

Queensland Catholic Schools and Curriculum



The purpose of this document is to assist Catholic school communities to reflect on and to conduct learning and teaching through a curriculum that is aligned with a Catholic theology and philosophy of education. In an era of rapid educational, social and religious change, it is imperative that Catholic schools intentionally base their curriculum on the core beliefs, values and philosophy of the Catholic community. This document offers a framework for reflection on foundational themes in Catholic theology and philosophy for curriculum in Catholic schools.

Defining curriculum in Queensland Catholic schools

In a broad sense curriculum is understood as all the activities and experiences in a school community which promote a student's learning and development as a whole person in a particular social context.

A more restricted understanding of curriculum focuses on the course of studies that is prescribed for students. A further perspective on curriculum proposes three levels of its identity in school life. The first level is the explicit curriculum, that is, what is prescribed and taught. The second level is the implicit curriculum, that is, the procedures, attitudes, structures and culture in a school community. A third level is the null curriculum, that is, what is neglected or ignored in a school.

The character of a school curriculum reflects certain beliefs about the nature of a human being, the role of a person in society, learning and theories of education. Curriculum is the public expression of a school's values and a sure indicator of a school's educational philosophy. In an ideal educational world curriculum is a positive educational response to the question, 'What kind of people do our schools want our students to be and become?'

The diversity of assumptions, ideology and philosophy among educators and members of the community ensure that school curriculum is one of the most hotly contested areas of our national life. Recent debates in Australia about the nature and focus of curriculum, the desirability of a national curriculum and the rights of the Commonwealth and the states in relation to curriculum control are examples of this diversity of assumptions, ideology and philosophy about curriculum.

How does the curriculum in a Catholic school faithfully reflect a Christian vision of life? If there is one place where a Catholic philosophy and theology of education should be evident, it would surely reside in the curriculum and in how learning and teaching are experienced.

Three core assertions should constitute a Catholic framework for curriculum:

- learning and living are linked in the curriculum in the context of a Catholic understanding of purpose, meaning and destiny
- curriculum forms the whole person in the context of a Catholic understanding of the inherent dignity of a person created in the image and likeness of God
- curriculum prepares students for global responsibilities in the context of a Catholic understanding of justice, peace and ecological sustainability.

However the reality of a plethora of influences on school life generates a much more confused picture than any simplistic statement on Catholic schools and curriculum. Education in a Catholic tradition must take up the challenges named in the Adelaide Declaration of National Goals for schooling in the 21st century as: 'to enable all young people to engage effectively with an increasingly complex world. This world will be characterised by advances in communication technologies, population diversity arising from international mobility and migration, and complex environmental and social changes'. All Australian schools, including Catholic schools aspire to fulfill this stated goal in the Adelaide Declaration.

Influences on curriculum

The advent of the 21st century witnessed the human community entering a threshold time replete with some of the most significant opportunities and perils of any period of human history.

Issues and challenges arise from such movements as the exponential growth of knowledge, globalisation, the widening wealth-poor gap, the prevalence in developed nations of sophisticated technology, environmental concerns, a quest for sustainable relationships and search for spiritual meaning.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

What are some significant influences on the shape and character of curriculum in Catholic schools? The following selected themes are identified as a sample of influences that impact on curriculum. Within the limits of this document, the themes are stated without elaboration:

- there is an overriding need for compliance with government requirements concerning curriculum
- Australian society is increasingly multicultural and multi-faith in character

- a growing fragmentation of society tends to overload schools with an increment of social roles, previously addressed by family and communal groups
- intrusive ideologies of consumerism and materialism erode a Christian vision of life and its values
- rapid social changes emphasise the principles of lifelong learning as a given
- the compartmentalisation of knowledge, especially in upper secondary schools, establishes jealously guarded boundaries that detract from a holistic approach to curriculum
- political and economic imperatives compromise idealistic visions of a school's aspirations for empowering students to work for the common good
- a growing disengagement of parents and students in the wider church from Catholic life and faith practices poses serious questions for a desired alignment of school culture with a Catholic philosophy of education. The great majority of Catholic students have little or no affiliation with parish life and the worshipping community. A significant number of students are now drawn from religious faiths other than Catholic or have no religious affiliation at all.



