

A Look at Needs in Catholic Schools
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INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his book Educational Ideals in the Ancient World, William Barclay quotes T.R. Glover's caustic remark (from "The Boy and the Theorist"): "Probably most human beings would by now regard it as a truism, or even an axiom, that to be tedious it is only necessary to discuss education." Well, discuss education we must, but we can avoid being tedious by saying what needs to be said; but by saying it only once. It is this that I will try to do.

In this I wish to imply no criticism of any teacher, either within or without the Catholic system. Nevertheless, I do intend to make observations about what I perceive to be inadequacies in current methods of teacher formation both in the secular and religious areas.

It would be negative and non-productive of me simply to enumerate these inadequacies. It would be more productive instead, to express these problems in the form of "needs" in Catholic education. This approach serves the double function of identifying areas of concern while suggesting, at least in principle, some solution or advisory programme for continuing improvement.

This approach has been made necessary because of the general acceptance of secular educational, methodological and ideological concepts on the part of the Catholic teacher formation institutes.

AN EDUCATIONAL VISION

Recently, I attended a conference of Catholic Primary Principals. A visiting guest lecturer, Robert J. Starrat, presented a paper entitled "Catholic School Leadership: Vision, Drama, Institutional Transformation." He had this to say about the vision for Catholic schools: "Fashioning a vision of what our Catholic schools can be will emerge out of the many conversations we have had and will have, in which the collective shaping of our journeys emerges into words that hold the mystery, however incompletely ... our ability to hear legitimate echoes of our own journey in the words of our colleagues, will enable us to meld their expressions with our own into a perspective on our school that will guide all of us."

Aside from the fact that this statement lacks precision, it contains elements which are true of many contemporary articulations of the vision of Catholic education.

A feature of such statements, which I will call "TENDING", incorporates the use of a blend of present continuous and future tenses to convey a sense of movement or "becoming". Here are the verbs used: "Fashioning .. can be... will emerge ... have had and will have ... emerges ... to hear ... will enable ... to meld ... will guide." Such an approach reinforces, by the use of grammar, a relativist tenor which is also manifest in the actual meanings of the words used. Add

to this the conjunction of words which are not usually associated with each other and this process tends to break up the conceptual flow of ideas in the person reading them because there is a discord between the reader's memory of the normal context in which such words appear and the new contexts with which they are being associated. Take for example: "fashioning a vision" - normally one "has" a vision.

Here we see the utter subjectification of the vision of Catholic education; no longer something enshrined in Church documents on education but now to be "shaped" according to one's "many conversations". Another example of this dissonant use of ideas which I have called TENDING, is the, ..."collective shaping of our journeys emerg(ing) into words that hold the mystery"... To assert that one's life journey "emerges into words that hold the mystery" may be beautifully poetic but is hardly a way of expressing the vision of Catholic education, since it claims to be a mystery. Yet another example of this conceptual dissonance is, the expression "...to hear legitimate echoes of our own journey in the words of our colleagues..." Is it only the words of our colleagues which determine which echoes are legitimate? Can only our peers determine whether our vision is correct? I think not.

The second feature of successfully expressing the vision of Catholic education is comprehending. If they are sufficiently comprehensive, these aims will encompass the breadth of vision and the degree of consultation and cooperation sought by the conference speaker I have just quoted. Unlike his articulation however, they will avoid relativist ideology and concentrate on statements of educational principle. An ideal starting point for such a philosophy would be the highly developed educational postulates which are enshrined in recent documents and exhortations emanating from the highest levels of the Catholic Church's teaching authority.

The second "need" is TEACHERS WHO ARE RESOLUTE, because they have a clear philosophy, AND who are RELENTLESS in pursuing valued educational aims. Teachers without some philosophy of education cannot programme and teach to achieve these aims. The process of education becomes a kind of lurching progress from one good idea to another. These modern Catholic primary teachers could easily be more impressed by the fact that their peers found a lesson to be really enjoyable in the classroom than whether it was aimed at a certain educational goal. The result can be the choice of lessons more for their intrinsic fun or satisfaction value than the fact that they aim to implement certain goals.

