Critical challenges and dilemmas for Catholic Education Leadership internationally

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Critical challenges and dilemmas for Catholic Education Leadership internationally

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This paper considers the challenges faced by contemporary Catholic Education systems with particular reference to the contrast between the prevailing neo-liberal agenda and gospel values. It explicates this contrast from the perspectives of current critiques of the influence of the new managerialism in education and relevant literature on Catholic Education including successive documents originating from the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education. The challenge for Catholic Education is examined from the perspectives of curriculum policy and practice and the preferential option for the poor. The paper considers the possibility of integrating a Catholic perspective across the formal curriculum and outlines the approach adopted by the Ontario Institute for Catholic Education. Concerns regarding elitism in Catholic Education are examined from Australian and Irish viewpoints.

Keywords: neo-liberal agenda; gospel values; Catholic Education; curriculum integration; option for the poor

Introduction

Catholic Education systems face a number of challenges today including Church/state relations, the relationship between faith and culture, the meaning of Catholic identity, declining levels of religious observance and the aging profile of religious teaching communities. Conscious of the tendency for Catholic Education systems to focus on their own uniqueness, the author addresses a challenge of a different order, one that arises from the hegemony of scientific-technical reason and market-driven neo-liberal values, a hegemony that militates against gospel values. The paper considers appropriate responses to this ideology from the perspectives of curriculum policy and practice and the social values of the gospels, particularly the option for the poor. It is based on the author’s keynote address at the 2013 Australian Catholic University (ACU) Catholic Leadership conference and reflects his familiarity with education systems in Ireland and Australia.

Grace’s (1989) fundamental question remains valid – ‘Education: Commodity or Public Good?’ While Grace’s main focus was on the value of a liberal education, it was not long before the discourse of the neo-liberal ideology came to dominate. Today the term neo-liberal has come to be ‘used so widely and so loosely that it is in danger of becoming meaningless’ (Ball 2012, 3). For the purposes of the current paper, it refers to the adoption of private and social enterprise approaches to publicly funded education systems, often referred to as the new managerialism.

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The hegemony of scientific-technical reason means that, redolent of the Christian existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel, issues of great human significance are portrayed as problems that can be solved by the relevant experts. The emphasis is on performance indicators and on finding the most economic and effective solutions to such problems, as instanced, for example, by Dubai’s Knowledge Village. This culture of pragmatism, predicated on what Habermas (1972) calls the ‘technical paradigm’, is characterised by value neutrality and declining levels of critical public debate. Within the prevailing environment of enterprise and competition, there is a premium on individual rights to property ownership, legal protection and market freedom, while civic society, community values, social democracy and citizenship rights are eschewed. The focus is on collective responsibility, national identity and the pursuit of self-interest facilitates what Sennett (1998, 26) calls the corrosion of character.

**Neo-liberal policies and education**

Modern education systems are characterised by an undue emphasis on the relationship between education and economic growth and a growing obsession with performativity and league tables.

... the global policy convergence in schooling has seen the economisation of schooling policy, the emergence of human capital and productivity rationales as meta-policy in education, and new accountabilities, including high-stakes testing and policy, as numbers, with both global and national features. (Lingard 2010, 136)

This ‘new orthodoxy in education’ (Ball 1998) questions the very aims and purposes of public education. It identifies education as the key instrument for producing the new global citizen and as a major component of economic globalisation, while teachers are viewed, in an environment that is devoid of trust, as productive workers deprived of professional autonomy. The outcomes of this new managerialist approach are evident in the annual Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) production, *Education at a Glance*, with its myriad of league tables that facilitate contractual rather than professional accountability (Gleeson and O Donnabhain 2009). Within this environment, the growing power and influence of the modern state in education is legitimated by economic concerns. As former Australian Prime Minister Gillard stated:

Put simply, we cannot have the strong economy we want tomorrow, unless we have the best of education in our schools today. That is why the plan that I am announcing today is a plan for our schools to be in the world’s top five by 2025. (*The Australian*, 14 April, 2013)

This is to ignore Brown and Lauder’s (2012, 6) conclusion that ‘the human capital theory on which official policy discourse is based is fundamentally flawed because it assumes that all can capitalise on the demands for knowledge and skills, because they are key to increasing productivity and products’. Nor does it take cognisance of Wolf’s (2002, 251) observation that ‘our preoccupation with education as an engine of growth has only narrowed the way we think about social policy’.