- technology applied to learning and teaching, such as online learning, challenges traditional structures of schools as learning communities
- the phenomena of globalisation encourages a more universal vision of education and focus on a national curriculum
- child-centered education affirms the centrality of the student as a person rather than the student as an impersonal unit within an educational system
- there are multi-levels of teaching and learning approaches, especially in responses to students with learning difficulties and disabilities
- the stories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people as the first people of Australia are integrated into course content
- the principle of public educational accountability is balanced by localised validation and collegiality
- parents as primary educators of their children are encouraged to participate in discourses and decision making about curriculum
- outcomes approaches to education focus, not only on what is taught, but also on how students demonstrate what they know and can do with their learning
- a widening gap between rich and poor endangers fundamental principles of equity, justice and opportunities for all students regardless of their social status
- there are increasing demands to provide opportunities for multiple pathways for students in senior secondary schooling, leading to many systems beyond school.

A Catholic school is not simply a place where lessons are taught; it is a centre that has an operative educational philosophy, attentive to the needs of today's youth and illuminated by the gospel message.

The Religious Dimension of Education
in a Catholic School n.22

The glory of God is the human person fully alive.

St. Irenaeus c 200 ce



Catholic perspectives on curriculum

There is a long and venerable tradition in the story of Christian learning. During the first era of Christian life, Church Fathers, such as Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine were greatly influenced in their teachings by Greek philosophers, especially Plato.

During the Middle Ages, scholars such as St Thomas Aquinas used the works of another Greek philosopher, Aristotle, to propose a comprehensive exposition of Christian theology in Aquinas's *Summa*. Later cultural movements, such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the rise of democracy and universal schooling in the 19th century impacted on the character of curriculum in Catholic schools.

During the nineteenth century the emergence of government legislation for compulsory schooling for all children in Western societies posed challenges for Catholic schools in relation to how government directives for specified course content in curriculum were to be reconciled with Catholic culture, theology and philosophy of education. During the late 20th century the rise of ideologies such as relativism, pragmatism and materialism threatened traditional Christian values and beliefs. Consequent upon increased levels of government funding, accountability to government through compliance policies sometimes now lead to uneasy compromises in relation to the Catholicity of the school. A significant decline in active affiliation with church life gives urgency to the contemporary task of clarifying the theological and philosophical foundations of curriculum in Catholic schools.

In a world of rapid change and globalisation, Catholic leadership is challenged to communicate a clear articulation of a Catholic theology and philosophy of curriculum and to avoid the drift into a vacuous collection of subjects without any unifying, holistic and overarching Christian vision of life.

The enterprise of clarifying and articulating a Catholic theology and philosophy of curriculum is not an exercise in dogmatism or religious elitism. Nor is it a superimposition of Catholic doctrine on the integrity of academic subjects. Excessive sensitivity to an accusation of sectarianism can inhibit Catholic schools from celebrating their identity and the enormous 2000 year old cultural contribution to world education. The word 'Catholic' in its essential meaning suggests 'for everybody' or 'everyone is welcome'. The word 'Catholic' comes from the Greek word *katholos* (*kata* every; *holos* whole). Catholic schools are cooperative partners with all other schools in an Australian and Queensland context for the wellbeing of society and creation. The process of aligning curriculum in Catholic schools with its foundational beliefs will be characterised by discourse, communications, listening and seeking common ground with all people of goodwill.

Many themes in a theology and philosophy of curriculum in Catholic schools are affirmed by all schools that foster good holistic education. Commonwealth and state documents on schooling and curriculum, such as 'The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century' (1999) and 'National Framework for Values Education in Australian schools' (2005), offer an Australian cultural educational context for an appreciation of Catholic perspectives on curriculum. Queensland, like other states and territories, is continually experiencing curriculum reform.