The teacher needs to be driven by objectivity and the determination to teach children the best. Too often teachers are lured towards a curriculum innovation because it is getting good press in the journals; because it is popular with the other teachers who find it less demanding than previous approaches; because it is promoted as "new" and "progressive"; and even because it is favoured by the educational bureaucracy. None of these reasons are objective, nor do they establish the intrinsic worth of a new approach.

As a professional, every teacher has the right to make an objective judgment about a proposed innovation. This professional impartiality on the part of each teacher does not necessarily mean that schools would find it difficult to make corporate policy decisions about curriculum issues. On the contrary it ensures that such decisions will be made on rational grounds.

Each teacher needs to be driven by a resolution that children deserve the best we can give them. As teachers consider any proposed change or idea for educational innovation, their resolve to give the child only the best ought to provoke such questions as: "Is this new suggestion any better objectively than the one currently in use?" "Will it be better for the children rather than just easier and less work for me?" "Will it have the result that children are given less knowledge than they are currently being given?"

The teacher who is motivated by the pursuit of excellence will choose only those innovations which are objectively better than the ones currently in use; will not choose an approach because it is easier on the teacher; and will never allow the children's potential fund of knowledge to be reduced.

IT'S TOO HARD TO TEACH!

One of the things I have noticed in my work in primary religious education has been the prevalent but oft implied idea that what cannot be taught in thirty minutes is not worth teaching, or should be left until secondary school. For example: "The teaching on purgatory," teachers will say, "is too difficult for children to understand. Why not leave it to secondary school, or just leave it out?"

Because the doctrine on purgatory is a "carpetbag" one, which requires an understanding of sin, forgiveness, mercy, temporal punishment, reward and so forth, all of which are abstract ideas, it is viewed as too hard for primary children. Well, it is certainly too hard to teach in thirty minutes from scratch, but it can be taught well over a series of lessons. It is interesting to note that the same teachers think nothing of allocating many dozens, possibly hundreds, of lessons over several years to teaching the relatively simple concept of division.

CONTENT, SKILLS METHOD and "PROCESS"

I would like to address the "skills-rather-than-knowledge" syndrome. It would seem that a growing number of Catholic educators have fallen for this pedagogical legerdemain. They opine that education used to fill the children's empty heads with knowledge, most of which is soon outdated anyway. The solution they suggest is that rather than having a child knowing the principal rivers of New South Wales, or how hydroelectricity is made, it is more important for him/her to know how to look these facts up. This is a useful suggestion provided one can carry a multi-volume encyclopedia, dictionary, thesaurus, atlas, cooking manual, road directory, road law code, bible and catechism wherever one goes. I am not opposed to teaching research skills, or to the project/assignment style of teaching in some subjects, but does it take seven years to teach these skills? Couldn't we just try to get a little bit of useful knowledge into children as well? Wouldn't it be easier to determine what body of knowledge should reasonably be expected of the primary school graduate and then use the seven years of primary school in which to teach it?

One measure of educational achievement is the amount of useful practical and theoretical knowledge a person has retained. I fear that modern educational theory, absorbed as it is with "process", places far more value on the child's involvement in the educational dynamic than any objective quantifiable outcome which that dynamic might transmit to the child.

EDUCATION AS THERAPY

My experiences in schools over the past sixteen years has introduced me to the "therapeutic" model of classroom practice. In this paradigm the teacher, at a loss to articulate clearly defined aims, objectives and procedures for the classroom, opts instead for the notion of busy-ness. Unable to programme to achieve precise educational goals the teacher reckons its good to keep the kids busy.

There is only a subtle difference between the busy-ness of an ordered educational activity and the busy-ness of one which is aimless but gratifying to the children. An ordered educational activity required considerable effort on the part of the teacher. For the sake of each child, including the less cooperative ones, the teacher must motivate, stimulate, monitor, evaluate and remediate all stages of the educational dynamic. All of these things require effort and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher, and quite frequently, children have to be encouraged to do things they'd rather not do. The therapeutic solution is such an attractive alternative because it generates the minimum of classroom anxiety for both teacher and pupils alike.

