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Table of Contents

Student Leadership Development in a Catholic School Context: Some Implications for Catholic Schools and Religious Education

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Abstract

Part of the mission of Catholic schools is to ensure that those who attend them are inspired to emulate the leadership style of Jesus throughout their lives. Gaining insight into the ways in which this mission is being enacted within Catholic schools can best occur through consideration of the perspective of those exposed to such leadership examples and programs—namely students. Yet within the field of student leadership development this perspective is often lacking. This article explores the often missing perspective of students as to their experiences of leadership within a Catholic school setting. The perceptions of twenty-one year 12 students from three regional Catholic schools in the central west of New South Wales in this study allow for a better understanding of how students perceive leadership as a result of their Catholic schooling. The lack of acknowledgement of the leadership style of Jesus by the students in this study, and their critique of the leadership models present in their schools, has implications in relation to policy and practice for Catholic schools and educational authorities as they consider how to best live out their Christian leadership mission.

Introduction

Catholic schools have an obligation to promote the leadership style of Jesus, a style that Catholic educational authorities have explicitly aligned with the servant leadership model (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997). Jesus' leadership is felt to demonstrate a "Christ who came to serve rather than be served" (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, p. 4). This form of leadership is often linked to the concept of *diakonia*, whereby leaders "wait on the table" not in a demeaning sense but as a way of serving and ministering to others in a way that gives life to Jesus' greatest commandment to "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). This is a leadership vision that is based on love and compassion, in opposition

to “domination and power” and “pain and suffering” (Lavery, 2003, pp. 42–43; Sofield & Kuhn, 1995, p. 33).

Jesus’ example of leadership is often specifically linked to the servant leadership model (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1991). In fact, this leadership style, from its inception, has been connected to the leadership exhibited by Jesus (Greenleaf, 1977). A servant leader is one who has a “focus on followers’ growth and empowerment, a sense of community stewardship, and further emphasis on ethics, humility and moral behavior”, qualities seen as being aligned with those demonstrated by Jesus throughout his ministry (Kiersch & Peters, 2017, p. 121). Documents from Catholic educational authorities call Catholic schools to promote such leadership in their staff and students, because it so well aligns with the leadership example of Jesus (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, 1988). Catholic Education Melbourne (2019) states that leadership in Catholic schools should be “Following Christ’s model of ‘servant leadership’”, whereby “the leader places emphasis on prioritising the needs of others” (p. 4). Within a Catholic school environment, the teaching of Jesus’ leadership style is considered important, but so too is the modelling of such leadership by school leaders and teachers. Those in such positions of authority in Catholic schools are expected to act “in imitation of Christ, the only Teacher” so to “reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behaviour” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, n. 43).

Student leadership development is not the exclusive domain of Catholic schools. It is argued that student leadership development is important for all students in all schools (Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Lavery, 2006; Myers, 2015; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Yet, as noted above, Catholic schools have indicated that a core element of their mission is to develop students in servant leadership so that they can act as Jesus’ disciples throughout their lives (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009).

Student Leadership Development

Although Catholic schools are called to develop their students in leadership, research into whether this is occurring and how it is being achieved is limited (Hine, 2014; Murphy & Johnson, 2011). In fact, research into student leadership development in general is surprisingly limited, with Hine (2014) going so far as to state that there is a “striking dearth of literature” (p. 79). Of particular note is the specific lack of student voice or, as Richards (2011) defines it, “an absence of studies that consider the viewpoint of perhaps the key

stakeholder—the student" (p. 84). As such, researchers are challenged to "seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for what lies in the decades ahead" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 1). Although a currently limited field, the wider literature on student leadership development does offer some insight into what occurs within a high school context and provides advice on ways to improve a school's leadership development opportunities.

Initially, such research indicates that student leadership development should be an ongoing, developmental process for students throughout their high school journey (Coffey & Lavery, 2018; Funk, 2002). Building and experimenting with leadership skills across the entirety of a student's high schooling is beneficial as it targets young people when they are at a more sensitive, and therefore more malleable, developmental stage than adulthood (Lebel & Beaulieu, 2011; Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Moreover, allowing students to develop as leaders across this period gives them adequate time in which to recognise and appreciate their leadership aptitude (Karnes, 1990; Schneider, Paul, White, & Holcombe, 1999).

This ongoing process of leadership development should involve both singular and extended leadership opportunities based on theoretical learnings, practical applications of leadership, and reflective exercises (Carter & Spotanski, 1989; Dyson & Plunkett, 2018; Lavery, 2008). Although schools are often considered "hotbeds of leadership development", this is not necessarily the case in practice (van Linden & Fertman, 1998, p. 224). Instead, schools commonly tend to rely on singular training experiences rather than commit to an extended and developmental leadership program (Hine, 2013). Furthermore, rather than offer leadership development to all students, schools tend to target a select minority of students, those in elected leadership positions, or those in their final years of high school (Coffey & Lavery, 2018; Karnes & Stephens, 1999; Lavery, 2006; Myers, 2015; Owen, 2015; van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

Within a school environment, teachers can influence adolescents in leadership as a result of their example and active encouragement (Allio, 2005; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). A teacher's modelling of leadership for students and their encouragement of leadership activities can inspire a student to become involved and develop as a leader (Black et al., 2014; Buscall, Guerin, Macallister, & Robson, 1994). As leadership mentors, teachers need to have a knowledge of leadership development models, recognise and appreciate the leadership capacity of students, offer meaningful advice, and be committed to providing students with numerous leadership development opportunities (Chrystal-Green, 2018). It is important to consider that, whilst it is common for teachers to act as leadership mentors for

students, older student peers can also act as competent leadership mentors for younger students. Such students, however, need to be given adequate administrative, intrapersonal and interpersonal training in order to be effective (Haber, 2011).

Teachers' roles in developing students' leadership can be a valuable asset in schools, yet, unfortunately, teachers can also inhibit student leadership growth. By limiting opportunities for leadership in a classroom setting (due to feeling challenged by the leadership of students), reverting to hierarchical leadership models, offering only tokenistic leadership opportunities, and displaying a lack of awareness of the benefits of student leadership, teachers can have a detrimental effect on students' leadership growth (Brasof, 2015; Garandeau, Ahn, & Rodkin, 2011).

Student voice has been found to be valuable for student leadership in schools, but it is also lacking in any meaningful way (MacNeil, 2006). Student voice "gives insight into the metaphorical perspectives and worldviews that individuals inhabit" (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 6). Student voice within a school's organisational and leadership structures can improve student leadership through increased civic engagement, social awareness and activism (Lineburg & Gearheart, 2008; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Myers, 2015; Williamson & Blackburn, 2019). The school community can also experience increased levels of school pride, positive role modelling, and altruism when student voice is authentically included in decision-making processes (Williamson & Blackburn, 2019). In spite of these benefits, student voice is an underappreciated and under-utilised resource in schools (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009).

Opportunities for practical applications of leadership comprise "a hallmark of exemplary leadership programs" (Haber, 2011, p. 247). Students develop a better understanding of leadership and are able to put what they learn about leadership into practice when their learning includes a practical component, such as real-life leadership scenarios or service-learning projects (Haber, 2011). Practical leadership opportunities also ensure that leadership programs develop and challenge students over time, beginning with foundational knowledge about leadership and building to students demonstrating complex leadership actions (Rosch & Caza, 2012). This helps to overcome the common complaint that extended programs tend to stagnate over time rather than increase in complexity (Dugan et al., 2011).

Each of these recommendations for offering students effective leadership development throughout their schooling, when conducted in a Catholic school setting, needs to have the servant leadership model as a bedrock. In order to gain a more holistic understanding of what is occurring within this setting the perspectives of students, those

engaged in the leadership development experiences, need to be better represented. These perspectives, as supplied in the current study, will provide greater insight into what is occurring in such a setting and illustrate better the understanding students gain of Christian leadership as a result of their student leadership development experiences.

Methodology

This research on student experiences of leadership development in a Catholic high school setting used a qualitative design and multiple case-study approach. Qualitative studies provide deep insight into the everyday lives and experiences of different types of people, uncovering what they think under certain circumstances (Yin, 2016). This methodology leads to a "substantial appreciation of the perceptions, culture and 'worldviews' of the actors involved" (Allan, 1991, p. 177). The research questions for this study were:

RQ1. What is offered to students to help them develop in leadership within their Catholic secondary school setting?

RQ2. What factors within and outside of a Catholic secondary school setting facilitate students' leadership aspirations?

RQ3. What positive experiences of leadership development have students encountered within their Catholic secondary school setting?

RQ4. What obstacles within and outside of a Catholic secondary school setting do students experience in their leadership development?

The researcher conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with twenty-one year 12 Catholic students from three schools. The students chosen to participate in the study were selected based on purposeful criterion sampling. They met the following criteria:

- they have attended the school continuously from years 7 to 12
- they were currently in year 12
- they have shown an aptitude for leadership, but have not held an official school leadership position whilst in attendance at their current school
- they have been engaged in the school's leadership programs
- they can articulate their experiences of student leadership
- they were willing to be involved in the interview process.

The selection of participants according to these criteria was undertaken by the school principal or a delegate as it was felt that these people had the best understanding of the students within their school and, as such, would be able to nominate students who best fitted

the selection criteria. Each school was asked to identify approximately twelve students who could be approached via an email invitation to participate in the study. Trying to achieve a gender balance of participants was not specified by the researcher; however, each school did provide a list of potential participants that had an almost equal number of male and female students. As a result of the invitation process 11 male and 10 female students were included in the study.

The schools included in this study are in three towns in regional New South Wales, Australia. These schools were purposely selected in order to provide insight into schools that differ according to the numbers of students enrolled, their age ranges, and the schools' location, ranging from small to larger regional towns. Whilst all are diocesan schools, the size, student demographic and background of these schools differ widely. For example, two of the schools include grades 7–12 and have a student population between 900 and 1000; and are in regional towns of around 40,000 people. The first of these schools reported 25 students having a language background other than English. In 2019 the school listed 17% of students as relatively disadvantaged and 14% as relatively advantaged (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021). The second of these larger schools had 64 students identified as having a language background other than English and in 2019 15% of students were noted as being relatively disadvantaged whilst 21% were relatively advantaged (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2021). The third school is a kindergarten-year 12 school with just over 400 students from a town of just under 10,000 people. Only eight students had a language background other than English and the school is ranked above the average for educational advantage in Australia (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020).

Following the interview process, each participant was offered a transcribed copy of their interview to verify that the conversation was captured accurately. To better ensure anonymity for the schools and students involved in the study, pseudonyms were used.

Data Analysis

After the collection and validation process, the data set produced as part of this study was analysed. Following each interview and member check process, participant responses were analysed using the interview recordings and interview notes. A constant comparative method allowed for each unit of meaning to be analysed then categorised and coded with other, similar units of meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Silverman, 2013). This constant

comparison of student responses for each research question led to the development of a series of data analysis categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Subsequent interviews, dependent on the students' responses, could either add data to these existing categories or lead to the creation of new categories. As the interview process progressed, the categories were refined.

The data resulting from these research categories is communicated using a narrative research design. As the intent of this study was to allow the participants to tell the story of their experiences, a narrative research design was preferable as it ensures that the "perceptions, aspirations, beliefs or behaviours" of the participants are preserved in the data (Yin, 2016, p. 251). It allows the voices of these individuals to be heard, reinforcing to them that their experiences are important (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2016). As this study was focused on increasing student voice in the research field, this was a particularly strong consideration in the design of this study.

Findings and Discussion

The intention of this research was to provide insight into the experience students have had of Christian leadership development within a Catholic school environment. Through this the understanding students have gained of Christian leadership as a result of their leadership development experiences is gleaned. An analysis of the data has supplied student perspectives on the models of leadership provided in their Catholic school environment and recommendations they have for improving the development of students in their schools. Each of these areas results in some specific implications for Catholic school authorities and schools in order to better live out their mission of producing future generations of Christian leaders.

Models of Leadership Provided in a Catholic School Environment: Badged Student Leaders

Catholic schools are expected to teach their students to follow Jesus' example in their lives (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1965, 1977, 1988, 1997). It is expected that this would occur through school leaders in all forms acting as models of Jesus' servant leadership in their school communities. The students in this study spoke of leadership role models in two forms: badged student leaders and teachers. Discussions of the leadership example of student leaders and teachers never resulted in direct reference to the leadership of Jesus nor

the servant leadership style. There were, however, some common features of the leadership that was discussed by the students in this study that do need to be considered.

Firstly, the majority of students in this study spoke positively about the leadership models provided within their schools, specifically that provided by badged student leaders. These students were commonly referred to as "good role models" (Craig, Interview Text, pp. 5–6) and "great leaders" (Rose, Interview Text, p. 8). Some of the terms used to describe these individuals could be seen as aligned with the servant leadership model. They were described as "listen[ing] to the student body" (Daniel, Interview Text, p. 6) and as working well as a "team" (Tara, Interview Text, p. 7). They were also felt to be modest and humble, people who do not tend to "see themselves as better than us" (Shanaya, Interview Text, p. 7) purely because of their leadership status.

Whilst the individuals themselves appear to demonstrate the preferred leadership skills for their Catholic school context, the process used to elect them and their leadership duties once they took up the role do not appear to promote the servant leader model. Students in this study heavily criticised the process by which student leaders are elected. Across all three schools it was a common theme that the process for election favours those who are intelligent, popular and have strong public speaking skills. The students said that badged student leaders need to be "pretty academic" (Nathan, Interview Text, p. 5) in order to be placed in the role and that the student leadership election process is "a popularity contest at times" (Rose, Interview Text, p. 1). Such perceptions were enough to stop some students from pursuing an official student leadership position at school. Finally, the ability to speak well in public, and to be confident in doing so, is a strong element of the student leadership positions in these schools. In fact, the main role of these student leaders was often described as being required to "talk at the assemblies" (Simon, Interview Text, p. 8). Such qualities are not a priority in the servant leadership model. Rather than being seen as highly intelligent, popular or strong at public speaking, servant leaders are expected to demonstrate relational skills, leading in order to benefit their followers rather than themselves (Greenleaf, 1977; Hamilton, 2005). It appears, therefore, that the election process and the roles undertaken by student leaders in these schools do not explicitly promote the servant leadership model.