Foundational themes for curriculum in Catholic schools

The overarching focus of curriculum in Catholic schools is to empower learners to enrich the quality of life in the community by living out the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

What are foundational themes in a Catholic theology and philosophy of curriculum?

What is a Catholic worldview which shapes curriculum in Catholic schools?

The foundations of a Catholic theology and philosophy of curriculum may be described under four major headings:

Anthropology: a Catholic understanding of the human person;

Epistemology: a Catholic appreciation of how we know and the experience of knowing in learning and teaching;

Cosmology: a Catholic perspective on how humans are enjoined to live within the integrity of creation.

Catholic Christian Story and tradition: a 2000 year old heritage of Catholic Christian learning and teaching within the mission of the church to promote the reign of God.

While each discipline is taught systematically and according to its own methods, interdisciplinary studies, assisted by a careful and thorough study of philosophy and theology, enable students to acquire an organic vision of reality and develop a continuing desire for intellectual progress.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae.20

Anthropology

A foundational question for curriculum relates to beliefs about the human person. Who are we? What is our destiny? Every facet of curriculum is a manifestation of certain assumptions about the human person.

Catholic Christianity, drawing its inspiration from its Jewish roots, insists on the essential goodness of the human condition, created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26-30). Although the story of the Fall (Genesis 3) describes the flawed condition of humankind, a Catholic anthropology holds firmly to the essential dignity of women and men. Such a dignity gives people both rights as individuals and responsibilities to promote similar rights for others.

The advent of Jesus fulfils the wondrous belief of human beings as fashioned in God's likeness: *and the Word became flesh and lived among us* (John 1: 14). Jesus, as the icon of God (2 Corinthians 4:4), shows what it means to be a human being. His mission was to teach and live ways of realising our potential of being human: *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (John 10:10). A celebration of life, with all its ebbs and flows, affirms the goodness of our humanity. Through the Incarnation, Christians believe that God has reached out to humanity in a definitive way through Jesus and by the power of the Spirit. The person of Christ is the 'Teacher-of teachers' whose spirit infuses the whole school curriculum with a hopeful vision of life: *For in him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things* (Colossians 1:19).

A Catholic Christian anthropology holds that humans are relational beings, 'people-in-community'. The metaphor of God as Trinity describes the nature of God as relational and communal, a 'Being-for-the other'. Individualism is only one dimension of the human story.

Cain's question to God, *'Am I my brother's keeper?'* (Genesis 4:9) is to be answered with a resounding 'yes'. We are indeed enjoined to nurture a more relational society and promote the wellbeing of others and the earth. Humans are essentially social beings who are dependent on one another. To exclude oneself from others would contradict the very identity of one's personhood. By virtue of our communal nature there is a moral and ethical dimension to every phase of human life.

Living creatively in communities is not an option but an imperative for what it means to be truly human. In the Last Discourse (John 14-17), Jesus describes how love is the commandment for discipleship in community: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* (John 15:12). Love is the binding power of authentic community. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (2006) writes, *'God is love and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him'* (1 John 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith^(n.1). If caring relationships with others is a core sign of Christian community then a feature of an authentic Catholic school is a vital culture of community and pastoral care.

Belief in our being created in God's image and likeness implies a universal mandate to respect everyone and to foster justice. Pursuit of the 'common good' and active responses to the marginalised are foundational dimensions of Christian spirituality. In the Last Judgment scene of Matthew (Ch. 25) God is to be found among the most abandoned: *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink* (Matthew 25:35). Salvation can never be a personal thing. It is communal or it is nothing. Throughout its two thousand year story the church has provided countless services for the hungry and sick, the poor and dispossessed and has worked tirelessly for social justice.



