Leadership inspires leadership actions and aspirations in others

A discussion with Bishop Greg O’Kelly, Jesuit auxiliary Bishop of Adelaide and has had a distinguished career as an educator, including his role as Principal of St Ignatius College.

As simple as it sounds, O’Kelly believes one of the keys to successful leaders is the actual acknowledgment of leadership potential. That entails exploring the notion of whether education is a process of formation or instruction, and understanding one’s capacity to create a constructive or a destructive environment. “A principal can make or break a school, especially a small school, especially a primary school – the whole mood of a school can change and a parent’s confidence in a school can be significantly affected by how they view the quality of the leadership of the principal.”

O’Kelly unashamedly embraces education as process of formation, as it is this approach he believes is the access for values driven pedagogy. And he says regardless of whether the educational system within which a leader operates is religious or secular, there are common values, and common challenges – chief amongst them the diversity of views of staff. Just as there will be staff who will endorse a leader’s values and share their vision, there will be those who are benign and others who are indifferent. “The leader has to identify and work on, to elicit and encourage those who will make the atmosphere, who will set the tone.” O’Kelly also believes quite strongly that a leader has to show affection towards those whom they wish to inspire, to create in them a sense of trust and worthiness. “Relationships are at the heart of it” he says.

O’Kelly believes a sound structural framework can enable schools to maintain a consistent vision despite the movement of staff. He says the most successful leaders are “leader breeders” who impart leadership capacity in others. He says the leaders he admires are distinguished by integrity, and their focus on others rather than themselves, likening it to the transition from childhood to adulthood. “What they talk about, what they think about, what gets them excited is actually other people, and what they might do for other people – the focus is outside themselves and not within themselves.”

O’Kelly contends that to have and communicate a vision necessitates a philosophical exploration of the deeper question of what it is to be a human being. “Whether you’re dealing with children of different age groups, or whether you’re dealing with staff – What does it mean to be a human being? What does it mean to have a heart? To have a mind? To have a purpose? Because education can convey a vision, and scripture says that without a vision, the people will perish. I think that’s when schools begin to work well, when they share that vision.”

While empirical assessments such as surveys can be a useful measure of results, O’Kelly says it’s the intangibles that often indicate success in values leadership. “By and large it’s rapport. You can tell whether people are on side with you, or respect you, or whether they think you’re a drongo. And you know that parents in a school vote with their feet.”