

Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education

Integrating Catholic Social Teaching with Visual Arts Specialist lessons

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Context: Year 6, Term 3, 2015

Selected aspects of Catholic Social Teaching and rationale

The Dignity of the Human Person

Every human being is created in God's image and likeness and therefore is valuable and worthy of respect.

Human Equality

The equality of persons is a matter of their essential human dignity; social and cultural discrimination is not compatible with our understanding that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Students in Year 6 have undertaken studies in social Justice as part of their leadership within the school community throughout the academic year. In conjunction with this, Geography and History classroom learning has placed them in the position to study the novel Rabbit Proof Fence and issues surrounding the stolen generation. As a specialist teacher I have carried on with these themes, with a focus on racism within their art work for the term. Teaching of the above-mentioned Catholic Social Teachings (CST) ties in extremely well with the theme of racism.

Intended outcomes (Catholic Social Teaching)

Through a unit, themed around racism, in Visual Art it is hoped that children will develop their understanding of the Catholic Social Teachings as listed above and be able to start applying these to their everyday life. While Visual Art must remain the focus to ensure subject integrity, CSTs will be a discussion focus and this discussion will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the issue leading to deeper images being produced by the children.

Links with Australian Curriculum capabilities and cross-curricular themes

General Capabilities:

- Literacy – through classroom discussions children are developing their speaking and listening skills
- Critical and creative thinking – creating any art work involves varying degrees of problem solving throughout. Through the creation process children will develop their reasoning and creative skills and through exposure to and involvement in classroom discourse children will develop their critical thinking skills.

- Personal and social capabilities – it is hoped that children will commence developing a sense of empathy for victims of racism and their developing understanding of victim and perpetrator will foster their ever-developing relationship building skills
- Ethical understanding – through classroom discourse children will ‘develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others.’
- Intercultural understanding – through unit work we look at similarities and differences between cultures to develop an awareness of equity between cultures

Cross-curricular Priorities:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures (OI.9 Australia acknowledges the significant contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people locally and globally).
Objective: Through developing their understanding of the contributions Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have made to our nation, children develop a greater understanding of human equality.

Integration strategies

- Explicitly teaching the two listed CSTs
- Explicit teaching of and demonstration of drawing facial features present in a person experiencing feelings that have been identified as relating to victims of racism
- Classroom discussion surrounding racism, specifically the effects it has on the victim and possible reasons for the perpetrator
- 1 to 1 and small group conversations around the issue, embracing teachable moments throughout the course of the lesson
- Using images as a stimulus to discussion, and then guiding that discussion to ensure feelings are not hurt – removing ourselves from the discussion and instead talking generically.

Links with RE

Religious Life of the School: Social Action and Justice

By exposing children to issues relating to Human equality and Dignity of the human person we are fostering the development of attitudes, beliefs and actions within the future leaders of our communities. Children will be better placed to make informed decisions and act in a more just way over the long term if continued exposure is allowed/ fostered.

Religious Education Curriculum Year 6

They understand the significance of Jesus’ New Law for the way believers live their faith, including an exploration of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Resources

- A range of images sourced from the internet
- CST posters sourced from Caritas website – school resources section

Problems encountered

- Sourcing images that were not too powerful for primary age children, being able to make the decision that yes or no these children are ready to view these images. As a specialist teacher (not as familiar with the children as a classroom teacher) I tended to choose images that were less graphic or did not hold as strong of a message
- To maintain the integrity of my subject area (Visual Art) I found that I did not spend as much time on rich discussion as would have been ideal. I found that I had to cut discussions short to ensure that Visual Art learning was also taking place. This was not necessarily a problem relating specifically to the subject area, it was more the time constraints that I personally have; I see the children for 1 X 40 minute lesson per week. A classroom teacher could still use the conduit of Visual Arts to enrich the learning and, if the classroom discussion was rich, could extend the lesson time to maintain the flow.
- Many of the concepts discussed were too abstract for this particular age group. As CSTs are not embedded throughout the school this is the first exposure to them that many of the children have experienced. Therefore understanding and involvement was limited.
- I should not have introduced a new medium at the same time as the CST teaching. It may have eased the teaching and learning load if the children did not also have to learn a totally new art medium.
- My own understanding of CSTs was limited, and is still not extensive.
- My stimulus questions were hard for the students to understand. I also found it difficult to explain exactly what they meant without feeding the children the desired answer.
- Children panicked when given the written response to the stimulus as they immediately thought that it was a test! They were reassured; however, there was still a sense of panic.

