

Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education

Summary Report

Professor Jim Gleeson

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The Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education project was established at the Brisbane campus of Australian Catholic University in 2013 with the financial support of the five Queensland Catholic Education Offices, the Archdiocese of Brisbane, Catholic Church Insurances Ltd, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, the Sisters of Mercy (Brisbane), Presentation Sisters (Qld) and Edmund Rice Education Australia. This funding was for a five year period. The project advisory/reference group, which included representatives of all donors and ACU, met twice a year during the early years.

The main objective of this project is to bring a Catholic perspective to the general school curriculum so as to complement Religious Education and the religious life of the school.

Project team

Dr Jim Gleeson, Professor of Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education

Dr Peta Goldberg, Professor of Religious Education

Dr Maureen O'Neill, Research Assistant (p/t)

Main activities

The preliminary stages of this project involved meetings with the main partners and reconnaissance visits to approximately sixty schools and agencies. The main activities are summarised here under four headings.

Empirical research

- (i) Surveys and interviews were used to establish teachers' opinions, beliefs and practices regarding Catholic identity and curriculum (See draft report at http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/802378/draft_teacher_report.pdf; also Gleeson, O'Gorman, O'Neill, 2018; Gleeson, O'Neill, 2017a.
- (ii) Longitudinal study of ACU pre-service teachers' opinions regarding cognate questions was also conducted (Gleeson, O'Neill, 2017b)

Teacher survey

A mixed methods approach was used to establish the views of teachers in Queensland Catholic schools regarding the identity, purposes and characteristics of their schools, using the survey at http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1190183/Identity_and_Curriculum_in_Catholic_Education.pdf

This survey, which was designed in collaboration with representatives of the five Catholic Education Offices in Queensland, included items about the importance of

faith-based school identity and certain characteristics of Catholic schools, respondents' reasons for working in Catholic Education, and the purposes of Catholic schools (both generic and faith-based items). The fifteen given characteristics involved an adaptation of the items used in Convey's (2012) study in US Catholic Schools under four main headings: faith community; prayer, liturgies and symbols; whole curriculum; community service.

The survey was set up using Qualtrics software and piloted with 88 teachers in four Catholic schools in Rockhampton. It was distributed electronically to all 6,832 teachers in Queensland Catholic schools in March 2014. In order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality participants were not asked to provide their names or the name of school where they worked. Incomplete responses were discarded, leaving a total of 2287 complete responses in January 2015, an overall response rate of 33.5%.

Based on the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (2012) data for teacher gender and school type, the respondents were broadly representative of teachers in Queensland Catholic schools. Respondents included a wide range of ages (modal range 40-49 years) and teaching experience (modal range 11-20 years) and half of them had more than ten years' experience of teaching in Catholic schools. Over 80% identified as Catholic with one-third saying that religion is very important to how they live their lives (subsequently referred to as religiosity), while one-third had added professional responsibilities ranging from Principal to 'Position of Added Responsibility'. Almost two-thirds had some current or past experience of teaching Religious Education and/or Study of Religion (RE/SoR) and more than three-quarters rated their own knowledge of Catholic teaching as either very good (24%) or good (53%), particularly Catholics, teachers of RE/SOR and those with longer service in Catholic education, added professional responsibilities and high levels of religiosity. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis.

The **main findings** of this survey are as follows:

- The vast majority (93%) believe that Catholic schools are different or very different from other schools and that the **faith-based identity of Catholic schools** is important or very important.
- When respondents were asked to identify their single most important **reason for working in the Catholic school sector**, 56% chose the 'environment of Catholic schools' while 27% chose 'commitment to the Catholic faith' and 17% chose job-related reasons.

