Joan Lancaster*
ORCID: 0000-0003-2039-808X
Port Macquarie, Australia

Kurt Challinor**
ORCID: 0000-0001-8305-4757
Lismore, Australia

Richard Rymarz***
ORCID: 0009-0004-4392-3849
Melbourne, Australia

Twelve Months On: Navigating the Disparity Between Vision and Reality for Religious Education Teachers in Australian Catholic Schools

Dwanaście miesięcy później. Odnajdywanie się w sytuacji rozbieżności między wizją a rzeczywistością przez nauczycieli religii w szkołach katolickich w Australii

Abstract: This study builds on previous research exploring the formation needs and experiences of Early Career Teachers (ECT) in Catholic Schools in an Australian regional context, particularly concerning their understanding of Catholic identity and

---

    * Joan Lancaster, Diocese of Lismore – Catholic Schools; email: joan.lancaster@lism.catholic.edu.au
    ** Kurt Challinor, Diocese of Lismore – Catholic Schools; email: kurt.challinor@lism.catholic.edu.au
    *** Prof. Dr. Richard Rymarz, University of Notre Dame, Australia; email: richard.rymarz@nd.edu.au

the teaching of Religious Education. Conducted twelve months after the previous study, *'And Now I'm Teaching in a Catholic School'* – *The Experiences of Early Career Teachers (ECT) in Lismore Catholic Schools and What Can Be Learned to Support Their Formation: A Preliminary Study* (Challinor, Lancaster & Rymarz, 2022), follow-up interviews with twelve ECTs indicated an ongoing cognitive dissonance between the expressed ideal of Catholic education and the lived reality in Catholic schools. The study highlights the importance of ongoing staff formation and mentoring for ECTs. Three vignettes are provided as composite accounts of the range of ECTs engaged in the study, and the various challenges and learning opportunities experienced in their early years of appointment are highlighted. Further research is planned in four years to understand how the experience of ECTs continues to evolve and what can be learned to support their retention and continual formation.

Abstrakt: Niniejsze badanie opiera się na wcześniejszych badaniach potrzeb formacyjnych i doświadczeń nauczycieli rozpoczynających karierę zawodową (ECT – Early Career Teachers – nauczyciele na początku kariery zawodowej) w szkołach katolickich w regionalnym kontekście Australii, w szczególności w odniesieniu do ich rozumienia tożsamości katolickiej i nauczania religii. Przeprowadzone dwanaście miesięcy po poprzednim badaniu: „*A teraz uczę w szkole katolickiej*" – *doświadczenia początkujących nauczycieli w szkołach katolickich w Lismore i wynikające z nich wnioski odnośnie do wsparcia formacji. Badania pilotażowe*, wywiady uzupełniające z dwunastoma początkującymi nauczycielami wykazały ciągły dysonans poznawczy między wyrażanym ideałem edukacji katolickiej a rzeczywistością przeżywaną w szkołach katolickich. Badanie podkreśla znaczenie ciągłej formacji personelu i mentoringu dla nauczycieli na początku kariery zawodowej. Przedstawiono trzy motywy jako złożone charakterystyki osób zaangażowanych w badanie, a także podkreślono różne wyzwania i możliwości uczenia się doświadczane w pierwszych latach ich pracy. Dalsze badania planowane są za cztery lata, aby zrozumieć, w jaki sposób doświadczenie zawodowe nadal ewoluuje i czego można nauczać, aby wspierać ich w pracy i ciągłej formacji.

1. Introduction

To better understand the experiences and worldviews of ECTs, it is important first to consider the broader social context in which Catholic schools operate in a global context. Extensive literature has addressed this issue, so three indicative paradigms will be offered as a way of conceptualising it.

