



# The Valued Contribution of Religious and Lay in Church Schools

A JOINT VENTURE BY KSMR, SFCE AND CSA

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research study, which was part of a wider project entitled “The Valued Contribution of Lay and Religious in Church Schools” was carried out by Discern, in collaboration between the KSMR (*Kunsill Superjuri Maġġuri Reliġjużi*), the Secretariat for Catholic Education and the Church Schools Association. The preamble of the initial proposal for this research outlined its rationale and stated,

Religious Orders are for various reasons, which go beyond the scope of this exercise, facing the common challenge of dwindling numbers virtually across all communities. Unless adequately addressed in a timely manner, this may lead to uncertainty with regard to the future and the type of service that will continue to be offered by Church Schools in the Maltese Islands... Stakeholder involvement is key to ensure effectiveness of this endeavour, including the important role of the Episcopal Conference and the envisaged convergence of this process with the commitment by the Archdiocese for *ecclesial rebirthing ... as “One Church, One Journey”*.<sup>1</sup>

The proposal spoke of a four-phase process:

- Phase 1 – Gaining Cognisance
- Phase 2 – Devising Strategies
- Phase 3 – Implementing Strategies
- Phase 4 – Reviewing Strategies

Phase 1 consisted of a research study to collect data related to the identity, formation and governing structures of Church schools, in preparation for the seminar to be held as part of Phase 2. Discern was recruited to undertake the research study.

A Research Committee, within which all decisions related to the study were made, was formed and this was made up of representatives from KSMR, SfCE, CSA and Discern. The study was a qualitative one, targeting three populations:

- Congregational Superiors represented on the KSMR, as well as Ordinaries and Superiors from other religious entities running Church Schools;
- Persons who occupied the role of Director and Rector in Church Schools; and
- Heads of Church Schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Archdiocese of Malta. (2021, May 10). *Welcome*. Retrieved from One Church One Journey: <https://journey.church.mt/welcome/>

Semi-structured interviews, abiding by the necessary ethical considerations, were conducted with 12 Provincials (67% of the total population of 18), 7 Rectors/Directors (100%) and 32 Heads of Schools (70% of 46), for a total of 51 (72% of 71) participants. The level of participation was high but, given the immersion of the target population in the issue of Church schools, it was concerning to see that 6 Provincials and 14 Heads did not participate. It would be interesting to know what they would have wanted to say and what silenced them.

The data were analysed through thematic analysis and extracts were presented to the Research Committee and a wider representation of the stakeholders for their reflections. These were gathered through a process of listening, personal reflection and spiritual conversations. This process resulted in a number of goals being selected for the subsequent phases of the project.

The analysis of the research data resulted in seven themes and a number of sub-themes. Within these, a number of important points emerged, some of which were linked to more than one theme or sub-theme:

- The importance of **maintaining Catholic education and Church schools** emerged very strongly, together with the need to consider what contribution the Church schools are making to the Church. A number of participants compared the schools to a parish, pointing out that schools have larger numbers, more accessibility, compulsory attendance and more active involvement.
- One of the main aims of the Church schools is **maintaining a Catholic identity**, with participants describing the schools as miniature churches. The schools provide an opportunity for evangelisation, for spreading the Catholic message and its values, something which is essential to Church schools and their mission. This is done in both formal and informal ways and permeates the curriculum and co-curricular activities. Despite the fact that participants spoke about the congregation's charism, which could have been emphasised because of direct questions regarding the schools' particular identities and charism, the link with Catholicism was present throughout. The schools might be the first and/or only contact with the Catholic Church and the only place where children and/or their families receive formation.
- The **difference between the schools** in terms of preparation for the future, formation provided to the staff, policies and procedures and so on emerged very strongly. The lack of planning, formation and operational organisation is something

worrying and, in fact, features strongly in the strategic goals being formulated, particular when it comes to the setting up of robust governance structures and succession management. Besides this operational aspect, schools were seen as distinguishable because of their particular congregational charism, which enriches them, and as similar because of their foundation in Catholic teaching. The research showed the importance of respecting the autonomy of the schools, while encouraging collaboration. Some schools belong to an international network which has a number of advantages, such as the strengthening of the school's charism, but could also isolate the school from other local Church schools and decrease collaboration. The distinction between Church schools and other schools was also mentioned by participants, although there was some disagreement about whether the distinguishing features are exclusive to Church schools.

