Leading Catholic schools that don't look Catholic: The identity of Catholic Flexi schools in Australia and the challenges for those who lead them

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Abstract

Catholic Flexi schools are an alternative type of school that operate within the Australian schooling system. The paper focuses on Flexis operated by Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA), the largest provider of flexible education across all education sectors in Australia. They serve young people who have been disenfranchised from mainstream schooling. By their nature, Flexi schools are different in character to mainstream Catholic schools in Australia. Both the young people and the staff of Flexis do not contain the critical mass of Catholics that continue to be evident in other Catholic schools in Australia in spite of changing demographics. This presents a challenge for Flexi schools' identity leaders, their principals, whose Catholicity is a factor in their recruitment and for whom identity leadership is an expectation of their role. The makeup of Flexis in terms of their young people, their staff, and their principals is then considered. Thereafter and with particular reference to *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (CCE, 2022), the Catholic identity of Flexis compared to mainstream Catholic schools in Australia is investigated. Traditional Catholic schools express their Catholic identity through an explicit religious education curriculum, overt religious symbols and iconography, Catholic rituals, and a liturgical and prayer life. The elements of Flexi Catholic identity are a humanising education; inclusivity; a positive anthropology of the human person that is hope-filled and non-judgmental; dialogue; and a practical encounter with the poor and the marginalised which has a "fragrance of the Gospel" because its practitioners "take on the 'smell of the sheep'" (Francis, 2013, §39; 24). It is suggested that Flexi principals are crucially important and well placed to animate the Catholic identity of their schools through staff formation that honours receptive ecumenism and welcomes interfaith dialogue.

Leading Catholic schools that don't look Catholic: The identity of Catholic Flexi schools in Australia and the challenges for those who lead them

Introduction

This is a story about a very different kind of Catholic school, the Australian Catholic Flexi school. 'Flexis' has become the term used ubiquitously to refer to a style of alternative schooling in Australia that caters for educationally disenfranchised young people (Mills & McGregor, 2018). The identity of Catholic Flexi schools—so different to the Catholic identity of the traditional Australian Catholic school—poses challenges for the leaders of Catholic Flexi schools. Catholic Flexi schools challenge the notion of the Australian Catholic school—what it looks like, who it serves, how it expresses its Catholicity, and how its leaders best demonstrate fidelity to the task they have taken on: that is, to be lay Catholic leaders furthering the mission of the Church. This paper will propose that the recent Instruction from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (CCE, 2022; hereafter ICSCD) offers compelling ways in which the Catholic identity of Flexis can be imagined differently to the identity of the typical Australian Catholic school. The paper will also discuss the key role of the Flexi principal as identity leader and explore some of the complexities and challenges that Flexi principals face in leading their schools.

What are Flexi schools?

Flexi schools are a part of the Special Assistance School (SAS) sector in Australia. A SAS is defined in the Australian Education Act as a school which "primarily caters for students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties" (Australian Government, 2013, §6). Data in the official datasets available from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on the number of SASs in Australia is not readily available, as such schools are pooled, for reporting purposes, with Special Schools

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(catering for students with specific disabilities). The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) reports its data in a similar manner. Independent Schools Australia (ISA, 2022) data suggests that SASs are the fastest growing education sector in Australia, driven in large part by the Gonski (2011) reforms which directed greater funding to vulnerable students. ISA data indicates a 249 percent growth in SASs in the period 2013–2021.