Formal lessons are kept to a minimum and the rest of the time is taken up with activities enjoyed by all parties. Project work abounds and the core subjects are generally dealt with by the provision of an infinite succession of work sheets which eventually find their way home, are stuck on the 'fridge until the magnet can hold them no longer, and are then confined to the waste paper bin. The so-called "busy hum" of such classrooms is as deceptive as the hum of drone bees - all sound and little effect. This is not said in disparagement of those teachers who delight in an active classroom and who use worksheets effectively. Unless the activities and materials given to children in a teaching day are programmed to a precise educational goal they become nothing more than occupational therapy.

When challenged about this abrogation of educational responsibility the therapeutic teacher usually replies that he/she is being non- directive. The fact is, there is no such thing as nondirectional teaching. The two terms non-directional and teaching are mutually exclusive. To teach is to direct, whether this be an overt act, by "transmission"; or a covert influence, by "facilitation". The non- directive teacher is a myth which should be buried with the 1960's teaching manuals from whence it came. Whether teaching is a transmission or a facilitation is not really the issue. The fact remains that teaching means being either a transmitter or a facilitator. This brings me to the third "need". Colleges and Universities which prepare teachers to teach. Many focus on the idea of education as process - that the immersion of the child in the learning activity is more important than the knowledge gained by that process - has resulted in the subjugation of cognitive aims. How ridiculous! This existentialist argument places the experience of learning above the outcome of that learning. By this argument one can assume that

a week after a given lesson the child should retain the experience of learning, and not necessarily what was taught. This really is putting education on its head.

Teachers simply must be given the confidence that the pursuit of knowledge is a valid aim of education and that they are the ones who must have the determination to participate actively in giving it to children.

TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT

A further problem is by far the most serious one for religious educators. It would seem that teachers of today have considerable difficulty with many aspects of Catholic doctrine. This is not surprising given that they have been subjected to catechetical theory that supports the individual view point and not the universal. The concepts of denial and self restraint are viewed as "negative" and contrary to the image of a loving and forgiving God.

The fact is that certain dimensions of human existence, such as pain and sin, are inescapably negative, and that eternal separation from the all-loving God is the ultimate negative experience because it is "living Hell" in the strictest sense of the expression.

The so-called "negatives" are the very bones upon which are hung the flesh of Catholic belief. The entire doctrine on the reward of Heaven, for example, only has meaning because we are going to die. The doctrine on God's forgiveness only has meaning when we consider the consequences of denying His forgiveness. The doctrine on the eucharistic meal only has meaning because Jesus died in sacrifice. If you will pardon the mixed metaphor, without these so-called "negatives" Catholic belief would become an easily digestible diet of pap; poor in nutrition because it hasn't enough bones in it for the children to cut their teeth on.

This illustrates the fourth "need" in teacher formation for the Catholic system:

UNDERGRADUATE AND POST-GRADUATE FORMATION OF CATHOLIC TEACHERS IN A THOROUGH AND COMPLETE KNOWLEDGE OF CATHOLIC DOCTRINE.

It was suggested recently to me by one responsible for formation of teachers in a Catholic campus, that it was more important to teach the student teachers how to "theologise". Disregarding, for the moment, the fact that to theologise properly one must have a solid foundation of Catholic dogmatic and scriptural knowledge (which would possibly exceed the requirements of undergraduate teacher training in any case), it would seem self evident that a teacher formation institution is trying to produce religious education teachers not theologians. Had the students wanted to be theologians surely they would have enrolled in the Bachelor of Theology, not the Bachelor of Education?

More than one Catholic teacher training institution has acknowledged that it does not prepare its graduates with a systematic indoctrination into Catholic teachings. One person responsible for Catholic teacher formation called graduation a "learner's permit" and suggested that the aim is to produce graduates who "feel good about teaching religion". All I can say is I'd rather trust my child's life to a surgeon who has a lot more than a mere "learner's permit". So too, his eternal soul needs competent attention.