- When asked about **the purpose of Catholic schools**, respondents chose a 'safe and nurturing environment' ahead of more explicitly faith-based options such as 'provide an authentic experience of a Catholic community' and 'education in the Catholic faith and tradition'. When scores for the latter two items were combined they were on a par with 'safe and nurturing environment'.
- When asked to rate and rank fifteen given **characteristics of Catholic schools** the highest scores were for 'caring community', rated 'essential' by 88%, and ranked as the single most important characteristic by 60%.
- The next most **popular characteristics** were school is a community of faith; prayer is integral to the school's daily life for staff and students; the school engages in outreach and social justice programmes; Religious Education programmes present the teachings of the Catholic Church; the school community celebrates school liturgies frequently.
- Three **variables** had particularly strong **associations with faith-based reasons** for working in Catholic Education and the purposes of Catholic schools – having added professional responsibilities; length of service in Catholic schools, and being Catholic.
- Respondents for whom **faith commitment** was the main reason for teaching in Catholic schools were more than twice as likely as their peers to endorse explicitly faith-related purposes of schooling. Faith commitment was associated with being Catholic, high self-ratings for knowledge of Catholic teaching, length of service in Catholic Education, being a teacher of RE/SoR, being a primary teacher and having added professional responsibilities.
- Willingness to undertake **professional development** regarding the faith-based identity of schools was positively associated with the perceived importance of Catholic school identity, having added professional responsibilities and commitment to the Catholic faith.
- More than half the survey respondents were positively disposed towards **the planned integration of a Catholic perspective in their curriculum planning** and a similar proportion indicated that they integrated a Catholic perspective in their classroom practice. However, the importance of integrating a Catholic perspective was ranked 11th of the 15 given characteristics of Catholic schools.
- Those most favourably disposed to the **integration of a Catholic perspective** across the curriculum had added professional responsibilities, high self-reported levels of knowledge of Catholic teaching and were teaching in Catholic schools because of their faith commitment.

Comparison of Queensland and US teachers' opinions regarding the characteristics of Catholic schools

The Queensland ratings for these given characteristics of Catholic schools were compared with the ratings of 3,389 US Catholic school teachers (Convey, 2012). While it is important to acknowledge that neither of these large samples is statistically representative, some remarkable differences emerged when odds ratios were used to compute the odds of US respondents seeing a particular characteristic as essential by comparison with Queensland respondents.

- US respondents were far more likely to rate all given characteristics of Catholic schools as essential. These differences are reflected in the following in the following odds ratio values: teachers of religion are Catholic (25.81); celebration of school liturgies (11.64); RE programs present the teachings of the Church (11.00); integration of Catholic teachings across the formal curriculum (8.86); and prayer in the daily life of school (8.68).
- A similar pattern emerged when administrators' ratings in the two jurisdictions were compared. The differences were not as great however as for the overall responses, with the exception of teachers of religion are Catholic (28.69).

Teacher interviews

Some 43 survey respondents, representing a wide range of teaching experience, volunteered for follow-up interview and 20 were chosen with a view to getting the widest possible range of perspectives. The purpose of these interviews was to delve more deeply into the survey findings and each interview lasted 30-40 minutes. Data were analysed using a thematic coding approach meaning that transcripts were studied, themes were identified, and answers were organised and classified. For report on teacher interviews see http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/775158/MAY1515compositeteachintvreport.pdf

When asked about their classroom practice, most interviewees saw the integration of a Catholic perspective in terms of using spontaneous 'teachable moments' and/or personal witness (I teach who I am). Concerns were expressed, particularly by more experienced respondents, that teachers' levels of theological literacy would not allow them to engage confidently with curriculum topics from a faith perspective, particularly in the case of younger teachers.

Longitudinal study of pre-service teachers

168 first year pre-service teachers responded to a short survey in 2014 and 60 of these responded to the same survey as final year students in 2017. Some relevant findings include:

- When asked about the reasons for their **choice of secondary school**, first year students, regardless of religious affiliation, religiosity or school type, were influenced by convenience of location, reputation as a caring school and academic achievement, while faith-based considerations were of little importance.
- When asked about the **purposes of schooling** they saw 'providing a safe and caring school environment' as the most important purpose of schooling followed by academic achievement while faith-based purposes received particularly low ratings.
- 'Caring community' was regarded as the most important **characteristic** of the Catholic school by some distance followed by 'teachers of RE are accredited to teach RE' and 'engagement in outreach and social justice programmes'.
- Final year students followed a very similar pattern to first years although giving even lower ratings for faith-based education as a purpose of schooling. They endorsed 'caring community' even more strongly as a characteristic of Catholic schools and gave higher ratings to 'RE programmes present the teachings of the Catholic Church' and the importance of school liturgies and prayer.