Students' Understandings of Jesus' Leadership and the Servant Leadership Model

No student in the current study mentioned Jesus' leadership nor the servant leadership model. This indicates that an awareness of this leadership model and the importance of emulating the leadership of Jesus within their Catholic school environment is not present amongst students. Nevertheless, it is arguable that, when discussing the leadership experiences within their schools, the leadership qualities promoted do, in fact, correlate with the servant leadership model. Yet this leadership style and the leadership of Jesus were not explicitly referenced. Given the emphasis placed on this model for students in Catholic schools, it is important to consider the perspectives of these students when evaluating how well this leadership model is taught and modelled throughout their schooling. This may be an area worthy of greater attention in the research field.

The Role of Teachers in Student Leadership Development

When referencing the leadership models provided within their school environments, students mentioned the role their teachers had in providing encouragement of their leadership. No teacher was explicitly described as acting as a servant leader; in fact, leadership role modelling by a teacher was mentioned by only one student out of the twenty-one interviewed. A teacher's encouragement of students' leadership potential, however, was regularly referenced and could be seen as a discernible quality of the servant leader (Greenleaf, 1977). The students in this study described teachers actively encouraging them to take on leadership roles or participate in leadership development opportunities. This description of the impact of teachers on students' leadership conforms with earlier research (Allio, 2005; Pianta et al., 2012). Such action by teachers, in urging students to participate in leadership experiences, was highly effective for the students in this study, helping them to overcome some obstructive internal factors that often held them back from engaging with leadership activities, such as self-doubt or fear of public speaking. Some students even hypothesised that such support and encouragement from their teachers could inspire them to participate in leadership activities to which their peers had expressed apathy, a scenario that would usually result in their likewise expressing disinterest in becoming involved. In short, it became clear that teachers can have a notable impact on students' leadership development.

Although current research indicates that leadership development within a classroom setting is effective, the responses of students in this study support current findings that many

teachers do not allow students leadership opportunities in the classroom (Brasof, 2015; Garandeau et al., 2011). These students did not say why leadership opportunities rarely occur in a classroom setting. Notably, however, student leadership in the classroom was shown by these students to occur within practical classes only, such as hospitality, drama and science. In these settings students described leadership development as happening when they were able to witness the leadership of their peers or exhibit their own leadership skills when empowered by their teacher to take charge of a group of students in completing a science experiment, drama sketch or catering event. Descriptions of these leadership experiences did not mention students acting as servant leaders nor teachers promoting the servant leadership model.

Recommended Improvements for Student Leadership Development in Catholic schools

The recommendations students gave for improving the leadership development offerings of their schools give insight into what they are experiencing in their school setting and what they consider works well in improving their leadership skills and confidence. Many of the suggestions offered by the students in this study are echoed in the recommendations of researchers in this field. Some, however, have not been studied at depth and more research is needed to determine whether the strategies suggested by these students would in reality be beneficial to their development as leaders.

Improvements for Student Leadership Programs

The first recommendation voiced by students is that leadership programs be developmental, occurring across the span of a student's time in high school. This echoes the recommendations of Fertman and van Linden (1999), who state that student leadership development needs to be a "developmental process" (p. 10). The students in this study particularly wanted greater opportunities for leadership development in the younger years of high school. They, like Coffey and Lavery (2018), instead found that student leadership development opportunities tend to be "the prerogative of senior students" (p. 187). The students in this study felt that student leadership development would be more effective if activities were to be offered across the different year groups in a progressive and age-appropriate way.

Another strong recommendation is that leadership activities within any leadership development program be made available to all students. The research in the student leadership development field has found that whilst all students should be trained in leadership, leadership development opportunities are reserved for the few students holding elected student leadership positions (Lavery & Hine, 2013; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). The students in this study did not make the explicit argument that elected student leaders in their schools received greater leadership development opportunities; however, these students did tend to have greater opportunity to exercise their leadership within their school community.

Recommended Leadership Development Activities

Within a leadership development program, the students in this study wanted to see more singular, or one-off, leadership experiences. This is of some concern, however, as such experiences are not as useful to students' leadership development as a prolonged and developmental program, as proposed by earlier research. Students in this study who noted a preference for such experiences could indicate that this is the most common form of leadership development they have experienced, as supported by what has been found in the current research in the field, and therefore it is what could be drawn upon when making recommendations for improvement. Their enjoyment of such activities, however, is worth noting.

Students in the current study indicated that they had a strong desire for leadership development opportunities that include practical applications of leadership and leadership as part of a team. From their perspective, practically acting as leaders alongside their peers was the most effective and enjoyable way to learn how to be a leader and experiment with leadership challenges in a safe and supported environment. This desire is supported by research in the field of student leadership that has shown that it is the most effective and meaningful way of developing students as leaders.

Increasing the value of student voice, particularly in the senior year groups, was expressed by the students in this study as a way of improving students' leadership skills in a meaningful way. At the same time, they expressed that student voice had been little valued in their schools, and that they had no role in school decision-making processes. This perception supports what has been found to routinely be the case in schools. The students in this study

argued that student voice should contribute to decision-making, especially when these decisions would have an impact on students.

It is worth noting that none of these recommendations specifically mentioned the leadership of Jesus nor the servant leadership style. They do, however, give insight into the way these students felt they best learned about and improved their leadership skills. Taking such recommendations into account would assist those in Catholic education in their development of a faith-based leadership development program aligned with these student recommendations.

Conclusion

Ensuring Catholic schools are living out their mission of promoting the servant leadership model as a way of following the leadership example of Jesus requires consideration of the leadership structures that are currently in place in such an environment. The perspectives of students within a Catholic school environment indicate that whilst the qualities of a servant leader are preferred by these students, an understanding of the servant leadership model is lacking. Also, leaders within the school community, including teachers and student leaders, are not considered to be strongly demonstrating the qualities of a servant leader in their roles. Catholic schools and educational authorities can use these insights to improve the teaching, programs and models of leadership that are present in their schools so that they better reflect their Christian call to, at all times and in all ways, promote the leadership model of Jesus.

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Catholic Education, The Art of Total Vision: Exploring the Role of Coherence in Religious Education

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Abstract

For some time now, religious educators have wrestled with the reality of secularism and the effect that it has had on their work. A growing body of philosophical and sociological research has posited the experience of secularism as one of fragmentation. In the educational and cognitive science domains, a growing body of research has posited fragmentation as antithetical to learning, and the pursuit of coherence as the most pressing response to it. A close examination of the literature reveals a network of concepts and strategies with much to contribute to those interested in the enrichment and revitalisation of religious education.

> *So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked,*
> *"Do you understand what you are reading?"*
> *And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"*
> *And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*
>
> Acts 8:30-31 (ESV)

Introduction: The Art of Total Vision

In the first book of his PerCorso trilogy, *On the Religious Sense*, Luigi Giussani (1997) repeatedly posed the question, "How can one achieve existential certainty about another?" (pp. 14, 18, 20, 21, 26). His years teaching high school religion in Milan and his work with young people in the movement he founded, had convinced him of the deep-seated desire for this kind of certainty about the person of Jesus Christ. In the second book, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, Giussani answered the question in relation to Christ by citing Hans Urs von Balthasar's observation: "In order to see that each individual aspect in truth receives its full meaning only by its overall relationship to the whole, the 'art of total vision' is required" (Giussani, 1998, p. 41). For Giussani this art of total vision has two obvious ramifications. Firstly, it means an investment of time. This time, he argued, is "a necessary

condition that enables an individual to obtain that qualitative skill which produces certainty" (p. 41). For many students in contemporary Catholic schools, this investment of time occurs exclusively within their religious education lessons. Secondly, the art of total vision also means teaching with coherence: consistently foregrounding the connection of each part with the whole. In this sense, Giussani was somewhat ahead of his time. Over recent decades, educational debate and cognitive science have repeatedly drawn attention to the central role of coherence within the learning process. This is especially relevant to religious educators when we consider that the experience of secularism is defined by the fragmentation of the whole and the experience of hyperpluralism. This article will draw upon educational and cognitive research to assess how educational coherence can be a significant means of restoring the "art of vision" to contemporary religious education in the twin areas of curriculum reform and instructional design.

Secularism and Fragmented Visions

The question of secularism has produced significant debate over the last one hundred years or so. And while philosophers, sociologists and intellectual historians all disagree on the causes of secularism, its effects, and terminology, there is near uniform agreement that secularism has radically fragmented the shared vision of reality. As Jose Casanova (1994) summed up the discussion: "It is a commonplace of sociological analysis that the modern differentiation of autonomous spheres leads irremediably to a pluralism of norms, values and worldviews" (p. 42).

Charles Taylor (2007) explained the experience of fragmentation thus: "the present scene, shorn of the earlier forms, is different and unrecognizable to any earlier epoch. It is marked by an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end" (p. 437). Brad S. Gregory (2012) described the resultant "hyperpluralism" as the "open-ended range of rival truth claims about answers to the Life Questions" regarding "meaning, morality, values, priorities, and purpose" (p. 369). Research from 2021 conducted among 10,274 13–25-year-olds gave rise to the term "faith unbundled". This was to describe the way in which young people, even those who describe themselves as religious, experience faith as being fragmented and radically individualised (Springtide Research Institute, 2021, pp. 62–64, 98). Where once the shared vision animating religious education might be familiar to all students, this is no longer

the case. By its very nature, secularism weakens and even eliminates contextual sources of coherence and intensifies the need for the art of total vision in the RE classroom.

Educational Coherence

It is worth tracing out the literature of educational coherence in order to consider its full significance for religious educators. Since the 1970s academics have been consistently concerned by the distance between student context and the development of curriculum or the delivery of particular subjects or disciplines (Henchey, 1981; McNamara, 1986; Styles, 1976). Throughout the 1980s, the debate around educational coherence was most pronounced in higher education. Academics like Kenneth Stunkel (1989) wrote about the incoherence of humanities courses produced by the fragmentation of "the western tradition" in the form of canonical texts and intellectual authorities (pp. 325–326). The cumulative effect of what he saw as pluralism, fragmentation and individualism was the lack of any common vision linking the disparate elements of the emerging humanities courses into a coherent whole (p. 329). Similarly, Joan Stark (1989) wrote of the inability to develop "coherent curricula" among colleges and campuses because of political infighting rather than a focus on "commonly accepted themes that form the essential basis of education" (p. 75).

Academics involved in teacher education were particularly active in the search for a curriculum able to marry theoretical study to the practical requirements encountered by practicum or graduate teachers (Buchmann & Floden, 1991). Reformers in the field became deeply convinced that the disjuncture of subject-specific and pedagogically orientated courses from experiential education proved ruinous to the progress of students: "Although each space contributes to learning, each does so in episodic ways. The result being that the person least equipped to navigate among and across these different sites has the task of coordinating disparate experiences, concepts, and discourses into a meaningful and useful whole" (Bain & Moje, 2012, pp. 62–63). The experience of secularism suggests that this is a particular danger for those involved in religious education.

Conversely, improving coherence is also an opportunity to inspire deep learning. Numerous studies have demonstrated that perceptions of coherence among student teachers boost learning outcomes, contribute to the transfer of knowledge to other contexts, and ultimately support the construction of teacher identity (Canrinus, Bergem, Klette, & Hammerness, 2017; Goh, Canrinus, & Wong, 2020; Grossman, Hammerness, McDonald, & Ronfeldt, 2008; Richmond, Bartell, Carter Andrews, & Neville, 2019). Gradually empirical

research confirmed Buchman and Floden's 1991 thesis: "Enhancing order, continuity, and the compatibility of parts in a pattern, 'coherence' would seem to lessen the chance that ideas and experiences decompose into disparate, meaningless bits, their worth and formative power eroded accordingly" (p. 67).

Over time, there has emerged a common consensus in teacher education. "Coherence contrasts with fragmentation, which implies that learning from experience becomes difficult or impossible" (Smeby & Heggen, 2014). This is because fragmented learning experiences are antithetical to "deep understanding" and its concomitant: progress in learning.

Redolent of Balthasar and Giussani, the resultant educational literature is largely united in its understanding that coherence begins with a vision, a whole. Often that vision is the hidden dimension, which should be made explicit to develop the internal coherence of a course (Amador, Martinho, Bacelar-Nicolau, Caeiro, & Oliveira, 2015). Researchers in the 1990s were referring to that vision as the "web of beliefs" or the core concepts towards which all learning opportunities are organised both conceptually and logistically (Buchmann & Floden, 1991, p. 65). More recently, it has been referred to as the "shared mission", or the "shared vision", connecting all the elements of a course into a whole (Canrinus, Klette, & Hammerness, 2019; Richmond et al., 2019).

This principle of an articulated vision or web of beliefs precipitated the common belief that a good program invariably coheres around a set of consistent ideas. This articulated vision of purpose begets coherence so long as it informs and aligns program design, curriculum and pedagogy. Competing visions only promote further fragmentation. Ideally, students should be able to perceive the central or foundational ideas undergirding every aspect of a course, from reading lists to assessment tasks (Klette & Hammerness, 2016). To put it in Balthasarian terms, all parts must be overtly connected with the whole.

More recent literature in the educational field has yielded a framework demarcating the distinct but mutually reinforcing sources of coherence—these being conceptual, structural and contextual coherence (Canrinus et al., 2019). Conceptual coherence concerns the order in which foundational ideas comprising a vision are introduced to students, reflect classroom practice and build upon one another. Program or structural coherence is the way in which *all* elements of a course (choice of pedagogy, order of the units and assessment choices, etc.) reflect the vision. While contextual coherence (sometimes called biographical or experiential coherence) is the connection with lived experience and the extent to which alternate sources of knowledge either shape, accompany or even displace foundational ideas (Smeby & Heggen, 2014, p. 73). These concepts offer fruitful foci for any researcher concerned with the

promotion of coherence in religious education, indicating that wherever contextual coherence is diminished, the need for conceptual and structural coherence is increased.

