

Article

Leading the School Wisely and Purposefully: Design of a Practical, Wise Leadership Practice to Fulfil the Mission of Catholic Education

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Abstract: Regarding the educational endeavour of their schools, Catholic school leaders are challenged to maintain “mission integrity”, and to remain faithful to the principles of Catholic education. While their daily praxis is characterised by multiple interruptions, even school leaders with profound theoretical knowledge and extensive experience do not automatically know how to deal with them in a way that aligns with the distinctive and authentic principles of Catholic education. This article argues that a practical, wise leadership practice based on Christian discernment practices provides a kind of executive function that helps Catholic school leaders to decide and act wisely and purposefully. A generic design for interrelated strategies of practical, wise school leadership is presented that in a profound way does justice not only to the ethical but also to the transformative nature of the endeavour of Catholic education. The design consists of four clusters of strategies, characterised by practical wisdom and well-chosen reflective questions to activate these strategies.

Keywords: Catholic school leaders; interruption; practical wisdom; educational design research; soft strategies; reflective questions



Citation: Van der Zee, Theo. 2022.

Leading the School Wisely and Purposefully: Design of a Practical, Wise Leadership Practice to Fulfil the Mission of Catholic Education. *Religions* 13: 1151. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121151>

Academic Editor: Paweł Makosa

Received: 26 October 2022

Accepted: 21 November 2022

Published: 25 November 2022

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1. Introduction

Catholic education is characterised first and foremost by a Christian vision on education that espouses the humanisation of the world and mankind. Based on this vision, Catholic schools endeavour to practise good education. School leaders have a crucial responsibility regarding the educational endeavour of Catholic schools, and the development and maintenance of a consistent culture and ethos. In particular, they are challenged to maintain mission integrity; that is, to match the rhetoric of the principles of Catholic education with reality (Grace 2010, 2018; Fincham 2021). While their daily praxis is characterised by multiple incidents that interrupt the expected course of events, Catholic school leaders are nevertheless expected to remain faithful to the principles of Catholic education. By what means can they navigate through their day-to-day experiences and yet remain faithful to these principles?

This article explores how Catholic school leaders may be able to maintain mission integrity; not in an instrumental way, but in a way that justifies the ethical and transformative nature of the educational endeavour of Catholic schools. Catholic education is oriented to the *telos* of humanisation, but its realisation cannot be enforced or controlled. Catholic school leaders would therefore benefit from soft strategies that acknowledge the non-enforceability of educational aims and purposes. A practical, wise leadership practice that is based on Christian practices of discernment would involve such strategies.

The design of the article is as follows. First, it explores the issue of how Catholic school leaders act, in view of their responsibility to maintain mission integrity. Next, theoretical considerations are presented to deepen the understanding of the issue. In order to contribute to a solution to the issue of their actions, an educational design perspective is taken to lay out an intervention for Catholic school leaders. This intervention aims

to support Catholic school leaders in making wise and purposeful decisions regarding the educational endeavour. Based on design requirements and a design proposition, a generic design for practical, wise leadership practice is presented. The article ends with a conclusion and a contribution for the discussion.

2. School Leaders and the Mission of Catholic Education

Catholic schools endeavour to provide good education, with a view to the future of their students and of society. Their educational mission is closely linked to the mission of the Church, which is evangelisation and the humanisation ([Vatican Council II 1965](#), sct. 8). In Catholic schools, therefore, good education goes beyond a simple list of societal assignments—such as acquiring literacy and mathematics skills, and internalising social and democratic behaviour—intending to contribute to the greater good of humanisation, which can be expressed in the pedagogical aims and purposes of the school. These aims and purposes are ethically oriented towards the good life, and their distinctive articulation and interpretation are based on and motivated by the Catholic religion having its origin in the person of Christ, and its roots in the teachings of the Gospel ([Groome 1998](#); [Conroy 1999](#); [Miller 2007](#)).