Action research related activities

- (i) Seeking participants
- (ii) Visit to Ontario
- (iii) Provision of teaching resources
- (iv) Implementing school-based action research with approximately thirty teachers in primary and secondary schools integrating Catholic Social Teaching (CST) with the support of the project team
- (v) Action research Seminars, May and November 2016
- (vi) Provision of academic credit (ACU) at Master's level for participating teachers
- (vii) Whole school approach

Seeking participants

This involved meetings/presentations with/at all five Catholic Education Offices in Queensland and in more than sixty Catholic schools in Brisbane Archdiocese.

Visit to Ontario

Peta Goldberg and Jim Gleeson visited Halton District Catholic School Board, Ontario in October 2015 to learn more about their approach to integrating Catholic identity across the curriculum.

Teaching resources

Links to various Caritas materials, organised by Catholic Social Teaching principle, learning area and year level **have been posted on the project website at** http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties,_institutes_and_centres/education_and_arts/schools/research/identity_and_curriculum_in_catholic_education/teaching_and_learning_resources

With a view to the integration of CST with language/literacy teaching in primary schools, 'Picture Books and Catholic Social Teaching', prepared by Carmel Turner & Louise Mercer, Australian Catholic University, is also available at the above link on the project website.

Implementation of school-based action research

The main research questions were:

- Is it possible to integrate Catholic Social Teaching in a planned way across learning areas other than RE?
- What are the necessary conditions and/or the main constraints?

The members of the project team framed their work in terms of a partnership between the project and schools with the project undertaking to:

- Provide PD in relation to Catholic Social Teaching and action research
- Support and facilitate participating teachers in planning, implementation, teacher reflection and evaluation of student outcomes
- Pay for teacher release to enable participating teachers to attend PD and collaborate with the project team
- Assist teachers with locating relevant resources
- Provide opportunities for participating teachers to showcase their work
- Make it possible for participating teachers to gain academic credit at Master's level by completing related assignments.

School leaders were expected to provide the necessary supports while participating teachers were expected to attend related PD events and work collaboratively with the project.

Notwithstanding survey respondents' positive responses to the integration of a Catholic perspective, it proved quite difficult to find teacher volunteers for action research. Some 30 teachers representing seven different schools (primary and secondary) have been directly involved over the past two years (see Appendix 1). The most commonly chosen CST principle was Stewardship of Creation, followed by Dignity of the Human Person and Subsidiarity and Participation (see Appendix 2).

Curriculum planning and implementation

Participating teachers were encouraged to use a common planning template. Some favoured an organic approach over strict adherence to previously prepared plans and this involved having plans in place for 'teachable moments' as they arise and the planned orchestration of such moments.

While teachers saw the value of an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum integration, one that began from particular CST principles, secondary teachers generally regarded integration of CST into one subject as the most viable and realistic approach in practice with primary teachers adopting a more multi-disciplinary approach where CST was introduced where possible when teaching particular Units of work.

While it was generally recognized that the Australian Curriculum general capabilities and cross-curricular themes have the potential to facilitate the integration of CST, they do not appear to have not gained much traction in schools to date.

Although participating teachers readily recognized the pivotal role of Religious Education in their attempts to integrate CST, matching the RE programme with the prescribed curriculum proved difficult in practice.

Teachers' opinions were somewhat divided regarding the use of CST-related assessment tasks. While some regarded the inclusion of such tasks as very important for maintaining focus, others favoured a more organic approach and/or 'more authentic approaches' to the assessment of CST learning outcomes.