In more recent times, the Church has developed an imposing corpus of teachings on social justice. A Catholic curriculum is orientated towards making positive contributions to citizenship and social reform. Education for social transformation is a critical dimension for curriculum in Catholic schools. The Good News of the Gospel, the reign of God, seeks a more harmonious and just society. A just curriculum will be characterised by fostering values of inclusion, holistic learning and by combating discrimination on any basis such as sex, race, religion and social class.

All subjects (must) be surveyed in the light of being connected with one another, and they cannot be understood except in the light of those interconnections.

St. Augustine c 400 De Doctrina Christiana



Epistemology

Epistemology (Greek *episteme* 'knowledge') is concerned with the act and nature of knowing. Epistemology explores such questions as, 'How do we know?' 'Is all knowledge relative?' 'Are there best ways of communicating knowledge?' 'Is scientific knowing the only certain approach to knowing what is true?' Because schools are places of teaching and learning, the experience of knowing is one of the most basic issues in education. A Catholic theology and philosophy of curriculum comprehends and applies a Catholic appreciation of epistemology. Teachers in Catholic schools need to be conversant with a Catholic vision of epistemology and to ensure that matters of curriculum are firmly grounded on its tenets.

What are basic themes in a Catholic perspective on epistemology?

Rationality

Catholic Christianity believes that the human mind can and should strive to understand the mysteries of life and the Divine Presence through rational reflection. According to St. Thomas Aquinas we are most like God through our intellect. Although we would challenge Aquinas's overemphasis on reason as signifying our affinity with the Divine, the intellect is a gift enabling humankind to expand the spheres of knowledge. However, in a Catholic perspective of knowledge, there will always be tension between the gift of rationality and thinking with no limits to its scope. Postmodern philosophies, such as deconstruction and relativism, can easily degenerate into intellectual nihilism. Certain genres of postmodernism reject any notion of absolute truth and propose that all ideas are ideologically or culturally fashioned.

Holistic Knowing

A second feature of a Catholic perspective on epistemology affirms that knowing is a holistic enterprise that embraces the intellect, emotions, imagination, experience and community and is not just an exercise of the mind or intellect. Descartes' (1596-1650) famous dictum, '*I think, therefore I am*' was widely accepted by philosophers in the western tradition thus isolating intellectual knowledge from all those other features of knowing that constitute knowledge as a holistic experience. All knowledge is connected. In more recent times the emergence of feminine consciousness has highlighted the role of intuition and imagination in acts of knowing.

Knowing and Living

A third dimension of a Catholic view of knowing is that practical scientific knowing cannot be separated from knowing that is concerned with ethics, religion and life. The German philosopher Kant (1724-1804) sought to resolve the dilemma posed by the challenge of modern scientific knowledge to religious assumptions about knowing. The tragic consequences of separating science from ethics has been graphically illustrated in later centuries by such developments as nuclear weapons and certain expressions of genetic engineering.

Wisdom as the Fruit of Knowing

A fourth feature of epistemology in a Catholic tradition is that all knowing should ultimately lead to wisdom. Philosophies such as pragmatism and positivism exalt scientific and practical knowledge as the only 'certain' knowledge. According to these philosophies, knowledge is thus an exclusive province of an elitist group and people's experiences count for little. A wisdom epistemology affirms the insights of ordinary people in everyday lives to make moral choice for wholesome living. In an age of a multiplicity of choices, it is imperative that students are empowered to acquire skills about making life enhancing choices for themselves, others and the earth. It is no coincidence that the feminine figure of Sophia or Wisdom is imaged as standing by the side of the Creator when the world was born (Proverbs 8:31).



Lifelong Learning

A fifth characteristic of an epistemology in a Catholic tradition is that the acquisition of knowledge is a lifelong enterprise. The motif of journey is a common theme in religious literature where the goal of the life journey is enlightenment. Reflective self-directed learning that is open to expanding consciousness allows learners to continually widen the scope of their knowledge horizons. Reflective teaching and learning in the curriculum provides sabbath spaces for teachers and students to interiorise knowledge.