Within the Catholic sector in Australia, Flexi schools have their origin in 1985 in the work of the Christian Brothers in Logan City Queensland, who established the Centre Ed Program to address the issue of significant truancy and juvenile justice issues in that place and time (Kingston, 1996). Over many years, through the work initially of the Centre Ed team and later the significant expansion of Flexis under Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA), Flexis developed their own specific style of schooling, based on relational practice, common ground, unconditional positive regard, and four agreed upon principles: respect, safe and legal, honest and participation (Murray, 2018). Flexi relational practice seeks to consciously shift the young person and all of their needs to the centre, and has trust, safety and support of young people as central themes (Morgan, 2018). Relational practice is evident, for example, in the way students are always referred to as 'young people' in Flexis and where reference to the young person as a 'student' is anathema. Reference to a 'young person' acknowledges the fullness of their personhood. By contrast, referring to young people as students or pupils, the normative signifier used in mainstream schooling, defines a person by their function as a part of a system. Relational practice is also typified by work beyond the traditional boundaries of the classroom, engaging with young people through "conversation and dialogue in real life settings" as well as a "shift from telling young people what they need to know to genuinely listening to what young people want" (Morgan, 2018, p.9). Relational practice is also known to be more important for young people challenged with lower academic achievement and difficult personal circumstances (Rushton & Wilson, 2020).

Today, EREA operates 22 Flexi schools across Australia, in every state and territory except for the ACT. All of these Flexi schools operate in a secondary school context, catering for

educationally disenfranchised young people between the ages of 12 and 24. While there are some other providers (including other Catholic providers) who operate Flexi schools, EREA is by far the largest provider of Flexi education across *all* education sectors. It is noteworthy that around 30 percent of young people in EREA Flexis are First Nations young people; some schools have a First Nations enrolment exceeding 90 percent (Shay, Miller, Mills, & Ockerby, 2022). First Nations staff in Flexi schools are also prevalent, estimated at around 30 percent (Shay, 2020). For brevity, in referring to Flexi schools this paper is specifically referencing Catholic Flexi schools of the type found within EREA.

Who attends and works in Catholic schools in Australia?

Even in mainstream Catholic schools with relatively low proportions of Catholic students, there is an identifiable nominal Catholic population sourced significantly from schools' Catholic feeder primary schools (NCPR, 2019). This is not the case in Flexi schools. In addition, while a significant proportion of staff in mainstream Catholic schools are nominally Catholic, this is not necessary the case in Flexi schools. The factors of student, staff and leadership makeup will be addressed below, before then considering the elements of Catholic identity apposite to Flexis, and the crucial role of Flexi leaders in the Catholic identity of Flexis.

The makeup of Flexi schools compared to other Catholic schools: Young people

Young people in Flexi schools are referred through a variety of means: social service and care agencies, youth justice services, local public schools; but lowest on that list is local Catholic primary schools. These patterns of referral suggest a relatively low percentage of Catholic students in Flexis. Formal statistics on numbers of Catholic students in Flexis are not collected. As others have noted, data on the religious affiliation of staff, students and parents of Catholic schools is sparse and wildly variant (Gleeson, O'Gorman, & O'Neill, 2019). For example, EREA claims 65.5 percent of the students in all their schools are Catholic (EREA, 2021), but the peak body of Religious Institute and Ministerial Public Juridic Person Catholic schools (CORMSAA),

of which EREA is a part, indicates just 19 percent Catholic enrolments in their schools (CORMSAA, 2022). The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has 2016 figures for Catholic primary and secondary students at Catholic schools at 53.1 percent and 54.5 percent respectively (NCPR, 2019). NCEC reports the percentage of Catholics in Catholic schools at 61.1 percent (2022b). These figures generally represent a decline in Catholic enrolments in Catholic schools over time (cf NCEC, 2013), consistent with the ongoing decline in religious affiliation evident in successive Australian national censuses.

In their 2007 pastoral letter, the bishops of New South Wales and Canberra-Goulburn spoke of the need for "a 'critical mass' of Catholic students in our schools" in order to ensure schools' ongoing Catholic identity (Bishops NSW and the ACT, 2007, p.10). The call of the bishops was a response to the decline in Catholic enrolments indicated above. The lack of a critical mass of Catholic students, however, does not preclude schools from being Catholic in many parts of the world where Catholic schools operate successfully and purposefully as a part of the mission of the Church (Grocholewski, 2015). A critical mass is evidently not present in Flexis; this need not be a matter which defines their capacity to be schools with an authentic Catholic identity. It does, nonetheless, present a challenge to those who lead Flexi schools.

