Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education

One of my briefs as Professor of Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education is to collate and conduct research to bring a Catholic perspective to the whole of the formal curriculum. In that context I have identified some recent literature from England, USA, Canada and Scotland.

The Irish-born Thomas Groome (1996, 107) identified ‘what makes a school Catholic’ in terms of ‘the distinctiveness of Catholic education is prompted by the distinctive characteristics of Catholicism itself, and these characteristics should be reflected in the whole curriculum of Catholic schools’.

John Convey of The Catholic University of America regards the integration of Catholic teachings in all aspects of the curriculum as being just as important a component of the Catholic school as the religion course (2012, 192). He cites the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, 37ff) to the effect that ‘the content of a Catholic school is a “synthesis of culture and faith and a synthesis of faith and life” [where] all academic subjects can contribute to the development of a mature Christian.

In his own research Convey (2012) received survey responses from 3,389 teachers in Catholic schools across the USA. He found that the rankings and ratings for the integration of Catholic teachings into the curriculum showed the greatest variation among responding teachers and administrators. While its mean rating score placed it ninth among the twelve components and it came tenth on the list of components rated essential, its average ranking was fifth highest. It also emerged that the integration of Catholic teachings into the curriculum received higher ratings from administrators and more experienced teachers than from other respondents.

James Arthur (2013, 83) expresses concern that the ‘secularisation process’ in Catholic schools in England is ‘proceeding at a dramatic pace with the result that policy and practice [are] consequently more distant than ever from the educational principles of Church teaching’. He cites Vatican II and the post-conciliar documents in support of the notion of a Catholic worldview and argues that this worldview should indeed influence the Catholic school’s curriculum.
A Catholic worldview is therefore a way of looking at the world through a Catholic perspective. 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 (ibid, 86).

Arthur (ibid, 94) goes on to identify the work of the Institute of Catholic Education in Toronto as one of the best examples of curriculum development in Catholic schools. This has involved collaboration between the Canadian bishops in Ontario, working through the Institute, with local Catholic teachers to include the distinctive foundational elements of a Catholic school system.

The Institute for Catholic Education, Ontario, has identified three related contexts for Catholic Education – philosophical, theological and curricular. A Catholic philosophy of education emphasises living faith based on revealed wisdom, commitment to learning excellence and a search for the common good. The theological context is characterised by a Faith that is Christ-centred, an anthropology that is incarnational, a sacramental worldview and an ecclesial sense of community. The curricular context involves three possible tasks:

- **Separation**, a subject-specific task, where religion is a course of study like other academic disciplines
- **Permeation**, a whole-school task where the emphasis is on the role of the Catholic school’s culture and its communal influences in the process of learning. Curriculum is seen as the school’s planned educational experiences, including the connection between faith and life, church and school, learning and community service e.g. pastoral care, parish and school celebrations, nurturing spirituality, outreach programmes.
- **Integration**, a cross-curricular task. This is a more difficult task that brings together broad areas from the traditional subjects to address themes, skills and role performance in a meaningful way and involves interdisciplinary or trans-disciplinary experience. It includes knowledge, values and skills that bring about ‘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’ (Institute for Catholic Education, 1996, 25).

The Institute is of the view that ‘curriculum integration carries within it the capacity to develop curriculum that visibly demonstrates the Catholic character of learning’ (ibid, 26) and provide ‘an authentic fit’ between the knowledge, values and skills of e.g. religion and science; religion and social studies; religion and business. 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. This simply results in superficial and trivial links. It is suggested that, since curriculum is never value neutral, the best approach is to embed the moral framework of Catholicism into the curriculum.

The pioneering work of the Ontario Institute has led to the development by Catholic Curriculum Cooperatives of Ontario (2006) of ‘Writing the Catholic Curriculum’ which was ‘designed to stimulate not only debate but, as appropriate, informed action and change in the Catholic school classroom’ (ibid, 3). This has resulted in combining the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations and the Ontario Ministry of Education expectations for specific subjects to create resources for teachers in Catholic classrooms so that they can infuse a Catholic world view across the curriculum. These include: ‘Curriculum Links’ between the Ontario State curriculum and various Catholic resources; ‘Curriculum Maps’ (Catholic Curriculum Corporation, 2006); and ‘Course Profiles’ (by Grade and subject area) developed by the Catholic District School Board Writing Partnership to guide practising teachers in Catholic schools. These maps and profiles continue to be revised in order to keep in step with state curriculum revisions. It is my understanding that teachers in Catholic schools have become comfortable with this process to the point where they need less guidance from the centre.

Mention of the moral framework of Catholicism leads on to the work of Gerald Grace at the London Institute. Grace (2013) argues that Catholic social teaching should permeate the Catholic secondary school curriculum. While acknowledging that that the language used in the social encyclicals has been an ‘impediment’, he 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’ with the result that ‘a great opportunity for the dissemination of the counter-cultural social messages of the Church has thereby been lost’ (ibid, 99). Grace believes that Pope Benedict’s encyclical, Caritas in Veritate ‘could provide the material for Catholic educators to use in a wide range of secondary school curricula subjects’ (ibid) and identifies some major themes including (1) religious, moral and cultural issues; (2) economic, business and enterprise issues; and (3) social, environmental and political issues.

Finally, two Scottish based authors, Davis and Franchi (2013, 42), talk of the ‘the need to address the whole curriculum in the task of cultivating the Catholic mind’. They dispel the notion of ‘soft’ subject areas that are more hospitable to Catholic ideas and identify possibilities in literature, Science, Health and citizenship.

While various authors across different countries and continents have identified the importance of adopting a whole curriculum approach to identity in Catholic schools it would appear that Ontario has made the most strides when it comes to applying such ideas in schools. There’s an opportunity here for Queensland Catholic Education systems to make an impression internationally while responding to Grace’s challenge of taking up a counter cultural position in the face of the neo-liberal agenda that has become the major theme across the increasingly globalised systems of the developed world.

References


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