Student outcomes

- There was a small number of students that I could 'grab' teachable moments with by engaging in 1 to 1 or small group discussions based on a topic of conversation that may have arisen. These students, I feel, did gain more from this particular unit than other students who were less willing to become involved in this way. Unfortunately though, I feel that they are still too young, or too immature in their thinking, to articulate this in their written response to the stimulus questions.
- I believe that if there is continued exposure to Catholic Social Teachings these students will more easily develop their understanding in this area. The seeds have been planted and as they mature deeper understanding will be more accessible.

Evaluation of student learning

Based on classroom discourse, student response to stimulus and anecdotal records it is my understanding that:

- Most children gained a deeper understanding of artist's use of colour to convey mood and facial expression within art to tell a story. Many used this understanding and their developing skills to

create art works with a strong message (remembering that these are year 6 children not secondary art students).

- Many children have further developed their understanding of CSTs, however, I do not feel that there has been a significant increase in this understanding as yet; I believe that this is a long term learning experience. The learning is very abstract and the children in primary school are still very young. The real advantage will come when they are continually exposed to CSTs in their learning and as they have the benefit of age and maturity they will more readily accept these concepts and be ready to act for a more just society. If CSTs were embedded across the primary school, however, by the time the children reached year 6 they would be more ready to embrace Catholic Social Teachings. They would have a deep understanding of Catholic Identity and could possibly be starting to live this beyond the classroom context.
- It was evident that there was a small group of students who totally missed the point of the unit, they simply wanted to make their art 'beautiful'. During class a great deal of the discussion was based on colour to represent mood. Unfortunately a small number of children finished their piece of art with bright rainbow colours in the background, giving an overall feeling/mood to their work of happiness and joy.

Reflections on planning and implementation

- It is a genuine benefit to have the backup of the CST to support us if parents take offence at what we are teaching in the classroom. For example, if we are discussing boat people in class and we come to the conclusion that the government position is unjust based on our understanding of CSTs then even if the parents hold a different view we can state that it is not actually our personal opinion that we are sprouting to the children in class, we are basing our open discussion on CSTs.
- Throughout this project my teaching of CST has lost its 'naturalness.' I am working too hard to get the message across because it is my unit focus rather than just my beliefs and passion. I became more aware of this as the unit progressed and I made a genuine effort towards the conclusion of the unit to stop pressuring myself so much and it became more natural again. I needed to accept that because I only see the children for 1 X 40 minute lesson per week the impact is not going to be as significant as if I was a classroom teacher. Every little bit does make a difference though; maybe the impact will be more likely to be long term rather than short term.

Teacher outcomes

Teacher outcomes will vary, depending on the individual.

- If the individual demonstrates a genuine interest in CSTs they are more likely to adopt the processes involved in embedding this throughout the curriculum, and seek further information leading to a deeper understanding;

- If the individual has a high awareness of social justice issues within the local and international community then he/she will be more likely to foster awareness of this within the classroom context

As an individual who is very interested in CSTs and living out my faith in this way I was already embedding CSTs into my teaching as much as practicable, although I may not have 'named' it as such. During unit planning sessions I would actually search for ways to incorporate social justice issues into the Visual Arts classroom. In the past this has come quite naturally in the planning and implementation stages and I was quite excited at the prospect of taking this to another level.

I have personally increased my understanding of Catholic Social Teachings, particularly Dignity of the Human Person and Human Equality, though my understanding of all CSTs has increased considerably over the course of this project. As it is an area of interest my learning in this area will continue and I am interested in pursuing this from a parish perspective.

Lessons learned for future attempts

- Make a genuine attempt to tie in Visual Art learning (or theme for unit) with what is already being covered in the classroom context. For example, The year 6 students were learning about earthquakes in science, I could have easily chosen a Catholic Social Teaching that would directly relate to the aftermath of or humanitarian response to earthquake devastated areas. This would have eased my teaching load beyond the Visual Art curriculum area and also eased the cognitive load on the students.
- Make a definite choice to not introduce a new concept and a new medium simultaneously, reducing the cognitive load on the children.
- Spend more time searching for quality resources online or hard copy.

Implications for school community

- If CSTs were a focus across the school then as the children work their way through the year levels the potential for rich outcomes in learning (and action based projects) would be greatly enhanced.
- Teachers need to receive professional development in the area of Catholic Social Teachings and how to apply these to the classroom context. Only when teacher understanding and knowledge is increased will we see an embedded approach to CST.
- Teachers need to be provided with opportunities to witness and understand the difference between charity and justice, enabling them to acknowledge that a deep understanding of CST is imperative in a Catholic school community.