

Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education: integration of Catholic Social Teaching

School: St Columban's College, Caboolture

Teacher(s): Jozef Friedmann, Paul Schaumberg, Andrew Skinner

APRE: Raechel Fletcher

Religious Education coordinator: Reuben Pather

Class: Year 12, Biology

Unit topic: Human Impact on Ecosystems.

General context:

The school Principal agreed in late 2014 that St Columban's College would participate in action research to address the issue, how can Catholic Social Teaching be integrated across the curriculum in a planned way? Following some initial discussions regarding the possibilities afforded by the Yr. 7 English curriculum, the Identity and Curriculum project team had a number of meetings with the APRE.

The publication of the encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, provided an important backdrop to the initiative.

Catholic Social Teaching Principle(s):

Following discussions between the APRE and Curriculum Coordinators it was decided in September 2015 to work with Year 12 Biology teachers in relation to the CST principle, **Stewardship of Creation**, and the ACARA cross-curricular theme of sustainability. This principle was of particular relevance to the Year 12, Term 4, Biology Unit: Human Impact on Ecosystems.

Intended outcomes:

To introduce students to those aspects of *Laudato Si'* which are of particular relevance to the impact of humans on ecosystems. As the APRE put it, 'the intention was to make the connection between what the Pope is saying and what's happening in our world... we are trying to raise awareness of the social and ethical teaching of the Church'.

Approach to integration:

The relevance of the Australian curriculum cross-curricular theme of sustainability and the general capability of ethical understanding were discussed with participating teachers in advance of unit implementation. The three teachers took a common approach:

- They developed an 'Attitudes towards the environment survey' for use as a pre- and post-test.
- Introductory lesson to sustainability issues using *An Inconvenient Truth* – 'that gave a great base of information about the impact to start with'. One teacher also used a Discovery programme called *Population Overload*. Teachers were very positive about this approach – 'that worked really well, they had some basic knowledge of human impact on ecosystems before I brought in the encyclical'.
- Each teacher introduced *Laudato Si'* over the course of a class period

- Selected aspects of Laudato Si' were introduced in subsequent lessons when the occasion presented itself e.g. when teaching issues such as population growth, the relationship between poverty and sustainability.

They were very aware of the importance of starting from 'where the students are at' and to avoid indoctrination and promote critical thinking:

It's our job to say you need to look beyond yourselves, that if there are personal morality issues there are also communal, common good and sustainable practices and let's have a look at what the church does about sustainable practices... you will be voting, we can make decisions which affect the community.... we don't want to be ramming it down their throats... but teaching them to think, educating them morally, ethically, the whole of what the Catholic Church teaches anyway (Teacher D).

We have to teach kids to be critical thinking and look at the data and see what the thing is and that's a fantastic bit of evidence that he presents (Teacher B)

Teachers found they could make a natural connection between the topic and Laudato Si' and that their approach was more organic than artificial. As Teacher C explained:

We have been teaching evolution for quite a long time and things come up... kids don't know the church has changed and so it is the norm... the problem is that the moral compass has disappeared... there are so many competing ideas and polarized forces now, so there is no real ethics education.... and then they just do what they feel.... So there's an absolute need to address the morals and ethics...

Teachers' comments around the integration of the principle of stewardship shed light on their approach:

It would just keep popping up down the line for maybe a two minute discussion down the line... Students were surprised to hear that the Catholic Church had a position on global warming... so we concentrated more on the extracts on global warming... we spoke about the strong language that's in there ... some of them were a bit surprised that the Pope is pushing governments to try and do something but they thought it was a good thing that he was taking an interest... and then we spoke about what influence that could have on populations ... that they will be voting next year and it may change the way people who have read that encyclical may vote and see things... and from there we went on and looked at some more specific examples of human impact at a more local level rather than a global level... (Teacher A).

