



# Apporto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice all'educazione (1872-2022)

PERCORSI, SFIDE E PROSPETTIVE

Convegno internazionale - Roma, 25-30 settembre 2022

## **CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION TODAY: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Jacinta COLLINS

Executive Director  
National Catholic Education Commission, Australia

### **Acknowledgment of Country**

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live and work, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. I extend that respect to all Indigenous peoples.

Thank you for the opportunity to present an Australian perspective on confronting the challenges of education today and to Mr Wodon and the other respondents for presenting their perspectives.

### **A brief history of Australian education**

It's important to consider the role of Catholic education in the establishment of formal schooling in Australia. The history of Australian education is not well-recorded, with the first schools being established around three decades after colonial settlement in 1788.

The first 'official' Catholic school was founded around the same time in 1820 by Irish Catholic priest Fr John Therry, and run by former convict George Marley in Parramatta, near Sydney. The school taught 31 students – seven of whom were Protestants.

In 1885, the Australian Catholic Bishops named their intention for a Catholic school to be provided in every parish to educate children in the faith and contribute to the common good. Catholic schools grew alongside their public school counterparts, and established a parallel school system in Australia without any government funding or support for over a century.



Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze  
dell'Educazione «AUXILIUM»  
via Cremolino, 141 - 00166 ROMA

The re-introduction of funding by the Menzies Government in 1962, was a response to a protest by a local bishop who could not afford to comply with building repairs for its local school. The re-establishment of government support, recognised the moral responsibility of governments to fund, at least in part, education for all Australian children, including those who had been excluded based on their choice of a religious school, and also acknowledged the significant contribution of Catholic schools to the public good.

Catholic education in Australia has grown to become the largest schooling provider outside of government. Today, we educate one in five students or over 785,000 students, in 1,755 schools, with over 102,000 staff. Catholic schooling is a \$14 billion annual enterprise, and we invest nearly \$1.8 billion into capital infrastructure annually.

Australian governments contribute around 80% of all recurrent funding annually with parents and other sources of income making up around 20%.

Australia is quite unique in its provision and scope of Catholic education in the world.

## **Education for the Common Good**

Education for the common good lies at the heart of Catholic education across the world – a vision shared by the United Nations. In 2015, UNESCO reaffirmed a “humanistic” approach in education.

“Education alone cannot hope to solve all development challenges, but a humanistic and holistic approach to education can and should contribute to achieving a new development model. In such a model, economic growth must be guided by environmental stewardship and by concern for peace, inclusion and social justice. Regarding education and learning, it means going beyond narrow utilitarianism and economism to integrate the multiple dimensions of human existence.” (Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good, 2015, p10)

This vision is echoed in the recent Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration for Australian schools:

“... our education system must do more than this – it must also prepare young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex environmental, social and economic challenges. Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion.” (2019, p2)

In their recent pastoral letter, the Australian Catholic Bishops noted the contribution of Catholic schools to the common good.

“Catholic schools are also a major part of Australia’s educational ecosystem. They have provided high quality education to generations of young Australians, now numbering in their millions. They stand as a beacon in our society, for their contribution to the common good and to the nation’s social capital. They have helped nurture a more just, tolerant and cohesive society. Catholic education is determined in its commitment to excellence and equity.” (200 Years Young, p2).

## **Measuring our success**

It’s not enough to hold a vision for education that contributes to the common good, we need to measure our success in this endeavour.

There is sound evidence that shows education has a positive impact on physical and mental health, increases social cohesion, reduces crime rates and lowers welfare, which in turn strengthens civil society. (Education will be the engine room of Australia’s future prosperity, PwC, 2017, p4)

In 2020, Cardus Education Survey Australia Consortium and McCrindle Research published their findings of the impact of Australian education on Millennials, and specifically how education has contributed to the flourishing of Australian communities.

The survey of 25 to 39 year olds explored the extent to which these contributions are evident many years after students have graduated across a range of social, civic, cultural, academic and spiritual outcomes.

It found Christian school graduates are far more likely than government school graduates to believe their school prepared them to find a sense of meaning, purpose and direction in life (74% cf. 51%). Catholic (87%) and Christian (80%) school graduates were also more likely to believe their school emphasised religious or spiritual values than independent (65%) or government graduates (21%). (Cardus Education Survey Australia, 2020, p 6).

In 2019, before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found one in 10 Australians (10%) aged 24-39 were experiencing social isolation, and approximately 16% were experiencing loneliness. Research conducted since the pandemic, found Australians have been most negatively impacted socially (42%), over financial (28%), mental health (17%) or physical (13%) impacts. (Cardus Education Survey Australia, 2020, p 10).