Catholic education is characterised most importantly by a Christian vision on education in view of the humanisation of the world and mankind. By including ethically oriented and religiously inspired pedagogical aims and purposes as its transformative *telos*, Catholic education criticises the “buffered self” of modernity, i.e., not being open, porous and vulnerable to a transcendent world ([Taylor 2007](#)). From a Christian vision on education, Catholic schools strive for the integral formation of the whole student; and that includes love for wisdom, passion for truth, and the integration of faith, culture and life. Knowledge acquisition is not a goal in itself, but oriented to the formation of students and their dignity. The integral formation is founded on a Christian anthropology which not only reaches out to the whole person, and to each and every person, but also takes into account their vulnerability, weakness and strengths, and their transcendent destiny ([Vatican Council II 1965](#), sct. 1–2).

By developing and maintaining a coherent culture and ethos of shared values and commitments, Catholic schools are able to strive for good education, and appear to be rather successful in doing so ([Casson 2018](#); [Fincham 2021](#)). However, the endeavour of Catholic schools to provide good education should not be understood particularly in terms of strong rationality, instrumentality and plannability; but rather in terms of receptivity, openness and looking forward to a future that is yet to come (*adventus*) ([Roebben 2017](#)). In a Christian vision of education, the realisation of good education is the work of human hands enabled by God’s grace.

At a Catholic school, the school leaders have a crucial responsibility regarding the school’s educational endeavour, as well as the development and maintenance of a consistent culture and ethos. In particular, they are challenged “to maintain ‘mission integrity’, which can be described as the matching of the rhetoric of Catholic educational principles with reality.” ([Fincham 2021](#), pp. 8–9). Weak mission leadership may encourage a Catholic school to move away from its mission commitments, a “mission drift” ([Grace 2018](#)). By remaining faithful to the principles of Catholic education, school leaders are expected to facilitate the realisation of a distinctive curriculum based on pedagogical aims and purposes, and to enhance and continue the realisation of a coherent culture and ethos. However, contemporary societal developments such as detraditionalization ([Rymarz 2021](#)), declining religiosity and familiarity with the Christian tradition ([Wilkin 2018](#)) and impatient requests for individual freedom and personal autonomy ([Pring 2018](#)) challenge school leaders’ maintaining of mission integrity. These developments affect not only the plausibility of Catholic schools and their educational project, but also the possibilities for school leaders to interpret the Catholic tradition while remaining faithful to the principles of Catholic education ([Scott 2008](#)). How are leaders at Catholic schools able to maintain an ethically oriented and religiously inspired culture and ethos for the school in society’s predominantly

secular culture? How are they able to strive for an educational endeavour of shared aims and purposes, when the teachers, the students, their parents and other people involved assert their individual freedom and personal autonomy?

The marketisation of education also affects the responsibility of school leaders to maintain mission integrity. This refers to the phenomenon that schools gain market share only by striving for visible, measurable academic success, which is regarded almost exclusively as the sole criterion for judging a “good school” (Grace 2018). Society’s impatient quest for learning outcomes, performance and accountability has driven Catholic schools, like others, into the arms of a technical and instrumental rationality (Biesta 2010; Buchanan 2015). Following this rationality, the educational praxis is scrutinised through statistics and performance data. Failure to find a perfect match between input and output must be “fixed”, overcome by the application of strong, secure and predictable methods and procedures. However, from a Catholic perspective, pedagogical aims and purposes are of a transformative nature, open to what can possibly occur, and cannot be enforced. Education originates in a different epistemology. Biesta (2017, p. 52) presents it as

“a critique of immanence and an argument for transcendence, an argument for the idea that not everything that occurs in our lives is generated through our own acts of sense-making (construction or interpretation) but that there are things that come to us from the outside.”

How are school leaders of Catholic schools able to remain faithful to the principles of Catholic education when the dominant culture in education is that of measurability, instrumentality and plannability? How can they come to decisions that emphasise receptivity, grace and the transformative nature of the educational endeavour?