- When speaking about **Catholic education within the particular congregations and orders**, which run many of the schools, the participants spoke about a strong link between the schools and their founders, relating aspects of the founders' inspirational stories. Many of the schools' origins were tied to disadvantaged members of society and the research raised the question whether this focus is still being implemented today and whether the vision of the founders is still relevant today. The general opinion was that it is, but there were some participants who expressed concerns. Many of the congregations and orders which run schools have other ministries. Education is central to the vast majority of them but needs to be balanced with other ministries and requires a considerable amount of investment, both financial and human, which needs to be considered within the context of the decreasing number of religious members of the congregations. The schools emerged clearly as part of something much wider than them, the widest context being the Church in Malta and Gozo and the next level being the congregation. In this regard, a number of participants expressed the wish for deeper involvement of the episcopate in the schools, as well as a more frequent presence of their Provincials.
- Participants also referred to the **secular context** within which the schools are operating and mentioned a number of challenges associated with this. They spoke about the difficulties in transmitting the Catholic message when it is competing with so many other belief and value systems. They also mentioned the varying attitudes

of staff members towards Catholicism and its practice and how this impacts the transmission of the schools' ethos. These varying attitudes also exist in the students and their parents, requiring from Church Schools a greater effort to distil a consistent message that is faithful to Catholic values, encouraging participation in Catholic life wherever appropriate, whilst respecting the diversity within the community.

- The research also raised the question of which **values** are being transmitted by the schools. The participants spoke about Catholic values; values associated with the charism of the congregation, which are inexorably linked to Catholic values, and which give schools their particular identity; and human or secular values, which are values also embraced by Catholicism. The overarching value system emerged as the Catholic one with the importance of values being integrated into the running of the schools being emphasised. Regarding values, living them, and therefore bearing witness, was seen as important, rather than teaching them. The discussion about values led to the question about whether a successful outcome for a Church school would be producing practicing Catholics or persons with humanitarian values, with different opinions being expressed.
- The **low number of vocations** was mentioned very often by participants, although it should be noted that there are a small number of congregations which are attracting vocations. For the rest, the sustainability of the schools, particularly regarding the transmission of the school's mission, vision, charism and ethos, was often a major concern. Although the presence of religious members of the congregations was seen as very important, and many of the lay participants expressed their wish for their continued, and even increased, if possible, involvement in the schools, most of the participants were confident about the willingness and ability of lay persons to lead Church schools. The crucial factor which emerged from the research and in subsequent reflections, is the importance of appropriate formation, both academic and spiritual, to all personnel who are preparing to take on these roles. In addition, in situations where there are doubts regarding lay personnel increasing their involvement in the schools and, ultimately, taking over as necessary, support needs to be provided to all involved to facilitate a smooth transition which, in many cases, is inevitable. As was pointed out by a number of participants, lay persons have to be seen as collaborators in this mission not as persons who are roped in when there is no other choice. Regarding the lack of religious vocations, a point which was made is

that, if one of the missions of the schools is to attract vocations, although the relevance of this mission in today's context was perceived as highly debatable, they are failing, despite the fact that they have a large captive audience. At the same time, religious vocations, even if the number is small, often emerge through contact with a Church school. This raises the question of why certain congregations are attracting vocations and others are not. Foreign members of the congregations were discussed as alleviating the situation of lack of vocations, with the pros and cons of this being presented.

- The participants identified a number of **characteristics of Church schools**. The main ones they mentioned were inclusion, holistic education, leading by example, the sense of a supportive community, positive relationships which lead to accompaniment, an environment conducive to learning, a positive teaching and discipline style and treating everybody as an individual. The issue of inclusion was discussed in depth both during the collection of data and during the subsequent reflections. It was seen that, although it is important that Church schools are open to diversity, it is equally important that the Catholic identity is maintained. The academic aspect of holistic education, which also includes the spiritual and personal aspects, was emphasised by a number of participants who pointed out that this could be the motivation for the choice of school by the parents, rather than the spiritual aspect. The question of whether academic excellence can be seen as aligned with Catholic teachings, as was suggested by some participants, was raised. These participants mentioned the development of potential, which has been given by God, as their rationale. It was also emphasised that, within a Church school, students need to feel that they are unconditionally loved by God irrespective of diversities characterising the individual. Regarding the need to lead by example, the importance of witness, with its associated challenges, was emphasised throughout the research with participants pointing out that people have to be imbued with the Catholic identity and charism in order to transmit it.
- The important role of the **Secretariat for Catholic Education** emerged both from the findings and from the subsequent reflections. The strategic goals also envisage a wider remit for the Secretariat, definitely requiring the strengthening of its structures and an increased investment of resources. Enhancing the Secretariat's position and resources in this way would allow it to support those Church schools who are

struggling to maintain their sustainability and participate in ensuring the implementation of appropriate governance structures.

From this first phase of the project, the process will move on to its second phase, Devising Strategies, with the formulation of strategic goals, together with action plans, based on the findings which emerged from this research process and the reflective process undertaken about them.

The Church Schools Association, the Secretariat for Catholic Education and the Council for Religious Major Superiors are committed to continue to generously contribute to the mission of evangelisation, which is so dear to Pope Francis, in all Church Schools which serve 30% of the student population in compulsory education in Malta and Gozo.

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