Stoltz et al. (2015) propose that religious institutions and individuals operate within a conceptual framework that involves a dynamic tension between secular and religious principles. To illustrate, consider parents enrolling their child in a school. When doing this, they have a range of options before them. The parents may not be religious themselves, but they may be able to see a range of benefits in enrolling their child in religiously affiliated schools. The school may have a good reputation and be close to transport, and the parents themselves may have gone to such a school and had a good experience there. These are some of the factors that may influence parental decisions. A range of factors also make a religiously affiliated school less attractive (Rymarz, 2017). The fundamental notion here is that decisions are arrived at through a process of negotiation, which is dynamic. Over time, it may evolve with changing circumstances or adapt to the perspectives of enrolling parents. A similar notion of negotiated religion also applies to teachers who work in religiously affiliated schools. The factors for and against working in such schools are aligned, and a teacher, or even school leader, who is not themselves religious, may decide to work in such a school. This is because, on balance, the benefits of working in such an environment outweigh the disadvantages.

Dillon (2018), in her discussion of religious affiliation amongst younger Catholics, offers valuable insights that are in accord with the notion of negotiated religion. In her framework, she describes many younger Catholics as manifesting interpretive autonomy. This autonomy is illustrated in the human community of Catholic schools, where many adopt some aspects of Catholic belief and practices (Smith et al., 2014). This creates a diffuse, thin religious identity. Being Catholic is a part, and often a small, non-directive part, of personal identity. The key here is to recognise that this construction of identity is created by the individual and is dependent on time and place. Teachers may be willing to adopt a higher degree of religious affiliation when working in a school, but this does not generally carry over to life outside the school.

In our previous study, *'And Now I'm Teaching in a Catholic School' – The Experiences of Early Career Teachers (ECT) in Lismore Catholic Schools and What Can Be Learned to Support Their Formation: A Preliminary Study* (2022), we explored the experiences of Early Career Teachers (ECTs) in Catholic schools within the Diocese of Lismore, Australia. The study found that ECTs generally felt welcomed and supported within their school communities, but also faced significant challenges in teaching Religious Education, often citing a lack of confidence and preparedness in addressing theological questions (Challinor, Lancaster & Rymarz, 2022). Additionally, while many ECTs were open to further spiritual formation, they expressed difficulties in integrating a Catholic worldview into their teaching practices (Challinor, Lancaster & Rymarz, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of targeted formation and support for ECTs, particularly in the areas of Religious Education and liturgical preparation (Challinor, Lancaster & Rymarz, 2022). Building upon those findings, this follow-up paper aims to examine how the participants' experiences have progressed or shifted 12 months later. Specifically, it investigates any changes in their confidence, teaching practices, and engagement with the Catholic school environment, as well as the long-term impact of the support and formation programs they received.

The questions for this study remain essentially unchanged. The researchers sought to apprehend how ECTs' understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a Catholic school may have been shaped and changed, or indeed, may have remained the same, 12 months on from their previous engagement with this research. ECTs were asked to share their experiences over the previous 12 months and were asked about their experiences with formation opportunities and with teaching Religious Education. They also shared what they saw as the advantages and challenges of teaching in a Catholic school. They were asked what advice they would offer to other ECTs as they entered into a career as a teacher in Catholic education.

2. Methodology

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of 2022, with 12 of the original 19 participants interviewed a second time, approxi-

mately 12 months after their first interview (Minichiello et al., 1995). Questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences over the course of the year, examining how their understanding of Catholic Education had evolved and which specific experiences shaped this understanding, consistent with the reflective approach outlined by Taylor et al. (2016). Participants were also asked to consider what advice they would give an ECT in their first year of employment and respond to some of the questions asked in the first interview, such as their experiences of Religious Education, Catholic worldview permeation, and formation opportunities. Interview responses were analysed by clustering responses into dominant categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In the final part of the interview, participants reconsidered the previous response they were invited to make in the first interview based on the same quote from *200 Years Young: A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of Australia to the leaders, staff, students, and families of Catholic education in Australia* (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference [ACBC], 2021, p. 2).

> Catholic schools are a jewel in the crown of the Catholic Church in Australia, with few parallels in other countries. Alongside families and parishes they are the Church's principal meeting point with young people. They are integral to the Church's mission of transmitting the faith to the next generation. It is there that many young people encounter Christ, intensify their knowledge and love of God, and are formed as future contributors to Australian society. We hope all our students will emerge from our schools with a deepened sense of the sacred and greater appreciation of the true, the good and the beautiful. Catholic education is steadfast in its commitment to evangelisation, catechesis, religious education and spiritual and moral formation.