The Pursuit of Coherent Curriculum Reform

Unsurprisingly, the need for greater coherence has increasingly been a focus of those concerned with curricular reform. As a report conducted for the Quebec government averred: "The need for alignment among curriculum, instruction and assessment is a fundamental principle of educational practice" (Bateman, Taylor, Janik, & Logan, 2007, p. 15). Closer to home, the (Geoff) Masters' (2022) New South Wales curriculum review, *Nurturing Wonder and Igniting Passion*, reflected the growing desire for greater coherence. In the report were the now familiar warnings that cluttered and fragmented curricular alternatives to "a smooth continuum of learning across years of school" are potentially damaging to student learning (p. 53). But there was also the familiar acknowledgement that "Big ideas are the major concepts that anchor a coherent curriculum" (p. 18). In response, it was argued that curriculum design needs to be concerned with the sequencing of big ideas, providing a foundation and then building upon that foundation. This would mean shifting "the curriculum focus from a multitude of discrete knowledge and skills to the meaningful connections among them" (p. 18).

This same search for increased educational coherence is also fast becoming the hallmark of subject-specific curriculum reform. For instance, it was in the fields of maths and science when (predominantly) US-based academics and teachers, responding to distressing data trends in student achievement, began to prioritise coherence. Rodger Bybee (2003), calling for scientific education reform, argued that: "Coherence occurs when a small number of basic components are defined in a system, organized in conceptual relationship to each other, and other components are based on or derived from those basic components" (p. 350). Coherence then becomes the measure of connectedness among core scientific concepts (that web of beliefs) that students encounter during their study of science. The debate is often intense concerning the specific details of different conceptual schemes. As to the necessity of such a scheme, however, there is near universal agreement.

Out of the subject-specific literature emerges another useful distinction between horizontal and vertical coherence. Horizontal coherence is that which occurs across a course of study within a single year, whereas vertical coherence refers to connections made between grade levels (Bybee, 2003, p. 351). In many ways these terms are coterminous with

Hammerness's distinction between structural and conceptual coherence. Emerging from these different research areas comes a multidimensional conception of educational coherence with much to contribute to the work of those concerned with enriching teaching and learning in 21st-century religious education.

Coherent Curriculum Reform and Religious Education

As the recent framing paper on religious education in Australia made clear: "The principles and practices that inform learning and teaching in other areas are expected and evident in the Religious Education classroom" (National Catholic Education Commission, 2018, p. 18). Consequently, the widespread understanding that the foregrounding of a shared vision and the emphasis on connecting the disparate parts with this shared vision is vital for quality teaching and learning is not something that should be ignored by religious educators. Whether they are educational leaders concerned with curricular reform or RECs and teachers concerned with the enrichment of existing religious education programs, it is clearly vital to investigate the state of coherence within the subject domain.

The conversation must begin with the "web of beliefs" or "core concepts" that constitute the purpose of the subject. Often the conversation is concerned with outcomes or skills rather than the key ideas students will encounter across a given period. What is the vision about which we hope to inspire certainty? The NCEC framing paper makes plain that "the development of students' knowledge and understandings of Christianity" in religious education takes place "in the light of Jesus and the Gospel" (2018, p. 7). This is the core vision. St Paul spoke theologically when he said that in everything Christ must be pre-eminent (Colossians 1:18). The art of vision is merely the methodology by which this pre-eminence is demonstrated. "The proclamation of the Gospel means presenting Christ, then everything else in reference to him" (Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, 2020, p. 114).

The syntony of thought between the educational and theological literature indicates that teachers must be able to articulate the core concepts present within each unit and be skilled in foregrounding their link to the person of Jesus Christ. To that end, any REC working to evaluate the state of conceptual coherence within their programs might begin by leading a reflection with their team. They could begin by interrogating their scopes and sequences using questions such as the following:

- What are the core concepts we will teach this year?

- How do they link with the person of Jesus Christ?
- What is the intrinsic load associated with each concept?
- Where have students encountered these core concepts before?
- How will students deepen their understanding of those concepts within a given unit?
- Do the units build upon one another? Does the order of their presentation matter?
- Is the year seven course a prerequisite for the year eight course?

From here, it is worth evaluating the structural coherence or the relationship between the different elements within a given unit. This could involve asking a series of questions to investigate each unit:

- Which are the teaching and learning activities that deepen student understanding of the core concepts?
- Which do not?
- How many activities have been retained purely because they are engaging rather than germane?
- To what extent does completing the assessment task enable students to deepen their understanding of the core concepts?
- What strategies might I use to more effectively deepen student understanding?

Cognitive Load Theory and Coherent Instructional Design

As cognitive science has yielded greater and more defined insights into the architecture of human knowledge, it has become an increasingly important voice within the educational coherence conversation. Cognitive science research has made it abundantly clear that "'usable knowledge' is not the same as a mere list of disconnected facts". In fact, expert knowledge is always organised into coherent patterns or schemata (Bransford, 2000, pp. 32–34). These schemata exist within our long-term memory. In contrast, novel information is processed by working memory, which cannot handle many elements. This relationship provides the scientific rationale for the crucial role played by coherence. In turn, these insights have much to contribute to the development of structural coherence.

A key contribution came from John Sweller, who, in subsequent collaboration with Jeroen J. G. van Merriënboer and Fred Paas, developed what became known as Cognitive Load Theory or CLT. Sweller's theory built upon advances in understanding the relationship between working and long-term memory: "schemata can act as a central executive, organizing information or knowledge that needs to be processed in working memory….

under these circumstances there are no limits to working memory" (van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005, p. 149). From this insight, Sweller and his colleagues developed certain principles of instructional design (a subsection of structural coherence) by virtue of which novel information could be moved into long-term memory by the construction of schemata. In Cognitive Load Theory the "cognitive load" of any given learning is decided by the complexity of the task (its intrinsic load) or the design of the instruction. Where the design is coherent, the load is diminished.

Sweller's great contribution was to provide a cognitive language for what Buchman and Floden (1991) intuitively described as the "meaningless bits" of a fragmented teaching approach (p. 67). Sweller called this "extraneous load", by virtue of which students expend cognitive effort on activities or sources of information or processes that are unnecessary for schema construction, structurally or conceptually incoherent instruction. Such poorly designed instruction imposes a high cognitive load on students by prematurely holding them responsible for making connections between disparate parts and building understanding before schemata have been developed in the long-term memory (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017). In contrast, germane load is the product of "supportive instructional design" and refers to the load imposed by the process of learning (Gerjets, Scheiter & Cierniak, 2009, as cited in Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2017, p. 4). It is germane because the working memory resources are being dedicated exclusively to dealing with the intrinsic load rather than with anything extrinsic (Leahy & Sweller, 2020, p. 224).

Working Memory in Religious Education

Secularism has meant that an increased number of students in Catholic schools no longer participate in the sacramental life of the church (Dixon et al., 2007; National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2020). One of the effects of regular Mass attendance is the development of schemata. The liturgical season, the readings of each Sunday, the recitation of the Creed, indeed the very design of the church with its Stations of the Cross and the stained glass windows all contribute to the young person being exposed to salvation history and the basic tenets of the Catholic faith—the whole vision. Their subsequent conversation with their parents is then the most effective means of developing this into formed schemata (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021, p. 83). As we have seen, the experience of secularism works against the development of this kind of schema and promotes fragmentation in its place. This

ensures that students have fewer and fewer schemata to draw upon in Religion lessons. In turn, the intrinsic load grows higher for each student. This places greater pressure on the instruction design to be coherent—to promote germane cognitive load in order to facilitate learning.

High Element Interactivity in Religious Education

In addition, religious education is a subject high in element interactivity. This is the means by which CLT measures complexity. Crucially, however, complexity comes from two sources: firstly, how inherently complex the information is; and secondly, the prior knowledge of the learner. As the knowledge level increases, the element interactivity of the same information decreases. The ability of long-term knowledge to alter performance is mediated by element interactivity (Leahy & Sweller, 2020, pp. 224–225).

Leahy and Sweller (2020) have shown that "counting the number of steps a learner with a particular knowledge level would need to process [in order] to fully comprehend a construct can give an approximation of the element interactivity metric" (p. 225). An example comes from a current syllabus being used in multiple NSW dioceses. In a Stage Four unit on Reconciliation, students are presented with a quote from John 20:20-23:

> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. (ESV)

Students with a reasonable knowledge of Scripture and the sacramental life of the church will have schemata to draw upon. The first verse immediately positions the quote in the post-resurrection period. The Lord is readily identifiable and "Peace be with you" is a phrase familiar from the Mass, as is the idea of being "sent out" on mission. The action of Jesus breathing on the apostles might be unfamiliar and constitute a complex element, but any experience of reconciliation would have made the idea of forgiving sins reasonably clear. For such a student the intrinsic load is concerned with the one element and the conversation can begin with the Hebrew word *ruah*, meaning both spirit and breath, followed by a look back at the creation of man in Genesis 2:7, and perhaps even Ezekiel 37:9, before returning to the risen Jesus standing with the disciples.

For a student with little knowledge of Scripture and minimal experience of the sacramental life of the church, there are a significant number of elements to deal with in just the first line: why the hands and side? who is the Lord? where is he sending them? The conversation invariably focuses on the breathing, but with few schemata to draw upon the element interactivity is often simply too high. The instructional design utilised for students with existing schemata will not work for these students. "A high intrinsic load from the content associated with a high extraneous load caused by poor instructional design [i.e. minimal structural and conceptual coherence], may overwhelm limited working memory resources" (Leahy & Sweller, 2020, p. 229). Confronted with Hebrew terminology and unfamiliar Old Testament figures, the experience of cognitive overload will become manifest. Secondary Religion teachers are very familiar with this experience. Potentially, for all but a handful of students, the effort to engage meaningfully with this piece of the curriculum begins to feel impossible: there are simply too many elements needing to be processed. The effort to fit this curricular piece coherently into the whole can then become overwhelming.

Coherent Instructional Design in Religious Education

The need for structural coherence is obviously pressing within religious education. This is particularly evident in the area of coherent instructional design. Teachers need strategies capable of foregrounding the connections between disparate parts and the whole, between various scripture passages and the entire unit. And yet, while there are a multiplicity of possible strategies, religious education, by its very nature, gives rise to four strategies, which invariably contribute towards structural coherence in general and more effective instructional design in particular.

The first two strategies, which deal with continuity and chronology, are commonplace pedagogical practices designed to ensure coherence, but it is often the case that they are neglected in religious education. In addition to these strategies, it is useful to look at two specifically catechetical practices promoting the art of total vision. Cognitively these are "chunking strategies" that "draw the pieces together", giving students an interpretive key with which they can connect the parts with the whole (O'Shea, 2018, pp. 107, 108).

(1) Emphasise Continuity

Imagine our core concept is the sacrament of the Eucharist. Students often have little experience of the Mass outside of occasional school Masses. The temptation for many teachers is to discuss the contemporary Mass as being distinct from the Latin Mass of the early 20th century and as distinct again from the Last Supper. Beginning by focusing on change is a very quick way to draw the student's attention to extraneous detail like the language or the vestments. In contrast, beginning with continuity helps the student focus on the core concept of what the Mass is. "Multiple representations [of the same concept] can also help students construct deeper understanding of an instructional message because integrating the different representations can expose the underlying structure of the problem or domain represented" (Eitel, Bender, & Renkl, 2020, p. 174). Indeed, the process of abstracting from the superficial features of the three conceptual representations "may foster deeper understanding of the underlying … principle" (p. 174). By emphasising continuity, we enable students to devote all their cognitive resources to identifying connections between examples and thereby forming an impression of the whole.

(2) Explicate Chronology and Context

Religious education in Catholic schools introduces concepts from a period of five thousand years of history. And yet chronology, perhaps the most basic tool in the historian's coherence arsenal, is often unused. The introduction of a multiplicity of scriptural examples and no attempt to place them in chronological order or provide even a sentence or two of contextualising information means that students are too reliant on working memory to decode the meaning. More broadly, the same could be said for the order of units, which often force the student's attention to move around between the centuries for no obvious reason. This can be particularly evident for students in year seven who arrive in a religious education classroom from a public school. Why do we start with a 19th-century foundress when we have not yet established who Christ is, or whether God created the world? Utilising chronology enables students to construct narrative schemata in their long-term memory. Failing to do so places the pressure on the novice/student to construct the story from an assortment of vaguely connected pieces. This can only lead to cognitive overload.

(3) Apply Typology

The strategy, biblical typology, "looks for the connections between what may seem at first to be unconnected events in the bible itself" (O'Shea, 2018, p. 115). It does this by viewing the entirety of Scripture as a unity displaying God's loving plan of salvation. By foregrounding the continuity of Scripture and reading the old in light of the new, students are given an interpretive key, making it possible to build schemata more efficiently. The result is that students bring more schemata to subsequent scriptural episodes, relieving the pressure on their working memory and reducing the complexity of the task before them. It also avoids the marginalisation of the Old Testament in the face of cognitive overload.

(4) Draw on Mystagogy

Often the sacramental and liturgical life of the school is seen as divorced from the religious education classroom. One is an academic endeavour, the other a whole-school spiritual endeavour. And yet, as Pope Francis (2013) wrote so profoundly in *Lumen Fidei*, n. 40, the liturgy contains the whole:

> But what is communicated in the Church, what is handed down in her living Tradition, is the new light born of an encounter with the true God, a light which touches us at the core of our being and engages our minds, wills and emotions, opening us to relationships lived in communion. There is a special means for passing down this fullness, a means capable of engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others. It is the sacraments, celebrated in the Church's liturgy.