The makeup of Flexi schools compared to other Catholic schools: Staff
The bishops of NSW and ACT also noted the need for a 'critical mass' of Catholic staff in order to protect the identity of Catholic schools (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). Based on 2019–2020 staff survey data in EREA schools, overall 80 percent of staff identify as Christian and 14.7 percent identify as 'no religion' but in Flexi schools the number of staff identifying as Christian falls to 51 percent and those with no religion rises to 37 percent (Wattam, 2021). While statistics on the number of Catholic staff in Catholic schools are not readily available, the EREA figures quoted above are a reasonable assessment of the critical mass of Catholic staff that make up Catholic schools in Australia in general. One reason for this is that teachers make up the

majority of staff in mainstream Catholic schools and their Catholic identity is one of the filters through which they are recruited.

In contrast to mainstream schools, Flexi youth workers work alongside teachers at a ratio of one-to-one. There is not the same kind of 'Catholic workforce' in youth workers as there is for teachers in Australia. In addition, there is no Catholic program of initial teacher education attracting teachers to Flexi schools. Indeed, with the exception of only one small pilot program in a secular university, there is no initial teacher course in Australia that prepares teachers for work in Flexis (Thomas, Coleman, & Herrlander Birgerson, 2022). Consequently, the workforce in Flexi schools is not ostensibly Catholic. In addition, the Flexi workforce is less experienced, more itinerant, and more casualised than in other school settings (Baroutsis, Mills, & McGregor, 2022). This different kind of workforce presents a further challenge for Flexi school leaders.

The makeup of Flexi schools compared to other Catholic schools: Principals

We have seen that there is a relatively low proportion of Catholic young people in Flexi schools. Similarly, there is a less Catholic-identifying workforce. The only people whose Catholicity is relatively assured is that of Flexi principals, where status as a practicing Catholic is an element in their recruitment and selection criteria. In this regard, Flexi schools are similar to other Catholic schools in their makeup. Flexi principals are the one group in Flexis where a 'critical mass' is relatively assured. These facts about the makeup of Flexi young people, staff and principals combine to reinforce the crucial importance of Flexi leaders as the group who must reflect deeply on the challenge of articulating the fidelity of Flexis to their Catholic mission.

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How Flexis compare to traditional Australian Catholic schools

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It is generally presumed that all Catholic schools in Australia have an equality in the way that they are signified, marking them as distinctly Catholic. They are, it is presumed, institutions which offer "opportunities for prayer [and] catechesis", as well as a "sacramental and liturgical life", with a Catholic identity marked by "icons and symbols" and a religious education

curriculum which is "at the heart of Catholic schools" (NCEC, 2022a, pp. 6; 11). An anecdote related by Archbishop Tim Costelloe is instructive by way of reinforcing this signification:

> I went to Catholic schools in Melbourne from 1959, when I was in prep, until 1971, when I completed my secondary schooling. Both schools catered for what we might call working class families. Mum worked part time in a fruit shop and dad worked in the local pub. They had to make great sacrifices to send both my brother and me to Catholic schools, and it was not easy for them to find the funds for such things as uniforms, books, even bus fares at times, not to mention such things as excursions, although these were in reality few and far between in those days. In both my primary and secondary schools there were some excellent teachers, some ordinary teachers, and some poor teachers. The facilities were not overly impressive, the resources were limited, and the classes were large. One thing, however, was very clear. The 'God question' was absolutely front and centre. Prayer at the beginning and end of the day, regular celebration of the sacraments, daily religious education classes, religious images, and the presence of religious sisters, brothers and priests all pointed in the same direction: God, as God was understood within the Catholic tradition, was the whole reason for the school's existence. Not everyone embraced it, not everyone liked it, some agitated against it, many just put up with it, but no-one was in any doubt as to just why the school existed (Costelloe, 2013, p. 4).