While they are expected to facilitate the realisation of a distinctive curriculum from a Christian vision on education, as well as enhancing the realisation of a coherent culture and ethos, Catholic school leaders are confronted with serious dilemmas and challenges. The issue of actions concerns the question: in the present context of detraditionalization, secularisation and individualism, as well as the marketisation of education, how should school leaders act with a view to maintaining mission integrity?

3. Theoretical Considerations

With the intention of contributing to a possible solution, we now further explore the issue of the actions of Catholic school leaders. By looking firstly at their day-to-day reality, we intend to find out how and when the issue of the actions that maintain mission integrity manifests itself. This exploration should provide leads for a new understanding of the acting issue. We then turn to the capacity of school leaders to deal with issues in the course of their daily activities, and to agogic practices of the Catholic tradition, in order to discover new possibilities for dealing with issues.

3.1. Daily Reality of School Leaders

Because maintaining mission integrity is about “fidelity in practice and not just in public rhetoric to the distinctive and authentic principles of a Catholic education” (Grace 2010, p. 8), it translates to the realisation of educational principles and mission commitments within the everyday reality (Fincham 2021). What are the day-to-day experiences of school leaders?

A school leader’s job can be characterised by its complexity, among other things, which presents itself in day-to-day experiences. Due to societal and political developments, as well as an increase in pressure on schools to perform and an emphasis on accountability, the complexity of the job has increased significantly over the last few decades (Leithwood and Earl 2000; Odhiambo and Hii 2012). In a context of increased pressure and expectations, school leaders are often confronted by incidents that manifest themselves as problems. The incidents occur and evolve in ways that were not expected or could not be predicted, and in which it is not clear how the various elements are related to each other. They may concern events such as an unusual request from a school department concerning the

curriculum, a serious row between a teacher and a student, an impatient demand from a group of disgruntled parents regarding student attendance at religious services, or the unexpected announcement of a pandemic. These and many other events require responses and decisions from school leaders. The occurrence of such events interrupts the daily reality of the school and puts the school leader's repertoire of acting strategies to the test.

Dealing with these and many other daily problems is by no means easy. From a systemic perspective, school leaders can deal with these problems in an instrumental way by shrinking back from the issue and attempting to apply their usual strategies (Bakker 2016). They can try harder by using repair strategies, for example by urging students to attend religious services and insinuating to their parents that attendance is obligatory. They can also opt for strategies to develop or extend the current system further, for example by expanding school protocols on curriculum renewal or student behaviour. By using these instrumental strategies, an interruption is put aside, and a problem may well be solved in the short term. However, this approach equates to ignoring or glossing over the interruption, and seldom leads to a serious investigation of the underlying issue and its ethical orientation.

A more fruitful approach must address the ethical quality of the school leader's job. A school leader is confronted with ethical questions and issues on a daily basis. Daily interruptions evoke ethical questions and issues because they can be interpreted in numerous ways and looked at from various angles; therefore, they call for reflection and judgement in the context of the educational endeavour of the school. A request from the department could mean serious criticism of the current school curriculum, but could also supplement it, complement it or renew it entirely. It could also mean more than one thing: what appears to be a long-awaited supplement may turn out to be a profound renewal. The occurrence of an interruption such as this calls for reflection and judgement. According to which motivations should the request be valued: efficiency, mastery and control, care, ethics or normativity (van Groningen et al. 2016)? Which aims and purposes are at stake? What is the just and righteous thing to do? In the societal context of an impatient quest for learning outcomes, performance and accountability, the ambiguity of daily interruptions that could have happened differently or not at all can cause confusion, stress or helplessness in school leaders (Hammersley-Fletcher 2015). Remaining faithful to the principles of Catholic education does not mean an instrumental application of logical premises. School leaders are expected to deal with interruptions beyond a systemic, instrumental way, and in a way that justifies the ethically oriented educational endeavour of the school as a Catholic school. What kinds of strategies should Catholic school leaders use to listen, interpret, discern and judge, in order to satisfy the endeavour for good education?

In short, maintaining mission integrity in the course of leading the school is especially put to the test in complex day-to-day reality, often punctuated by interruptions that evoke ethical questions and issues. The question becomes: what is the preferred way for school leaders to deal with these daily interruptions, in a way that aligns with the distinctive and authentic principles of Catholic education?