Mystagogy, then, is a strategy foregrounding the connection between the parts and the whole. Mystagogy looks closely at the signs and symbols contained in the liturgy. It seeks to understand them in light of salvation history, appreciate their symbolism and via those symbols and rites understand what they communicate about the Christian life (Benedict XVI, 2007, n. 64).

Cognitively, such a focus contributes to pattern forming because it gives students an interpretive key to access a multimodal representation of the whole. Sweller has argued, for instance, that replacing written texts with visual and spoken explanation is a key way to reduce extraneous cognitive load (van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005, p. 151). And yet, too few students are presented with an interpretive key that would allow them to build schemata through the cyclical and repetitive actions of their school's sacramental life.

Conclusion

In his book *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* (1998), Luigi Giussani explained the role of coherence in the encounter with Christ. Whenever we meet someone who is to be significant within our lives, there is a moment of overwhelming recognition (pp. 50–51). For the disciples this was evident in their first encounters with the Lord (John 1:41). The coherence of their experiences led to a certainty. No subsequent experience negated a previous one, but rather each deepened that first impression (Giussani, 1998, p. 51). Students cannot hope to achieve certainty about the person Jesus Christ unless their experience of him in their religious education is coherent. Cognitively it is how they learn, but, perhaps more pressingly, their hearts desire certainty and the freedom in which to arrive at certainty. Religious educators need to rediscover the art of total vision and work to promote coherence in their classrooms.

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Exploring Teacher Formation in Catholic Schools

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Abstract

Teacher formation, both spiritual and theological, is central to the Catholic identity and the development of the ethos and mission of Catholic schools. This article will be in two parts. The first part will examine the cultural context of teacher formation within a particular faith-based context—namely Catholic education in a major Australian school system. The second part will involve a closer examination of a teacher formation program offered by Brisbane Catholic Education and of one by an independent Catholic religious institute school in Brisbane.

Impact of Current Cultural Context on Young Teachers

Young Catholic school teachers are challenged by changing cultural contexts. The *AGZ Survey* found that 52% of teenagers do not identify with a religion (Singleton, Rasmussen, Halafoff, & Bouma, 2019). Similarly, half of Australia's teens believe that people with strong religious beliefs are too intolerant of others (Singleton et al., 2019). Vermeer (2010) maintains that a decline in religious upbringing and socialisation of our young people has weakened religious bonds between home and church. Cultural processes such as secularisation and increasing individualism have also caused a decline in religious affiliation across our society (Vermeer, 2010). Bouma and Halafoff (2017) argue that although there is a rise in the proportion of young people who claim to have no religion, this does not necessarily mean that they are anti-religion. However, it is clear that young people today regard religion as not having a decisive influence on their lives.

Rymarz (2016) believes that many aspiring teachers in Catholic schools are part of this demographic and, although they may be happy to support the Catholic ethos of schools, their own religious "affiliation" is often non-commitment. This has implications for Catholic schools and the type of teacher formation that should be offered. Franchi and Rymarz (2017,

p. 7) argue that it is the responsibility of Catholic schools and faith communities to "take it upon themselves to provide a thorough and ongoing education for members of the faith community", otherwise they may default to the dominant secular world view of the wider culture. Thus, young teachers have been influenced by a decline in religious belief as evident across our society today. This has repercussions as Catholic schools must consider this demographic and their changing cultural context when planning teacher formation opportunities. Catholic schools must not assume that teachers are literate in the Catholic faith, and ensure that formation programs are tailored to meet the needs of all teachers, regardless of where they are on their faith journey. For this reason, it is crucial to ensure Catholic schools properly invest in meeting the spiritual and theological needs of the young teacher demographic.

School approaches to teacher formation must take into account the cultural environment of our young teachers. Currently, the majority of Catholic school teachers do not engage in the life of faith beyond the school, and, for many, formation experiences are relatively limited (Hall & Sultmann, 2020, p. 4). Treston (2015) acknowledges that Christianity is undergoing a major crisis of relevance, and this causes concerns in relation to the Catholic identity and mission of our faith-based schools. He proposes a *four pillars approach* based on the Catholic world view of anthropology, epistemology, cosmology and heritage. Treston argues that his four pillars method is highly relevant because it is "inclusive of every person in the school community" whilst remaining "faithful to the core beliefs in the Catholic story" (2015, p. 12). Thus, this framework can be utilised by the young teacher demographic without personal appropriation of belief and practice as it is "grounded in people's experiences" (2015, p. 12).

A comparative study of Queensland Catholic school teachers and US Catholic teachers showed that teachers in the United States were consistently more likely to rate certain characteristics of Catholic schools as "essential" than teachers in Queensland Catholic schools, as demonstrated in Table 1, below (Gleeson, O'Gorman, Goldburg, & O'Neil, 2018).

Table 1.

Teachers' Ratings of Given Characteristics as "Essential" by Jurisdiction

Characteristic	% US (n=2895)	% Qld (n=1858)	χ^2	OR
Community of faith	93	43	1454.57	17.01
Prayer in daily life of the school	92	59	730.12	7.99
Celebration of school liturgies	90	45	1141.77	11.00
Outreach and Christian service	88	53	739.46	6.50
Display of Christian symbols	79	43	647.37	4.99
The principal is Catholic	77	51	349.67	3.22
Teachers of religion are Catholic	84	17	2104.37	25.63
Vast majority of students are Catholic	14	06	75.11	2.55
Vast majority of teachers are Catholic	43	14	445.57	4.63
RE programs present the teachings of the Church	92	48	1161.01	12.46
Integration of Catholic teaching across the formal curriculum	64	17	1017.21	8.68

Note. All of these differences were statistically significant at $p < .0006$

(Gleeson et al., 2018, p. 93)

US respondents were far more likely to rate each of these characteristics as essential. Gleeson et al. (2018) believe that greater support structures for spiritual and faith formation of teachers in Catholic schools in the United States is a possible explanation for the stark differences. Vicki Bell, Director of Leadership and Professional Learning in Catholic Education, Cairns Diocese, has been working to tackle teacher supply and demand issues in Far North Queensland, and claims that up to 75% of teachers leave Catholic schooling by the end of their third year of employment (Earp, 2021). Bell sites the teaching of religion and staff formation as major obstacles. "We are a Catholic system, which requires the teaching of Religion. This can be challenging for non-Catholic employees, so requires significant formation. As our applicant pools diminish this is an increasing challenge" (Earp, 2021). Further exploration of current formation programs in Queensland, specifically Brisbane, may shed some light on such matters.

This overview of the cultural context in which teachers operate leads to a consideration of how Catholic schools understand and implement teacher formation. Before a more detailed examination of teacher formation is given, some further contextualisation is

necessary. This will refer to a particular school context, define key terms used in this article, and offer a rationale for the necessity of teacher formation in response to cultural changes.

Definition of Key Terms

Teacher formation in this article refers to both spiritual and theological formation. *Spiritual formation* can be defined as nourishing "the personal narrative of teachers, support staff and leaders, growing dispositions and behaviours that reflect our deepest identity and underpin our service to others" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2022); whilst *theological formation* is very closely linked with the greater mission of the church. It "gives us a lens to understand our own spiritual experience; the big questions of life, of meaning and of God; and to dialogue with other wisdom traditions. This helps us live and work for God's way of doing things in the world" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2022). Religious education (RE) professional development refers to targeted professional learning that aims to improve teaching and learning strategies and pedagogies in the RE classroom. Thus, spiritual and theological formation emphasises one's personal and spiritual narrative as an encounter with God for the greater mission of the church, whereas religious education professional development has a pedagogical focus.

Catholic Schools in the Brisbane Context

National Catholic Education Commission statistics show that Australian Catholic schools enrol approximately 20% of all students nationally. Queensland accounts for the third largest share of national Catholic school enrolments at 19.2 %, behind Victoria at 27.3% and New South Wales at 33.3% (National Catholic Education Commission, 2019). Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) is the second largest education sector in Queensland, operating 167 schools. There are a number of religious institute (RI) schools that are Catholic yet non-systemic but autonomous in the same region. They differ from BCE schools in that the latter sit within a hierarchical organisational structure and are managed by the Executive Director. Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) also manages several Catholic schools in the Edmund Rice tradition in the same region. Together, BCE, RI schools, and EREA operate within the Archdiocese of Brisbane and the three educate 22% of Queensland school students (Archdiocese of Brisbane, 2022). This is reflective of a nationwide increase in Catholic school enrolments, where full-time-equivalent enrolments have increased by 32.9% since

1985 (National Catholic Education Commission, 2019). Interestingly, this rise in Catholic school enrolments is occurring at a time when religious affiliation and expression is declining. Rymarz and Belmonte refer to this phenomenon as a "paradox of Catholic education" (2017, p. 36). Dowling, Beavis, Underwood, Sadeghi, and O'Malley (2009) exemplify this phenomenon through a study conducted of Brisbane Catholic school students. Their study concluded that although society is becoming more secular, Catholic schools are becoming more popular as a result of socially upwardly mobile parents. That study also reported the primary reason parents enrolled their children in Catholic Secondary schools was predominantly for pragmatic rather than religious reasons. It can be discerned that while student enrolments in Catholic schools are increasing, the prospect of receiving a faith-based education is not necessarily the dominant factor determining whether parents enrol their children in Catholic schools.

Why Is Teacher Formation Necessary?

Historically, teachers in Catholic schools across Australia consisted of sisters (female religious), brothers (male religious), and priests, who ensured that Catholic practices permeated every facet of school life. Today, the majority of Catholic school teachers in Australia are lay people (Hansen, 2001), making teacher formation even more critical to ensure the preservation of the Catholic faith and mission. This is expressed in *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Declaration on Christian Education from the Second Vatican Council, which affirms that Catholic schools depend upon teachers for the achievement of their goals and programs (Vatican Council II, 1965, n. 8). Similarly, Pope Francis (2020), in *Fratelli Tutti*, echoes these sentiments, expressing that teachers must be aware of their responsibility extending to "the moral, spiritual and social aspects of life" (Francis, 2020, n. 114). The importance of spiritual and theological formation for educators as part of a Catholic community is articulated in the documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education, where their educational commitment becomes "a consequence deriving from their faith" (Benedict XVI, n. 31). This is apparent within the schools of Brisbane Catholic Education as they are encouraged to "develop a formation plan nurturing the spirituality of every person" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2021). Thus, church documents affirm the integral role teachers play in preserving Catholic identity in schools, as BCE ensures teacher formation is prioritised, building the capacity of staff to grow the Catholic identity of their schools and individual spirituality of each staff member.

According to the National Catholic Education Commission, for formation to be truly effective it requires an organised and intentional approach. It must be "relevant engaging and effective", with a clear focus on the individual's needs (2022, p. 5). This is especially important, given "the uneven levels of knowledge, experience and personal appropriation of the Church's spiritual traditions and religious practices" (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017, p. 5). Therefore, formation must be differentiated to meet the needs of all staff, no matter where they are on their faith journey. Furthermore, the demographic of young staff and their contemporary culture must be considered when planning for formation experiences.

Maintaining religious identity is even more crucial today, given the significant cultural shift away from institutionalised religion that permeates contemporary culture. Catholic teachers need to be spiritually formed in order to fulfil the requirements of their role to evangelise and form their students in the Catholic faith. This is articulated in the *P–12 Religious Education Curriculum* of the Brisbane Archdiocese, summarising faith formation as immersing its members in the "shared beliefs, language, symbols, liturgy and activities of the Catholic Christian tradition" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2013, p. 207). Catholic schools within the archdiocese offer faith formation and evangelisation to their students through the three elements of "living the gospel", "spiritual formation", and "witness to the wider community" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2013, p. 207). However, this is proving to be a challenge for many young teachers, as Singleton et al. (2019) affirms that only a shrinking proportion of the population identify as Christian. Thus, the majority of young people are disconnected from Catholic beliefs and symbols, which poses problems for the formation of young teachers and, in turn, their students.

It is therefore necessary to build teacher capacity through spiritual and theological formation, allowing teachers to become familiar with the language of Catholicism in building up their own spiritual understanding of God. Catholic educators require spiritual and pastoral care to allow them to fulfil their mission as Catholic educators—that is, to evangelise and form the students in their care. The young teacher demographic must be supported in meeting their formation needs to ensure a formation of their own heart to positively influence and open up their spirit to others. Yet, the question remains: How do we best form and support our young teachers when their core identity is not religious? Croke (2007) summarises similar concerns regarding the ability of young teachers to contribute meaningfully to the goals of Catholic education. He asserts that "ensuring [the] quality of teachers … may well turn out to be the most difficult and threatening challenge to the future of Catholic schools"

(p. 823). He stresses the importance of professional development as key to overcoming this dilemma, but is this sufficient when young people today have limited, if any, religious socialisation? RE professional development may well teach staff about the beliefs and doctrines of the faith and how they may teach these in class, but is this enough to encounter the richness of the Catholic faith and traditions?

Brisbane Catholic Education Formation Programs

Brisbane Catholic Education gives priority to providing theological and spiritual formation to its staff. Its formation programs are part of a larger established system that is well supported and is reflective of the tensions in our wider contemporary culture, especially the growing numbers who have little or no familiarity with Catholic beliefs and values. Although BCE offers a variety of formation experiences, including pilgrimages, service learning and conferences, its most recent offerings will be examined for the purpose of this article.

Two recent suites of formation that have been developed by BCE include a series of pop-up sessions, *Introducing the Catholic World*, and modules called *Catholic Identity: Formation for Mission.* The *Formation for Mission* modules mirror the work of Groome, *What Makes a School Catholic?* (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2021). The distinctive features of a Catholic school include the universal Catholic themes of anthropology, sacramentality, community, tradition, and rationality. These distinguishing characteristics of Catholicism overlap with the works of several authors, including Treston's (2015) *Four Pillars*—of anthropology, epistemology, cosmology and heritage.