The mainstream Catholic school, in some senses, looks very different to the picture illustrated by Archbishop Costelloe, and yet some things have remained remarkably similar. The religious sisters and brothers are gone, but explicit religious education classes, overt religious symbols and iconography, Catholic rituals, and a liturgical and prayer life remain key markers of what makes a Catholic school look and feel Catholic. None of these markers are evident in Flexi schools. The signs and symbols present in Flexi schools are more likely to be reflective of First Nations or diversity agendas, in keeping with their community population. In looking to articulate the authenticity of Flexi schools as Catholic apostolic works, their leaders need to turn to other elements of Catholic identity.

The elements of Flexi schools' Catholic identity

The typical markers of Catholic school identity are not sufficient to delineate the identity of the Catholic school. They say nothing of the elements of Catholicity of schools identified in Church documents; for example, the witness of right relationships (CCE, 2013, §50); a humanising education that is deeply aware of the "personal, moral and social abilities" of its participants (CCE, 2017, §10); an education and a practice that is inclusive and dialogical (CCE, 2022, §17; 32; 87; 97); and an education that sows hope (Francis, 2017). Catholic schools, too, should be imbued with the theme that dominates the entirety of Francis' papacy: namely the care, protection and love for the poor, vulnerable and marginalised. From prior to his election as pope, Francis spoke of the need for the Church to move to the "existential margins" (Faggioli, 2015, p.3). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis extols the virtue of a Church "which is bruised, hurting and dirty, because it has been out on the streets" (Francis, 2013, §49).

Flexi schools do not appear to be Catholic in terms of the traditional markers of the Australian Catholic school—prayer and liturgical life; symbols and iconography; and religious education curriculum—but their authenticity is evident in these other elements of Catholic identity in an educational setting—humanising education; inclusivity; a positive anthropology of the human person that is hope-filled and non-judgmental; dialogue; and a practical encounter with young people which has a "fragrance of the Gospel" because its practitioners "take on the 'smell of the sheep'" (Francis, 2013, §39; 24).

The following sections will consider each of these elements, before turning to a consideration of how Flexi Principals might use these elements in a more powerful articulation of their Catholic identity.

The humanising education of Flexi schools

The four principles of Flexi schools— respect, safe and legal, honest and participation—provide the boundaries within which all in the school community must operate, but they are not rules.

The rules of mainstream schooling are like the common law: if you breach the regulation, you face a particular and consistent consequence. The four principles of Flexi schools are more like 'canon law': they clearly establish the ideal, but there are exceptions and 'dispensations' in recognition of people's imperfection. Trauma-informed practice in Flexi schools requires a nuanced approach to the behaviour of young people. Rather than identifying dysregulated behaviour as a *choice*, Flexi practitioners first reflect on behaviour as the result of underlying trauma or personal difficulty beyond the immediate setting, the effects of which may not be immediately self-evident and which require time and relational practice to uncover (Morgan, 2018; Stokes & Brunzell, 2020). The *EREA Strategic Directions 2020–2024* document describes a humanising education this way: "building a living community, person and community at the centre of education, not the individual; pulling down the walls of exclusivity, extending the classroom to embrace every corner of social experience in which education can generate solidarity and community" (EREA, 2019). This description is reflective of the "liberating education" of which Freire spoke, where the teacher is a conscious actor working for the setting free of students from their community disenfranchisement and disadvantage (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.46).

Inclusion in Catholic schools: Comparing Flexis and mainstream Catholic schools

Flexis share in the mission of all Catholic schools to be a sign and instrument of the communion of all people (*Lumen Gentium*, §1). The text of *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* was not specifically referencing Flexi schools, but its words nonetheless apply especially to Flexis; namely, Flexis are not reserved to Catholics only, "but [are] open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project" (CCE, 1997, §16). Indeed, while census data collection on the faith background of Flexi students has never been undertaken, it is generally understood that the vast majority of Flexi students do not come from backgrounds that are even nominally Catholic. To this point in time, Flexi schools have never

been placed under any of the informal pressure to meet particular quotas of Catholic students experienced from time to time in different Catholic dioceses in Australia.