This paper records responses and offers an analysis of the second round of interviews. To reiterate, these were conducted 12 months after the first interviews. Participants were once again invited to consider their response to this quote in light of their experience working in a Catholic school for 12 months.

3. Representative Vignettes

Vignettes are presented not as individual participants but as amalgams of experiences of a range of ECTs developed to represent the broad response categories. They offer a departure point for further analysis.

Vignette 1: James, non-Catholic teacher, 'Coping well'

James is a non-Catholic teacher in his second year of working in a Catholic primary school in the small, close-knit coastal community in the Lismore area where he grew up. Before joining the school community, James had previously had no real association with the Catholic church, having attended school in the local state primary and high schools. After finishing his teaching degree, he began casual teaching in the state primary school before taking on some teaching blocks at the Catholic primary school where he now works. For James, this was a very positive experience, and eventually, he was appointed to a longer-term contract.

James feels that he is 'coping well.' He particularly appreciates the sense of community that he feels in his Catholic school. There is a strong sense of unity between staff members, and he feels well-supported by his colleagues and principal. James also feels a strong connection between the school and the local community, perhaps enhanced because, being local to the area, he knows many of the parents and students from outside of the school context.

James feels cared for and supported as a staff member and is appreciated by the school leaders. The staff are available to offer collegial support and guidance to new teachers, and James feels as though there are numerous people he can turn to when he needs to seek guidance. He strongly values the support he has received from his school-based mentor throughout his first two years as a teacher in his school. His mentor has been approachable and non-judgemental and has guided James significantly as he navigates the transition to working in a Catholic school. James also appreciates the significant support he has received from his mentor and other teachers who have assisted him with teaching Religious Education. His colleagues have provided him with detailed programs to follow and are available to answer his questions about the religious content he is teaching.

James feels that after two years of teaching in a Catholic school, he is deepening his understanding of what it means to work in Catholic education. When asked to describe what it is that sets Catholic schools apart from other schools, James explains that he appreciates the values that Catholic schools seek to impart to their students. James can see how these values are aimed at helping students to 'become a good person' and also sees broad consistency between these values and his own worldview. When pressed on the genesis of these values, James cannot connect them to any transcendent spiritual reality. James also struggled with some of the Catholic ritual and liturgical aspects of working in a Catholic school. He noted that many students were disengaged when attending school Masses: 'there is a lot of sitting and standing and going through the motions, but is there something more engaging they could be doing with their time?' While he does not mind the school prayer experiences and retreat opportunities and feels that these help him with the teaching of Religious Education, he notes that some of his teaching colleagues find these 'a drag.'

Becoming more aware of what it means to work in a Catholic school has provoked some cognitive dissonance for James. He is increasingly aware of the tension between the vision and the reality of Catholic education. For instance, he recognises that many self-identified Catholic teachers and leaders are not active members of parish communities. This distinction between the vision for Catholic education and the lived reality challenges James and leaves him wondering about the expectations placed upon him as a non-Catholic teacher working in a Catholic school.

Vignette 2: Amy, Catholic teacher, 'I know what the right thing to do is.'

Amy is an indicative example of a significant, perhaps dominant, subgroup of ECT, an enthusiastic, capable young teacher whose primary point of contact with the Church has been Catholic education. She had a positive experience as a student of Catholic schools in the diocese. Now, after her teacher training, again at the local university, she is working in a Catholic primary school. When asked about her experiences as an ECT, she encapsulates this powerfully when she notes her experiential advantage, 'I know all the right things to do.' By this, Amy means she is familiar with the 'rhythm' of Catho-

lic schools. She is accustomed to prayers, Scripture, liturgy and the place of Religious Education in the school. She has acquired this from her own school-based experiences, the point of contrast being that she is not and, for many like her, has never been an active member of a parish community. This fits in well with the interpretive autonomy thesis outlined earlier. Younger Catholic teachers, like Amy, can move effortlessly between the school world and the bigger world of their conventional lives, where they approximate their peer group's dominant mentality and practices. This is evident when she discusses her understanding of the rationale and purpose of Catholic education. Here, she articulates a commonly held view. For Amy, the essence of Catholic education is successfully establishing a community based on common values. The primary point of agreement amongst school community members is adherence to shared, common values. Moreover, to extend this principle, Catholic ethos and identity are inextricably and primarily linked to an ineffable sense of 'catholic' values.

