

Directions for Catholic Educational Leadership in the 21st Century: The Vision, Challenges and Reality

Non-refereed paper

Title: Providing Cultural Leadership – An induction strategy

Abstract number: 6345

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Introduction

Not long ago a teacher was discussing a problem with me. She had some years of professional experience behind her but was new to the Catholic system of schools.

'I teach Art,' she said. 'I'm interested in images and symbols, in ways people represent reality.'

'In my new school I keep encountering images and language that I'm not familiar with – pictures, statues and other representations, little altars, slogans, ceremonies and commonly-used phrases. They all speak of something that I have yet to learn about. *I need to crack the code!*'

'I've news for you,' I said. 'You have come into contact with the Catholic imagination.'

Here is the rich, symbolic, analogical and celebratory world that Catholics take for granted. It helps define a particular religious culture.

With greater or lesser degrees of success, Catholic schools nurture this culture. Their teachers have often unconsciously absorbed it during their own schooling. Many have done formal courses on it during their pre-service preparation. To others, such as my friend the Art teacher, it is all a closed book.

Yet the Catholic school is deeply embedded in Catholic culture and translates this culture into an educational context. Principals and other members of the school executive are cultural leaders. Amongst their responsibilities is the induction of new teachers, and the ongoing re-induction of all staff, into the religious culture that gives Catholic schools their most distinguishing characteristic.

An induction program

This is part of the background of a program developed for the Diocese of Parramatta to assist in the induction and re-induction of staff into Catholic school culture. Titled '*The Way We Do Things Around Here*', the program explores how Catholic worldview, life and culture help shape the modern Catholic school.

The program was initially designed as part of an accreditation process for teachers who had not completed a formal course dealing with Catholic school culture. Its usefulness for whole staffs wishing to revisit and clarify the Catholic cultural identity of their own school soon became apparent.

Description

The program is structured around ten inter-related sessions, each of about one-and-a-half hours' duration. It can be easily adapted for presentation on one day.

The program is not a series of scripts to be followed by a presenter but rather a flexible structure which invites adaptation. While notes on content are provided, and activities are suggestion, it is anticipated that the presenter (who may be one of the school leaders, another member of staff, or a visiting facilitator) will draw heavily on their own knowledge and experience while responding to the backgrounds and needs of the participants. Story-telling is vitally important to the program. And the best stories are the presenter's own.

When in full swing, the program will involve various teachers and students. It will engage the participants and be linked to the life of the participants' own school(s) with special attention being given to the school's history, symbols, ceremonies and practices, and its other distinguishing features. Some aspects may well be illustrated by the students' work.

A Catholic way of seeing the world

The aim of the first session is to help participants realise that there is a broad Catholic way of understanding reality and that this worldview helps create the life and culture of the Catholic school.

The session itself begins with the concept of worldview and identifies some of the expressions of it that are common throughout contemporary society.

Features of a distinctly Catholic worldview are introduced by identifying some of its core ideas (eg the dignity of the human person, the sacredness of the environment, the importance of community, reconciliation and transformation) and by unpacking some of the religious beliefs and understandings that underpin these.

The implications of a Catholic worldview for the culture of the Catholic school are then considered. What *values*, for instance, would you expect to find? What sort of relationships? What practices? What publicly expressed views and behaviours of teachers would be seen as supporting the Catholic community's worldview? What might be offensive to it?

Community

The focus of the second session is the communal dimension of the Catholic Church and the Catholic school where community is understood as more than merely a sociological concept.

The aim of the session is to help participants to appreciate the role of the Catholic school in the context of the Church and its mission. It also provides opportunities for clarifying some of the expectations of the Church, CEO (where relevant), parents and colleagues in relation to the work of all school personnel. Here will be considered roles and responsibilities within the Church, particularly as these are relevant to schools.

The session offers an appropriate opportunity for participants to examine diocesan and school publications prepared for the guidance of teachers, especially beginning teachers.

Culture: stories and traditions

The third session focuses more directly on culture by looking at the stories and traditions that have become part of the life of the Catholic school in Australia.

This can be enriched by personal narratives: stories of individual Catholics (especially the presenter), members of a religious congregation associated with the school, the parish priest, other teachers, parents, and so on.

Stories would include foundation myths, 'tribal memories' which still influence the culture, migration stories, stories of individuals and whole school communities.

Not all of our stories are good. Within the cultural shadow, some people have been hurt and opportunities to serve the Kingdom more effectively have been missed. The need for repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation is universal.