ICSCD reaffirms that the Catholic school is integral to the pastoral mission of the Church (§21). Catholic schools are "for all... especially the weakest" and they are obliged to meet the "needs of the socially and economically disadvantaged" (§22) and are to be places of welcome (§30). While Catholic schools in Australia welcome all (NCEC, 2022a), the degree of that inclusion is questionable when we delve more deeply into the people whom they actually serve relative to other Australian schools. This is an assertion supported by the data available from ACARA (2022). There are 188 Australian inner and outer regional towns with exactly one government school and one Catholic school, allowing for direct comparison uncomplicated by other external factors. Of those 188 matched pairs, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of the Catholic school is equal to or higher than that of the government school in 176 cases. ICSEA, is a metric used by ACARA to compare schools. The metric utilises parents' occupation, parents' education, geographical location and proportion of indigenous students in its measurement (ACARA, 2015). In the 12 instances where the Catholic school ICSEA is equal to or lower than that of its government school counterpart, the average difference in ICSEA is 16.4 points. The average corresponding difference in ICSEA for the remaining 176 government schools is 69.7 ICSEA points, a difference of 425 percent. Thus, in regional Australia, Catholic schools enroll relatively more students from advantaged backgrounds. This picture of relative advantage in Australian Catholic schools is also supported more broadly by NCEC and ABS data: The 2016 median weekly family income in Catholic schools was $1,918 (NCEC, 2019, p.15), compared to $1438 for all private dwellings (ABS, 2023).

The NSW and ACT bishops had already recognised in 2007 that the poorest Catholics did not attend Catholic schools (Bishops NSW and the ACT, 2007, p.10). Focusing in on a town of marked disadvantage—Alice Springs in central Australia—recent data from the federal government's My School website reinforces the point. There is a Catholic flexi school in Alice Springs, one of fourteen schools in the town. There is one other Catholic school (Transition (pre-

school) to Year 12) with an ICSEA of 1021. There are four other Christian schools, with an average ICSEA of 918, just over one standard deviation below that of the Catholic school. There are six government schools (including Ross Park Primary School, with the third highest ICSEA in the town); the government school average ICSEA is 887, nearly one and a third standard deviations below the Catholic school average. The Flexi ICSEA is not recorded on the My Schools website due to "insufficient student background data received" (https://www.myschool.edu.au), but ACARA data does reveal that the average ICSEA of Flexis is 803, more than two standard deviations below the T–12 Catholic school in Alice Springs. Again in this example we see that, perhaps unwittingly, mainstream Catholic schools in Australia have become comfortable places for the middle class, but they are not truly inclusive. Further examples could be offered, but suffice to say, as others have concluded, there is a risk of a division even *within* the Catholic community of "schools for the wealthy and schools for the poor" (Hawkins, 2022).

In contrast to the relative advantage of mainstream Catholic schools, Flexis are radically inclusive. The very term 'radical inclusion' is a catchphrase of Flexi practice. Radical inclusion modelled after Jesus and demanded by the Gospel is frequently cited as a pressing need of Catholic education in Australia (Hall & Sultmann, 2020); but it is a call to which there is rarely a revolutionary response. Resistance to radical inclusion is seen commonly in mainstream schools in their approach to exclusions of students for behaviour deemed unacceptable (Connelly, 2020). Flexi inclusion, by contrast, extends to the way in which behaviour is managed. Exclusion is simply not a normative part of Flexi practice; practitioners seek other ways in which to keep the young person at school and resolve the difficulties through negotiation and working agreements.