3.2. *Practical Wisdom of School Leaders*

When confronted by interruptions, even school leaders with profound theoretical knowledge and extensive experience do not automatically know what to do regarding the educational endeavour of the school. In the course of leading the school, they must make holistic judgements to deal ethically with individual interruptions. Practical wisdom is perceived as the capacity to make such judgements.

Lately, practical wisdom has been enjoying a significant revival, as the conceptualisation of a moral compass for navigating through contemporary professional praxis and orienting human action in the sense of the good (Bondi et al. 2011; Kinsella and Pitman 2012; Schwartz and Sharpe 2010). In the context of management literature, this revival of interest has engendered a broad and sometimes divergent theoretical field involving various conceptualisations, interpretations and terminologies. Though worded in various ways

(“wisdom of practice”, “prudence”, “practical reason”, “phronesis”), practical wisdom generally refers to the capacity to integrate ethical considerations with instrumental concerns; to exercise moral leadership; to envision aims and be aware of personal limitations; to seek the advice of others; to illuminate the ethical dimension of decision making and to solve complex problems, especially in contexts of uncertainty (Küpers and Pauleen 2016; Bachmann et al. 2018; Schwartz 2011). In management literature, one of the core issues regarding practical wisdom is that of the improvement of judgement and decision making. Rather than blindly maximising performance quantities, practical wisdom considers which aims and purposes are worth pursuing. It “introduces ethics in decision making by considering both the end or goal pursued and the means to achieve such an end from the perspective of the human good” (Melé 2010, p. 642).

The concept of practical wisdom also resonates in academic reflection on school leadership. It is seen as “a mature, deliberative capacity that helps to illuminate the ethical dimensions of (...) decision making and leadership” in schools (Bohlin 2022, p. 157). With a view to allowing students to flourish educationally, practical wisdom

“... with its capacity to absorb uncertainty, to welcome dialogical conflict, to encourage critical self- and institutional reflection, with its propensity to action, with its commitment to the development of virtue incrementally over time and its ethical imperative, equips the disposed Principal with a mode of leadership that is necessary to navigate the school through both the still and choppy waters of such a project.” (McCutcheon 2009, p. 202)

Because “knowing what works” appears not to be sufficient, school leaders should be able to use (self-)reflection to deal effectively and successfully with the complexity of day-to-day realities (Geijssels 2015). Practical wisdom is understood first and foremost as a reflective, deliberative capacity of school leaders to deal with complex, ambiguous and contingent incidents. In view of their shared aims and purposes, practical wisdom helps school leaders to respond to these incidents with the consideration required to take the right action. In the praxis of school leaders, practical wisdom “guides problem setting and problem solving, integrating apperception, judgment, choice, planning, and action in a single continuous arc. (...) The distinguishing characteristic (...) is the ability to effectively size up novel situations that cannot, by definition, be specified in advance.” (Halverson 2004, p. 96). It “acts as an executive faculty that identifies which aspects of the environment are worthy of action, employs the appropriate means, and evaluates the results” (Halverson 2004, p. 100). Practical wisdom is helpful in responding to all the various dilemmas school leaders face in the course of their leadership; but especially in situations when they do not know what to do.

“Thus, practical wisdom is vital to school leaders who desire to (a) identify and rally others around a common aim in support of flourishing; (b) notice and make sense of dynamic and varied situation-specific contexts; and (c) respect the dignity and empower the agency of all constituents, so they can chart an effective (...) course of action aligned with shared aim(s).” (Bohlin 2022, p. 158)

Practical wisdom, as the capacity to navigate through contemporary professional praxis and to orient human action in the sense of the good, consists of various strategies. Some scholars emphasise the importance of attentive receptivity (Dunne 2011), some accentuate reflective strategies (Geijssels 2015; Kinsella and Pitman 2012) and others highlight strategies of judgement and decision making (Melé 2010). Halverson (2004) suggests that practical, wise leadership in schools integrates strategies of apperception, judgment, choice, planning and action. Bohlin (2022) proposes a Practical Wisdom Framework that consists of four successive coping strategies—reflective listening, reflecting, recalibrating and responding—to activate the internal compass with a view to formative decision making. Her framework appears promising in terms of dealing with the various problems and issues school leaders face in their daily occurrences.