A Catholic perspective on epistemology orientates a curriculum in a Catholic school to nurture a love of learning and inquiry, offers a multiplicity of learning experiences, promotes ethical and lifelong learning and above all fosters learning that leads to wisdom.



Cosmology

Cosmology relates to how humans understand their place in the universe and choices they make as to how they might live within the integrity of creation. If curriculum in a Catholic school intends to assist students to realise their potential and make a positive difference to the wellbeing of society and the earth community, then students need to appreciate their special role as stewards in the dynamics of creation. The second biblical account of creation describes how humans are both earth and breath of God beings (Genesis 2:7). People can no longer support an anthropocentrism whereby humans assumed that they are masters of creation and could do what they like with the earth. A conversion from 'nature-for-us' attitude to a biocentric perspective on 'nature-for-its-own sake' is critical for the future of planetary health. Humans are co-creators with God and as stewards, they are charged with cultivating and caring for God's garden of creation. Earth care ethics insist that humans have a moral obligation to share in the unfolding evolution of God's plan for creation through sustainable development.

Humans are sacramental people who experience God's presence in their everyday world. In a faith vision of life, women and men encounter God in communities, in the church and its sacramental life, through nature, human activity and the world at large. Such an encounter is infused with a sense of awe, mystery and wonder at God's loving being gracing every feature of creation. God's first revelation to us was through the wonder of the earth and the universe: *The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork* (Psalm 19:1). The principle of sacramentality encourages staff, students and parents to reject any notion of dualism in the curriculum. Dualism in the curriculum implies that there is a twofold division in subjects, the so-called 'secular' subjects and 'religious' subjects.

Catholic christian story and tradition

In the gospels the most popular title for Jesus was 'The Teacher'. From the very beginning of Christianity, the Christian community has been engaged in teaching.

The divine commissioning of the disciples to spread the Good News of the reign of God throughout the entire world happened immediately after the ascension of Christ: *Go therefore... teaching them...* (Matthew 28:19-20). The mission of the Catholic school is integral to the great mission of the church to evangelise and 'teach all nations'. The enterprise of 'teaching all nations' embraces not only participation in schools, but also participation in the whole life of the church, the sacraments, liturgy, devotions as well as witness to the gospel through virtuous living.

(The school) must help students spell out the meaning of their experiences and their truths. Any school which neglects this duty, and which offers pre-cast conclusions, hinders the personal development of its pupils.

The Catholic school n. 27

A curriculum of a contemporary Catholic school stands on the shoulders of countless experiences of teaching and learning throughout the 2000 years of the church story. The schools of the Charlemagne era (c 800 CE), monastic schools in the Middle Ages, Ursuline schools (16th century), Jesuit education (16th century), the schools of John Baptist De La Salle (18th century) and a whole host of Catholic educators in the nineteenth century such as Edmund Rice, Catherine McAuley, Marcellin Champagnat, John Bosco and Mary MacKillop, all shaped and formed an illustrious heritage of Catholic curriculum. Christian educators of other traditions, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin significantly enriched a Christian vision of education.

Catholic curriculum throughout the ages has experienced a multiplicity of evolutions shaped by diverse cultural mores, philosophies, theological movements, human consciousness, educational theories and social transformations. However certain fundamental themes about human dignity and the imperative to foster the common good have remained constant, even if specific practices in teaching and learning have not always remained faithful to these beliefs. A Catholic vision of curriculum, while respecting the integrity of various subjects, upholds the connectedness of all knowledge emanating from the one source of God as eternal Truth.

Theology plays a particularly important role in the search for a synthesis of knowledge as well as in the dialogue between faith and reason. It serves all other disciplines in their search for meaning, not only by helping them to investigate how their discoveries will affect individuals and society but also by bringing a perspective and orientation not contained within their own methodologies.