Hope-filled and non-judgmental education

A positive anthropology of the human person that is hope-filled and non-judgmental is a quintessential element of a Catholic education, but because of the ecosystem within which Catholic schools in Australia operate, it is a difficult ideal to achieve. Catholic schools should be

places that preeminently guide young people on "how to live, be happy and find peace" (Tinsey, 2021, para. 4). Tinsey goes on to consider that "we assume that young people learn this by osmosis. But when we look around at our fragmented world, it doesn't appear to be working that well by osmosis alone" (para. 4).

There are powerful forces distracting Catholic schools from the wholistic ambitions for the young people they serve. There is pressure for all types of mainstream schools to participate in the competitive performativity of high stakes external testing in Australia (Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004; Bonnor & Caro, 2012; Thomas, 2018) and internationally (Bacon, 2019; Ehren & Baxter, 2021). Catholic schools, too, participate in the league-tabling games of the Australian schooling system, responding to media-inspired rhetoric of schools in crisis, engaging in competitive practices that have contributed to a growing inequality in Australian schools (Baroutsis, 2016).

Flexi schools cannot participate in this performativity. Their young people are significantly behind the curriculum outcomes of their peers in mainstream schools due to traumatic circumstances of one kind or another. Flexi leaders consequently focus on the building of confidence and agency of young people so that those young people can be engaged and purposeful members of their local communities and lead personally fulfilling lives (EREA, 2022). Significantly freed of some of the distractions that occupy mainstream principals, Flexi leaders and those who work with them can focus on a hope-filled and non-judgmental education, deeply conscious of young people's existential concerns (CCE, 2017). Flexis as Catholic schools are responding to the notion that Catholic education seeks "the growth of students in the fullness of their humanity" (NCEC, 2022a, p. 10).

Flexi schools, dialogue and the search for meaning

Young people arrive in Flexis disenfranchised from a positive experience of education with high numbers of First Nations young people among them. The signs, symbols and iconography of Flexis reflect this reality; representations of indigenous Australian culture, for example, are

prevalent. This is the context for dialogue and young peoples' search for meaning in Flexi settings. Because of this context, dialogue around the search for meaning in Flexis is deeply aware of the coloniality that persists in the communities in which their young people live, that is, patterns of subjugation and control that are ongoing vestiges of former colonial rule. Churches and their practices can be perceived as a part of this subjugation. As Foley (2019) notes, "from a political perspective, rituals of many forms have been used as tools of coloniality" (p.5). Flexi dialogue is drawn to language that delinks sacramentality from its coloniality by a process of "unlearning and relearning" in ways that take account of the views of First Nations people and diverse cultural backgrounds (EREA, 2022). Delinking is a critical process for meaning making in a Catholic educational context so closely bound to First Nations narratives. Foley (2019) makes the connection between delinking and sacramentality that is relevant to Catholic schools seeking to guide their young people in the search for meaning:

> Key to that delinking for Roman Catholicism is a rethinking of the nature of sacramentality so central to its self-definition and theologies. Decoloniality is about returning agency in "thinking and doing" to indigenous peoples, local practices and contextual epistemologies. For Roman Catholics, a key route of this empowerment is returning and nourishing sacramental agency to the baptized (p.6)

While the religious education typical of Australian Catholic schools is not identifiable in Flexi schools, staff give witness to the Catholic principle of sacramentality by journeying with compassion, solidarity and hope alongside young people surviving and thriving amidst extraordinary personal difficulties. The sacredness of each person is reflected in Flexis' relational practice, common ground, unconditional positive regard, and four agreed upon principles: respect, safe and legal, honest and participation. These practices are synonymous with the "culture of care" encouraged in ICSCD (§36). By recognising the "sacredness of difference… as a reality and a gift," Flexis "bring people closer to God… and closer to the heartbeat of the human family and the whole of creation" (Moore, 2020, p.294).