I got them to do some research on government response and also on Laudato Si'... Opportunities came up ... things came up about population... a lot of good opportunities come up from the scientific data, what the scientists agree on, what the media say they don't agree on... things they see as impacting in a big way [such as] population, pollution, use of resources and the speeding up of these resources... when we looked at Laudato Si' we could then say this is an important point... It became obvious that they didn't know too much about what organisations are saying about climate

change, even the Australian government.... so there was an opportunity for me to give a lesson on the Australian government approach ... they began to ask, what was the Pope actually trying to achieve ... [and to see that] it comes back to the moral role of leaders in bringing about change, that was a light bulb moment for a lot of them... (Teacher B)

Teacher C recalled that his students were initially resistant to the involvement of the Church in environmental issues. He then 'introduced notion of creation as something we can't take for granted'. He linked environmental problems with the environment and, like Teacher A, found that the students 'were quite surprised at what the Pope had to say about poverty and looking after the planet... they were quite connected to that one.... I could see the changes in their views.'

He noted the complexity of the issue:

... [there is potential for] conflict between the encyclical and the teaching of the Church on abortion and contraception ... [and that] taking people out of poverty simply leads to a lot of consumerism.... The biological gene means you populate and this creates pressure on resources, but even under ideal conditions the planet has finite resources so the problem is not simple at all and some of those teachings of the Church start colliding with each other ... there has to be rationality but it does not equal at all that you have to abort and that you have to have no kids... leads to very good discussion, that's important, it's when you can get sidetracked... it's complex.

Knowledge of Religious Education

No formal links to the RE curriculum were built into the Biology Unit. One teacher reported that students recalled hearing about Catholic Social Teaching in RE units taken in other years.

When I did an individual lesson on the encyclical and we talked about what they knew about Catholic Social Teaching, straight away they said they knew a bit from SOR... not a lot, I thought they might have known a bit more. (Teacher A).

It also emerged that, although stewardship had been mentioned at assembly, as one teacher remarked, 'they heard about it but it didn't stick'.

While the three Biology teachers felt able to cope with the Catholic Social Teaching aspect, as one of them put it, 'you never have enough knowledge but I didn't feel I was inadequate'.

Teachers' overall reactions

Teachers' reactions were generally very positive. Teacher C noted the high level of student interest in environmental issues:

It was definitely positive ... it's important to infuse it and try to make a difference...the funny thing is, when you're talking about something like sea levels they almost forget about science and talk about what the government should be doing and what should happen... most of them end up on that moral platform... you'd be struggling to give the marks for science...

Teacher D felt that

It's important that it just doesn't appear in RE because that's pushed aside as just 'the God thing'... we want to try and show them we're not polar opposites... they don't associate scientific advance or inquiry with Church, traditionally it was quite often about doctrine...

Teacher B remarked that:

It was certainly worthwhile, Year 12s were quite receptive... in Biology we tend to look at the small picture in Year 11 and the big picture in Year 12, things that shape humans and the world ... I think most of them were quite receptive and I think the level of discussion was a little bit better than normal... Unless you get kids discussing things you can't really enrich their concepts and it's difficult initiating discussion because you're really relying on the kids to explore... They have actually got to read and there's a lot less willingness for kids to do a lot of that sort of stuff today so it's actually quite hard to initiate a lot of these ... This was a little better, a lot of kids were prepared to express a few opinions... It was worthwhile.

Students had to write an 'impact essay', and teachers saw the fact it wasn't part of the subject assessment as an advantage – 'in assessment they tend to say the right thing'.

Resources used

The Coordinator of Religious Education provided teachers with copies of *Laudato Si'* and with a summary of the encyclical from *Inform*. He also provided access to relevant aspects of the Caritas website. The Coordinator was also available to discuss relevant issues as they arose including the Church's teaching on abortion and birth control

Problems encountered

Since this was implemented in Term 4, time was particularly limited

...and we are very time poor... there was a focus on assessments in this term... I would make the connections, but you give them the base knowledge and then they work with their own topics and make work on their own... it's short, don't have that much time to read explicitly...

Stewardship of Creation was not built into Unit assessment although learning from related discussions did inform the 'Persuasive Essay' that individual students had to write at the end of the Unit.