This new managerialist culture redefines knowledge and education within ‘the legitimate framework of public choice and market accountability’ (Lynch, Grummel, and Devine 2012, 4). The associated growth in policy entrepreneurship is
reflected in the emergence of major international education consultancy businesses and transnational advocacy networks such as the Atlas Economics Research Foundation, the Liberty network and Tooley’s Templeton Foundation (Ball 2012). Such networks facilitate policy borrowing (Lingard 2010) and constitute a new form of governance, what Ball (2012, 9) calls ‘a market of authorities’. This means that ‘the boundaries between state, economy and civil society are being blurred [while] multilateral agencies, NGOs and business interests and influences can separately or together constitute a powerful policy alternative to state “failure”’ (Ball 2012, 9). The activities of such networks are heavily focused on developing countries and their policies are ‘typically discussed and portrayed within a paradigm of progressive policy solutions, vulnerable constituencies and community empowerment related to human rights and environmental issues in particular’ (Ball 2012, 12).

The World Trade Organization’s General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) regards education and other public services as marketable goals where ‘the student is defined as an economic maximizer, governed by self-interest [and] and capable of making market-led choices’ (Lynch, Grummel, and Devine 2012, 14). In this environment education is perceived as a consumable good rather than ‘a key instrument in protecting people’s human rights’ (Lynch, Grummel, and Devine 2012). Some 10 years ago Merrill Lynch estimated that the global market in educational services was worth $111 billion a year outside of the USA with a ‘potential consumer base of 32 million students’ (Spring 2009, 84). This market ideology is portrayed ‘as a natural way of doing things’ (Gandin 2006, 192), while social policy decisions in education are increasingly being defined by powerful intergovernmental organisations, such as the United Nations, OECD, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (Ball 2008; Spring 2009; Ditchburn 2012).

Impact on education practice
The neo-liberal agenda impacts on the practice of schooling in many ways. The emphasis is on measurable outputs, employment-related skills and competences, consumer choice, increased state control over curriculum content and assessment and standardised testing. The associated curriculum discourse is highly technicist, standardised and universalistic in character, with the definition, selection, and structuring of legitimate knowledge being externally prescribed and prioritising the self-realisation of the individual child. Curriculum is seen in terms of product rather than process, something that the teacher must ‘deliver’, rather like the mail or the milk. For example, Michael Barber’s (former Head of the UK Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit) address to the Africa Development Bank in March 2010 was titled ‘An Introduction to Deliverology’ (Ball 2012, 108).

Au (2013) sees No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the USA, with its roots ‘in the logics of competition and markets of neoliberal capitalism’, as the prelude to their recently introduced Common Core State Standards (CCSS). He argues that Obama’s ‘Race To The Top’ means that NCLB is more deeply entrenched than ever, with test score results being used as the main justification for charter schools which are undermining both public and Catholic Education systems.

From an Australian perspective, Lingard (2010) sees the recent introduction of their national curriculum as part of a nation-building exercise involving the alignment of curriculum with global economic imperatives. From the perspective of neighbouring New Zealand, an early adopter of the neo-liberal agenda, Dale (2000, 431) argued that the
popularity of standardised models of education meant that the school curriculum had become ‘a ritual enactment of worldwide educational norms and conventions rather than instrumental choice of individual societies to meet various local requirements’.

There has been a proliferation of standardised testing programmes such as the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia and NCLB. This has resulted in a wide variety of tensions between, for example, educational quality and [e]quality; education as public good and competitive private commodity; ‘having an education’ and ‘being an educated person’; the role of the teacher as technician/professional.

The spread of this ideology has also had regrettable implications for schools, as reflected in Hargreaves (2003) study of the influence of neo-liberal reforms on the highly progressive, student-centred, Blue Mountain School in Ontario. He concluded that inflexibly mandated, standardised reform measures impacted on all aspects of the school’s work and culture and ‘chipped steadily away at Blue Mountain’s distinctive approach to teaching and learning’ (Hargreaves 2003, 146).

In its short history, Blue Mountain has built a strong and enviable reputation for caring, among pupils and staff alike. But the secure selves and relationships on which effective caring depends are being consistently undermined by the effects of large-scale, standardised reform. (Hargreaves 2003, 151)

One of the defining characteristics of neo-liberal policies has been an emphasis on outcomes-based education (OBE). The shortcomings of this approach have been well documented (Stenhouse 1975; Hussey and Smith 2002; Gleeson 2013). While OBE is appropriate for training and instruction, it fails to recognise the importance of induction into the thought processes of the disciplines (Stenhouse 1975), a process that draws on the essential nature of these disciplines and/or on child-centred ethical/pedagogical principles.

There is a growing realisation that PISA results exert enormous and disproportionate influence on education policy. Almost one hundred high-ranking international educationalists including many well-known professors of education called on the PISA director to halt the next round of testing (UK Guardian, 6 May, 2014). Their overall concern is that PISA is a form of ‘educational colonialism’, heavily influenced by psychometricians, statisticians and economists, that harms our children, impoverishes our classrooms, further increases stress levels in schools and endangers the well-being of students and teachers.