Student and teacher outcomes

Based on data from pre- and post-surveys, student assessment tasks, teachers' classroom observations and some parental feedback, participating teachers have identified many positive outcomes including:

- Increased levels of knowledge, awareness and understanding with respect to CST for both students and teachers e.g. a Business Studies teacher was 'pleasantly surprised' at the reaction of her Year 12 students.
- Students across the age range had increased awareness of

the relevance of CST principles such as the dignity of human life and stewardship to various curriculum areas and/or their school/local community.

- Students were motivated to adopt CST perspectives towards critical social questions in modern society e.g. respect for differences, sense of empowerment.

Teachers reported that their own understanding of and enthusiasm for CST had increased and they identified a number of issues needing attention:

- Ongoing professional development to enhance their knowledge and understanding of CST
- The importance of a systemic, whole school, approach to the integration of CST
- The role of the teacher when dealing with controversial issues in the classroom.
- Access to appropriate teaching resources
- Achieving balance between CST and education for social justice /human rights.
- The merits of including explicit lessons on CST as a prelude to curriculum integration versus a more integrationist approach.
- The merits of a systematic approach to curriculum planning as against a more organic approach and 'teachable moments'
- The synchronization of the RE curriculum with the integration of CST.
- The difficulty of integrating CST within prevailing time pressures and the demands of the Australian Curriculum particularly at secondary level.

Action Research Seminars

Opportunities were provided for teacher participants in the action research project to showcase and disseminate the planned integration of Catholic Social Teaching across the curriculum at two seminars held at the ACU Leadership Centre on 10th May and November 9th, 2016 (1.30pm-7pm). Each event was attended by more than sixty people.

Teachers' presentations (Power Point slides and/or video clips as well as associated Q&A clips) are posted on the project website at

http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties,_institutes_and_centres/education_and_arts/schools/research/identity_and_curriculum_in_catholic_education/action_research_activities

Academic Credit

Academic credit is available from ACU at Master’s level (Education/Religious Education/Educational Leadership) for participating teachers who undertake related professional development, submit two assignments for assessment and make a presentation of their research to regional or school colleagues.

Whole school approach

Participating teachers and seminar attendees have readily recognised the importance of moving towards a whole school approach to the integration of CST. Three schools are at various stages of the adoption of such an approach. Our Lady of the Angels primary school, Wavell Heights, began the implementation of this approach across all classes in January 2017.

Other project activities

- (i) Profiles of approaches to the integration of a Catholic perspective across the curriculum at St Patrick’s, Shorncliffe and St Rita’s College, Clayfield.

http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/795120/St_Ritas_1311_Final_Singles.pdf

http://www.acu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/800844/St_Patricks_College,_Shorncliffe..pdf

- (ii) Development and implementation of Unit EDCU623 ‘Social Justice, Identity and Curriculum’, a core Unit of ACU’s M.Ed. programme, taken by 320 students to date.
- (iii) Preparation of Exemplar Units in conjunction with some EDCU623 students.
- (iv) Supported Brisbane School of Education initiative on Catholic Social Teaching in teacher education.
- (v) Comparative study: ‘the teacher as moral educator: comparative study of secondary teachers in Catholic schools in Australia and Ireland’ with Dr Joanne O’Flaherty, University of Limerick.
- (vi) Longitudinal study of pre-service teachers’ levels of moral reasoning.

Related publications in peer-reviewed journal papers

Gleeson, J., O’Gorman, J., O’Neill, M. (2018). The identity of Catholic schools as seen by teachers in Catholic schools in Queensland. *International Studies in Catholic Education*.