ISCSD promotes a contemporary understanding of the Catholic school as a place of encounter (§80), where people welcomed from diverse cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations (§27) are nurtured to "an attitude of openness and solidarity" (§16). In adaptation to contemporary realities, a "grammar of dialogue" is a "constitutive dimension" of "societies [that] are characterised by a multicultural and multireligious composition" (§30). This contemporary understanding of the place of dialogue in a post-Christian and pluralistic environment is consistent with the realities of Western societies in general. Contemporary pluralistic societies need dialogue as a "cooperative venture", where the richness of faith perspectives like Catholicism can contribute significantly to the human search for meaning (Habermas, 2001, p. 4)

Flexis schools can be places of encounter, where a "grammar of dialogue" (ISCSD §30) respects and encourages young peoples' existential questions, about themselves and about their world. One recent study of young people in Flexi schools affirms that this is indeed the case, where the vast majority of young people agreed that they were free to ask questions about life and the world and where they were able to express their spiritual beliefs (Shay et al., 2022). Flexis are contributing to education's mission "to resource the choosing self, and to supply materials with which to build the house of the spirit" (Hill, 2008, p. 49). Doing so in the context of their secularised and multi-faith (or no-faith) collectives, Flexi schools are demonstrating (as all Catholic schools must do) how their faith-based approach to education betters Australian society as a whole (See Rossiter, 2018, p. 126).

Flexis compared to other Catholic apostolic works

The religious identity of Flexi schools is more akin to that of Catholic hospitals or social services—focused on excellence, care, respect, compassion and open as they are to all persons without discrimination as to religious background, orientation or adherence—than to traditional Catholic schools. The Catholic identity of hospitals has been repeatedly explored (see Swetz, Crowley, & Maines, 2013). Trancik & Barina (2015) suggest that rather than questions about identifying concrete Catholicity, the challenge in Catholic healthcare is to build cultures and

make decisions that are *reflective* of a Catholic identity that is deeply embedded. Like Flexis, Catholic healthcare services in Australia operate without a critical mass of Catholic staff. In such a situation, Edward, Giandinoto, Mills, & Kay (2018) suggest that "values in action" and "taking the extra step" are the means by which a diverse workforce can be encouraged to animate the mission of the Catholic hospital (p.1669–1670).

Reflecting on similar identity challenges in the US Catholic healthcare system, Raith (2021) argues that a focus on values in action, while commendable, has been shown to result in a weakening of mission identity in Catholic hospitals. A desire for neutrality or a reluctance to offend can lead to a culture where there is a reluctance to mention Jesus at all (Mudd & Shea, 2023). Raith (2021) proposes a "receptive ecumenism" that fully engages in "listening and learning" from those who are a part of the organisation who are of other faiths or no faith at all (p.66). The full engagement of mission leaders in respectfully and intentionally sharing Catholic identity and the story of Jesus with all those who work in the enterprise is fully in keeping with the dialogic response called for in ICSCD.

Also reflecting on the US Catholic healthcare space, Mudd & Shea (2023) propose that the way forward in animating Catholic identity in the contemporary context of a diverse and multifaith workforce is to engage in welcoming ecumenical and interfaith dialogue that respectfully brings all workers to a "values alignment" that is in keeping with the explicitly stated Catholic values of the organisation (p.6). A values alignment, however, does not mean a culture that is closed to the authenticity of others' cultural and faith experience. Mudd & Shea (2023) offer the example a Catholic hospital serving a Jewish community: "the hospital's dedication ceremony included local rabbis placing mezuzahs at the entrances to patient rooms along with chaplains placing the traditional crosses" (p.8). One sees in this example a reflection of the way in which Flexis are alive to First Nations cultures in their communities.