Although it could be argued that the effect of these modules on that which is in one's heart is immeasurable, the relevance of these modules for young teachers in a changing cultural world will nevertheless be examined. The series of pop-up seminars are short one-hour sessions that are perfectly suited to the young teacher demographic. These seminars take into consideration the reality that many young teachers are not affiliated with the church as they introduce basic Catholic ideas, culture and practices. For this reason, BCE uses these formation sessions as part of its new teacher induction program. Topics include: "The Great Questions", "The Good Book", "Jesus, Mary and Joseph", and "Going to Mass" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2022). These introductory themes are ideal preliminaries for young teachers before they delve deeper into Catholic theology.

BCE schools must therefore ensure that the pop-up sessions are run prior to the theologically more challenging *Formation for Mission* modules. Although these sessions have been mostly presented physically in person by BCE Education Officers, an alternative delivery method should be made more readily available to allow for greater flexibility. Online methods, whether pre-recorded or delivered live as webinars via Zoom or Microsoft TEAMS, are all valid options, allowing these offerings to be tailored to suit the needs of all teachers. Thus, the combined programs offered by BCE are purposeful and the content is explicitly Christological, scripturally rich and ecclesially grounded.

These programs seek to develop the willingness, confidence and capacities of staff to serve the evangelising mission of Catholic education as outlined as important formation factors by the National Catholic Education Commission (National Catholic Education Commission, 2017). However, the programs are primarily based on delivering content, and although they are grounded in Scripture, they lack prayerfulness, reflection and eucharistic elements. It is currently the responsibility of each BCE school and their senior leaders to ensure that prayer, reflection and eucharistic elements are addressed. Catholic schools and leaders must therefore ensure a move beyond cultural literacy in seeking meaningful ways to provide valuable formation experiences for teachers. Franchi and Rymarz (2022) believe the use of pilgrimage, reflection and meditation are ideal experiences in providing such valuable formation. An "Italian Pilgrimage" and a "Staff Formation Retreat" will be explored as examples of formation from a Catholic independent religious institute school in Brisbane to determine if these formation opportunities better address the needs of young teachers.

Formation Within a Brisbane Catholic Religious Institute School

Spiritual and theological formation at Covenant College (a pseudonym), although centred on developing its Catholic ethos and mission much like BCE, does have as its point of difference a strong religious charism based on the school's founder. Education at Covenant College is based on "building a firm foundation of knowledge for personal and spiritual life" (Covenant College website, 2022). Much like BCE it caters to the young teacher demographic with an induction formation program; however, the primary focus is on the school's patron saint rather than an introduction to Catholicism. This is followed by a staff spiritual formation retreat that, unlike the BCE pop-up sessions, allows greater opportunity for teachers to enter a personal relationship with Jesus through renewed participation in the

Eucharist, and emphasises dialogue. The retreat allows teachers to explore their personal story and renew their call to teach, building on their own narrative and everyday reality through dialogue with each other.

This formation experience is both experiential and relevant for young teachers, as it facilitates encounter and reinterpretation of faith for today's context. It is also closely aligned to the key principles for formation as outlined by the National Catholic Education Commission. Another significant feature of this formation retreat is the capability to move staff beyond relativism and literalism to a post-critical belief system.

Further to this, Covenant College offers an immersive spiritual formation experience of an Italian pilgrimage. This opportunity allows young teachers especially to deepen their knowledge of the school's heritage, primarily through retracing the footsteps of the school's patron saint. The Holy See's Pontifical Council believes formation experiences such as pilgrimages are an ideal way to transform one's faith (Capets, 2018). Capets (2018) affirms that pilgrimage gives educators the opportunity to have a liminal experience that often leads to transformation. It allows them to "return home with a newly integrated confidence in his/her role in the school and/or classroom" (2018, p. 9). This is certainly true of the experiences of the Covenant College staff who participated in an Italian pilgrimage. One staff member expressed that living with the fathers at the San Gimignano monastery was a moving experience that "has helped shape me into a better person…. I will endeavour to continue to live a life of service to others and continue to have a restlessness for seeking the Truth" (Sevare et al., 2021, p. 3). One might contend that the impact of the experience of pilgrimage is far greater in facilitating encounter and a personal connection with God than online formation modules or religious education professional development sessions. Although pilgrimage was examined through the lens of an RI school, it is of note that Brisbane Catholic Education also offers an array of comparable pilgrimages, including the "Josephite Colloquium", "Celtic Pilgrimages", and "The Aussie Camino" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2020).

Promoting "Catholic identity" is a priority when examining teacher formation in Catholic schools, yet this has been addressed in divergent ways by Covenant College and Brisbane Catholic Education. Hall and Sultmann (2020) concur that clarity of Catholic identity remains a challenge. This challenge is prevalent amongst many young teachers and students at Covenant College as they regard the school's religious charism to be the sole identity of the college, dissociating it from the Catholic Church. In a recent retreat experience both young teachers and students referred to the school's religious charism without mention

of Catholicism, failing to realise the part the school plays in the broader universal Catholic Church. A reason for this may be the fact that all the teacher formation programs at Covenant College are based on the religious charism of the school's founder, as can be seen in a list of the mandatory teacher formation online modules provided by the college (February 2022):

- Pedagogical Strategies Relating to the Religious Charism of the School's Founder
- Values in the Classroom Relating to the Religious Charism of the School's Founder
- A Teacher in the Religious Charism of the School's Founder
- Four Key Modules Based on the Religious Charism of the School's Founder
- Ongoing Conversion: The Story of the Religious Charism of the School's Founder.

This dissociation has implications for young teachers who are already limited in their understanding of Catholicism. A greater focus on the universal Catholic Church rather than on the religious charism of the school's founder may assist to alleviate confusion amongst the young staff demographic and enhance Catholic identity. According to Cook and Simonds (2011), charisms allow schools to be successful in a competitive market through offering a "unique educational opportunity in order to attract students and remain viable" and this may be the case for RI schools such as Covenant College that charge significantly higher tuition fees compared to their BCE counterparts. The strong emphasis on charism can also be attributed to the foundational history of the college, which was established and has been run by a religious order. Cook and Simonds (2011) also highlight the positive contribution that a particular charism adds to a school's identity, including the dimension of school giftedness and contribution to church and society. By comparison, BCE formation programs are universal and broadly Catholic; it is the role of each school to infuse its own charism if desired. Thus, clarity of Catholic identity is an area that needs to be addressed. Although a charism contributes more to the church, schools must ensure this is made distinct for our young teacher demographic who lack religious socialisation and have difficulty in differentiating between the lens of charism and that of Catholicism.

Some Implications for the Future of Teacher Formation

A key question remains: How do we best form our young teachers in Catholic schools, given the change in cultural context and lack of religiosity? Pope Francis (2013), in *Evangelii Gaudium*, believes renewed forms of expression are key to reinterpreting the Catholic heritage in responding to the signs of the times: "Vast and rapid cultural changes

demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness" (Francis, 2013, n. 41). This is also upheld by National Catholic Education Commission documents suggesting that we must look to "re-present [the Catholic faith] to the next generation so that it also addresses their context and questions" (2017, p. 10). One way to do this is to ensure the observance of key intentions of genuine encounter and a culture of dialogue. This is affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, who says that a "formation of the heart" is "to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens … love and opens … spirits to others" (2005, n. 31). Sweetman (2022) proposes the importance of dialogue for Catholic teachers, for when time is intentionally given to educators to professionally dialogue, the benefits reach the entire community. Thus, the intentional allocation of time and space for dialogue is a necessity in cultivating a dialogical mindset that will benefit the formation of young teachers and their students.

Jones (2022) proposes that the Carmelite spiritual tradition is a rich resource for promoting the interior lives of Catholic school teachers. She suggests the use of secular self-development material including books, podcasts and YouTube clips. Cultural elements of visual arts, music, and movements for social justice, and environmental activism, according to Jones (2022), could also serve as "bridges" for forming teachers. Meanwhile, Franchi and Rymarz suggest an "ecological model of agency" (2022, p. 1) as a framework for exploring approaches to developing both the professional and spiritual capital that teachers require to fulfil their mission as Catholic educators, especially in a time of increased secularisation.

Hall and Sultmann's (2020) *Ways Forward in Religious Education: Reflections of an Australian Colloquium* will be utilised as the basis for further analysis of current formation programs in the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The premise of their research was founded on the sharing of practice of a group of educators in discerning pathways or ways forward within Catholic schools in the changing context. Emerging themes that will be explored include *Teacher Evangelisation*, *Embracing the Mystery*, *Witness*, and *Catholic Identity*.

Differentiating the faith encounter and formation opportunities is an important priority addressed by Hall and Sultmann and this is evident in the formation programs of BCE. Brisbane Catholic Education clearly outlines that this is in fact a challenge today in schools and their formation strives to "to meet the need for a contemporary response that honours both the rich tradition and ecclesial responsibilities, as well as the individual's need in the contemporary context for authentic meaning making" (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2020). For this reason, their *Introducing the Catholic World* pop-up seminars have taken into consideration the challenging cultural context of their young teachers who may be limited in

their understanding of the Catholic tradition. Whilst the BCE formation focus of this article has been on its most recent formation programs, including *Introducing the Catholic World* and the *Formation for Mission* modules, it would be remiss not to mention the breadth and depth of its differentiated formation offerings. Other experiences include Christ-centered formation through *The Teacher's Calling*, which engages young and early-career teachers over a three-year period, and school leader formation programs, such as *Leading Evangelisation in Catholic Schools* (Brisbane Catholic Education, 2020).

Embracing the Mystery and *Witness* are two pathways that remain challenging for teacher formation in Catholic schools today. These pathways are defined by Hall and Sultmann as recognising that we do God's work where union with God is critical and teachers are able to draw students into experiences where they can encounter Christ. Although Covenant College and BCE have been attempting to address these issues through establishing ongoing and intentional process of formation with a special emphasis on introductory induction sessions, such as *Introduction to the Catholic World*, more needs to be done. Franchi and Rymarz (2017) argue such challenges stem from a "decline of a cultural religious paradigm, the growth of weak religious affiliation and the rise of those who profess no religion". They further argue that it is likely that many who enter teacher education programs and go on to work in Catholic schools may in fact "not have a strong cognitive grasp of Catholicism" (Franchi & Rymarz, 2017, p. 7). This has clear implications for Catholic teachers in *Embracing the Mystery* and *Witness* when they themselves have limited affiliation with the church and only 5.8% of people attending Mass in 2016 were aged between 15 and 24 years (National Centre for Pastoral Research, 2020). Hall and Sultmann remind us of the significance of this issue: "it's not good enough to have well meaning, 'generally spiritual' people…. when we are trying to draw secondary school students into experiences where they can encounter Christ" (2020, p. 19).

Conclusion

The contemporary Catholic school can no longer rely on the faith-based identity of parents and students to create institutional Catholic identity; however, Catholic schools within the Archdiocese of Brisbane are working to ensure their formation programs are effective in today's context. Although enrolments in Catholic schools are increasing, a faith-based education is not necessarily the deciding factor for parents in sending their children to Catholic schools. Maintaining Catholic identity in Australian Catholic schools is even more

crucial today, given the changing religious landscape, where the majority of teenagers and young adults do not identify with any religion.

It is clear that the teacher formation programs of BCE and Covenant College are strongly underpinned by a focus on *Teacher Evangelisation* as delineated by Hall and Sultmann. The programs of both institutions are intentional, ongoing, reflective and differentiated to meet the needs of staff within their community. Catholic identity is an area that needs to be further addressed within the context of many independent schools that have been established by religious institutes, as with Covenant College misperceptions within the young teacher demographic between charism and Catholic identity can arise. Hall and Sultmann's pathways of *Embracing the Mystery* and *Witness* remain an area of growth for both Brisbane Catholic Education and Covenant College, reflective of the cultural context of wider society.

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A Reconceptualist Approach to Religious Education and the Place of Faith Formation

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Abstract

While a reconceptualist approach to religious education provides a strong intellectual and academic foundation for studying religion, the question is: Does this same approach provide opportunities for personal student learning that impacts spirituality and personal faith? This question, which remains a central issue for religious education theory, will be discussed in detail. Because not all students in Catholic schools are Catholic and because many Catholic students are not noticeably religious, some educators consider that classroom activities intentionally designed to enhance students' personal religious faith can be experienced as presumptive, and even intrusive. The article proposes that this problem results from an inclusivist approach to religion. It posits that the hermeneutic communicative model may provide a way forward. While allowing for educational objectives to be addressed, the HCM model, underpinned by a "multilithic" theological approach, provides a mechanism for enhancing students' personal faith.

Introduction

A reconceptualist approach to teaching religion is one that identifies the purpose of religious education (RE) to be primarily the academic development of the student. It conceives RE as needing to place the same intellectual and pedagogical demands on students as other subjects in a school's suite of academic offerings. The approach has grown out of the debate about the relationship between religious education and catechesis. Over the last 70 years, different pedagogies in RE have emerged and been used in response to the perceived needs of students. These range from the catechetical approach (pre-1960s), the kerygmatic approach (1960s), the life-centred approach (1970s), the Christian-praxis approach (1980s), and the educational approach (1970s to the present) to the phenomenological approach (1980s to the present) (Engebretson, Fleming, & Rymarz, 2002); (Ryan & Malone, 1996, p. 58). I would also include in this mix the influence of the *Enhancing Catholic School Identity*

Project (ESCIP), which, while not an RE approach per se, is currently having an influence on RE in its emphasis on dialogue and recontextualisation (University of Leuven, 2017). In each of these approaches there is a different balance struck between the academic objectives of religious education and catechetical objectives. Over this 70-year period, the pendulum has swung between these two sets of objectives, seeing a movement away from catechetical objectives in the RE classroom to those that are more explicitly academic. The reconceptualist approach to RE is a version of the educational approach and views the purpose of RE to be primarily academic rather than catechetical.