Amy feels well-supported in the school. She understands the demands of the job and the pressure that all teachers are under but feels she is coping well in her school. Amy can call on her mentor, who is also the mission leader, as well as other teachers. This support is particularly important when teaching Religious Education where practical assistance is very forthcoming. She sees teaching Religious Education as part of the job but not as her real passion or her strongest learning discipline. As the year has progressed, she has become more confident, and once again, she notes that she has the advantage of re-acquainting herself with practices with which she was once more familiar. Amy has also taken part in retreat and formation days provided at the school and system levels. She has also found these beneficial, especially those parts which stress the importance of building up a strong sense of community. Amy would like to learn more about things like Scripture. Though she is familiar with it, she does not really have a good understanding of it. It would be good to 'go into a little more depth just as long as it is not too heavy.'

What Amy has difficulty with are the more transcendent dimensions of Catholic education. Amy concedes that she finds the theological rationale a little baffling; she notes that a lot of this just 'washes over me.' She does not see a great disjuncture between the goals of Catholic education and how these are realised. The cognitive dissonance noted by more active Catholic ECTs is not readily acknowledged by Amy. From her perspective, Catholic

schools are 'doing what they should,' as this has always been her experience of Catholic schools. Amy's comment reflects a sense of distance from the purpose and aims of a Catholic school beyond the good teaching and learning that is happening in classrooms. They are doing what they should, and Amy is doing what she should, but the two are not necessarily aligned. Amy teaches *in* a Catholic school, but she herself is not *the* Catholic school. This is not a judgement of Amy as a teacher but rather an observation worthy of further investigation and consideration.

Vignette 3: Mathilde, committed Catholic teacher, 'Nice idea, but how do we do it?'

Mathilde is a keen and capable ECT. She sees working in Catholic schools as her vocation. She comes into Catholic education from a strong, intentional faith background. She has been involved in youth ministry, is an active member of her current parish community, and is supported by a wider network of family and friends who share her religious beliefs and practices. Along with this comes an acknowledgement of a certain sense of isolation both in the school and the wider community. This is exemplified by her surprise at how few staff in her high school participate in parish communities and how they are less keen than she is to support the school's ethos. As she puts it, 'the faith stuff is not a high priority for them.' She acknowledges that even at this early stage in her career, she is identified as a bit of a 'go-to person,' and she is readily identified as a person of strong faith. As she puts it, 'I sometimes feel in the firing line!'

Mathilde recognises that many people her age are not so involved in the Church. This is not something she resents, far from it, but is a perceptive observation on her part. It takes shape in her experience of being an ECT. She identifies a cognitive dissonance evident in two streams or narratives that shape Catholic education. She comments on the stated goals of the Catholic school, 'yeah, it's a nice idea, but how do we do it?' The distinction between the two narratives can be better understood as the tension between the ideal and the actual. This is evident in many ways. While she, for example, has already met the demands for Religious Education teaching qualification and certification, many in her school have not. In more general terms, there is

a difference between, on the one hand, the narrative centred on the high expectations set for teachers and for the school and, on the other, the narrative around the standard that is actually reached.

As befits a person with a strong faith background, she has strong views on the teaching of Religious Education, and it is something about which she is passionate and enthusiastic. Mathilde tries to make Religious Education 'relevant to students' lives.' She recognises the difficulty in achieving this and sees complications in a range of pedagogies, but recognises that the RENEW program offers a good way of valuing student experiences. She emphasises the need for a balance in approaches and not relying too much on one method. At the same time, she is well aware of the strong cognitive basis needed to teach Religious Education in contemporary Catholic schools. This highlights what she sees as the great challenge for Catholic schools – the need to invest in teacher formation… 'there is so much that teachers don't know!'

