

On Being a Catholic School: All Learning Areas

(QCEC colloquium 2016)

Background

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission has a [strategic objective](#) 1.2: *To support ... a Catholic perspective across the general curriculum.*

This objective is supported by the foundational QCEC document  [Queensland Catholic Schools and Curriculum](#) (Treston, 2008) which states:

The character of a school curriculum reflects certain beliefs about the nature of a human being, the role of a person in society, learning and theories of education. Curriculum is the public expression of a school's values and a sure indicator of a school's educational philosophy. In an ideal educational world curriculum is a positive educational response to the question, 'What kind of people do our schools want our students to be and become?'

The visit by Thomas Groome in 2016 to the QCEC colloquium provided the opportunity for leaders in Catholic education to explore the notion of a Catholic perspective to the taught curriculum in appropriate places outside of the Religious Education subject. The colloquium also explored how students might be helped to make sense of life through a theology that:

- promotes discussion on real and meaningful issues within the taught curriculum
- is appropriate to the students' age and encourages deep thinking
- provides the foundation to explore the diversity of beliefs within contemporary classrooms.

Discussion

The following is a summary of participant responses and the reflections of Dr Patricia Hindmarsh for each of the topics explored.

1. **How might Catholic beliefs about the nature of a human being and the role of a person in society influence learning and teaching in Catholic schools?**

Three themes emerged:

1. **The Story of Jesus:** The way Jesus taught, the truth of what He taught and the way He lived life in relationship and community is central and crucial to the Catholic school. Catholic schools should reflect *how* as well as *what* he taught. 'Telling the Story' uses a pedagogy that can engage students (and parents) to respond to that story. Students therefore not just learn about but *learn from* Catholic faith and *integrate life and faith into lived faith*. Through this practice, the everyday life experiences are a source of reflection and conation that can lead to the gaining of wisdom. To be implemented, [staff require ready access](#) to the 'whole Story' of Catholic Christian faith and be knowledgeable and confident in their vision of God.
2. **The radical nature of Jesus' message:** Jesus was totally inclusive, open to all comers, especially the disadvantaged and used invitation rather than coercion or dominance. While it is always an invitation for students to respond to the message, the school should remain focused on following Jesus' teaching and life example. Christ is not an after-thought or an add-on to Catholic educational philosophy. Christ is the basis of the entire enterprise. Catholicism should permeate the entire curriculum.
3. **Catholic education is for LIFE:** Education is not just for academic success or career. Creative imagination can inspire the planning of school policies and strategies to reflect the richness of Jesus' promise, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John10:10). Vatican documents speak of "an integral education, an education which responds to all the needs of the human person." Education not only provides students with knowledge and

experience but also allows them to grasp its meaning. In this way they become good citizens within their community.

Participants identified a number of challenges and considerations where Catholic beliefs impact on schools/school authorities:

- diversity and inclusivity
- healthy relationships, communication and decision making
- social Justice and outreach
- formation of staff
- home/school belief systems and distinguishing 'evangelisation' from 'proselytisation'
- engaging staff in their own faith formation journey.

2. Theological insights for teachers of the 21st century.

Theological insights to emerge included:

4. **Values:** In a Catholic school setting these are deeper than 'civic' values that apply in a civilised society; they emerge from the deep wells of faith tradition and mission of Catholic schools, based on the Person of Jesus. For example, social justice is not just about humanistic sensibilities but is deepened by such inspiration as comes from Micah: 'To live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God'. Reflection and meditation deepen spiritual understanding. The liberal arts also help to develop wisdom.
5. **Holism:** All subjects in the curriculum and every aspect of the school including caring for the earth, positive discipline and the sports program, contributes to a Catholic way of education.
6. **Reflective Practice:** Through open-ended questioning, encouraging student engagement, critical thinking and drawing on [Loneragan's reflective processes](#), many areas of study create opportunities for students to develop an appreciation for the sacramentality of the whole of life.
7. **Re-contextualisation:** Through our commitment to depth educational thinking and teaching practice through reflection and fidelity to the Christian story, we engage in the work of bringing that story alive in the context of our contemporary schools. This can empower students to be grateful for the gifts of life, and also to critique the aspects of culture not in tune with the Gospel.

Catholic School Authorities were challenged to name their blind spot(s), their unconscious bias and unquestioned privilege. Catholic schools are challenged to be places that engage families and community in "the story" in an authentic/ meaningful way and find time to be people of Jesus. To do this might require time to analyse/collect data about faith in a meaningful way. Many Authorities are using the [ACU Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education project](#) and/or the [Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project](#) to help here.

3. Educational Leadership as ministry.

Three leadership areas where ministry can happen:

- **Pedagogy:** Good pedagogy resists 'telling' and invites dialogue, uses story-telling and begins and ends with real life (praxis). Learning is informed by genuine and deep reflection on what the faith tradition/s have to offer by way of truth and enlightenment. Ministry as applied to the lives of students goes beyond providing 'understanding'. It assists students to make judgements, decisions and actions formed from wisdom. For effective and open learning to occur, the learning space and culture needs to be one of trust.

- **Teacher Development:** Teachers need to know how to effectively engage students in *the Life to Faith to Life* process. Teachers need to bring a 'passion for life' to their teaching as well as competence and knowledge.
- **Faith:** Education in faith involves more than knowing. It means that students have been able to learn to make positive life choices about themselves, others and the world. [Catholic social teachings](#) can be used as a framework for action.
Quality education in Faith involves balancing the 'academic' with building community and involvement in outreach through social justice, and is strengthened and sustained by access to Eucharist and sacramental life. Teachers need courage and confidence to do this work effectively. The power of 'invitation' is critical in allowing students to respond. Faith needs to be embedded in the total life of the school, addressing issues of relevance for students that include issues beyond their immediate world as well as those related to their personal lives. Recognition needs to be given to the excitement and curiosity students who do not identify as Catholic can bring to an education in Faith.

Key Themes that emerged were:

- Faith [formation for staff](#) was seen as a top priority. This needs to be intentional and funded.
- The 'journey' into understanding of the process of *Life to Faith to Life* is a continuum, and needs to find practical expression in the school context. This will need to result in consistency of practice and authentic pedagogy.
- Faith needs to be brought to life in all classrooms and not just in the Religious Education subject. There is a need to be always reviewing and providing effective staff formation to enable this.
- [Catholic Social Teaching](#) is an important lens to use as a way to provide Catholic perspectives and wisdom teaching across the entire curriculum.