

Professional Development of Formators in Catholic Schools: Building Competence for Generational, Digital, and Pastoral Change

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ABSTRACT

Catholic schools are not only educational institutions but communities in which faith, culture, learning, and relationships are intentionally integrated. Within this mission, formators and campus ministers translate Catholic identity into concrete experiences of accompaniment, reflection, worship, dialogue, and community life. Yet the contexts in which formation occurs have become increasingly complex because of generational diversity, digitally mediated relationships, changing communication practices, cultural pluralism, and pastoral situations that may involve grief, adversity, or other forms of vulnerability. This article examines the resulting professional-development challenge through an integrative literature review and conceptual analysis. Drawing on scholarship on Catholic education, workplace spirituality, pastoral leadership, digital literacy, generational change, and trauma-informed pastoral care, the analysis synthesizes five interrelated competency domains required of contemporary formators: spiritual, theological, pastoral, professional, and contextual-digital competence. The findings indicate that the principal challenge is not the obsolescence of traditional formation, but the widening gap between the enduring formative mission of Catholic education and the expanding competencies required to enact that mission in contemporary settings. The article therefore proposes an institutional approach to continuing professional development that combines theological and spiritual formation with pastoral skills, generational and linguistic fluency, digital pastoral literacy, trauma-informed and referral-sensitive practice, mentoring, supervision, and organizational support. The study contributes a practice-oriented framework for understanding professional development as part of the infrastructure of Catholic formation rather than as an optional supplement to ministry. It concludes that sustained, context-responsive development of formators is necessary to preserve the effectiveness, integrity, and mission of Catholic educational institutions while enabling practitioners to respond responsibly to changing pastoral and educational realities.

Keywords: Catholic schools, formators, professional development, pastoral formation, digital literacy

INTRODUCTION

Education occupies a distinctive place in the mission of the Catholic Church because it concerns the formation of the whole person. *Gravissimum Educationis* presents education as an enduring responsibility that must respond to changing social conditions, while the Congregation for Catholic Education describes the Catholic school as a community in which faith and culture are brought into meaningful relationship. The Catholic school therefore cannot be understood merely as a site for academic instruction. Its distinctive identity is expressed through the manner in which teaching, relationships, community life, and the search for truth are oriented toward a Christian vision of the human person [3, 14].

This mission places particular demands on those responsible for formation. Formators, campus ministers, pastoral staff, and related practitioners occupy a mediating position between institutional identity and the lived experiences of students and employees. Their work may include retreats, recollections, liturgical preparation, faith-sharing, pastoral accompaniment, community-building, program development, collaboration with academic and administrative units, and the creation of spaces for reflection and dialogue. Campus-ministry

research likewise shows that Catholic ministry in educational settings involves negotiating multiple ministerial visions and organizational arrangements rather than performing a single narrowly defined pastoral function [6].

At the same time, the environments in which this work takes place have become more complex. Contemporary formation participants encounter Catholic education amid rapid technological change, diverse cultural references, changing patterns of religious affiliation and engagement, and communication practices shaped by digital media. Pope Francis observes in *Christus Vivit* that digital culture affects not simply the use of communication tools but people's understanding of time, space, themselves, others, learning, and relationships [8, para. 86]. The implication for formation is significant: the medium and cultural environment are themselves part of the context in which meaning is negotiated.

The problem addressed in this article is therefore a professional-development problem. Formators may possess substantial theological or pastoral preparation while simultaneously encountering responsibilities that require additional competencies in facilitation, organizational leadership, communication, digital media, intercultural engagement, safeguarding, trauma sensitivity, and referral. Research on pastoral leadership suggests that clergy and pastoral leaders often develop through demanding experiences, transitions, and relationships in the course of ministry itself, highlighting the importance of structured opportunities to interpret experience and consolidate learning [11]. The issue is not that initial formation is inadequate in itself; rather, the professional demands of formation can expand faster than the systems of continuing development designed to support those who carry them.

