appropriately? |

not only such structural elements as resources, task structures and responsibilities (McKenney and Reeves 2019, 135–145), but also such ‘soft’ aspects as an invitational and inclusive approach, an effective presence, and respect for the careful weighing of each individual (Healy 2021). Further research should also investigate what the effects of expansion and implementation are on self-understanding as educational communities in general, and on educational projects in particular. While discernment has been shown to be a powerful predictor of transformational leadership (Hermans 2021), research is needed to establish its impact on the transformation of Catholic schools as educational communities. An important aspect of this future research is the co-design of educational practices with students, their parents and stakeholders, with a view not only to the realisation of the educational project but also to the contribution to the common good of society (Delbecq et al. 2004). Co-design of further research by researchers and practitioners would also be worthwhile exploring, also taking into account the practical validity, credibility and transferability of the results (Stuart-Buttle 2018; Lindheim 2022).

This article offers a modest contribution to dealing with the issue of the actions of Catholic schools, by presenting a generic design for a communal discernment practice. Hopefully it will serve as an inspiration not only for the further development of Catholic schools, but also for the study of and the gathering of further knowledge about Catholic education.

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