Mathilde feels well supported in the school, especially by her mentor, who is also the Assistant Principal Mission. She also enjoys the retreat days and other formation activities. She notes that while these current activities are beneficial, she could be pushed or challenged a little more. This, again, is expressed in the context of her being aware that her starting point in terms of faith formation is different from other staff, particularly her peers.

4. Results and Discussion

The interviews highlighted several common themes, many of which were evident in the previous interviews. Participants maintained the positive responses previously reported in relation to working in Catholic schools. They continued to report feeling welcomed and as though they belonged in their school community.

Role of Mentors

Early Career Teachers continued to express a strong sense of feeling supported in their transition into working in a Catholic school. Many interviewees acknowledged the significant support they received from mentors, both for-

mal and informal, and how beneficial this was in building their understanding of what it means to work in a Catholic school. Many ECTs felt that they had a number of teachers to whom they could turn for advice and guidance about all aspects of teaching and Catholic identity over and above the formal mentoring opportunities afforded to them. The formal mentoring structure provided by the system was also highly valued by ECTs. Many interviewees spoke of the support they had received from their assigned school-based mentor. They spoke of building a strong relationship with them over the two years of their mentorship and how they felt these were people with whom they could engage in open dialogue, bringing to their mentors any questions they had about their role. Some ECTs also spoke of the relationship they had fostered with the system-based regional mentors and explained how they felt this role offered another valuable capability-building opportunity. When asked what advice he would provide to other ECTs, one interviewee suggested that they make the best use they can of their graduate teacher mentors, seeking as much advice and asking as many questions as possible. A number of ECTs referred explicitly to the support their allocated mentors provided to them as they navigated the challenges faced in planning and teaching Religious Education lessons.

One interviewee spoke of how she 'never felt judged' when she brought questions to her mentor about how best to approach teaching Religious Education. Others spoke specifically about the advice, modelling and professional learning their mentor provided about understanding the content they were teaching in Religious Education and the best pedagogical approaches to teaching it. One ECT spoke of how their school-based mentor had provided significant advice to her on how best to teach specific concepts in Religious Education and had encouraged her to try new approaches to teaching concepts as well. Those ECTs whose school-based mentors also held the role of Assistant Principal of Mission (Religious Education and Catholic Identity) were specifically acknowledged by interviewees as being beneficial in supporting their understanding of the Catholic dimension of their schools and in assisting them in their teaching of Religious Education. This raises questions about the qualities and skills required for the school-based mentors to effectively support these ECTs. How do we ensure school-based mentors are themselves well-formed and experienced Religious Education teachers who are equipped to support the needs of ECTs, or, in the instances where school-

based mentors do not fulfil these criteria, should ECTs be provided with an additional, well-formed school-based mentor specifically to support their understanding of the religious life of the school. The overwhelmingly positive feedback provided by ECTs about these mentoring approaches strongly endorses this system-developed initiative for supporting teachers in the first years of their career in Catholic Education.

Teaching Religious Education

An additional year of teaching has enabled the ECTs to become more confident in teaching Religious Education. Pivotal to this was the support and mentoring from leaders in their schools. Interviewees acknowledged and were grateful to be able to ask questions of more experienced teachers and leaders, as well as draw on system support by working with system-based Education Officers to program and plan lessons. Several interviewees also articulated the realisation that they were not expected to know everything about teaching Religious Education (RE) and the Catholic faith, but instead needed to draw on the expertise and experience of others in the school. A recurring theme was the recognition that, like students, teachers are on a journey in their faith understanding, and it was important to recognise that not everyone is at, nor needs to be, at the same level.

At the same time, there was a clear recognition that deepening their knowledge and understanding also played a part in developing their confidence in teaching RE. The support of others was vital, but participants also identified other resources that assisted, including background support documentation provided with curriculum programs that included key information on Catholic teachings.