3.3. Christian Discernment Practice

Practical, wise school leaders act based on their interpretation of contextual particulars (Halverson 2004). By merely interpreting daily interruptions as problems, however, school leaders fail to seize opportunities to maintain mission integrity. Recognition of the mystery of the ambiguous and contingent occurrence of interruptions as a complement to common problematisation could open new avenues of understanding. Recognition of the mystery is not to be confused with limited understanding, but should be understood as an essentially positive act of the mind (Marcel 1950). By being attentively receptive to the reality that presents itself and recognising its mystery, school leaders will be able to discover the emergence of the good in an incident that appears filled with defectiveness, vulnerability or failure. By being hermeneutically attentive to the mystery of reality, they will be able to discover new and unexpected possibilities to make the good visible and powerful. From a transformative perspective, what appears to be a problem from a systemic point of view could well be a possibility to open a “perspective to that which transcends harsh reality, and directs man to the good life” (Speelman 2022). In short, interruptions should not be seen as a problem, but interpreted as a welcome opportunity to avert narrative foreclosure and to discover new and unexpected possibilities in terms of making the good visible and powerful (Boeve 2007).

When confronted by an interruption, how might a school leader open new avenues of understanding to maintain mission integrity? A design for interrelated strategies of practical, wise school leadership has not yet been provided that does justice in a profound way not only to the ethical but also to the transformative nature of the endeavour of Catholic education. This transformative nature refers not only to the orientation of the educational endeavour towards a future that is yet to come (*adventus*), but also awareness of its non-enforceability, receptivity and unexpectedness. To establish what this means in terms of a coherent assemblage of acting strategies that are open to the good that is yet to come, we deepen our understanding by relating practical, wise leadership to discernment practices. We thus aim to fill the knowledge gap regarding coherence by working out how to move from reflection to judgement in order to act wisely and purposefully.

The Christian tradition includes various agogic practices for how to live well with and for others with a view to the lasting, ultimate good. In this tradition, discernment is the paradigm of receptive and critical reflection and interpretation, deliberation, and judgement in a specific situation in order to strive for the ultimate good (Waaijman 2002, 2013). Although the Christian tradition encompasses various forms of discernment practices, they may be characterised by four core qualities, each made up of soft strategies (Waaijman 2002; Hermans 2021; van der Zee 2022).

- Firstly, to look outwards. Discernment starts with seeing differences, which involves attentive receptivity, openness for what emerges, allowing it to draw one’s attention, and wondering about it. To look outwards aims not only at seeing different positions or perspectives, but also at sensing the good that emerges in what others bring in or in what happens next.
- Secondly, to look inwards. Discernment proceeds with reflection and self-examination. Reflection aims to interpret an incident to discover which values and ethical commitments are at stake or about to emerge. Self-examination aims to investigate how we are involved with these values and commitment to what happens, what we find desirable and what our motives are. Being attentive to emerging deep feelings is very important for 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” in order to come to a new, unexpected and shared understanding.
- Finally, to decide what to do. Possibilities should be judged carefully, and in two ways. Discernment involves a principled judgment—not so much with a view to “solving

the problem” of an incident, but in order to act in a 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 particular situation. The desirable option should then pass the test of justice and fairness.

In the course of history, Christians have developed various agogic practices with the quality of allowing users to discern what to do in reaction to specific incidents in order to endeavour for the ultimate good in God’s eyes. It should be noted that discernment practices are not merely of an instrumental nature, but also enhance an openness to what is to come to us from the outside. Discernment should therefore not be perceived as the result of an intellectual and intuitive reflection only, but as the prospect of a “breaking through” of insights and ideas that are characterised by immediacy. Thomas Aquinas (2006, II-II, q. 52) hints at this possibility when he discusses the virtue of prudence in his *Summa Theologiae*. He refers to new insights as gifts of counsel about what must be done for the sake of the actualisation of the good (Keenan 2002).