Evaluation of student learning:

A survey of students' attitudes towards the environment was designed by the teaching team and administered at the beginning and end of the Unit. The purpose of this survey (Appendix One) was to 'follow up generally on what we were doing and also on what other organisations might have to say and where they got that information from and we also included items on the role of organisations such as the Catholic Church in relation to the environment' (Teacher B).

The same questions were repeated in the post- survey apart from the final question where they were asked about 'the future possible role that government and then religion should play in helping limit human impacts on the world's environment'.

46 students completed the pre-test and 40 completed the post- test.

Students generally **agreed** in relation to the following (stronger agreement in the post-test):

Environmental issues are important to my everyday life

Environment issues should be in the realm of politics

Human meddling in the environment will cause future environmental problems

Science can help solve environmental issues

Human greed greatly contributes to environmental issues

Increasing world population increases the pressure on the World's ecosystems and leads to environmental issues

There were higher levels of agreement with the following items at the end of the Unit than at the beginning:

The church is interested in climate change and the effect it will have on the poor

(39% of one group agreed with this statement in advance as against 57% after. As one teacher remarked, 'attitude to involvement of Church did change').

Organisations that produce environmental statements other than scientific organisations should be treated with suspicion (their reaction to this item seems to contradict their response to the previous item).

Students generally **disagreed** with the following

Environmental issues are best solved by future generations if/when they get worse

Other organisations, such as the Catholic Church, should leave environmental issues to the government (although more students were positive in the post-test)

They were also asked to rate their own knowledge of environmental issues:

Students' post-test knowledge levels were higher to varying degrees in relation to their knowledge of:

- How humans may contribute to climate change
- The pressure that an increased population puts onto the environment
- What Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* has to say about the effects of climate change
- Solutions about particular environmental issues

Ratings for knowledge of 'the Australian government's policy towards limiting climate change' remained more or less the same.

Students' main sources of information with respect to environmental issues were: TV/ media/ documentaries (48%); class discussion/treatment (39%); internet (33%)

Asked about future roles of government in helping limit human impacts on the environment, 55% specified improved enforcement of laws, strategies and policies and 17.5% mentioned educational awareness. 25% did not respond.

Asked about future roles of religion in helping limit human impacts on the environment, 35% again mentioned promoting education and/or encouraging action through education, 12% suggested stronger engagement with scientific evidence (also a feature of *Laudato Si'*) and 45% gave no response.

Teacher outcomes

Participating teachers' awareness of Catholic Social Teaching and *Laudato Si'* was raised and they expressed enthusiasm about continuing to integrate Catholic Social Teaching Principles across the curriculum.

Their experience had brought them to recognize the need for relevant CPD dealing with Catholic Social Teaching e.g. 'more knowledge is what I would want'; 'I would like to have opportunities to make more links with Catholic Social Teaching'; 'we do not have the knowledge of a theologian, we do not have the insights'; 'you are trying to influence student formation and their moral thinking but you need stuff for that'.

Teacher B identified himself as 'a practicing Catholic but without a fantastic knowledge of Catholic teaching'. He said he would like to 'be able to verbalise and be sure about the detail, I don't want to confuse kids and would like to be able to cope with some of the questions before students bring them... have more support so as to be able to give a more holistic approach.' This teacher also acknowledged the support of the RE Coordinator when he was working with the Unit.

Teachers also recognized the relevance of Catholic Social Teaching to Catholic identity and the importance of sharing their experience with the school colleagues.

Looking to the future

The importance of CPD in relation to Catholic Social Teaching was clearly recognized. There was general agreement that 'it's best to have a specific focus rather than a broad generalized approach' (Teacher A).

While, as the APRE remarked that 'it's taken us a while to get our heads around what you were talking about', there was enthusiasm for continuing with the integration of Catholic Social Teaching. The next Biology topic where this might be done is Reproduction in Term 1, 2016. The desirability of expanding into other subject areas was also discussed.

Teacher B talked about 'mapping all the subject areas against 6 CST principles across the 12 years of education' adding that 'to have some quality outcomes you have to look at it from that perspective and see where things fit naturally.'