One would think that in the interest of perpetuating the Catholic Faith of future generations of primary school leavers, graduates of Catholic teacher training institutions should have a basic competence in the one subject which should distinguish Catholic schools from all others. Is it so hard to give embryonic teachers at least the minimal level of doctrinal competence to be able to grasp the level of Catholic teaching required to be given in the primary school? In all of this we should be mindful of the directive of Canon Law, the law of the Church, which says:

"Formation and education in a Catholic school must be based on the principles of Catholic doctrine, and the teachers must be outstanding in true doctrine and uprightness of life." (Canon 803. n.2)

It is disturbing to consider it necessary to suggest that Catholic teachers' Colleges and University campuses should teach a thorough knowledge of Catholic Doctrine, but the facts will bear out the reality of this necessity. I would be very happy to be proven wrong in the conclusions I have reached. Nothing would make me happier than for the teacher training institutions to prove, by the graduates they produce, that they have formed them in a sound, systematic and complete knowledge of Catholic doctrine. I know that graduates are up to date with many contemporary theological opinions, but they don't seem to know some of the more basic teachings about God's nature, Original Sin, Redemption, Supernatural Grace, angels, sacraments, the last things, Transubstantiation, or even be able to recite the Ten Commandments in correct order. No one is suggesting that this list constitutes the sum total of Divine Revelation, or that it fully acknowledges the lived and spiritual dimensions of Catholic life, yet it would be reasonable to expect that a Catholic graduate should know this core of Catholic belief thoroughly.

"SUBJECT TRANSFORMATION"

An interesting transposition has altered the very lines of delineation which separated the type of subjects, both secular and religious which occur in the primary school curriculum. The distinction between the utilitarian and the conceptual has been blurred, if not completely eliminated.

To explain myself I will consider the example of two subjects: Mathematics and Religion. I would contend that once these subjects would have been described as either conceptual or utilitarian in the following way.

A utilitarian subject is one whose aims are practical - usually the mastery of certain skills or abilities considered necessary for productive human existence. And so, it concentrates on teaching the skills and attitudes necessary for the achievement of these practical aims with a view to implementing them in daily life.

A conceptual subject is one whose aims are conceptual They are about the understanding of ideas and appreciating and valuing them. Thus, it concentrates on making students sensitive and aware of these ideas and values with a view to expressing them in daily life.

I would not attempt to place a higher value on either the conceptual or the utilitarian. Nor are the traditional primary school subjects restricted to being either exclusively utilitarian or conceptual. Suffice to say here that primary education has traditionally assigned these values, in the main, to particular subjects and not to others.

For example, Mathematics, once commonly called Arithmetic, had been seen within the primary school curriculum as utilitarian. Its main occupation was that of teaching children how to "do sums". Accordingly its aims were practical. It taught the skills of estimation, computation, of mental arithmetic. It aimed to deal with the mechanical aspects of human existence which we generally demand in mathematics. To this end its aims were purely utilitarian - getting on with life's business.

It would not be until the end of secondary school that pure mathematics or infinitesimal calculus might hold some romantic appeal for the very few who did not see it as an alien science to be mastered for the purposes of getting a science or medicine place at university.

Today, it would appear that Arithmetic has become Mathematics, a conceptual subject. Great stress is laid on the student "experiencing" mathematics. It is suggested that the student must understand the processes used. We might as well say that before a person can really enjoy watching television he/she needs to really understand how it works. This conjures up the vision of teachers striving to help children really understand and appreciate why they should bring down the next digit after performing the subtraction in a long division sum. The poor toiling teacher is required to be occupied with explaining the intricacies of why we calculate an average. "Our mathematics must make sense now, otherwise it becomes an abstract and meaningless game ... Mathematics can make sense when it is linked to what students know or want to know.

Having made the distinction between the conceptual and utilitarian subjects, let us turn our attention again to Religious Education.

RESTRUCTURED RELIGION

Mindful of the original definition of the conceptual subject as all about the understanding of ideas and appreciating and valuing them, one can see that Religious Education would most admirably fit the bill as a conceptual subject. Clearly, it concentrates on making students sensitive and aware of certain spiritual ideas and values with a view to expressing them in daily life.

A unique reorientation has occurred in the teaching of religion. Its effect has been to turn what was a conceptual subject into a utilitarian one. To my mind this is far more serious than any redefinition which might have occurred in the secular subjects since it alters the very *raison d'être* of the Catholic school.