It can be hypothesised that Catholic school leaders could effectively navigate the multiple challenges they face daily by using the soft strategies of practical wisdom that emanate from discernment practices. However, little is known regarding possible ways to activate these strategies, to establish what to do when confronted by an incident that interrupts the course of their leadership praxis. The question that orients our research reads: what would the design of a practical, wise leadership practice for Catholic school leaders look like in order to navigate through their everyday reality and know what to do?

4. Methodological Considerations

From an educational design perspective, the development and implementation of a solution could contribute to resolving the issues around how school leaders should act (McKenney and Reeves 2019). A possible contribution to their issue of maintaining mission integrity is the generic design of an intervention to facilitate a practical, wise leadership practice. Based on a generic design, school leaders should be able to create specific ways and practices that establish how they should act regarding their responsibilities and obligations in their context. In order to develop the design of such an intervention, we present the design requirements and a proposition below.

4.1. Design Requirements

Design requirements describe *what* the intervention will address and give guidance on what is to be accomplished in the context of a school (McKenney and Reeves 2019, pp. 126–60). The intervention of a practical, wise leadership practice addresses the ethical dimension of the school leaders’ day-to-day existence and aims at enabling them to decide on an effective action. Such an intervention would guide Catholic school leaders in making correct and just decisions on actions that support an educational endeavour that is of a transformative nature.

Theoretical and functionality design requirements must be included. Based on the aforementioned theoretical considerations, the following elements are to be included in the intervention: paying attention to the daily praxis of school leaders, addressing the ethical dimension, making decisions to act, including reflection and deliberation, and taking a transformative perspective. They are discussed below.

Design requirement 1. Pay attention to the complex daily occurrences of school leaders. In a context of accountability and increased pressure to perform, school leaders are confronted with multiple interruptions on a daily basis and required to respond by taking action (Bohlin 2022; Hammersley-Fletcher 2015). The intervention should be grounded in the contextual dynamics of this complex daily reality.

Design requirement 2. Address the ethical dimension of the day-to-day reality. Catholic school leaders have a great responsibility regarding the ethically oriented educational endeavour of Catholic schools, as well as the development and maintenance of a consistent culture and ethos. In order to fulfil their responsibility, they must deal ethically with

interruptions to their daily activities (Bohlin 2022). From a teleological perspective on ethics, they are invited to orient their professional conduct towards the ultimate good (*telos*) of the educational endeavour of the school, and the local good (*bonum*) in the eyes of the students. The intervention should include indications regarding how to do this.

Design requirement 3. Enable school leaders to come to decisions in order to act. A crucial part of the daily routine of school leaders is judgement and decision making. In proposing a coherent whole made up of relevant and interrelated strategies, the intervention should contribute to the improvement of judgement and decision making by including principles of Catholic education (Melé 2010; Halverson 2004).

Design requirement 4. Include reflection and deliberation. Reflection is needed in view of the motivations and commitments that are part of decision making. Deliberation involves the welcoming of diversity in the dialogue by enabling the participation of practical, wise others as well as the inclusion of (religious) stories of practical wisdom (van Groningen et al. 2016; Habisch and Bachmann 2016). The intervention should include strategies for reflection and deliberation so as to come to new, unexpected possibilities.

Design requirement 5. Take a transformative perspective by treating interruptions as opportunities to let reality present itself and to be hermeneutically attentive. While Catholic school leaders commonly deal with interruptions as problems to be solved, they should be invited to perceive interruptions as possibilities that have become actual, and to treat them as opportunities to allow the good to emerge, made visible and powerful. Usually the good in interruptions is barely visible, and even then only in a veiled and inconclusive way (Speelman 2022). The intervention should invite school leaders to open up for the good to emerge.