They identified a number of particular causes for anxiety including the resulting escalation in standardised testing, the associated reliance on quantitative measures, the limitations of the actual instruments themselves, the obsession with short-term ‘fixes’ to help a country climb the rankings quickly, the backwash effect on physical, moral, civic and artistic education and the associated neglect of personal development, growth and wellbeing.

Noting the planned introduction of PISA testing to Africa, the authors suggest that OECD has formed alliances with multi-national for-profit companies (policy entrepreneurs) that stand to gain financially from elementary education there. As they scathingly point out, ‘comparing developing countries, where 15-year-olds are regularly drafted into child labour, with first-world countries makes neither educational nor political sense’.
The authors challenge the role of the OECD directly in their concluding paragraph:

OECD's narrow focus on standardised testing risks turning learning into drudgery and killing the joy of learning. As PISA has led many governments into an international competition for higher test scores, OECD has assumed the power to shape education policy around the world, with no debate about the necessity or limitations of OECD's goals. We are deeply concerned that measuring a great diversity of educational traditions and cultures using a single, narrow, biased yardstick could, in the end, do irreparable harm to our schools and our students.

Not all critics of the prevailing ideology of standardised testing are academics. We have recently seen a significant volte face on the part of the Editorial Board of the New York Times (July 2013) on this issue. While defending the NCLB Act as an exercise in school accountability, they acknowledge that ‘it has become clear to us over time that testing was being overemphasized – and misused – in schools that were substituting test preparation for instruction’.

This ideology is based on certain principles that are at variance with those that underpin faith-based educational systems. Some of the counter-cultural possibilities of these systems are now considered.

**Faith-based education and the neo-liberal agenda**

In his analysis of the impact of globalisation on education policy and practice, Spring (2009, 144) notes that ‘some religious and indigenous groups are major dissenters to the world culture and the materialism embodied in the human capital and progressive education models’. Spring’s examples include Gandhi’s Sarvodaya, state supported Islamic Education with its holistic vision of knowledge and education expounded by Al Zeera and Liberation Theology which seeks to ‘free humans from the spiritual vacuum caused by political and economic repression’ (Spring 2009, 161). The Peruvian theologian Gutierrez saw Liberation Theology, influenced by Paolo Freire,5 as creative, fruitful and ultimately political: ‘liberation theology’s educational programmes were practised by the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua which overthrew the dictatorship of the Somoza dynasty in 1979 and in neighbouring El Salvador by National Liberation Front’ (Spring 2009, 166).

Strong religious faith ‘is not an “add-on” to the rest of life, but something that has an influence on the way that the whole of life is lived [which makes it] inevitable that those starting new schools should see the nature of the curriculum as one of the central features that they wished to control and develop’ (Walford 2002, 404). For example, Hewer (2001, 522ff) emphasises that ‘the whole of education in the Muslim world is seen as a faith-centred integrated … Islamic system that brings out profound challenges to any idea of a “value-neutral” concept of education’.

While recognising that the Muslim ideal involves the integration of faith across the whole curriculum, Walford (2002) notes that the shortage of Muslim teachers and the cost of curriculum development makes this difficult in practice. Although acknowledging that some Christian Evangelical groups have devoted considerable energy to curriculum, he concludes that their ‘practical attempts to design a curriculum that rejects humanism and secularism and, instead, reflects Christianity have met with various degrees of success’ (Walford 2002, 408). He offers the example of the Christian Schools Trust Curriculum Team for Science which offered alternative values to the
'idols of science, technology and economic growth … [found] in secular textbooks and syllabi' (Walford 2002, 411).

Taking a less extreme example, it is noteworthy that the first principle of the Norwegian core curriculum is that of ‘the spiritual human being [based on] fundamental Christian and humanistic values’. The Norwegian Board of Education (The Royal Ministry of Education 1997, 7) declares that:

> our Christian and humanistic tradition places equality, human rights and rationality at the fore. Social progress is sought in reason and enlightenment, and in man's ability to create, appreciate and communicate. Together, this interwoven tradition provides us with unwithering values both to orient our conduct and to organize our communities.

Their other key curriculum principles are part of this piece – the creative human being, the working human being, the liberally educated human being, the social human being, the environmentally aware human being and the integrated human being.

The Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education has consistently adopted a holistic, integrated approach to education. For example, it has commented critically on the ‘noticeable tendency to reduce education to its purely technical and practical aspects’ (1997, 10) and defined its educational project as a ‘synthesis between culture and faith’ (1997, 14). It sees the fundamental characteristics of the Catholic school in terms of the ‘integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation … [involving] ecclesial and cultural identity … [and] service to society’ (1997, 4). While acknowledging that ‘we live in a knowledge-based society’, the Congregation (2013, 66) encourages Catholic schools ‘to go beyond knowledge and educate people to think, evaluating facts in the light of values’.