Culture: symbols and celebrations

The theme of culture continues in the fourth session's focus on symbols and celebrations which provide glimpses into the Catholic imagination.

The Catholic worldview is particularly conscious of the deepest mysteries of life and death. It makes heavy use of images – both visual and verbal – in dealing with these mysteries. So when a person enters a Catholic place such as a Catholic school, he or she enters a rich symbolic and celebratory world of icons and banners, logos and mottos, stories and liturgies, crucifixes and statues, music and prayers, gestures and special turns of phrase.

Beneath it all are layers of meaning, a religious sensibility, a conviction that there is an active presence of Someone truly remarkable in our everyday world.

The participants are given the special opportunity to explore the symbolic and celebratory life of the Catholic school: sacred spaces, school motto and mission, special assemblies, the Sacraments for which the students are prepared at critical times of their schooling, the Church's liturgical year – seasons and feast days.

Much of this can be elaborated upon and put in a very practical context by colleagues of the participants and by the students themselves. 'This is the way we do things around here!'

Catholic educational philosophy

Session 5 focuses on the educational thinking which underpins the curriculum of a Catholic school.

While much of the educational program is very similar in all types of schools, a Catholic understanding of the nature of both education and the human person underpins the total culture, including the educational programs, of a Catholic school.

Some pedagogies and general approaches to the organisation of learning are particularly appropriate in reflecting Catholic understanding of the purpose of schooling, the nature of the school and the human qualities of the learner. In an important sense, all education has a religious dimension.

Worthy of introduction at this point is the NSW Catholic Education Commission's Curriculum documents, *Towards Wholeness K-6* and *towards Wholeness 7-10*. These present a Christian perspective on the Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PD/H/PE) syllabuses produced by a government agency (the NSW Board of Studies). A coordinator or teacher who is familiar with *Towards Wholeness* might appropriately lead participants in discussing how the school explores the religious dimension of this learning area.

School culture

The sixth session brings together the earlier work on Catholic culture and Catholic educational thinking. Where participants are all from the one school, this provides an excellent opportunity for the school leadership team to guide the reflection on the school's culture, based on a specific framework: stories and traditions; values and beliefs; symbols; rituals, ceremonies and celebrations; relationships and protocols; routines and behaviours.

The wider culture

The seventh session considers Catholic schools in their wider cultural context.

Contemporary Catholic schools are influenced by a vast range of social and cultural forces, some of which are supportive of the Catholic culture while others are not.

Participants identify and evaluate the impact on Catholic schools of such societal influences as secularism, popular culture, consumerism, technocracy, individualism, post-modernism and New Age thinking.

This session does not imply that a Catholic school should be a closed society, separated and alienated from the world around it. Rather, its mission is to engage the world and contribute to its development. This requires the exercise of critical discernment.

Catholic identity

The eighth session considers the question of the Catholic identity of the school. It does this by providing a window through which participants can view some of the processes whereby one Catholic diocesan community sought to maintain the authenticity of its schools.

The focus of the session is the discussion paper, *The Identity of Our Catholic Schools*, published by the Parramatta Catholic Schools Council after extensive community consultation. However, similar publications on identity (eg Wollongong's *Learning and Teaching in a Catholic Community*) could be used.

Participants follow a process whereby, after the discussion paper is placed in context, they set about reviewing it, discussing some of the case studies and challenges listed, as well as considering the paper's nomination of certain verbal images as being particularly effective in catching distinguishing features of the authentic Catholic school (eg schools as a family, an educating community, a web of connections, an artist's workshop, a garden ... as distinct from school as a business, a shop, a factory, a race, a sorting house or a competition).

Spirituality

The ninth session is devoted to the concept of the personal spirituality of the teacher. It gives participants the opportunity to reflect on some of their own most basic and personal understandings of the significance of what they bring to their work. The process, which is intended to be private and personal, is built around four reflection sheets.

Synthesis

The final session draws the threads together, giving participants the opportunity to clarify their views and achieve a degree of personal integration of the program content.

After the presenter reviews the program, members of a panel of experienced teachers are invited to make personal responses – hopefully, in an interesting and anecdotal way – to some important questions. These would cover such topics as their own experiences of

teaching in a Catholic school, the things they have come to value, significant events and ceremonies, their understanding of the core work of teaching in a Catholic school, and their observations of how the work of teachers in Catholic schools has made a significant difference to the lives of individual students.

Conclusion

The presenter's notes contain a suggested structure for each session, along with worksheets, readings, follow-up activities and a glossary. It is assumed that these will be refined and expanded as presenters make the program their own.