The question that this article will explore is: Does a reconceptualist approach compromise the potential for RE to be a subject that enhances the spirituality and personal faith of the student? While an overtly catechetical approach to RE is no longer appropriate, given the shifting student demographic in the RE classroom, the challenge remains as to how to better engage students and assist them to make personal meaning of religion. In order to respond to this question, I will examine the needs of the learner, identify how young people have a genuine interest in spirituality, and explain how an inclusivist approach to RE has tended to permeate the teaching of RE and, as a result, to impact negatively on the learner's interest in spirituality. Finally, I will propose that, in the RE classroom, the hermeneutic communicative model (HCM) as presented by Pollefeyt and Richards (2019), underpinned by a multilithic theological approach (Towne, 2001), enhances the spirituality and personal faith of the learner.

A Reconceptualist Approach

A reconceptualist approach is specifically linked to an educational framework rather than to a catechetical or "shared Christian praxis" framework (Elliot, Stower, & Victor, 2013). The three characteristics that define a reconceptualist approach are that it is non-presumptive, employs powerful pedagogies, and teaches about the Catholic tradition (Elliot et al., 2013, p. 12). It positions religious education to be a robust academic subject in the school curriculum, alongside other academic subjects with the personal/spiritual dimension accommodated within it. By saying that RE needs to be a "robust academic subject" means that it needs to be viewed as on par with any other academic subject in the curriculum in developing 21st-century knowledge and skills that contribute to good citizenship. In Australia, education is generally centred on the learner becoming "confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community" (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019, p. 6). These goals are

consistent with a reconceptualist approach to RE. Scott says that "a reconceptualised religious education takes education as its overarching frame of reference. It self-consciously works out of an educational rather than ministerial framework" (1984, p. 333).

A reconceptualist approach provides a strong academic foundation to an understanding and knowledge of the Catholic Christian tradition in addition to other religious traditions. Scott posits that a reconceptualist approach to RE "is the way we go about understanding our own religious tradition, convictions and our God over against the religious identity of 'the other,' the stranger" (1984, p. 334). An example of this is the P–12 Curriculum used by the Archdiocese of Brisbane, which explicitly uses a reconceptualist approach (Elliot et al., 2013, p. 12). In this curriculum, the Catholic Christian tradition is explicitly taught in addition to other world religions—for example, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. However, one of the challenges, particularly in the secondary space, is that while a reconceptualist approach explicitly recognises the place of educational objectives, the place of faith formational objectives is not always clear.

Faith Formation

Faith formation, as I use the term, denotes enhancing students' knowledge and understanding of the faith tradition of the school and of other non-Christian religions, with a view to influencing their world view. Rather than direct and explicit faith formation, indirect and implicit faith formation is to be preferred. This is because it is non-intrusive and non-presumptive. Rossiter defines direct and explicit faith formation as "an activity that intentionally sets out to change the personal beliefs and commitments of individuals" (Rossitter, 2018, p. 90). Such an approach can be viewed as intrusive, whereby a key objective of RE is viewed as persuading the learner to adopt a Catholic Christian world view as pre-eminent. Rather than setting out to intentionally "change the beliefs and commitments of individuals" and to ideologically persuade them, indirect and implicit faith formation is an invitation, through dialogue, to consider the beliefs and commitments of other individuals, alongside one's own. It invites students to be open to the contribution that these beliefs and commitments might make to an articulation of what is true. I call this type of faith formation "personal meaning-making".

As a term, faith formation has a degree of ambiguity about it, originating from seminaries and religious houses as places of formation for the priestly and religious life,

respectively. Due to its earlier ecclesial focus, the use of the term "faith formation" in religious education is confusing. Rossiter says that it inclines people "especially students, teachers and parents, to see religious education as an exclusively ecclesiastical activity rather than primarily as education" (Rossitter, 2018, p. x). In the RE classroom, it risks placing church and not the learner at the centre of meaning construction. Personal meaning-making, on the other hand, sees religious education as primarily educational. Furthermore, it puts the learner at the centre of meaning construction. In the context of this article, then, by personal meaning-making I mean the degree of influence that a knowledge and understanding of the faith tradition of a school, and of other non-Christian religions, has on a student's world view. However, the effect that it may or may not have on a student's world view is purely at the discretion of the learner and not an explicit goal of the curriculum. "Personal meaning-making" happens most effectively, then, when students are invited into dialogue and are able to ask and discuss what Scott calls "the pressing religious questions of our time" (1984, p. 336).

Engaging the Learner

To engage students more effectively in RE and facilitate personal meaning-making, it is imperative that we know them and effectively respond to their learning needs. Recent studies provide some useful information about the needs of the learner and how we ought to respond. They suggest that young people have a profound interest in religious questions and are seeking more contemporary ways of expressing their spirituality in response to these questions. As a result, Rossiter argues that "there is a need to re-orient Catholic school religious education more in the direction of trying to enhance the basic human spirituality of young people, whether or not they engage with Catholicism" (Rossitter, 2018, p. 96). In other words, within the RE classroom, there is a need to recognise that, whether students are religious or not, they have a spirituality; secondly, it is the task of RE to nurture a student's spirituality. As a result, religious education is to be understood more as a process than as a product. Roebben proves instructional here. He says that the teacher is an accompanier who reflects spiritually and theologically with young people as they dialogue on matters of importance. Hence, identifying pedagogical practices that support the process of gaining meaning and promoting thinking about the transcendent become pivotal (Roebben, 2021). If we are to be successful in engaging young people in the RE classroom, then, we need to make religion classes not only places of robust academic learning but also places of robust personal meaning-making. While the two may overlap, this cannot be guaranteed.

Knowing the Learner

To effectively engage students in the RE classroom through a reconceptualist approach, it is important to know the learner whom we are teaching. Recent studies provide evidence that suggests young people in Australia today are spiritual more so than religious. While young people are not identifying as strongly with institutional forms of religion, evidence indicates that they remain deeply spiritual and interested in nurturing some form of spirituality. The decline in identification with institutional forms of religion reflects what Sharkey calls the challenge of detraditionalisation. Detraditionalisation denotes a cultural trend whereby people do not have their identities created for them by their family, community and society any longer. Instead, they construct a personal identity and a social world independent of traditional institutions like family, school and religion (Sharkey, 2010). Consequently, Boeve says, "Christianity has not been replaced by a secular culture, but by a plurality of life options and religions", among which the secularist/atheist position is only one (2003, pp. 5, 27). Because of this, students are more likely to shop around for something that best suits their spiritual needs rather than remain faithful to a religious institution that they view as outmoded and/or out of touch.

Evidence suggests that young people, while less interested in formal religion, are extremely interested in spirituality. In a report published by the Australian National University in 2019, entitled *Australia's Generation Z Study*, it was found that 52% of 13–18-year-olds identify as having no religion. However, while this age group finds institutional forms of religion to be less appealing and plausible, and so less "normal", the report reveals that atheism and an active rejection of religion have *not* become the norm (Singleton, Rasmussen, Halafoff, & Bouma, 2019, p. 3). In fact, the report indicates that "74% of Australia's teens" generally have a positive attitude towards religion and, while not necessarily affiliated with a specific religion, nevertheless remain open to some form of spirituality (Singleton et al., 2019, p. 3). This certainly reinforces the idea that all people, whether they are affiliated with a religion or not, have a spiritual dimension to their lives.

Statistically speaking, a significant percentage of young people maintain a genuine interest and openness to spirituality. A recent study, conducted by McCrindle, found that "while Australia as a nation is seeing a decline in cultural Christianity, it remains spiritual". This is owing, in part, to Australia's increasing cultural diversity and to migration, which has brought other faiths into society (2021, p. 6). In addition, the *Australia's Generation Z Study* report indicates that while 24% of gen Z teens have no belief in God or a higher being, 37% believe in God, while another 30% believe in a higher being or life force instead of God.

Additionally, another 9% identify as *not sure* regarding the existence of God or a higher life force (Singleton et al., 2019, p. 6). This means that 67% of Australian teens demonstrate a belief in some form of transcendent reality beyond themselves, while a further 9%, while identifying as unsure, are not closed off from considering it as a possibility. Hence, a considerable number of teens either maintain or are open to a belief in a spiritual or supernatural dimension to life. Given that this demographic is the one that presents itself in Catholic secondary RE classrooms across the country, this set of statistics is significant and inspires hope for the future.

If there is an interest and openness in young people to that which is spiritual, then, my question is: How do we leverage that so that we can more effectively engage our young people in classroom religion? My proposal is that, consistent with a reconceptualist approach to RE, a powerful pedagogy that needs to be adopted is a dialogical one. A dialogical pedagogy is one that does not give doctrinal pre-eminence to one expression of religious faith over another and recognises the integrity of each expression of religious faith without seeking to harmonise it with other faith expressions. However, in order to adopt a dialogical pedagogy, we have to address a theological trend toward inclusivism that has tended to thwart the creation of truly dialogical classrooms.

Inclusivism and Religious Education

A predominantly inclusivist theological paradigm inadvertently underpins the teaching of religion in Catholic schools across Australia and negatively impacts on levels of student interest in spirituality and engagement. Inclusivism is a theological paradigm that operates from the idea that other religious belief systems are partial versions of an exclusively true religion, which, for Catholics, is the Catholic Christian tradition (Hick, 1989). This means that while the Catholic Christian tradition is deemed to be exclusively true, truth can be found in other religious traditions as well. According to Pollefeyt and Richards (2019), since Vatican II, an inclusivist model "has been the official position of the church". This, they argue, is evident in documents like *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16 (Vatican Council II, 1964) and *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2 (Vatican Council II, 1965). While these documents identify that truth can be found outside of the Catholic Christian tradition, it is only "a ray of that truth" rather than truth in its fullness. Furthermore, while an inclusivist approach recognises that truth can be found in other religious contexts and not just a Catholic Christian one, it suggests that this is only possible through the action of Christ.

An inclusivist approach views Christ as the objective supernatural means through which all people come to salvation. This has a propensity to reduce adherents of non-Christian religions to the status of what Karl Rahner once referred to as the "anonymous Christian" (1979, p. 218).

> The theory [of "anonymous Christianity"] arose from two facts: first, the possibility of supernatural salvation and of a corresponding faith which must be granted to non-Christians, even if they never become Christian; and secondly, that salvation cannot be gained without reference to God and Christ, since it must in its origin, history and fulfilment be a theistic and Christian salvation. (Rahner, 1979, p. 218).

Rahner's reasoning, was that (1) God, who desires all people to be saved, cannot possibly consign all non-Christians to hell, and that (2) Jesus Christ is God's only means of salvation. This must then mean that non-Christians who end up in heaven must have received the grace of Christ without realising it. Hence, the appellation, "anonymous Christian". Furthermore, in the declaration, *Dominus Jesus* (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church), promulgated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000, similar thinking is reflected. By emphasising the personal unity between the eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, this declaration relativises all other claims to truth about the nature of ultimate reality (n. 10). The declaration (n. 9) says that Christ reveals the divine "in an exclusive way" and not "in a way complementary with other revelatory and salvific figures". This declaration clearly subscribes to an inclusivist model. The underlying assumption of this type of language is that it is Christ who universally saves, whether one is Christian or not, and it continues to influence the way classroom religion is taught in Catholic schools. Consequently, an inclusivist approach is problematic if we are trying to create spaces of dialogue for students.

While we may not explicitly employ an inclusivist approach, its influence continues to be felt. Pollefeyt and Richards would argue that inclusivism prevails in the sense that, as teachers of religion, we often fail to acknowledge the true "otherness" of the religious, or non-religious, other. This is evident insofar as there is often an assumption operative within the collective Catholic psyche that "Christ reveals Christself in the other" (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2019, p. 4), whether the other is Christian or not. Consequently, in the RE classroom, there is a real danger of seeing religious difference absorbed and homogenised into a Catholic frame of reference. According to Lemuel Sandoval, there is often good reason for this. Ecclesial authorities have a vested interest in ensuring that, in educational contexts, "the 'right' knowledge" is passed on to the students" (Sandoval, 2020). He suggests that,

when “dealing with the sacred and the divine [there is] a lot of mystery surrounding God and none would like to fall into heresy trying to explain the divinity” (Sandoval, 2020). He adds that “there are also commitments made to denominations and confessions [by educational institutions] to keep the so-called ‘sound doctrine,’ whatever it may be”. This puts a certain pressure on teachers to get it right, theologically speaking.

Due to the pressure of “wanting to get it right”, there can be a tendency of mono-correlating a variety of religious experiences, across a plethora of religious and non-religious traditions, with a Catholic Christian interpretation of those experiences. Mono-correlation is a manifestation of inclusivism that seeks to harmonise the difference of the religious other with a Catholic Christian point of view or understanding. For example, by mono-correlating Catholic Christian beliefs (e.g., living “in Christ”: Romans 8:1) with the beliefs of non-Christian religions (e.g., realising the Buddha nature), teachers seek to reinforce the correctness of the Catholic tradition while also creating opportunities for students to deepen an understanding of their own faith. While the intention may be to maintain orthodoxy and bring students to a deeper appreciation of the Catholic Christian tradition, Pollefeyt and Richards suggest that rather than help students to reconnect, it often leads them to “feel coerced or even manipulated into (re)identifying themselves as Christian” (2019, p. 4). In more extreme cases, it can even be perceived as a form of indoctrination (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2019, p. 4). While this may be done to enhance personal meaning-making, it can be interpreted by students as presumptive and distract from a genuine inquiry into matters spiritual. This is so as it presumes that (1) students have a Christian faith and that (2) they want to deepen their Christian faith. It can also be deemed intrusive as far as it does not allow students to freely choose whether or not they would like to avail themselves of such an opportunity.