The most recent Congregation (2014, 10) document again calls for a holistic, integrated education in a context where ‘contemporary educators have a renewed mission, which has the ambitious aim of offering young people an integral education as well as assistance in discovering their personal freedom, which is a gift from God’. In a clear reaction to neo-liberal values it warns against simply responding to ‘the demands deriving from the ever-changing economic situation. Catholic schools think out their curricula to place centre-stage both individuals and their search for meaning … What is taught is not neutral, and neither is the way of teaching it’ (2014, 64). Reminiscent of Stenhouse (1975), the Congregation (2014, 12) notes that education goes well beyond instruction, and comments critically on the ‘merely functional view of education’ taken by the European Union, OECD, World Bank and on the instrumental and competitive emphases found in the education policies of several countries with their ‘instrumental reason and competitiveness … [concerned with] the market economy and the labor market’.

Writing in an Irish context, Tuohy (2013, 121) argues that Catholic Education goes beyond training in skills and the competition for qualifications. It helps individuals to seek wholeness, truth and hope in their lives [and] sees the person as essentially social, and therefore promotes a sense of community based on solidarity, the promotion of justice and making a difference.

While the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, 68) recognised that ‘education is an important means of improving the social and economic condition of
the individual and of peoples’, it also argued that ‘the Church should offer its educational services first to the poor or those deprived of family help or affection, or those far from the faith’. Failure would contribute towards the perpetuation of privilege, ‘and could thereby continue to favour a society which is unjust’ (1977). *Instrumentum Laboris* (Congregation for Catholic Education 2014, 12) declared that ‘the kind of education that is promoted by Catholic schools is not aimed at establishing an elitist meritocracy’, while the Congregation (2013, 66) proposed more recently that the curriculum of Catholic schools must address ‘the unequal distribution of resources, poverty, injustice and human rights denied’.

The remaining sections of this paper will address two challenges: bringing a Catholic perspective to the whole curriculum and giving witness to the gospel value of justice, fairness and equality.

**Curriculum integration: bringing a faith-based perspective to the curriculum of Catholic schools**

Curricula are never value free (Grundy 1987; Cornbleth 1990) and, as noted earlier, denominational school groups wish to see their own particular perspective reflected in their curricula. From the Evangelical Christian perspective Walford (2002, 412) suggests that Christian definitions of school subjects ‘offer a coherence to the entire school curriculum that is usually absent (or certainly not made explicit but is actually in the form of secularism, individualism and so on)’. Hewer (2001) argues that every aspect of study in a Muslim school ‘should be permeated by Islamic values and the divinely ordained harmony should be brought out by the educational process’. This argument is frequently made from a Catholic perspective, for example, Davis and Franchi (2013), Arthur (2013), with the latter suggesting that:

> religion cannot be separated or divorced from the rest of the curriculum, nor can religious education be seen as the raison d’etre of the Catholic school. The idea that the school subjects that make up the curriculum (excluding religious education) are value-free and therefore somehow separate from the Catholic faith is clearly contrary to the Catholic worldview. (Arthur 2013, 86)

The Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, 37ff) suggests that ‘all academic subjects can contribute to the development of a mature Christian’ while Groome (1996, 107) argues that the ‘distinctive characteristics of Catholicism should be reflected in the whole curriculum of Catholic schools’. Murray (1991), former Catholic Bishop of Limerick, identified five key elements of a philosophy of education: wholeness, which requires the education of the whole person; truth, which requires open expression of the values that underpin the work of the school; awakening the minds of students to economic, cultural, racial and religious injustices; respect for the honest, systematic and respectful search for truth; freedom to challenge and develop the artistic, imaginative, innovative, creative capacities of the pupil. Arguing that increased attention to science and technology must not lead to the neglect of the humanities, he flags the danger of reducing education to producing good material for the workplace or good citizens for the state rather than promoting ‘the integral development of good people capable of living a fully human life’ (Murray 1991, 23). Murray’s response, along with some other Irish colleagues, is to advocate curriculum integration.
Education should lead to the integration of what is learned, breaking down traditional subject demarcations, overcoming fragmentation and encouraging dialogue between disciplines ... [and] address the integral development of the person: aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual. (Murray 1991, 20)

RE alone does not make the Catholic school ... The Catholic school seeks to integrate the curriculum, to unify faith and culture, and to bring together the different pieces of the school programme into a higher synthesis that influences the social and spiritual formation of pupils. (Lane 1991, 12)

The issue of depth and integration of learning is a constant challenge – a counter-cultural demand in an approach dominated by a ‘surfing’ mentality.6 (Tuohy 2013, 121)

The Congregation for Catholic Education (2014, 67) also recognises the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge:

each discipline is not an island inhabited by a form of knowledge that is distinct and ring-fenced; rather, it is in a dynamic relationship with all other forms of knowledge, each of which expresses something about the human person and touches upon some truth.