Gleeson, J., Goldberg, P., O’Gorman, J. O’Neill, M. (2018) Characteristics of Catholic Schools as seen by Teachers in the USA and Queensland, Australia, *Journal of Catholic Education*

Gleeson, J., O’Neill, M. (2017a). Curriculum, culture and Catholic education: a Queensland perspective. *Curriculum Perspectives*. DOI 10.1007/s41297-017-0018-6

Gleeson, J., O’Neill, M. (2017b) Student-teachers’ perspectives on the purposes and characteristics of faith-based schools: an Australian view. *British Journal of Religious Education iFirst*
<http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/INMc4ITiNXBJRseB2w-fR/full>

With O’Flaherty, J., McCormack, O., O’Reilly, B., (2017). Developing the characteristic spirit of publicly managed schools in a more secular and pluralist Ireland, *Cambridge Journal of Education*

Gleeson, J., O’Flaherty, J. (2016). The teacher as moral educator: comparative study of secondary teachers in Catholic schools in Australia and Ireland. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 55, 45-56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.12.002>

Gleeson, J. 2015. Critical challenges and dilemmas for Catholic Education Leadership internationally, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 7:2, 145-161, DOI:10.1080/19422539.2015.1072955

Forthcoming publications

Goldburg, P.M. (in press). Catholic social teaching across the curriculum: Insights from theory and practice. *Hong Kong Journal of Catholic Studies* 8.

Gleeson, J., Goldberg, P. (forthcoming). Integration of Catholic Social Teaching across the curriculum: an action research approach. *Educational Action Research*.

Conference papers

Integrating Catholic Social Teaching across the curriculum in Catholic schools in Queensland: an action research approach. Session paper, Annual Conference of New Zealand Educational Research Association. Wellington, November 22, 2016.

With Peta Goldberg: Integrating a Catholic perspective across the curriculum – an action research approach. Session paper, National Institute for Christian Education Research, Canterbury, July 7, 2017.

Reference

Convey, J.J. (2012). Perceptions of Catholic Identity: Views of Catholic School Administrators and Teachers. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 16 (1) 187-214

APPENDIX 1: Schools and teachers participating in action research

Holy Spirit Catholic School, Bray Park. Helen Bachmann, Kim Barrett-Coade (APRE), Rebecca Burke, Greg Mennis, Kate McCorkindale, Kristy Nice.

St. Anthony’s Catholic Primary School, Alexandra Hills. Leann Bridge

St Ita’s Catholic Primary School, Dutton Park. Farah Anderson, Ann-Marie Badcock, Peta Ebzery, Kathleen Hammond (Primary Learning Leader), Paula McConnon (APRE)

St Joseph’s Tobruk Memorial School, Beenleigh. Nicolle Birks, Katherine Condon, Catherine Schloman (Curriculum Support)

Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Primary School, Wavell Heights. Kirsten Karey, Sue McIntosh and approximately 30 teachers.

Assisi Catholic College, Upper Coomera. Corina Jeflea (Business & Economics), Michaela O’Connor (English), Danny McCormick (APRE); Leanne Whibley (Primary)

St Columban’s College, Caboolture. Raechel Fletcher (APRE), Reuben Pather (RE), Jozef Friedmann, Nedra Rose, Paul Schaumberg, Andrew Skinner, Brendan Walsh (Science), Deborah Holland, Daniel Out (Humanities Curriculum Leaders), Lavinia Affleck & Lucia Harkin (History); Derek Hughes & David Schmidt (Geography).

APPENDIX 2

Primary	Stewardship of Creation	Year 3, across whole primary curriculum Year 3 HASS , RE, English, Design and Technologies Year 3 HASS, RE, English, Science, Design, Digital Media Year 4 HASS, Science
Primary	Common Good	Year 4 English, RE
Primary	Subsidiarity and Participation	Year 6 HASS Year 3, English, HASS Year 3 HASS, English, RE, Health
Primary	Preferential Option for the Poor	Year 6, HASS, RE, English
Secondary	Stewardship of Creation	Year 12 Biology Year 8 English Year 9 Geography
Secondary	Dignity of the human person	Year 8 English Year 10 Biology
Secondary	Solidarity	Year 8 English
Secondary	Common Good	Year 9 History
Secondary	Dignity of the human person and Stewardship of Creation	Year 12 Business Communication & Technologies (Corporate Social Responsibility)



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