Developing their understanding of various pedagogical approaches also contributed to their increased confidence. A number of interviewees recognised the diocesan initiative focused on a renewal of Religious Education (known as RENEW), which allowed for more engaging and effective teaching of RE with its emphasis on inquiry and project-based learning. Another interviewee expressed pleasant surprise at students' engagement in a lesson using the storytelling pedagogy based on Godly Play from the work of Jerome Berryman (2021). She had been too nervous to use this pedagogy in

her first year of teaching, 'I had thought this would be a nightmare,' but with the support of her APM/mentor, and 'after being encouraged, [she] bit the bullet and did it.' She considers this the most successful RE lesson she has experienced, and students were already asking when they would have story-telling in their RE lessons again. Trying something new and meeting with success was mentioned by several participants and connected with a recurring theme where ECTs slowly realised they were not required or expected to know and be able to do everything, but that trying something out and learning from it was much more rewarding than remaining too nervous to attempt anything outside of their comfort zone.

It was no surprise that explicitly connecting student learning with real-life experiences was also identified as key to ensuring students could see the relevance of RE as a subject at school. Two interviewees, in particular, were also able to highlight the positives of connecting different subject areas, such as Science, through the Catholic lens and working with students to discuss these connections, particularly in terms of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). CST was identified as a critical engagement piece with the Church regarding social justice and outreach activities. However, some interviewees also acknowledged that students had limited understanding about why such activities were taking place other than to be 'good people.' The more profound connection between mission and Church teaching seemed to be vague or missing altogether.

Permeating a Catholic worldview in other KLAs

Some interviewees also identified increased confidence in permeating other Key Learning Areas with a Catholic worldview. The nervousness associated with this in their first year of teaching had dissipated through the support of other teachers and hands-on experience with teaching a Catholic worldview in other subject areas. This aligns with findings from diocesan surveys that support from other teachers and leaders was crucial to teacher self-efficacy levels. There was a recognition that some subject areas were easier to permeate than others. However, the main driver of effective permeation was the clear articulation of the reason behind and purpose of considering all subject areas and learning through a Catholic lens. This was key, especially when, as one interviewee mentioned, students challenged this by asking, 'Why are we

learning about RE in Science?' Having access to programs that were already permeated and explicit support materials also assisted ECTs to feel confident enough to teach with a Catholic lens.

James, Amy and Mathilde illustrate the need for the intentional formation of teachers of Religious Education at the early career stage. For committed Catholics like Mathilde, who have deep content knowledge and are confident in the knowledge and pedagogy required for RE, the systems and support offered are effective and work well. Current practices supporting teachers like James and Amy through mentor teachers and program support are seen as effective. There is a clear sense that well-structured support and the intentional accompaniment of Early Career Teachers is provided. This may be a different story once these teachers are no longer considered or recognised as ECTs. Structures and formation support, such as post-graduate study scholarships and ongoing professional development, may need to be clearly identified and offered in order to ensure that as teachers move from 'early career' to more experienced, they are not left behind and that the need for ongoing formation in order to teach RE or permeate a Catholic worldview is not overlooked.

Catholic identity and the religious life of the school

Cognitive dissonance and tensions are present among all three representative vignettes concerning the perceived reality of working in a Catholic school and the proposed ideal. The connection between the parish and the school became clearer for some interviewees over the year, especially after the disruptions of COVID. Sacramental programs were back on school agendas, though it was also evident that many participants identified the same disconnect discussed in the first round of interviews.

This disconnect centres on the apparent gap between the mission and faith ideals of the Catholic school and the lived reality of staff and families. This aligns with both interpretive autonomy and negotiated religion. School community members saw the value of religion but preferred it to be integrated in a more relaxed and unobtrusive manner rather than being imposed. One interviewee mentioned that the staff were professionally connected but not faith-connected. Another was surprised by how few staff were involved

in the parish and how many staff seemed reluctant to support the Catholic ethos of the school.

Some participants also identified a gap in their school formation opportunities. Generally, such days were considered beneficial and allowed school staff to reflect, connect, and build a sense of community. However, some participants noted that on such days, discussions could remain quite general and lacked a specific focus on Scripture. One participant's impression was that perhaps the mission was done really well with students but not so well with staff.