Functionality requirements may be imposed regarding practical and formal constraints and opportunities. Catholic school leaders should address constraints and opportunities when expanding a generic design into specific solutions for their context, for example regarding the availability of time, resources and space to deliberate. Practical wisdom is not about cutting corners, but asks for pauses before proceeding to the next step (Delbecq et al. 2004).

4.2. Design Proposition

Design propositions provide guidance as to *how* the intervention will help school leaders to achieve effective decisions to act. They are determined primarily by theory and expertise, and secondarily by empirical testing in the context (McKenney and Reeves 2019, pp. 126–60). Following CIMO logic (Denyer et al. 2008), design propositions must provide details regarding in which Context the use of which Interventions induces which Mechanisms in order to achieve which Outcomes. We first elaborate the various elements, and then present a design proposition for a practical, wise leadership practice.

First, the context. In a societal context of detraditionalization, secularisation and individualisation, and of the marketisation of education, Catholic school leaders strive to maintain mission integrity, but are confronted by incidents that interrupt the course of their leadership and put their commonly used strategies to the test. They want to know what to do when interrupted in order to fulfil their responsibility—not in an instrumentally systemic way, but in an ethical and transformative way.

Second, the intervention. The primary focus of the intervention is to ensure the school leader will come to decisions that result in wise and purposeful action. While there are different types of educational intervention (McKenney and Reeves 2019), we opt for an intervention that includes processes such as strategies, tactics and sequences to support decision making in order to act wisely and purposefully. Dialogical interactions are the main avenue for activating the necessary processes and involve not only the exchange of insights and arguments, but above all, “sensemaking” conversation to generate new, sometimes unexpected possibilities. School leaders must have a dialogue with themselves; with practical, wise others; and with (religious) stories of practical wisdom. The intervention

consists of a protocol of reflective questions that promote dialogical interactions to activate strategies of practical wisdom.

Third, the mechanisms. The intervention aims to activate four groups of strategies of practical wisdom to be used consecutively in order to come to decisions on an interruption that will maintain mission integrity: 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 the one or more decisions required to respond to an interruption, but also ways to convert these decisions into action. By using strategies of practical wisdom, Catholic school leaders achieve agency and are able to act practically, wisely and purposefully for the benefit of the ultimate good (*telos*) of the educational endeavour of the school, and the local good (*bonum*) in the eyes of the students.

Design Proposition: When confronted with an incident of interruption (context), Catholic school leaders are able to achieve decisions and act practically and wisely concerning the educational endeavour of their school (outcome) by using reflective questions in various dialogical interactions (intervention) that activate strategies of practical, wise leadership (mechanism).

5. Design of a Practical, Wise Leadership Practice

Core features of a practical, wise leadership practice are presented here that should be expanded by Catholic school leaders into specific solutions for their context. We first present some general remarks on the process, and then aggregate various elements in Table 1.

Practical, wise leadership practice encompasses various dialogical interactions engaged in by Catholic school leaders when confronted by an interruption. The core dialogical interactions align with the four core actions of 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 of practical, wise leadership that are activated consecutively 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.

Table 1 below aggregates the various strategies and reflective questions into a cohesive whole, divided into four components, that could form a practical, wise leadership practice for Catholic school leaders. The list is not comprehensive but consists of examples of well-chosen questions.

Table 1. Strategies for practical, wise leadership, and reflective questions.

Strategy	Reflective Questions to Activate the Strategy
<i>To look outwards</i> - become sensitive to different positions, experiences and perspectives - be able to wonder	- What has happened? What is my first observation of it? How do others observe it? How am I affected by what I observe or learn from others? Do I perceive it as an interruption in the course of my leadership? - Do I interpret it as a worthwhile or an inconvenient interruption? What do I sense in what emerges in the interruption? What kind of appeal is made by what emerges? How does it relate to the coming of the good?

Table 1. Cont.