Traditionally, the teaching of religion aimed at giving a body of religious knowledge which dealt with the sublime metaphysical realities in simple human terms. The primary school child learnt, in little phrases, that God created the Universe, that He created the human race who disobeyed

Him in the persons of Adam and Eve, that He promised His own Son would redeem them by His death on the Cross, and that He would leave His lasting Church as a means of Salvation, thus providing the sacraments of Grace and the hierarchial structure which would preserve His authentic teaching forever. They learnt of the promise of eternal life and, by their prayers, learnt of His all-encompassing love for each person. In the fullness of Catholic Liturgy and worship they could grow and develop as fully mature Christians, ready to take an actively beneficial place in secular society.

This form of teaching had two distinctive features: firstly, its concrete aim was that even by the end of primary school the children knew all of this to the limit of their ability; and secondly, that this knowledge made them aware of their responsibility to value these beliefs and try to live them. It was a form of education that had remained unchanged for many centuries. It had produced countless saints, both canonised and uncanonised. As a conceptual subject, it valued orthodoxy, that is, correct belief, as the starting point of catechesis. The products of this approach proceeded from knowledge to action. Put succinctly, out of the knowledge of correct belief came correct action based on that belief. This of course does not discount the existence of sin which is the failure to live out these beliefs in practice. It certainly does not obliterate the need for the acquisition of that correct knowledge in the first place.

This transformed approach to the teaching of religion has often been called the "New Catechetics". Its proponents claim the Second Vatican Council as the starting point of this reconceptualisation. Often quoting the so-called "spirit" of Vatican II they constructed a persuasive argument that knowledge-based catechesis was to be replaced with a child or lifecentered approach. The Catholic teacher training institutions have been in the forefront of promoting this philosophy of religious education.

The attraction of this approach is that it is immediately utilitarian. Instead of teaching a body of idealised doctrine, it concentrates on the practical. Using the child's personal experiences it teaches correct behaviour. It enjoins them to "sharing", "caring" and "loving". It emphasizes love of neighbour, justice, and very many other virtues. But the relationship between knowledge and behaviour is, in the process, destroyed.

The child-centred approach suggests that by reflecting on the child's experiences, the teacher then draws from this some principle of Christian belief. This method immediately raises two important objections. First, for this to be effective it must draw uniquely from each child's personal lived experiences. Aside from drawing out general principles about good behaviour, it can teach little of the metaphysical. In order to teach about God's immutable, omnipotent and omniscient nature the teacher will have to abandon the child-centred approach and use a Godcentred one.

To this end the utilitarian reconceptualisation of catechesis favours orthopraxis, that is correct behaviour. It is sufficient to note here, that the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II had signaled the failure of this approach as long ago as 1979. He said: "It is also quite useless to campaign for the abandonment of serious and orderly study of the message of Christ in the name of a method concentrating on life experience. No one can arrive at the whole truth on the basis solely of some simple private experience, that is to say without an adequate explanation of the message

of Christ ... Nor is any opposition to be set up between a catechesis taking life as its point of departure and a traditional, doctrinal and systematic catechesis. Authentic catechesis is always an orderly and systematic initiation into the revelation that God has given of himself to humanity in Christ Jesus, a revelation stored in the depths of the Church's memory and in Sacred Scripture, and constantly communicated from one generation to the next by a living active tradition." (Catechesi Tradendae, p. 22)

This serves to highlight the fifth need in Catholic teacher formation: a commitment on the part of the teacher training institutions to the reinstatement of catechesis as a conceptual, rather than utilitarian, activity. Such an activity which systematically imparts the revelation of Christ through

His Church would be the means to a fully mature and adult Christian witness in the world.

CONCLUSION

The first need: clear articulation of the aims of education.

The second need: teachers who are resolute, because they have a clear philosophy, and who are relentless in pursuing valued educational aims.

The third need: the transmission of knowledge, in its own right, should be valued as a major occupation of primary education.

The fourth need: undergraduate and post-graduate formation of Catholic teachers in a thorough and complete knowledge of Catholic doctrine.

The fifth need: a commitment on the part of the teacher training institutions to the reinstatement of catechesis as a conceptual, rather than utilitarian, activity.

These needs can be met, at least in terms of the initial formation of teachers, by the Catholic Teachers' Colleges and campuses of the Australian Catholic University. I would contend that these institutions could do a little more towards achieving them than is being done at present.