Catholic leadership of Flexi schools

In Australia, Catholic healthcare, "although couched in a not-for-profit philosophy, is necessarily premised upon a not-for-loss paradigm." The sector is challenged in serving the poor and marginalised who are "seemingly 'unprofitable' vulnerable groups" (Edward et al., 2018, p.1677). Unlike Catholic healthcare, Flexis can serve the poor and the marginalised without financial competitiveness as a looming consideration; but *like* Catholic healthcare, they possess a diverse workforce and do not have at their service the critical mass of Catholic staff still found in mainstream Catholic schools in Australia. Also like healthcare, Flexis need to turn to their mission leaders—their principals—to lead the formation of staff to a values alignment that is deeply embedded in a dialogic, positive and hope-filled culture in keeping with the expectations of the contemporary Catholic school expressed in ISCSD. It is no less than building a school community that has the "fragrance of the Gospel" (Francis, 2013, §39).

As their guide, Flexi leaders cannot look to examples of Catholic school identity as it is expressed in typical Australian Catholic schools; what they see there is a model not fit for purpose. Flexi leaders need to look elsewhere to construct an understanding of their Catholic identity. Insights from Catholic healthcare make it clear that the challenge for Flexi leaders is to first work with their staff in the animating of their Catholic identity. ICSCD is also instructive. ICSCD suggests that "Episcopal Conferences are especially recommended to apply to the local context... the promotion and verification of the identity of Catholic schools, illustrated in general terms in this *Instruction*" (CCE, 2022, §63). ICSCD provides a useful framework through which the authentic Catholic identity of Flexi schools might be best understood.

The majority of staff in Flexi schools are not practicing or even nominal Catholics, a reality common in Catholic schools in many parts of the world (Grace & O'Keefe, 2007), but not in Australia, where there continues to be a critical mass of Catholic teachers serving mainstream Catholic schools (Gleeson, O'Gorman, Goldburg, & O'Neill, 2018). ICSCD challenges the reality of Flexi schools when it posits that "the predominant presence of a group of Catholic teachers can ensure the successful implementation of the educational plan developed in keeping with the Catholic identity of the schools" (§47). Nonetheless, in drawing attention to the critical

importance of cooperating staff, ICSCD sets the immediate challenge for Flexi schools: how might the spiritualities and sensibilities of all Flexi staff be so enriched and informed that they contribute to their Flexis' distinctly Catholic culture and manner of decision-making? The building blocks for a more explicit project of staff formation is already present in Flexis, filled as they are with staff who—choosing to work in school with trauma and complexity woven into the very fabric of their communities—already exhibit a predisposition to do as St Francis is reputed to have encouraged: to always preach the gospel, sometimes using words. As noted earlier in this paper, Flexi leaders can turn to the elements of their practice which are idealised in the Catholic tradition— humanising education; inclusivity; a positive anthropology of the human person that is hope-filled and non-judgmental; dialogue; and a practical encounter with young people—as the foci for a formation program with their staff that draw their staff to a values alignment that is grounded not just in actions, but which is unapologetically alive to the Jesus story while at the same time being richly welcoming and respectful of Flexis' diverse people, cultures and faiths.

Conclusion

Flexi schools are a responsive and deeply compassionate response to those who would otherwise disappear from formal education in Australia, a social issue that is little discussed despite its immensity (Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). Deeply immersed in the world, Flexis are courageous and innovative in the manner that schools are called upon to be in ICSCD (§27). ICSCD highlights the importance of Catholic governing authorities being proactive in exploring and asserting the Catholic identity of their schools. The unique character of Flexis as diverse communities of both young people and staff puts particular challenges before Flexi principals to be identity leaders for their communities. In exploring and clarifying a Catholic identity of Flexi schools that is distinctively different from mainstream Catholic schools in Australia, this paper has proposed next steps for Flexi leaders in their responsibility for the Catholic educational project which they lead, namely, the formation of their staff in a values alignment that is explicitly Catholic but not in an exclusory way. Clarity about the humanity to which Flexis

aspire, and how what they say and do is deeply rooted in a Catholic milieu, is quintessential to their future success as alternative models of Catholic schooling. Flexi leaders can elucidate and animate their schools' identity through staff formation that honours receptive ecumenism and welcomes interfaith dialogue.

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