Ex Corde Ecclesiae n.22



Focused questions

Focused questions for a curriculum in a Catholic school that is aligned with a theology and philosophy of Catholic Education

Catholic schools seek to contribute to the holistic development of each student. The Vatican document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium* (1997) states, 'the person... is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school' (n.9).

Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

(Luke 18:16)

The development of each student includes empowering students with the motivations, knowledge, skills and spirituality necessary to live and work effectively as witnessing people in society inspired by a Christian vision of life. To this end the curriculum in an authentic Catholic school needs to foster values, attitudes and habits related to such questions as:

1. How does the curriculum provide students with appropriate knowledge and a values-based understanding of the social, political and economic structures which exist in society and possible alternatives to these structures? How are students encouraged to develop critical thinking to evaluate these structures in the light of the gospel?
2. How does the curriculum offer opportunities to become more knowledgeable about issues affecting our relationships with stewardship of the world and relationships with others? Such issues include themes such as earth care, poverty and distribution of wealth, global warming, land rights and reconciliation?

3. How does the curriculum provide diverse opportunities for students to develop intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically through an evolving commitment to the teachings and mission of Jesus in promoting 'life in abundance' (John 10:10)?
4. How does the curriculum lead students to take their place effectively in the workforce through competencies and attitudes related to self-discipline, flexibility, resilience, lifelong learning and positive citizenship in the 21st century?
5. How does the curriculum provide for the continuous development of skills such as, listening, thinking logically, research methods, explaining, debating and making life enhancing decisions?
6. How does the curriculum provide students with foundational beliefs about the dignity of people, celebrating differences in a globalised world and empower them to effectively promote the common good and justice?
7. How does the curriculum reflect key principles in the social teachings of the church?

And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

(Matthew 13:52)

A way forward

A way forward for developing a greater awareness of Catholic curriculum and the implementation of relevant practices.

The following themes are proposed as possible pathways for deepening an awareness and practical application of the theological and philosophical foundations of curriculum in Catholic schools:

- develop resources for schools that illustrate how Catholic perspectives on curriculum may be implemented in the teaching and learning of the various key learning areas
- conduct programs on the themes of the theological and philosophical foundations of curriculum in Catholic schools for staff, parents, leadership people, as well as Catholic education consultants in curriculum
- research approaches to curriculum development that illustrate how a Catholic theology and philosophy may permeate teaching and learning that is integrated into key learning areas without diminishing the integrity of each subject

- clarify the purpose of Catholic schools with all stakeholders as learning communities which integrate faith, life and culture within a Catholic tradition of education
- plan and implement induction sessions with new staff and parents to include appropriate introductions to the theology and philosophy of curriculum in Catholic schools.

He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.

(Colossians 1:17)

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid the foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

(1 Corinthians. 3:10-11)



Conclusion

The project of developing a greater awareness and knowledge of the theological and philosophical foundations of curriculum in Catholic schools is a critical challenge at this epoch in the story of Catholic education.

As Catholic schools become more integrated into state and national educational policies and beholden to governments for a growing number of compliance issues, it is imperative that the stakeholders in Catholic schools are very clear about the ethos of their schools and the need for positive initiatives to align the curriculum with their foundational theology, beliefs, values and philosophy.



References

Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century (1999).

Benedict XVI (2006). *De Caritas Est*. Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI. Strathfield NSW. St Pauls.

Congregation for Catholic Education (1988). *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*. Homebush NSW. St. Paul Publications.

Congregation for Catholic Education (1998). *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*. Homebush St. Paul Publications.

John Paul II. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* Encyclical Letter. Promulgated 15th August 1990.

Scripture quotations

From the New Revised Standard Version Bible: copyright 1989.



With acknowledgement to educational consultant Dr Kevin Treston OAM for his work in consultation with the Queensland Catholic Education Commission and its Education Committee.

Contact

Queensland Catholic Education Commission
GPO Box 2441 Brisbane 4001
Ph (07) 3336 9306 Fax (07) 3229 0907

www.qcec.qld.catholic.edu.au