Active involvement in groups and associations are not just for economic or psychological reasons, but are fundamental to our good as humans. The Cardus survey found large differences in group affiliation with Christian school graduates most likely to be active members (45%) of a church or religious group. Government school graduates displayed lower levels of engagement across groups and associations compared to other sectors, but often only marginally. More than a quarter of government school graduates

(28%) are an active member of a sports, leisure or cultural group, and sports groups are also where Catholic school graduates are most likely to be active members (34%). (Cardus Education Survey Australia, 2020, p 12).

The common good is fostered through generosity in giving and volunteering. The survey found Christian school graduates volunteer most frequently (48%); Catholic school graduates have high frequencies of giving. In the previous 12 months, 68% of Catholic school graduates surveyed had donated to a non-profit, charitable organisation or group. While Catholic school graduates have highest household incomes, their giving highlights an outward-facing approach when it comes to stewarding the resources they have earned. (Cardus Education Survey Australia, 2020, p 12)

### **Faith – enliven faith formation and Religious Education**

There is a growing body of credible research to suggest religious beliefs and practices such as prayer, meditation, religious-moral teaching and practice, can be associated with greater mental health and wellbeing, reduced depression and anxiety, decreased substance use, and increased social support. (Religion and Mental Health Address, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP, 2020)

Faith formation is a challenging area to collect data and, at the National Catholic Education Commission, we are exploring what data is available, enhancing the quality of this data, and our response to it.

The data from the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics' (2021) census highlighted a decrease in Australians identifying as "Christian". On paper it showed a drop from 52 per cent to 44 per cent over four years, with "no religion" rising to 38.9 per cent, from 30.1 per cent in 2016.

While this doesn't take into account anomalies in the way the Australian census has been collected over the years; the understanding of spiritual belief alongside religious affiliation; or a strong secular campaign to tick "no religion" at the last census; it does show the challenge for policy makers and faith-based groups in advocating for support of religious freedom, faith-based schooling and policy representation. (Australian Bureau of Statistics Census, 2021)

How we measure the impact of schools on spiritual and religious affiliation is complex. Christian school graduates are the most likely to believe in God (45%), while more government school graduates don't (35%). Christian school graduates are most likely to have prayed (62%), engaged with a religious text (46%) or attended a religious service (40%) at least monthly in the past 12 months. Interestingly, while Catholic school graduates believe their school had an emphasis on spiritual and religious values, only 16% of Catholic school graduates had attended a religious service at least monthly in the past 12 months. (Cardus Education Survey Australia, 2020, p 12).

There is a tension that exists between faith formation and contributing to the common good that is reflected in the diversity of those we enrol, and their connection to faith, parish life and active worship. For Catholic schools, our partnership with parishes in 1885 is as important today, and our schools are one of our strongest opportunities to evangelise and continue to be fertile ground to enrich faith formation and religious education.

## **Excellence - continual improvement of educational outcomes**

Level of education attainment has been shown to have a direct impact on an individual's health, with adults scoring lower literacy proficiency being more likely to report poor health. Conversely, better educated people have lower morbidity rates and longer life expectancy. (Education will be the engine room of Australia's future prosperity, PwC, 2017, p4)

A pressing concern for all Australian schools, not just Catholic schools, is how we will reverse a 20-year decline in student performance as measured by the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other local assessment measures which show an absolute and relative decline in performance.

This decline cannot be attributed to one particular school sector, but is a challenge shared across the whole education landscape, and particularly for students experiencing educational disadvantage and those from rural and remote areas.

As part of our strategic focus we are working with states, territories, dioceses and school communities to understand the national picture, and are looking at highly effective schools across the Catholic and other sectors to identify and share best practice. While the initial focus is on numeracy and maths, where there is significant need according to our national data, we will also continue this work with reading and writing. This work will support local efforts to lift educational standards across our Catholic system.

Our 'systemness' is our greatest asset to share expertise and learn from each other in order to lift educational outcomes for all students.

## **Access – How best to respond to the needs of families**

In our earliest days, Catholic schools were originally established to educate the poor and most vulnerable in society. While the "preferential option for the poor" is still a valued aspiration for Catholic education, we have increasingly found ourselves more accessible to families from middle class backgrounds in Australia, with government schools carrying more of the load in regard to educational and socio-economic disadvantage.

We know that students from lower income backgrounds, students with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, are under-represented in our schools. There

are a number of reasons for this including limited capital support to grow and build new Catholic schools, however, we also need to consider how we can remove barriers to enrolment to be more welcoming and inclusive, and to better meet the needs of students and families from all backgrounds.

At our National Catholic Education Conference earlier this month, Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, Andreas Schleicher, said the findings from the PISA assessment have demonstrated that education can moderate social disadvantage, however he acknowledges the performance variability between schools.