Finding a Better Way

To address the influence of inclusivism on religious education, it is proposed that, within a reconceptualist approach, a dialogical pedagogy, underpinned by a multilithic theological paradigm, be used. A dialogical approach better addresses a contemporary student demographic and provides a strategy that may mitigate the impact of inclusivism. While Vatican II gave importance to dialogue, evident in documents like *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), dialogue has assumed even greater importance in more recent documents promulgated by Pope Francis. In one of those documents, *Lumen Fidei*, Francis says that truth makes us humble: “knowing that, more than our possessing it, it is truth that

embraces and possesses us. Far from stiffening us, the certainty of the faith puts us on the way, and makes possible witness and dialogue with everyone" (2013, n. 34). By stating that it is truth that "possesses us" rather than we who possess it, Francis implies that openness to the other is required if we are to grow in our understanding and knowledge of the truth. This is because it is the same truth that possesses the other, which we can only access through dialogue with the other. The whole purpose of dialogue, then, is that we grow in our understanding and knowledge of the truth, which "is a truth disclosed in personal encounter with the Other and with others" (2013, n. 34). A multilithic approach provides a theological rationale for the idea that truth is something disclosed through encounter with the other.

A Multilithic Approach

The multilithic theological paradigm, espoused by McTernan, has emerged out of a changed sociocultural and religious landscape whereby diversity has been acknowledged but without the need to explain such diversity away with a universalising theory (McTernan, 2002). Approaches to understanding religious diversity, based on phenomenology, have often been employed to rationalise difference by identifying universal characteristics common to all religions. Smart's seven dimensions of religion is an example of this. According to Towne, the postmodern religious term, 'multilithic', falls between the idea of the existence of multiple gods (polytheism) and a cultural lens view of plural gods as variations of one God (monotheism) (Towne, 2001). This view does not propose multiple divine entities but rather emphasises and radicalises the incommensurability of different sociocultural and historical constructions of ultimate reality in order to retain their distinctiveness. That is, this view recognises the very otherness of ultimate reality, which is reflected in the otherness of each institutional form of religion. Unlike Smart's phenomenological approach to religion, a multilithic approach does not reduce various world religions to what is common or shared. Rather, it identifies the uniqueness of each religion and its articulation of ultimate reality without trying to explain religious differences away.

When the theological insights of a multilithic approach are used to underpin a reconceptualist approach to RE, each discrete religion can be understood as a concrete manifestation of a unique relationship with ultimate reality. The ontological character of ultimate reality—the "quality" or essence of its nature—is understood to be mutable. This means that when talking about a relationship with God in the RE classroom, it is understood that "God's intimacy with humanity changes God" and not only the human community (McTernan, 2002, p. 2). In other words, ultimate reality is shaped and changed while in

relationship with a particular religious community. Thus, the way in which one religious community experiences ultimate reality is understood to be unique not only because of its sociocultural and historical differences but because of differences in the very nature of encounter with ultimate reality itself. Such a model allows ultimate reality to truly be what it is: the source of infinite possibility. It does not limit divinity to particular historical realities and/or manifestations of truth.

This model provides a solid theological rationale for moving away from an inclusivist approach to teaching RE. This is because it recognises the ontological integrity of a religious adherent's experience of ultimate reality with an understanding that no single religion has doctrinal pre-eminence over another. Each religion is understood to be a space of genuine encounter with ultimate reality or God, whereby what is true is mediated and revealed. Hence, only by engaging in dialogue with the other can the fullness of truth be revealed through the other. This is why dialogue is encouraged as a powerful pedagogy within a reconceptualist approach to RE.

A Dialogical Approach

While allowing for educational objectives to be addressed, the hermeneutical communicative model (HCM), underpinned by a multilithic approach, provides a mechanism for resourcing the spirituality of students and enhancing personal faith. It does so by giving importance to the place of dialogue within the classroom. Dialogue, within Catholic education generally, is given immense importance. The Congregation for Catholic Education states: "The nature of education lies precisely in being able to lay the foundations for peaceful dialogue and allow the encounter between differences with the primary objective of building a better world" (2017, n. 15). The hermeneutical communicative model responds to the challenge of promoting dialogue based on the most fundamental dialogue that there is: the dialogue between God and humankind.

The hermeneutical communicative model is characterised by an openness to the ultimate "Other". Pollefeyt calls the ultimate "Other" the "transcendent transcendence" (Pollefeyt, 2013, p. 2). This denotes an openness to the divine. Human beings have the capacity to experience the interruption of the divine presence within the ordinary events of life: moments of sacred encounter. Consequently, the essence of a human being consists in his or her ability to transcend his or her own reality through openness to the other, whether the other presents as another person, religion or culture. This openness is called the "hermeneutical space" (Pollefeyt, 2013, p. 2).

The hermeneutical communicative model (HCM) enables students to make meaning more effectively in the religious education classroom. It allows for faith formation, or personal meaning-making, that is not presumptive or intrusive. Rather than being explicit and direct, personal meaning-making is implicit and occurs indirectly via a dialogical process. Furthermore, a dialogical model does not attempt to homogenise religious difference. Unlike inclusivism, it allows the "Other" to be "other". It brings diverse and divergent religious perspectives together in search of a deeper understanding of what is true without giving pre-eminence to any one view. This is consistent with a multilithic view, whereby each manifestation of religion is deemed equally valid as an agency of truth. In Catholic Christian educational contexts, this does not mean that we cannot privilege the Catholic Christian tradition. Rather, what it is suggesting is that we adopt an attitude of radical openness to what is true through a radical openness to what is other. This radical openness is achieved through dialogue.

When dialogue happens in the religion classroom, students are invited to grow beyond the limits of their own particular and historically conditioned perspective. By so doing, they indirectly enter into a process of meaning-making and, so, personal formation. This is because they are challenged to acknowledge the limits of their own perspective or horizon of meaning and embrace a truth claim that arises from the dialogue itself. This truth claim may even challenge what one currently holds to be true. A student, then, is challenged to put at risk their own idea of what is true to embrace a deeper and more meaningful articulation of it. This means that while one may present in the classroom with a particular religious understanding of reality (e.g., a Catholic Christian understanding), by being open to the religious other, one is invited to embrace the possibility of a more authentic articulation of what is true. For example, Richards and Pollefeyt suggest that in a Catholic school, religious education emphasises the learning of one body of religious and spiritual literacy, replete with certain symbols, stories, rites and rituals. For Christians, it is through these signs and symbols that God communicates with humanity. However, in a dialogical classroom, this Catholic language and symbol system "is appreciated *in dialogue with*—not [in] isolation from—other religious and philosophical language systems" (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2019, pp. 6–7). This enables an intersection of religious horizons or meaning systems and may lead to more authentic articulations of what is true than would otherwise be possible in the absence of dialogue.

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Living Water Years 11–12 Senior RE Praxis Course: Overview and Implementation

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Abstract

An area of considerable interest in the current discussion of religious education (RE) in Australian Catholic schools is the place of RE in senior high school (Rossiter, 2021). The wider context of these discussions is premised on changes in the wider culture along with a need to make religious education more engaging. This article will examine a new course designed for senior school students in Catholic schools in the Toowoomba Diocese, and will be presented in two parts. The first part aims to give some background and rationale for the development of the new course, Living Water (LW). In this part some contextualisation on the place of religious education in contemporary Catholic education will be examined. In response to new cultural challenges the outline of the new course will be presented and some of the goals, expectations and aspirations of the course will be explained. The second part of the article will report on an empirical examination of the implementation of the course in some Toowoomba Catholic schools. This will examine the responses of teachers, school-based RE leaders and students to the course and set a platform for the final discussion, which will give some recommendations on the future role and implementation of LW.

Living Water: An Overview

In June 2020, Toowoomba Catholic Schools (TCS) published "Living Water", a senior RE praxis course intentionally designed to provide year 11 and year 12 students with opportunities for practical application of Catholic beliefs and values through experiential service learning. LW emerged as a response to several challenges and critical questions faced by secondary colleges. It was a particular time of changing senior schooling expectations in

Queensland in the midst of growing cultural and religious plurality. The time was right for developing a "new" way of engaging senior students in a practical form of RE that would allow them to understand and interpret the Catholic faith in the world around them.

Dr Pat Coughlan, Executive Director, Toowoomba Catholic Schools, states, in the course overview for Living Water, that:

> Catholic schools are charged with the challenging mission to make the Reign of God a reality in the lives of all students … The Living Water program ensures that Religious Education remains an essential component of a student's life at school and gives each student the opportunity to experience and practice the values, knowledge and qualities that will form their identity for life after formal education. (2019, p. 3)

With data and recommendations derived from the Catholic University of Leuven, Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) online survey instruments, insight was provided into the spectrum of belief of stakeholders within the communities and into the teaching and student experiences of religion. As a system of schools, TCS used this opportunity to act on the research and recommendations from the Catholic University of Leuven to create opportunities and experiences that recontextualise the faith tradition whilst encouraging dialogue and developing a post-critical faith understanding (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2022). Serendipitous changes to senior education in Queensland also catalysed this project by suggesting senior RE programs could engage students more, assist in drawing from the Catholic Christian tradition, and connect students to the reality of the world around them.

The Context of Toowoomba Catholic Schools

Toowoomba Catholic Schools (TCS) comprises 31 schools and the Toowoomba Catholic Schools Office (TCSO), providing quality Catholic education and care to families in Toowoomba, the Darling Downs, and across south-western Queensland. School contexts vary from city schools to rural and remote. TCS includes five P–12 schools and four secondary colleges 7–12.

The mission of TCS is that schools be exemplary places of learning and faith where all students experience academic success within a distinctive Catholic environment. The theoretical and practical components of the LW program are premised on the reconceptualist approach, an approach that operates from an educational framework that incorporates and enhances the academic knowledge, understanding and skills specified in the Diocesan Religious Education Curriculum (Elliott, Stower, & Victor, 2020).

Educational Changes to Senior Schooling in Queensland, 2019

The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) decision in 2016–17 to develop a senior secondary schooling system to better support young people in the transition to further education, training or work became the catalyst for discussions about what this would mean for RE in the senior years of secondary in Catholic schools and colleges.

As a result of the QCAA recommendations, the new Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) was introduced in 2019, starting with year 11 students. Key features include:

- new and redeveloped senior syllabuses
- external assessment in general subjects
- new quality assurance processes to strengthen the quality and comparability of school-based assessment
- the introduction of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

(Queensland Curriculum Assessment Authority, n.d.).

The Diocese of Toowoomba Approach to Educational Reform

Senior educationalists in the Queensland dioceses began discerning what the changes to senior schooling would mean for schools, staff and students. Within the Toowoomba Diocese initial discussions drafted possibilities for new and revitalising options for RE for senior students.

A task force subsequently reviewed the current requirements of senior students for the study of religious education in the Toowoomba Diocese and made recommendations to the diocesan bishop that included incorporating a "praxis" component. The bishop commended this approach and commissioned the provision of an insightful and practical enhancement to options available to senior students. A smaller working party of school and office personnel developed the suggested format and course detail for the "praxis" component. The results and insights from the ECSI surveys influenced the program writers to focus on students' openness to opportunities to engage in social justice and issues of diversity, whilst ensuring there was connection to the Catholic tradition and world view through a post-critical and dialogical lens.

An Alternative:
Living Water

The "praxis" course was named "Living Water", as referred to in the Scripture of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42). This biblical passage was selected for its thought-provoking message that requires both an understanding of the original context and an interpretation of going out into the world as the living presence of Jesus.

In practical terms developing the LW course meant that secondary schools could offer more RE options to senior students. LW would provide an experiential form of RE and allow for more study time in year 12. The course would not require as many timetabled lessons as regular religion classes, thus ensuring students had ample time to meet the demands of the new senior secondary schooling requirements.

The combined *Religion and Ethics* / *Living Water* model would be implemented over three years of senior schooling. In this iteration, students complete the *Religion and Ethics* course and obtain the necessary points towards a QCE. The *Religion and Ethics* component of the course is in line with QCAA requirements. The LW component is monitored and requirements are signed off by each school. Both components (*Religion and Ethics* and *Living Water*) are undertaken within a three-year timespan. Each school is responsible for time allocation of both components. Some examples of what this looks like are:

(1) both components spread evenly across the three years—that is, *Religion and Ethics* completed in years 10 and 11 and *Living Water* in year 12;

(2) four lessons of *Religion and Ethics* in year 10; two of *Religion and Ethics* and some *Living Water* in year 11, and two of *Religion and Ethics* and some *Living Water* in year 12.

The decision about the delivery model is made by each school to fit within staffing and timetabling restrictions. Study of religion is also an option for students in years 11 and 12. The importance of developing the program was acknowledged by the ongoing support of the Diocese of Toowoomba Secondary Principals Association (DOTSPA) and the active participation by principals and APREs in the writing of the program.

The Vision and Rationale of Living Water

Students who complete the LW years 11–12 senior praxis course of study will have enriched their knowledge about and experience of the Catholic faith by listening and

responding to the call of their Christian vocation through prayer, liturgy, social justice, reflection, advocacy and eucharistic celebration.

Service learning is founded in the Gospels, with its importance enlivened through various encyclicals and bishops' statements published by the church. Catholic social teachings that draw from Scripture, tradition, reason and experience to address issues of social, economic and ecological justice underpin this service learning program (Cornish, n.d.). Students participating in the course come to understand and experience the key elements of service learning: recognition of the innate dignity of all people as children of God, appreciation of the meaning of relationship, and an attitude of service and authentic communication and connection with others through rich and real-life opportunities. Various models for service learning were utilised in the development of the course including Kolb's model of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, p. 42); the service-reflection-learning framework (Green, 2006, p. 68); recurring stages of student reflection in a service learning course model (Green, 2006, p. 220); and the spiral model of service learning (Price, 2008).

Course Structure

The course integrates five key components:

- models of service learning
- theology
- church teachings on social justice
- Scripture
- preparing to serve.

Four core social justice teachings that are paramount to the course are charity/action, social justice/solidarity, advocacy, and immersion/awareness. In the foreword, Bishop Robert McGuckin (the Bishop of Toowoomba) acknowledges the importance of incorporating the social teachings of the Catholic Church into the program:

> The Catholic Church teaches that each person is a sacred being, created by God, with a unique calling. The Living Water praxis course encourages students to reflect on who they are and who they can be, as an individual and member of community in relation to the world in which they live. (McGuckin, 2019, p. 3)

At a practical level the course requires a minimum of 110 hours to complete. This includes whole-group intensive days; retreat experiences (including a year 12 retreat); service learning experiences (40 hours); reflection and journalling; twilight reflection sessions;

preparing and facilitating prayer, liturgical and retreat experiences; advocacy; and a concluding retreat ritual and reflection. Timetabled lessons also form part of this experience.