This article consequently advances a central thesis: as Catholic educational contexts become increasingly generationally diverse, digitally mediated, culturally plural, and pastorally complex, the competencies required of formators extend beyond initial theological preparation; sustained and context-responsive professional development is therefore necessary to preserve the effectiveness, integrity, and mission of Catholic formation.

Three questions guide the analysis: (1) What contemporary generational, digital, cultural, and pastoral changes are reshaping formation in Catholic educational institutions? (2) What competencies do these changes require of formators beyond initial theological or ministerial preparation? (3) What forms of continuing professional development can enable formators to respond effectively while remaining faithful to Catholic educational identity?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The article uses an integrative literature review and conceptual analysis rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. This design is appropriate because the problem under examination is interdisciplinary and requires the synthesis of empirical studies, conceptual literature, professional scholarship, and authoritative Catholic documents. An integrative review is particularly suited to questions that require diverse forms of evidence to be considered together; Whittemore and Knafl [18] describe the approach as one that can combine empirical and theoretical literature, while Torraco [16, 17] emphasizes its capacity to generate new understanding through critical synthesis. The present article therefore does not claim to be a systematic review or meta-analysis; its purpose is integrative synthesis and conceptual development [17].

Review scope and sources

The review focuses on Catholic educational institutions and on practitioners whose functions substantially overlap with those of formators, campus ministers, pastoral leaders, and religious educators. Literature was purposively identified according to its conceptual relevance to the three review questions and organized around four bodies of literature: (a) Catholic education and formation; (b) workplace spirituality and meaning in organizational life; (c) generational, cultural, and digital change in education and ministry; and (d) pastoral leadership, professional development, and trauma-informed care [13, 16, 17]. The literature-identification

concepts corresponded to combinations of terms such as Catholic school/Catholic education, formator/formation, campus ministry, pastoral leadership, professional development, digital literacy/digital ministry, generational change/Gen Z, intercultural competence, and trauma-informed pastoral care.

Because the study was designed as an integrative review rather than a systematic review, it did not employ a fixed database-by-database search protocol, PRISMA-style screening sequence, or a predetermined numerical threshold for included studies. Sources were located through scholarly literature searches and publicly available ecclesial documents, with additional relevant works identified through reference checking and conceptual relevance. The original review did not retain a prospective database search log or a verifiable record of the number of records identified and screened; accordingly, no database names or record counts are supplied retrospectively where they cannot be established accurately. This limitation is disclosed rather than replaced with reconstructed or unverifiable search statistics.

Sources were considered eligible when they met at least one of the following criteria: (1) direct relevance to Catholic education, formation, or ministry; (2) a clear conceptual contribution to one of the competency domains under examination; (3) empirical evidence from an adjacent educational or pastoral field that could reasonably illuminate a professional-development issue; or (4) authoritative ecclesial guidance relevant to Catholic educational practice. Sources were excluded when they lacked a clear connection to the review questions, offered no transferable conceptual or empirical contribution, or could not support a defensible interpretation. The final body of literature was therefore determined purposively through relevance, evidentiary usefulness, and fit with the review questions, rather than through statistical aggregation.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed scholarly literature and primary institutional or ecclesial documents. Sources were included when they directly addressed one or more of the review questions, contributed a definitional or conceptual framework, offered empirical evidence relevant to ministry or education, or provided authoritative guidance for Catholic educational practice. Because the literature directly focused on Catholic-school formators is limited and heterogeneous, closely related evidence from campus ministry, theological education, pastoral leadership, and religious education was used where it could illuminate transferable professional-development concerns. Such transferability is treated as an interpretive bridge rather than as proof of identical conditions.

Analytical procedure

Evidence provenance and transferability

To avoid conflating different evidence bases, the synthesis distinguishes direct evidence concerning Catholic education or formation from adjacent evidence concerning campus ministry, pastoral leadership, theological education, workplace spirituality, digital literacy, generational change, or trauma-informed care. Direct Catholic evidence is used primarily to establish the mission and identity of Catholic education. Adjacent evidence is used only to illuminate transferable competency or professional-development concerns; it is not treated as proof that the same conditions or effects have been established specifically among Catholic-school formators. Where the literature does not directly study formators, the inference is identified as a conceptual transfer and the claim is limited accordingly.