Arguing that Catholic social teaching should permeate the Catholic secondary school curriculum, Grace (2010, 2013) suggests that ‘Catholic educational institutions at all levels have failed to provide curriculum mediations of this teaching as a crucial part of the formation of Catholic youth’ (2013, 99). Drawing on the counter-cultural teaching of Caritas in Veritate he identifies some key relevant issues including: religious, moral and cultural; economic, business and enterprise; and social, environmental and political. To this author’s knowledge, individual Australian schools and Edmund Rice Education Australia are responding impressively to this call.7

It is, however, one thing to promote the notion of curriculum integration and another to implement it. While Beane (1997) and Morris (2003) have identified some nine different forms of curriculum integration, these can be reduced to three broad modes. In the multidisciplinary approach subject disciplines continue to be taught separately with a particular theme being infused where possible. The interdisciplinary approach uses subject disciplines as tools for the study of particular problems, themes or questions. In the transdisciplinary approach students’ interests and questions become the main focus while subject boundaries are further blurred (Drake and Burns 2004; Drake 2012). Gehrke (1998, 255) sees the multi- and interdisciplinary approaches as being closely related insofar as the ‘subject areas never lose their distinctive forms [and the] integrity of the disciplines is the chief concern’ whereas the alternative transdisciplinary or ‘unified studies’ approach begins from ‘consideration of life experiences and individual and societal needs [where] the integrity of the learner’s experience, not the discipline, is the chief concern’ (1998, 256).

The work of the Ontario Institute of Catholic Education is regarded as one of the best examples of curriculum development and integration in Catholic schools (Arthur 2013, 94). The Institute has identified three related contexts for Catholic Education:

(1) philosophical, based on revealed wisdom, commitment to learning excellence and a search for the common good;
(2) theological, characterised by a Christ-centred faith, an incarnational anthropology, a sacramental worldview and an ecclesial sense of community;
(3) curricular tasks (Institute for Catholic Education 1996, 25).

Their curricular tasks fall into three categories:

(1) subject-specific (separation) where religion is a course of study like other academic disciplines.
(2) whole-school (permeation) where the emphasis is on the role and influence of the Catholic school’s culture in learning e.g. pastoral care, parish and school celebrations, nurturing spirituality, outreach programmes.
(3) cross-curricular (inter- and transdisciplinary) integration which brings together traditional subjects to meaningfully address themes, skills and role performance.

The Institute proposes that ‘curriculum integration carries within it the capacity to develop curriculum that visibly demonstrates the Catholic character of learning’ (Institute for Catholic Education 1996, 26) and to provide ‘an authentic fit’ between the knowledge, values and skills of, for example, religion and science; religion and social studies; religion and business. It recognises that integration involves ‘a critical perspective on social and global issues so that curriculum is transformative and functions as a vehicle for social and personal change based on principles of justice and the view of the learner as agent-of-change’. It warns against superimposing/forcing religious concepts and ideas into subject areas in the name of integration, with little regard for the integrity of the academic discipline because this simply produces superficial and trivial links.

The Institute (1998) has defined a common set of Catholic Graduate Expectations that include: discerning believer; effective communicator; reflective, creative and holistic thinker; lifelong learner; caring family member; commitment to the common good; responsible citizen. It has also produced written guidelines for writing curriculum for Catholic schools and has established regional Curriculum Cooperatives which use these guidelines to create teacher resources for educators wishing to integrate Catholic perspectives across the formal curriculum using both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary models of integration. The supports provided for the integration of a Catholic perspective in Ontario include:

(1) Course profiles (by grade and subject), developed in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, involve the fusion of their Graduate Expectations with the Ontario Ministry of Education expected learning outcomes for specific subjects to create resources for teachers in Catholic classrooms – a form of multidisciplinary integration.
(2) Catholic Critical Literacy materials that provide support for teachers wishing to address Catholic Social Teaching in their own subjects e.g. option for the poor and vulnerable; stewardship of creation; community and the common good. This also involves multidisciplinary integration.
(3) Catholic Curriculum Maps (Catholic Curriculum Corporation 2006) facilitate the integration of the expected learning outcomes of the catechetical programme across the whole curriculum. A particular Catholic social teaching is taken as the key theme for each year group and a common set of ‘essential questions’ provide a Catholic focus for all subject areas. The use of key themes and essential questions means that, depending on the teachers involved, this
approach has the potential to be interdisciplinary. Drake (2012, 39ff) argues that curriculum mapping facilitates accountability in relation to the achievement of standards while helping to ‘create a seamless curriculum’.