There is a need to consider further differentiated pathways for ECT formation. This is illustrated by the differences in responses between Amy and Mathilde. Amy has had a strong experience of Catholic schools, but as indicative of many of her generation, she has not appropriated religious faith in a strongly personal way. Mathilde, in contrast, has had a different faith journey and clearly expresses the need to be challenged more in her ongoing religious formation. In addition, the retreat experience for ECTs should reflect personal differences and backgrounds. A particular area of interest here is the ongoing formation of ECTs who, although having been students of Catholic schools, remain somewhat distant from the faith community. This is important because this particular subgroup represents, now and into the future, a sizeable number of teachers in Catholic schools. Consideration needs to be given to the most effective way of engaging these teachers' faith journey in an invitational and dialogical manner.

Interviewee responses to the provided quote

Interviewees were again asked to respond to a quote from the pastoral letter from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The researchers intended to determine whether there had been any significant shifts in their evaluation of the quote in light of the additional 12 months of experience they had accrued since they were last interviewed.

As in the previous interview, a number of participants were drawn to the reference to Catholic schools being the Church's 'principal meeting point with young people' (ACBC, 2021). There seemed to be a growing awareness among ECTs of the realities of the proportion of Catholic enrolments in their schools as some ECTs spoke to the fact that, for many students, the school

would constitute not just the 'principal meeting point' but, in fact, the only meeting point that the majority of students would have with the Church (ACBC, 2021). There was much broader awareness among ECTs of the realities of the secular experience of students in these interviews when compared to the research gathered in the previous 12 months.

Some participants were drawn to the quote's reference to students gaining a 'deepened sense of the sacred' through their education experience at a Catholic school (ACBC, 2021). However, those ECTs who referred to this aspect of the ACBC quote also acknowledged that this is not always possible, or indeed to be expected for all students in Catholic schools. One interviewee suggested that this connection to the sacred and transcendent might be something that flowers in students 'in the fullness of time' and that we cannot perhaps expect this to bear fruit in the time that our students are enrolled in our schools. Other participants similarly spoke of the role of the school in providing an 'invitation' to all students whilst remaining 'inclusive' of the beliefs of all students. Others used similar language in suggesting that the school's role was to 'offer an encounter' with the sacred but that this was not always something that would be accepted or acted upon by students.

The aspect of the quote that most strongly resonated with the interviewees was the reference to Catholic schools providing a strong 'moral formation' for their students (ACBC, 2021). This was similar to the responses from participants who had been interviewed previously. When questioned as to how they understood this formation in the moral life of the Church as proposed by the quote, respondents, as they had previously done, tended to make references to supporting students to learn how to 'be good people.' When pressed, ECTs struggled to connect to Church teaching or Scripture to explain in more concrete terms what it means to be a moral person. There seems to have been little growth for ECTs concerning this aspect of their understanding of the role of Catholic schools.

As in the previous year, some interviewees were drawn to the quote's reference to students, through Catholic education, gaining a 'greater appreciation of the true, the good and the beautiful' (ACBC, 2021). Like in previous years, those ECTs who were drawn to this aspect of the quote seemed to equate the transcendentals to the promotion of the ideals of social justice. One ECT, however, recognised that, for many students, there was no connec-

tion between the social justice initiatives they undertook and any transcendent reality which may create the purpose for undertaking them.

Teacher turnover and burnout

The focused Catholic Schools Office and school-based mentoring and support mechanisms that have been established largely ameliorate the possibility of ECT burnout. A well-planned and structured program of professional learning days across regions and within schools is evident and appreciated by those interviewed as it progresses them from Graduate to Proficient as per the requirements of the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA).

An aspect to be considered is the potential to overload those teachers like Mathilde, who have a 'thick' Catholic identity and are deeply committed to living this out authentically. There is the possibility for a considerable amount of pressure to be placed on ECTs like Mathilde to provide leadership concerning the school's Catholic identity and to take a significant role in the school and parish religious events (such as retreats and reflection days and children's liturgy and youth groups), even at such an early point in their teaching career. There is also the potential for those teachers with a 'thinner' Catholic identity to have the expectation that teachers like Mathilde will undertake this responsibility on behalf of other staff members. School leaders need to support and encourage the dedication of teachers like Mathilde while monitoring their workload and ensuring that the expectations placed upon them are realistic.