The analysis followed the broad logic of integrative review: problem formulation, literature identification, source evaluation, data extraction, comparison, synthesis, and presentation [18]. For each source, attention was given to the setting, population or object of analysis, principal concepts, major findings or arguments, implications for ministry or education, evidence provenance (direct or adjacent), and limitations relevant to transferability. The extracted material was then compared across sources to identify recurring patterns and tensions rather than to calculate pooled effect estimates. The synthesis was interpretive: recurring concepts were grouped into competency requirements and institutional professional-development implications, after which the five-domain framework was formulated as a conceptual proposition rather than as an empirically validated measurement model.

Five themes emerged from the synthesis: (1) the expansion of the formator's role; (2) the professional-development gap and risk of role overload; (3) generational and cultural change in formation; (4) digital culture as a formative environment; and (5) increasing need for trauma-informed and boundary-conscious pastoral practice. These themes were subsequently organized into a five-domain competency framework comprising spiritual, theological, pastoral, professional, and contextual-digital competence.

Rigor and limitations of the review

Rigor was pursued through explicit definition of the review problem, clear articulation of the literature-identification concepts and selection criteria, distinction between direct and adjacent evidence, use of authoritative Catholic sources for claims about Catholic educational identity, and avoidance of causal claims unsupported by the literature. Because the review is integrative and purposive rather than systematic, the literature-identification process is not presented as exhaustive or fully reproducible in the manner of a systematic review. The review is also conceptual rather than empirical: it does not report primary interviews, surveys, experiments, or institutional outcome measures. Accordingly, the proposed competency framework is a theoretically grounded conceptual proposition that requires empirical validation in different Catholic-school contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Catholic education as a formative mission

The starting point for professional development should be the mission of the Catholic school itself. Gravissimum Educationis understands education as a continuing human responsibility and situates Catholic education within the Church's concern for the integral development of persons [14]. The Congregation for Catholic Education further explains that the Catholic school's identity is inseparable from its Christian conception of life and its commitment to the development of the whole person [3]. The religious dimension of the school is therefore expressed not only in explicit religious activities but in the climate, relationships, intellectual work, and practices through which faith and culture encounter one another [4].

This theological and educational foundation matters for professional development because it establishes the criterion by which new competencies should be judged. The goal is not to make formators resemble corporate trainers, therapists, social-media managers, or generic youth workers. Rather, professional competencies are valuable insofar as they enable formators to perform their specifically formative mission with greater pastoral intelligence and fidelity. Continuing formation must therefore be additive rather than substitutive: new competencies should strengthen theological and spiritual identity rather than displace it.

Workplace spirituality and the expanding role of formators

The workplace-spirituality literature provides a useful organizational lens for understanding why formation has implications beyond explicitly religious programming. Ashmos and Duchon [2] conceptualize spirituality at work in terms that include inner life, meaningful work, and community. Duchon and Plowman [7] likewise connect workplace spirituality with meaningful work and community and examine the relationship between these conditions and organizational functioning. Mañez [9] extends this discussion to organizational change and cohesion, reinforcing the relevance of meaning and community to workplace life. These concepts should not be equated wholesale with Catholic spirituality; however, they illuminate a shared organizational concern: people experience institutions not only through formal structures but through meaning, relationships, belonging, and the perceived purpose of their work.

In Catholic schools, this organizational dimension is inseparable from mission. Formators are often expected to help make the school's values visible and experienced through retreats, worship, reflection, accompaniment, community events, and pastoral initiatives. Campus-ministry research demonstrates the complexity of this role, especially where professional ministers and missionary personnel work within the same institutional environment [6]. The formator is consequently not merely a program implementer. The role is simultaneously pastoral, educational, relational, communicative, and organizational.

This expansion changes the professional-development question. If the role involves translating institutional mission into lived experience, then competence cannot be reduced to theological knowledge. Formators need the capacity to design experiences, facilitate groups, read institutional dynamics, communicate across constituencies, manage projects, collaborate with other professionals, and exercise pastoral judgment. Professional development is therefore part of the means by which the Catholic school protects the quality of its formative mission.