The maps and profiles continue to be revised in order to keep in step with provincial curriculum revisions and it appears that teachers have begun to take ownership of this process to the point where they need less guidance from the centre. This elaborate plan for the integration of a Catholic perspective is focused thematically around their Catholic Graduate Expectations, Catholic Social Teaching and essential questions grounded in faith formation.

Drake and Burns (2004, 2–3) argue that, when teachers become more familiar with a standards-based approach, they are enthusiastic about integrating areas of curriculum and ‘their perception of interdisciplinary curriculum shifts dramatically’. While Catholic schools in the USA operate in a rather different environment, standards play a key role in their education policy and Catholic educators have developed a set of national standards and benchmarks for effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools.

CCSS have been adopted by 100 Catholic dioceses across 35 states and, according to Shimek (2014), the National Catholic Education Association is satisfied that this does not ‘in any way compromise the Catholic identity or educational program of a school’. There is no guarantee however that their introduction will facilitate an integrated approach. Based on survey responses from 3389 teachers in Catholic schools across the USA, Convey (2012) found that that the integration of Catholic teachings into the curriculum had an average ranking of fifth (of 12 possible characteristics of the Catholic school). This item also showed the greatest variation among responding teachers and administrators, receiving higher ratings from administrators and more experienced teachers than from other respondents.

Notwithstanding its focus on skills, the prevailing neo-liberal ideology provides a particularly hospitable environment for the preservation of clear subject boundaries, the great barrier to curriculum integration. As noted by Lam et al. (2013, 23ff), according ‘as the push for accountability and standardised testing increased, the voices supporting integrated curricula receded’. The net result is that ‘the tenacity of subject-based curricula has been reinforced by global trends toward neoliberalism [which] forwards essentialist and perennialist agendas, embodied in standards-based reforms, high-stake examinations, accountability and ranking, and discourses focused on excellence’ (2013, 25).

As noted earlier, the prevailing neo-liberal climate is characterised by increased emphasis on parental choice. This raises big questions for schools with a mission to give witness to gospel values.

Gospel values in a neo-liberal environment: what is happening to ‘the option for the poor’?

Market values and gospel values cannot coexist happily and the adoption of neo-liberal values has clear implications for education equality and justice. According to Maddox (2014, xi ff):

Choice has widened the gaps between the wealthy and the rest, and also hammered in some religious wedges… Today’s neoliberal outsourcing push sees around 40 per cent
of Australian children in education that is not free, although governments subsidise some of the costs. The latter constituency is growing with enrolments in independent schools growing by 35 per cent; and Catholic school enrolments by 11.6 per cent during the first decade of the new millennium.

This leads her to conclude that ‘the overall makeup of Australian education is shifted away from the all-in-this-together ideal that inspired the founders of Australia’s free and secular public system towards one where children are once again segregated by income, culture and religion’ (2014, 86–87). Lye and Hirschberg (2012) found that fees charged by non-government schools in the Australian state of Victoria have been ‘increasing at a very high rate along with the number of students attending these schools [with] more and more of the expense for secondary school education [being] borne directly by the parents of the students’ (2012, 11). The upshot is that Catholic schools in Victoria are becoming more privileged.

Independent schools attract the more affluent families with the highest [Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage] on average followed by Catholic and then Government schools which have minimal fees [and] consequently family income is not a barrier to enrol. (2012, 11)

In their study of students attending Catholic schools in Brisbane, Dowling et al. (2009, 6) draw attention to the apparent contradiction that ‘as society is becoming more secular, Catholic schools are becoming more popular than ever’. They concluded that the parents of children attending Catholic schools in Brisbane were strongly influenced by neo-liberal thinking insofar as they ‘have a pragmatic view of Catholic education and are most concerned about quality instruction and training for employment’ (2009, 114).

As noted by Tuohy (2008, 11), ‘when the Catholic school is seen to be very successful, the motivation for seeking places may be more related to the quality of general education than to the desire for a particularly Catholic ethos’. The Brisbane findings regarding the growing popularity of Catholic schools support Tuohy’s argument – ‘while parents provide numerous reasons for sending their children to non-government schools, the desire for a specifically religious education does not appear to be dominant, even amongst Catholic schools’ (Dowling et al. 2009, 20). Teachers in Catholic schools are expressing concerns that parents see Catholic Education as a more affordable version of private schooling (Gleeson and O’Neill 2015). These market-driven trends have obvious implications for equity and fairness in the school system.