Staffing

The selection of staff to lead the LW program in a school was critical to its success. In this service-learning course, teachers are actively engaged in bringing students sensitively into experiences of life that may disrupt their experience of the world and cause them to think at a deeper level on their own sense of self and on that of others and on connections to their spirituality. The ability to engage in dialogue, ask critical questions, and respond to students' experiences requires staff who demonstrate 'witness, specialist, moderator' skills and continue to reflect on their own sense of self and on their connections with others and the world in a post-critical belief mode (Pollefeyt, 2008). The teachers' own struggles to make meaning of life and the world makes them well-suited "guiding companions" in the LW journey.

LW was launched in the diocese in 2019 and is now a key component of the religious life of six secondary schools and colleges in the Diocese of Toowoomba**.** The course materials include an extensive teacher resource book, course overview and structure manual (Coughlan, 2019), and a student workbook. These books are available online to TCS schools through the TCS intranet in writable pdf form for students' ease of engagement.

Implementation of Living Water: An Empirical Study

The focus of the evaluation was a broad examination of how well the LW course, as an integrated curriculum drawing on Catholic social teaching and opportunities for wider practical engagement, was being implemented. Three sources of data were used in this study. Sixteen teachers and APREs involved in the LW curriculum responded to a survey. The survey comprised eleven questions that were either open-ended or answered by reference to a Likert scale. The questions focused on participants' perceptions of the new course and its implementation. The survey was conducted online, and responses were anonymous. The median age of participants was in the forties, and eleven (69%) of the participants had postgraduate qualifications in education. The median number of years' teaching RE was ten.

Eleven teachers were interviewed using the survey results as a departure point. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews followed a semi-structured pattern,

beginning with the question, “What has been your experience of the LW course?” Several funnel questions were probed, concerning: the amount of support offered for teachers; students’ perceptions; and opportunities, challenges and features of the course. As a semi-structured interview protocol was followed, there was broad scope for participants to respond to questions in different ways and to concentrate on their experiences and the issues that these raised. After each interview, major response categories were identified, and these shaped the next interview.

Twenty-nine students responded to an invitation to take part in a survey that examined their general attitude to LW, favoured topics, and areas that could be improved. The survey was short and focused, involving seven questions. Three questions were answerable according to a Likert rating scale and four of the questions were open-ended. Students completed the survey online and had the option to remain anonymous.

Findings

Overall response to the course. In both the teacher surveys and interviews, teachers expressed overall satisfaction with the program and enthusiasm for it to continue. Two survey questions addressed teachers’ general response to the course and its implementation. The first asked about implementation of the course and, on a scale of 0–10, where 10 represented extremely successful implementation, the average rating was 7.9. When asked about their confidence in teaching the course, again on a 0–10 scale, the average rating given in survey responses was 8.3. Both results support the contention that LW was seen as being well implemented and teachers were confident in their ability to teach the course. Comments on the survey also supported the notion that there was a high degree of satisfaction with the course. Some indicative quotes follow that underline this contention. One teacher noted, “All schools should take this on, it is the living (pardon the pun) example of doing Christ’s work”. Another remarked, “keep it”. There were many comments such as, “it’s working well” or “I enjoy teaching it”.

In interviews with teachers, further information was gathered that elaborated on the data from the teacher surveys. This information generally supported the contention that teachers were satisfied with the course and the way it was being implemented. The sense from many of the interviews was that teachers saw LW as a significant development in how religious education was conceptualised and delivered in Toowoomba Catholic schools. One teacher noted this when she commented, “I really like the praxis course as it tells us where

we are going as a school and how we are responding to student needs, that's a big tick for me". Another teacher remarked, "Despite being new it's good for the future and I enjoy teaching it". In a similar vein, several teachers noted that it had improved the quality of religious education in senior high school. One teacher noted, "RE now had a clearer direction".

The confidence of teachers can be better understood by at least two considerations. Firstly, participants in the study reported high levels of support at both a school and a system level when teaching LW. At a school level, support was centred on the relational aspect of working with an APRE who was able to understand the demands of the new curriculum and to guide and mentor teachers. At a systems level, teachers found that the course was well planned and materials such as teacher books provided practical support, especially for the classroom aspects of LW. Secondly, it is worth noting the skills and experience of the teachers involved in this new course. The median age of participants was in the forties, and many already had extensive experience as teachers and leaders in school-based RE. The participants spoke of their commitment to RE and how they were tasked to help deliver the LW program as it was new and needed the special attention of skilled practitioners. A recent study noted this tendency to align highly skilled practitioners as the "only she can teach it" phenomenon (Rymarz and Starkey, 2021). This refers to the successful implementation of a new course in senior school RE requiring considerable planning and support for the course and also, at least initially, excellent teachers. This is a natural reaction to a new curriculum as such programs tend to attract teachers with the necessary set of skills.

Student responses to Living Water. When asked in the teacher survey how well students had responded to the new course, the average rating of teachers was 7.7 out of 10. In interviews teachers commented on the overall favourable response from students. Some teachers contrasted this response with their perception of student engagement with the previous course. As one participant put it, "it's much better than what we were doing, some 'bedding down' issues but more student engagement for sure". In interviews the diversity of the student body doing LW was also noted. Some of the students, for instance, were in the high quartiles for academic achievement and already had sufficient courses and grades for university credit. For them LW was a means by which they could reduce the academic pressure on themselves. As one teacher remarked, "… are really capable students, it's a bit hard to engage them with the content but they really enjoy the service part".

As previously mentioned, the student survey contained three questions that were answerable according to a Likert rating scale; these indicated students' responses to the new course. When asked how the new course compared to what they did last year, remembering last year they were not doing LW, the average rating given was 6.9, where a score of 10 represented that LW was very much superior to the previous offering. When asked if they had learnt much in the new course, the average student rating was 6.3. Finally, students gave the new course an overall rating of 6.4 out of 10. These responses are lower than teachers' perceptions of students' response to the course, but they need to be considered as indicative of a well-established trend. Low student evaluations of RE are a perennial issue not just in Catholic schools but when RE (or similar) is taught in the public system, such as in large parts of Europe. The seminal work on student evaluation of RE in Catholic schools in Australia was conducted by Marcellin Flynn (1993). Over 20 years Flynn found that student evaluations of RE were consistently poor and this was especially so in senior high school—so much so that he recommended not teaching RE in senior high school! The argument is that students' evaluations in the range of 6.4–6.9 are comparatively high. To reiterate, when students compared LW with their previous experience, the average score here was 6.9, and this seems to be a strong preference for the new course—or at least for the style of the new course.

Students also had the option of writing comments in the survey, and several did this. These comments give another perspective on the course and can be read alongside the other findings in this report. Students, for example, noted the difficulty with "finding the hours", a challenge noted by teachers that will be returned to later. One student commented, "Hard to manage 40 hours of praxis during exams, more school-based opportunities". Another made a similar remark: "lessen the amount of community service hours maybe more practical learning activities". When asked for their favourite part of LW, however, by far the strongest response concerned the praxis aspects (variously described) of the course. Fourteen students nominated praxis, service, outreach and community involvement or similar terms as their favourite activities. Students also commented positively on the rationale for the praxis aspect of the course.

Students also made some perceptive comments on the course content, and this indicated that for some the content of the course was engaging. As one student remarked when asked what they liked about the course: "Learning about Catholic social teachings, adhering to the see, judge, act formula and learning about how we can help others within our community". In a similar vein, another student noted, "[I liked the] emphasis on biblical

stories that give examples of what LW means". These comments draw attention to the content of the course, which will be covered in more detail in the next section, and the positive reaction from some students. It is one of the recommendations of this study that further work be done on how best to convey the course content of LW in an engaging fashion.

Students also remarked on other positive aspects of the course, such as running retreats: "Being able to run retreats and liturgies, being able to go out and see the world through charity's eyes and being able to learn about countries less fortunate than us and taking that to advocate for them". There were also several comments from students about enjoying facilitating liturgies and working with younger students. Comments such as these indicate that the broad goals of the LW program are being met. When asked explicitly about three aspects of the course that could be improved, there was a wide and divergent range of responses. One of the major categories that emerged was a desire to see more diverse opportunities for service. As one student put it, "More community involvement, rather than just school-based activity". Another issue that students raised was that greater attention be given to how to properly and proactively journal. One student noted, "Journaling questions could have been more flexible/insightful".

Teaching the content. To conclude the presentation of findings, attention will be drawn to two areas that came up as strong response categories across all data gathered. The first of these concerns comments related to the content of LW. In speaking of their experience of teaching LW, most teacher-participants drew a contrast between the teaching and what was variously described as "the service". It is interesting to note that, with very few exceptions, when teachers were referring to the new course, they invariably described it as "the praxis course". On several occasions I (AT) drew participants' attention to this description and pointed out that the new course was, in fact, called Living Water. I think this description gives us some insight into how teachers approach LW, especially in terms of what they have seen as its key components.

When teachers described the new course in general terms, often their point of departure was how the course was designed to engage students, and the chief vehicle for this was the parts of the course they described as praxis-orientated. As noted, the term "praxis" often became the *de facto* referent for the course. The praxis element involved all service hours, the activities that took the students outside the classroom and into the wider community. Praxis involved activities such as mentoring other students, planning liturgies

and involvement in retreat programs. The challenges involved in the praxis components of LW will be discussed in more detail in the next section, but it is important to note the teacher-participants saw this aspect of the course as "front and centre", the core aspect of LW. Once again, the contrast was made between the new course and what had preceded it, not just at senior school but also in earlier years of RE. One teacher made this point when she commented, "in the past we have had a very 'top heavy' approach to RE, lots and lots of stuff to learn. With the praxis course the emphasis has changed".

When asked about the content of the course, which was often referred to as the "classroom aspects" of LW, teachers were less forthcoming, but did not dispute that this was an important part of the course. In the survey, for instance, when asked about how well the social justice teaching part of LW was being implemented, the average response score was 8.3, where 10 represented extremely well implemented. Teachers also found the workbooks and accompanying support material very helpful. One participant noted, "the resources books were written by someone who knows how to teach". In terms of teaching the content, a major advantage of LW is that it arises out of a well-planned curriculum. It will be suggested that a way to encourage further consideration of how to better integrate and present the content of LW is to consider it as an "integrated praxis model".

One specific content issue that was addressed in the teacher survey was how well Catholic social teaching, identified as social justice themes, was covered in LW. Teachers gave an average 8.3 Likert rating when asked about their satisfaction about how well social justice themes were covered. Social justice is, perhaps, the foundational concept in the LW curriculum and represents a bridge between the conceptual and the practical aspects of the course. While teachers were generally satisfied with how well social justice was covered, many of their comments in this area reflected their remarks on the content of the course in general. The level of support offered was seen as satisfactory and, in particular, resources such as the handbook were acknowledged and appreciated. It was, however, the "nitty gritty", as one teacher put it, that could be more thoroughly investigated. What, then, is the "nitty gritty" of teaching social justice themes? One indicative comment was on how best to integrate complex ideas that were more than just generic moral perspectives. One teacher put it, "it's great to go out and do all these things, but why do we do them? It's not enough to say that's what Jesus would do". The challenge of covering Catholic social teaching can be seen as a good illustration of the broader, longstanding issue in religious education—namely, how complex content is covered in a way that is both engaging and rigorous.

Finding the hours. A second major response category that emerged, especially from interviews with teachers and APREs, was finding enough activities for students to engage with that met the demands of the praxis aspect of the course. To encapsulate this point, one teacher spoke of what her school was doing to assist students in this regard. She noted, "we have homework clubs, blood drives, Meals on Wheels, working with primary school students, preparing prayer and liturgies and help planning and running retreats, I think that's all!"

There are several aspects of this "finding the hours" that will be commented on here. The first has been covered in earlier comments about the demands of the course and that the balance can be seen to shift to the service component, as this is the one that is seen as the characteristic feature of LW. One of the more specific challenges about finding activities for students was an acute one. This relates to the restrictions placed on students in times of COVID. Even though there were not widespread outbreaks of COVID in the Toowoomba Diocese, as a precaution there were many restrictions placed on when and where students could engage with the wider community. The most obvious example of this concerned visits to aged-care facilities. In time, it is hoped that these COVID restrictions will become much less onerous.

Conclusion

The goal for LW to be a leading example of a praxis approach to senior school RE is on track to be realised. Teachers involved in LW expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction with the course and its implementation. There was support for the integrated nature of LW, with course content on Catholic social teaching and a clear emphasis on opportunities for wider practical engagement. The existing curriculum was supported by teachers, and teachers felt supported at school and system levels. There was evidence for student satisfaction with the course, certainly in comparison to other courses and to the general reaction to RE in senior high school.

On the basis of the contextualisation of LW provided in part 1 of this article and the empirical examination of its implementation, a number of recommendations can be tentatively offered with a view to the future of LW as an example of an integrated praxis model for religious education in Catholic senior high school. Consideration should be given to expanding the teacher base who can engage well with the LW curriculum. A mentoring approach where experienced teachers could induct new teachers is one suitable model. In

future planning of the course and related professional development, the skills, expertise and enthusiasm of those currently involved in LW should be drawn upon by using collaborative professional learning communities.

There is a need to begin preparing future cohorts to teach LW. This is mindful of the current teachers exhibiting high levels of skills and engagement with the course. A further study could be conducted in the future that will focus on how teachers cover the content of LW, with a view to better understanding and supporting effective pedagogical strategies. Further consideration should be given to referring to LW as an integrated praxis model, one that combines Catholic social teaching and an explicit emphasis on service and lived experience. Finally, offering teachers targeted workshops on pedagogical approaches that could enhance student engagement should be explored.

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