The professional-development gap and role overload

Pastoral leadership research offers a particularly relevant warning. In their study of 100 pastors, McKenna, Yost, and Boyd [11] found that significant leadership development occurred through work experiences, transitions, and relationships. The finding does not establish that Catholic-school formators experience identical developmental patterns, but it does demonstrate the importance of learning from practice in pastoral leadership. When professional learning is left primarily to unstructured experience, development becomes dependent on whether individuals happen to encounter good mentors, supportive supervisors, reflective cultures, and opportunities to learn from difficulty.

Role overload is the organizational consequence of this problem. A formator may be expected to plan formation programs, facilitate retreats, coordinate liturgical activities, respond to pastoral concerns, communicate through digital channels, prepare reports, collaborate with multiple offices, and address emerging student needs. The accumulation of these functions can shift ministry from reflective accompaniment toward reactive task management. The danger is not simply personal fatigue; it is the gradual reduction of formation into a sequence of activities detached from the relational and spiritual purposes that justify those activities.

The appropriate institutional response is therefore not merely to tell formators to acquire more skills. Professional development must be paired with workload design, supervision, mentoring, role clarification, and adequate resources. A school that funds training but leaves practitioners without time to apply it, reflect on it, or receive supervision has not created a complete professional-development system.

Generational and cultural change: From stereotypes to fluency

Antonio's [1] study of Gen Y and Gen Z students in a Catholic university in the Philippines found no significant overall difference between the two groups in attitudes toward religion, illustrating why religious educators should attend to actual learner experiences rather than assume uniform generational patterns. Complementary research on Gen Z religious attitudes also points to the importance of the wider social and digital environment in which younger people negotiate questions of spirituality and religion [15].

As Csinos emphasizes in his treatment of formation across ages, effective intergenerational ministry requires attention to how people of different generations participate in the life of the church [5].

Such fluency also has an intergenerational dimension. Catholic schools bring together students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, religious personnel, and lay professionals whose cultural references and expectations may differ considerably. A formation program that is effective for one constituency may be ineffective for another. Continuing professional development should therefore include communication analysis, facilitation, intercultural competence, and reflective practice rather than a narrow module on how to 'handle Gen Z.'

Digital culture as a formative environment

Digital culture represents a deeper challenge than the adoption of new communication platforms. In *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis describes the digital environment as a characteristic feature of contemporary life and emphasizes its effects on self-understanding, relationships, learning, communication, and the perception of reality [8, para. 86]. This theological-pastoral observation supports a critical distinction: digital ministry is not simply ministry delivered through a screen; it is ministry undertaken among people whose patterns of attention, interaction, identity formation, and community have been shaped by digital environments.

Oliver and Williams-Duncan [12] similarly argue that digital literacy for faith leaders involves more than technical proficiency. Their study of theological educators highlights the need to understand digital literacy as a set of practices connected with ministry and professional learning. For Catholic-school formators, this suggests at least four layers of competence: technical literacy, communicative literacy, critical media literacy, and pastoral-theological discernment.

Technical literacy concerns the competent use of platforms and tools. Communicative literacy concerns adapting tone, format, timing, and interaction to digital contexts. Critical media literacy concerns evaluating how algorithms, images, information flows, and platform cultures shape attention and belief. Pastoral-theological discernment asks the deeper question: what kind of encounter is being created, and does the medium serve the formative purpose? The objective is not to make every formation activity digital. It is to ensure that formators understand the environments in which participants actually live.

Trauma-informed pastoral care and the limits of the formator role

Contemporary formation also occurs in the presence of grief, family disruption, violence, anxiety, loss, discrimination, and other experiences that can affect a person's capacity to trust, participate, and make meaning. McClintock [10] argues that clergy and pastoral caregivers benefit from trauma-informed approaches that help them recognize trauma responses, regulate their own reactions, and accompany people with greater competence and cultural sensitivity.