According to Australia’s National Catholic Education Commission (2013a, 86) 53% of the cost of educating a student in Catholic Education in 2011 came from federal government, 18% from State funds and 29% from private income (mainly school fees). Research conducted by the Australian Scholarship Group (ASG) concludes that primary school fees in Catholic schools in Metropolitan Australia for 2014 average $3600 per child as against $485 in government schools and $10,300 in Independent schools (many of which are faith based). They found that the average fees at secondary level are $9000 in Catholic schools, $980 in government schools and $18,000 in Independent schools.

Catholic schools are becoming ‘schools of choice’ for middle-class non-Catholics with over 40 per cent of secondary school students being non-Catholic. The National Catholic Education Commission (2013b) pointed out that only 52.8% of Catholic students attended Catholic primary or secondary schools. According to McLaughlin and
Standen (2013) only one in three low income Catholic children in Australia attend a Catholic School as against almost 60% of children from high income families. Their review indicates concern on the part of some members of the Australian Catholic hierarchy:

Archbishop Barry Hickey of Perth, in an interview with the West Australian newspaper, stated that ‘in accepting government grants, the Church’s role as an advocate of the poor can be blunted’. (McLaughlin and Standen, 2013).

Catholic schools are overly expensive and the church has become too middle-class. (Bishop Kevin Manning in an interview with Sarah Price, Sydney Morning Herald, August 19, 2007)

Poorer Catholic children are increasingly attending State schools [and] increasing accessibility for all students remains a significant challenge in some places. (Catholic Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007, 8)

Tuohy (2008, 131) argues that, in the Irish context, ‘the marketing of many Catholic schools, especially fee-paying schools … sits uncomfortably with the Church’s stated pursuit of the common good’. Noting that upwardly mobile parents in England have been putting their children forward for late baptisms and relocating home in order to qualify for admission to Catholic schools, he recalls instances in Ireland where, ‘when the Catholic school is faithful to an inclusive enrolment, parents with high social capital leave the catchment area for schools with a less varied intake’ (2008).

It is important to acknowledge the current tendency in Vatican documents to define poverty in spiritual rather than material terms.

[The poor today are] those who have lost all sense of meaning in life and lack any type of inspiring ideal, those to whom no values are proposed and who do not know the beauty of faith, who come from families which are broken and incapable of love, often living in situations of material and spiritual poverty; slaves to the new idols of society, which, not infrequently, promises them only a future of unemployment and marginalisation. (Congregation for Catholic Education 1998, Section 15)

While the Congregation (2013, 66) acknowledges that the curriculum must address ‘the unequal distribution of resources, poverty, injustice and human rights denied’, it goes on to suggest the adoption of ‘a broad and developed vision of poverty, in all its various forms and causes’. The following year, Instrumentum Laboris called for ‘missionary openness towards new forms of poverty’ (Congregation for Catholic Education 2014, 14).

Space allows for only a brief comment on the relationship between consumer choice and education equality. It is regrettable that the significant media attention afforded PISA results focuses mainly on country rankings while ignoring the findings of the PISA meta-analysis (OECD 2010). This latter analysis reveals some interesting characteristics of high-performing countries:

(1) Levels of student differentiation between and within schools are low
(2) Levels of competition between schools are low
(3) The disciplinary climate and teacher-student relations are good

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While the priority afforded disciplinary climate, positive relationships and caring in Australian Catholic schools is widely recognised (Dowling et al. 2009, 3; Gleeson and O’Flaherty 2014), levels of between-school competition for enrolments are uniquely high with 96% of students enrolled in schools that are in competition with at least one other school. The PISA meta-analysis finds that such competition is generally unrelated to overall student performance once socio-economic background is taken into account. In the case of Australia (OECD 2010, 74) however, when socio-economic background is taken into account, the average reading performance of students attending schools that are in competition for enrolment is 24 points lower than in schools that are not in competition. The Save Our Schools movement (17 December, 2010) concludes that the ‘availability of choice and competition, a key principle of neo-liberal policy, has not improved overall school results in the Australian situation and between-schools competition has brought average results down when socio-economic differences are taken into account’.

Conclusion
As noted by Spring (2009, 175), ‘the spiritual nature of religions creates a tension with the materialistic values embedded in human capital theory with its emphasis on economic growth and increasing personal income’. From an Irish perspective, Lynch, Grummel, and Devine (2012) observe that the Catholic Church has not overtly spoken out against neo-liberalism and that ‘the Church’s concerns have been with retaining their schools rather than challenging new managerialism’ (2012, 36). Tuohy (2008) concludes that there is greater agreement on the purpose than the identity of Irish Catholic schools in a context where ‘public policy in education is more in tune with Catholic social teaching than is the practice of many [Catholic] schools’ (2012, 131). Along similar lines, Lynch, Grummel, and Devine (2012) contend the Irish Church has not addressed the issue of how its values will be expressed in its schools: ‘Despite its concern for disadvantaged people … the Catholic Church continued to uphold the elite and socially selective schools that they operate in the second-level sector (2012, 36).