Strategy	Reflective Questions to Activate the Strategy
<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 I am involved with these values and commitments, what I find desirable and what my 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 the core values and commitments of our school at stake? In what sense? - How am I to reach out to the values and ethical commitments at stake? By entrusting myself to them, can I make sense of the situation? What motives drive my actions: are they from the coming of the good or from motives driven by my 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 does the reading and interpretation of (religious) stories contribute to the case? What kind of variance of interpretation appears? Which insights, beliefs and ideas come to the fore in an open space? What is revealed to us as a possibility to strive for values and ethical commitments that are open to a constant transcendence of the current ones? How do the possibilities converge with the school's educational endeavour?
<i>To decide what to do</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - make a pragmatic and principled judgement - establish if the proposed acts pass the test of justice and fairness - arrive at action(s) to be taken 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the good of humanisation is already emerging in the situation, what would I then do or would I refrain from action? Which possibility to act is judged as the most desirable option for our school in this situation? What are the small steps that can be taken consecutively? - Do the possibilities contribute to what is considered to be good in the eyes of our students? Are they just and righteous, taking into account not only our well-being but that of each individual (future) student, in an appropriate way and to promote humanisation? - Do I have the courage to take action? What else is needed, in order to act? Am I able to take up my leadership appropriately?

6. Conclusions and Contribution to the Discussion

Catholic school leaders have a significant responsibility to maintain the mission integrity of their schools (Grace 2010; Fincham 2021). While their daily routine is characterised by multiple incidents that interrupt the expected course of events, they are expected to remain faithful to the principles of Catholic education. How should they navigate through their day-to-day experiences and remain faithful to these ethically oriented and religiously inspired principles?

Previous research has provided a coherent set of practical, wise coping strategies for dealing with problematic incidents or conflicts that interrupt the expected course of events (Bohlin 2022). By interpreting an interruption merely as a problem, however, school leaders fail to seize opportunities to maintain mission integrity. By understanding an interruption as an opportunity to be hermeneutically attentive to the mystery of reality, new and unexpected possibilities could emerge that make the good visible and powerful. However, this is not a matter of instrumental application or similar logic but requires soft strategies that acknowledge the unenforceability of the good. This article dealt with the question of how Catholic school leaders are able, in an unenforceable and rather receptive way, to open up a new perspective that transcends harsh reality. A generic design is presented for interrelated strategies of practical, wise school leadership that in a profound way does justice not only to the ethical but also to the transformative nature of the endeavour of

Catholic education. The design consists of four clusters, made up of strategies of practical wisdom as well as well-chosen reflective questions to activate these strategies. Catholic school leaders must expand these into solutions for their specific context. By elaborating and then implementing a practical, wise leadership practice, Catholic school leaders are able to make the decisions necessary for them to act wisely and purposefully.

Research into practical, wise leadership praxis is necessary not only to validate the design, but also to establish how its elaboration and implementation may affect the agency of Catholic school leaders. While discernment has been shown to be a powerful predictor of transformational leadership (Hermans 2021), research is needed to establish what the impact is of the use of practical, wise strategies on the agency of school leaders in their daily routine, filled with interruptions. A promising avenue for research would be a narrative approach, with the use of *phronetic* narratives as articulations of practice and practical wisdom (Halverson 2004). An important aspect of the research on practical, wise leadership concerns the emerging praxis of distributed leadership (Spillane 2006). In more and more schools, leadership is distributed over a team of school leaders who share the responsibility of maintaining mission integrity. What would be the impact of practical, wise leadership if understood primarily as a distributed practice? Another aspect is that of the continuing development of school leaders, becoming more and more conditioned to act wisely and purposefully (Grace 2018; Bohlin 2022). It is to be expected that the character of school leaders would be formed through persistent participation in practical, wise leadership practices. Evidence is still sparse concerning the effectiveness of interventions of formal and informal learning, in terms of professional development and character formation (Daniëls et al. 2019).

This article is a modest contribution to resolving the issue of the actions of Catholic school leaders, by presenting a generic design for a practical, wise leadership practice. Hopefully it will not only serve as a spur to the further development of Catholic school leadership, but also highlight the need for further knowledge and study of Catholic education.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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