For formators, trauma-informed practice should not be confused with clinical psychotherapy. The appropriate professional objective is trauma sensitivity: creating predictable and respectful environments, avoiding unnecessary coercion or humiliation, recognizing signs that a participant may need additional support, maintaining boundaries, and knowing when and how to refer to qualified mental-health or safeguarding professionals.

This distinction is essential to ethical professional development. Training should not encourage formators to diagnose participants or become substitute clinicians. Rather, it should strengthen pastoral presence and referral competence. A well-designed program can teach formators how to establish psychological and relational safety, use non-shaming language, respond appropriately to disclosures, document and escalate concerns according to institutional policy, and care for themselves so that repeated exposure to distress does not erode their own capacity for ministry.

An integrated competency framework for formators

The synthesis of the literature supports a five-domain model of professional competence, presented here explicitly as a conceptual proposition rather than an empirically validated competency scale. The domains are analytically distinct but function as an integrated whole. The theological domain protects doctrinal and ecclesial fidelity; the spiritual domain sustains the formator's own vocation and interior life; the pastoral domain governs accompaniment and care; the professional domain supports leadership and program effectiveness; and the contextual-digital domain enables translation across contemporary environments. Table 1 maps each domain to the principal literature used in the synthesis and identifies the professional-development priorities that follow from that evidence.

Table 1. Integrated Competency Framework for Catholic-School Formators

Competency domain	Core capacities	Professional-development priorities	Literature support
Spiritual	Prayerful presence; reflective practice; vocational integration; discernment	Retreats, supervision, spiritual direction where appropriate, reflective practice	[3, 4, 14] Catholic educational identity and integral formation; [2, 7, 9] provide an organizational lens on meaning, community, and spirituality at work.
Theological	Scriptural literacy; Catholic identity; doctrinal coherence; faith-culture integration	Continuing theological formation; ecclesial documents; contextual theology	[3, 4, 14] Catholic school identity, religious dimension of education, and integral formation.
Pastoral	Accompaniment; facilitation; listening; boundaries; referral; trauma sensitivity	Pastoral skills training; safeguarding; trauma- informed care; case consultation	[6] Ministerial-role complexity in educational settings; [10, 11] trauma- informed pastoral care and pastoral-leadership development.
Professional	Leadership; program design; project management; collaboration; evaluation	Leadership development; mentoring; peer learning; program evaluation	[6, 11, 16, 17] ministerial- role integration, leadership development, and integrative- review/professional- development perspectives.
Contextual-Digital	Generational fluency; intercultural communication; digital literacy; discernment	Digital ministry; communication; intercultural competence; platform ethics	[2, 5, 8, 12, 15] generational and religious- attitude research, intergenerational formation, digital culture, and digital literacy.

The value of this framework lies in its integration. A formator can be technically skilled but pastorally ineffective; the person can be theologically knowledgeable but unable to communicate across cultural differences; or highly relational but insufficiently prepared to maintain professional boundaries. The framework therefore proposes that professional development should cultivate the five dimensions together while allowing institutions to emphasize particular domains according to context. Because the model has not yet been empirically tested, these domains should be treated as analytically useful categories for professional development rather than as a validated ranking or diagnostic instrument.

Professional development as an institutional system

The literature also indicates that professional development should not be located exclusively within the individual formator. Pastoral learning is shaped by organizational structures, relationships, opportunities, and demands. The institutional question is therefore: what environment enables formators to continue learning while doing the work of formation?

- Protected development time: allocate regular time for training, reflection, supervision, and peer consultation rather than treating development as an after-hours obligation.

- Structured mentoring: pair less-experienced formators with experienced practitioners who can help interpret complex pastoral and organizational situations.
- Competency-based training: organize annual development plans around the five competency domains rather than disconnected workshops.
- Supervision and referral systems: establish clear protocols for pastoral disclosures, safeguarding concerns, mental-health referrals, and crisis escalation.
- Digital formation: provide continuing training in digital communication, media literacy, online facilitation, privacy, and pastoral discernment.
- Evaluation: assess formation programs through participant feedback, facilitator reflection, program outcomes, and institutional learning rather than attendance counts alone.
- Sustainable workload: align responsibilities, staffing, and program expectations so that professional development is not undermined by chronic role overload.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutionalize continuing formation

Catholic schools should treat professional development for formators as a continuing institutional responsibility. A minimum annual development cycle can combine theological updating, pastoral skills, communication training, digital formation, case consultation, and reflective practice. The goal is continuity rather than a one-time seminar, with priorities selected from the five-domain framework according to institutional needs.