Mr Schleicher says performance variability between schools is less of a concern in countries like Finland, and even Australia, where he says we are actually performing quite well on this. However, there is huge variability in student performance within schools in Australia and it's not just disadvantaged students from disadvantaged areas. There are many young people "falling through the cracks" even in high performing and wealthy schools, which is a much harder problem to address and requires more attention on what is happening within the whole education system.

One area where Australia does well is to provide disadvantaged students with access to high performing schools. Mr Schleicher says, if you have good results and merit you can access a high performing school in Australia - the system is very porous. Social segregation in Australia is not a story of public versus private schools. "Most of the social segregation in Australia is actually happening within the public school sector. That's where the big problems of social segregation arise, or even also within the private sector. It's not so much a question of public versus private schools. So it's a question for the entire school system." (Educating learners for the future – not our past, National Catholic Education Conference, Australia, 2022)

The recent Plenary Council of Australia provided an opportunity to renew our focus on the educational mission of the Church. Unfortunately, this was overshadowed, at times, by other active voices and agendas which left many of us thinking we had missed an opportunity to give formal support to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration and highlight issues of excellence and equity. Nonetheless, this will not diminish our national strategic priorities to enrich the faith lives of students, support the continual improvement of student learning outcomes, and improve access to Catholic education to all students.

## **Teachers and leaders**

Finally, I want to acknowledge the work of teachers and leaders in Australian education. The COVID-19 pandemic has, in some way, better highlighted the need and value of the teaching profession in Australia. Without a quality teaching profession, our educational aims cannot be achieved.

Australia, like many places in the world, is challenged by teacher workforce shortages, particularly in specialist subject areas and regional and remote areas. We are working in partnership with our Catholic universities and the wider tertiary sector to identify new opportunities for strengthening the teacher workforce, building connections with today's students to consider teaching as a profession, strengthening initial teacher education, and utilising teaching undergraduates to support teachers in the classroom in innovative ways. We are also looking at how we can form our teachers and leaders in faith, and maintain our Catholic identity in a legislative environment focused on limiting religious freedom in some Australian states and territories.

## **Conclusion**

At our recent conference, in a very entertaining cooking segment with a hospitality student and their teacher, Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher OP said the recipe for success for Australian Catholic education, and one could say, education more broadly, can be equated to a well-baked souffle.

He said the ingredients need to be right and all parts of the souffle need to rise – the bottom, the middle and the top, otherwise the whole souffle will flop.

Education has the ability to mobilise future generations, to lift them out of poverty and disadvantage, as the early Australian Catholic educators aimed to do, and to foster the human flourishing of all young people.

For Catholic education, we describe this in the words of Jesus, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”. (John 10: 10)

I'd like to finish by sharing what our Bishops wrote in their recent pastoral letter:

“We also have great confidence in our young people: that inspired by their encounter with Jesus Christ and nurtured by a Catholic education, they will be young women and men of character and ideals, and will contribute as leaders and disciples in our world. And we have great confidence in our education leaders and staff: that in charting the course for Catholic education in Australia in its third century, you will help us imagine how our educational institutions can be schools in a deeper faith and humanity, and ensure that this dream is realised.” (200 Years Young, p.6)

Congratulations on your 150th anniversary and I hope your congress bears rich fruit for our ongoing work in Catholic education.

## References:

- UNESCO, 2015, Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good. Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232555> (Accessed 12 September 2022).
- Australian Government, 2019, The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. Available at <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springsmparntwe-education-declaration> (Accessed 12 September 2022).
- Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2021, 200 Years Young: A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of Australia to the leaders, staff, students and families of Catholic education in Australia. Available at [https://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/images/Pastoral\\_Letter\\_200\\_Years\\_Young\\_1802\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/images/Pastoral_Letter_200_Years_Young_1802_2021.pdf) (Accessed 12 September 2022).
- PwC, 2017, Education will be the engine room of Australia's future prosperity. Available at <https://www.pwc.com.au/education/education-reform-mar17.pdf> (Accessed 12 September 2022).
- Cheng, A. and Iselin, D. Cardus Education Survey Australia Consortium and McCrindle Research, 2020, Australian Schools and the Common Good, Summary Report of the Cardus Education Survey Australia. Available at [https://carduseducationsurvey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Cardus\\_Australian-schools-andthe-common-good-summary-report\\_Final.pdf](https://carduseducationsurvey.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Cardus_Australian-schools-andthe-common-good-summary-report_Final.pdf) (Accessed 12 September 2022).
- Fisher OP, A. 2022, Religion and Mental Health, Address to the Sydney Catholic Business Network, February 2022. Available at [https://www.sydneycatholic.org/addresses-and-statements/2020/religion-and-mentalhealth/#\\_edn11](https://www.sydneycatholic.org/addresses-and-statements/2020/religion-and-mentalhealth/#_edn11) (Accessed 12 September 2022).
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Religious affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 Census. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia> (Accessed 12 September 2022).