The challenges identified in this paper have important implications for the identity of the Catholic school. Ireland is not atypical in this respect and Dunne (2006) summed up the main options for Catholic Education there as follows:

1. ‘Cut one’s losses with schools altogether’ (2006, 212) and have parishes take on their current catechetical roles.
2. ‘Step back and ask quite radically what a Catholic education might look like [and] work out its practical implications’ (2006). This would require stronger commitment and painful choices on the part of parents and a willingness to forego the luxury of having both ‘the right peers and the right points [and would result in] fewer Catholic schools but ones of greater integrity’ (2006).
3. Challenge the dominant instrumentalist, technicist, ethos of schooling by adopting an overtly political role where schools become ‘loci not so much of catechesis as of evangelisation in the broad sense’ (2006).
4. The status quo.

The current paper has argued that Catholic Education finds itself between the rock of the gospels and the hard place of neo-liberal market values. Given the human
propensity to fear change, the growing demand for places in Catholic schools and the changing profiles of both students and teachers in these schools, some version of the status quo is likely to prevail. The environment, however, continues to change with non-Catholics making up 28% of secondary staff in New South Wales in 2006, 24% of students in Catholic schools across Australia being categorised as non-Catholic (Dowling et al. 2009, 23), while these expansionary trends continue.

Is it possible to reconcile the prevailing neo-liberal culture with gospel values in a context where the Catholic Church is inevitably influenced by prevailing societal values? Hughes (2011, 8) for example reports that ‘Australian Christians are divided on most economic issues in similar ways to the wider society’. He found that 50% of Church attenders favoured increases in social spending as against 46% of the overall population while 21% of attenders (almost one-third in the case of Catholics) favoured reducing taxes as against 26% of the overall population. Noting that many active Catholics are not familiar with Catholic social teaching, Hughes concluded that ‘the consistent alignment of church attenders with other sectors of the population suggests that their opinions are often shaped largely by culture’ (2011, 12).

Dunne’s counter-cultural options have the potential to address the disjuncture between gospel values and the prevailing neo-liberal values of modern education systems. The OECD (2003) *Schooling for the Future* study recognises the need for new thinking regarding the future viability of the ‘robust bureaucratic school’ and its associated structures. Some of their suggested systemic alternatives would facilitate the integration of gospel values across the formal as well as the informal school curriculum and their application to school admission policies. This would be consistent both with recent Church statements on education and with the inclusion of a Catholic world view across the whole curriculum of Catholic schools. Any such move will demand strong leadership, intensive professional development and enormous courage, as well as shrewd political negotiation with respect to the all-important matter of funding.

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Notes

1. Dubai Knowledge Village (DKV) is the world’s only Free Zone area dedicated to Human Resource Management and learning excellence. Established in 2003 as part of TECOM Investments, DKV aims to develop the region’s talent pool and establish the UAE as a knowledge-based economy. With over 500 business partners, DKV offers Human Resource Management, Consultation, Training and Personal Development programmes.

2. Contractual models of accountability are measurement-driven and concerned with standards and results whereas responsive or professional accountability is ‘more concerned with processes than outcomes, and with securing involvement and interaction to obtain decisions that meet a range of needs and preferences’ (Glatter, 2003, 53).

3. Charter schools in the United States are subject to fewer rules, regulations, and statutes than traditional state schools. While they receive less public funding than public schools, as non-
profit entities, they can receive donations from private sources. The number of American charter schools has been growing exponentially to some 6400 in 2013–14.

4. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international survey under the auspices of the OECD. It is conducted every three years and aims to evaluate education systems by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and science. Students representing more than 70 economies have participated in this assessment to date.

5. Paulo Freire’s (1921–1997) best known work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, was published in 1968 against the backdrop of gross inequality in Brazil. Other works include ‘Education, the practice of freedom’ (1976); The politics of education: culture, power, and liberation (1985); Politics and education (1998).

6. As in surfing the internet for quick-fire answers to complex questions.

7. A number of Edmund Rice Education Australia schools are involved in that body’s Curriculum of Justice and Peace project with its focus on the development of transformative and liberating curriculum. Other Religious Institute schools highlight the importance of social justice issues by drawing on the charisma of their founder.

8. There are seven Ontario Catholic schools’ graduate expectations, including the development of responsible citizens who give ‘witness to Catholic social teaching by promoting peace, justice and the sacredness of human life’. Their curriculum mapping work involves the integration of all ten principles of Catholic Social Teaching into the formal school curriculum, grounded in their RE and Family Life programme.

9. See also Grace (2013, 99).

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References