Develop generational, linguistic, and intercultural fluency

Training should equip formators to translate rather than dilute. Participants should learn to identify assumptions embedded in theological and pastoral language, test whether communication is intelligible to different constituencies, and use dialogue and participatory methods without surrendering the substance of Catholic teaching.

Build digital pastoral literacy

Digital competence should move beyond platform tutorials. Formators should understand online facilitation, media habits, visual communication, misinformation, privacy, digital boundaries, and the pastoral implications of technologically mediated relationships. Digital tools should be evaluated according to their formative purpose rather than novelty.

Establish trauma-informed and referral-sensitive practice

Formators should receive training in trauma awareness, psychological safety, appropriate response to disclosures, professional boundaries, safeguarding procedures, and referral pathways. Training should explicitly define the limits of the pastoral role and distinguish accompaniment from clinical diagnosis and treatment.

Create mentoring, supervision, and peer-learning structures

Professional growth should include communities of practice in which formators can discuss cases, review programs, share resources, and reflect on difficult experiences. Mentoring and supervision can convert experience into deliberate professional learning rather than leaving development to trial and error [11].

Evaluate professional development by formative impact

Institutions should evaluate whether professional development improves the quality of formation rather than merely measuring participation. Possible indicators include facilitator confidence and reflective capacity;

quality of program design; participant engagement; appropriate use of referral and safeguarding procedures; collaboration across offices; and evidence that formation experiences are becoming more context-responsive.

CONCLUSION

The challenge facing Catholic-school formators is not the disappearance of the traditional formative mission but the transformation of the contexts in which that mission must be carried out. Catholic education remains committed to the integral development of the person and to a community in which faith and culture are meaningfully related. Yet the contemporary formator works within a landscape shaped by generational diversity, digital mediation, changing communication practices, and increasingly complex pastoral situations.

The integrative analysis indicates that these changes expand the competency profile of the formator. Theological and spiritual formation remain foundational, while pastoral, professional, and contextual-digital capacities enable those foundations to be enacted responsibly within contemporary educational environments. The resulting model is not a secularization of Catholic formation; rather, it proposes that fidelity to mission requires sufficient professional competence to translate that mission into the realities of contemporary people and institutions.

The central implication is therefore institutional: continuing professional development should be treated as part of the infrastructure of Catholic formation. Schools that expect formators to accompany increasingly diverse and digitally mediated communities must also provide the organizational conditions necessary for that work. The five-domain framework offers a practical organizing structure for that continuing formation while remaining open to empirical refinement.

Future research should empirically test the proposed five-domain competency framework across Catholic schools and universities in different cultural contexts. A first phase could use expert panels or Delphi methods to examine the content validity and clarity of the five domains. A subsequent survey could operationalize indicators such as reflective and vocational integration (spiritual), theological literacy and faith-culture integration (theological), listening, boundary management, safeguarding, and referral competence (pastoral), program-design, leadership, collaboration, and evaluation skills (professional), and generational, intercultural, digital, and media-discernment skills (contextual-digital).

Mixed-method studies could then examine which competencies are most frequently required, where professional-development gaps are greatest, how role overload relates to pastoral effectiveness, and which institutional interventions produce sustainable improvements. Comparative studies across schools and cultural settings could test whether the five-domain structure remains stable or requires contextual adaptation. Such research would move the discussion from conceptual prescription toward evidence-based models of continuing formation.

Ethical Considerations

This article involved no human participants, animals, identifiable personal data, or primary data collection. Ethical approval was therefore not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this article.

Data Availability

No primary dataset was generated or analyzed in this study. The article is based on published literature and publicly available ecclesial documents cited in the reference list.

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