5. Conclusion

For all teachers, ongoing formation is generally considered a vitally important part of teaching in a Catholic school. The regular opportunities offered by schools and the system are seen as valuable. Prayer, liturgy, retreat and reflection days are accepted as part of Catholic school life by both students and staff. A differentiated approach to this formation for staff would be one consideration for both schools and systems to meet the needs of staff across the

broad range of understanding, experience and interest in the Catholic faith. Such differentiation could be organised under particular themes or topics, including Scripture, liturgy and prayer, and opportunities for encountering Jesus. This would ensure that formation is inclusive of the head (knowledge dimension) and heart (experiential dimension) and, therefore more holistic.

What is clear from the research in this context is that the diocesan Catholic education system is keenly aware of the current realities concerning the experiences and beliefs of those teachers who are now seeking to become a part of Catholic education and that the system is establishing structures designed to promote ECT formation and Catholic identity. Interviewees recognised the benefits of the support provided by the system, including retreat and formation days, mentoring from colleagues and post-graduate study opportunities.

Moreover, it is clear that Catholic schools are working hard to continue to provide a 'good Catholic education,' for which this regional Catholic system has had a strong reputation over many decades. This is characterised by strong academic and pastoral focuses in addition to a rich faith dimension, including opportunities for engagement in the Church's sacramental life, prayer experiences and a formal Religious Education curriculum. It is important to note that the perceived academic and pastoral benefits many ECTs see in working in Catholic schools have a stronger influence on their decision to do so and that the religious and spiritual dimension of the school is something that can be negotiated.

Another clearly identified challenge is addressing both the cognitive and content-based demands of teaching Religious Education and those in the secondary context who are not teaching RE as a discrete subject but still require formation in the Catholic worldview and religious life of the school as situated in the parish. Again, a differentiated approach would ensure that the range of teacher backgrounds, expertise, and experience is considered in an ongoing and intentional way.

The ongoing challenge from this research remains: How do we reconcile the disparity between the aspiration and the actuality of Catholic Education? This issue would appear to be becoming increasingly urgent in Catholic education. There are no simple solutions to this existential dilemma. The widely adopted approach has been to acknowledge the disparity and seek to remedy this by committing to further training and formation of teachers working

in schools. This strategy partially addresses the underlying issue. However, is there a point at which the gap becomes so large, and the pool of authentic Catholic teachers so diminished that no realistic intervention, no matter the commitment of time, resources or energy, could effectively address the need for differentiated teacher formation?

References

- Australian Catholic Bishops Conference [ACBC]. (2021). 200 Years Young: A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of Australia to the Leaders, Staff, Students and Families of Catholic Education in Australia. Canberra, ACT. Retrieved March 5, 2022, from: https://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/news-events/media-releases/554-pastoral-let- ter-on-catholic-education-200-years-young/file.

- Berryman, J. W. (2021). *The Complete Guide to Godly Play* (Vol. 6). Church Publishing.

- Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

- Challinor, K., Lancaster, J. & Rymarz, R. (2022). 'And Now I'm Teaching in a Catholic School' – The Experiences of Early Career Teachers (ECT) in Lismore Catholic Schools and What Can Be Learned to Support Their Formation: A Preliminary Study. *Paedagogia Christiana*, *49*(1), 121–143.

- Dillon, M. (2018). *Post-secular Catholicism: Relevance and renewal.* New York: Oxford University Press.

- Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, P. & Alexander, L. (1995). *In-depth Interviewing: Researching People.* Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

- Rymarz, R. & Belmonte, A. (2014). And Now I Find Myself Here: Some Life History Narratives of Religious Education Coordinators in Catholic Schools. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, *6*(2), 191–201.

- Rymarz, R. (2017). The paradox of Catholic schools. In R. Rymarz & A. Belmonte (Eds.), *Religious education in Australian Catholic schools.* Mulgrave: John Garrett.

- Smith, C., Longest, K., Hill, J. & Christoffersen, K. (2014). *Young Catholic America: Emerging adults in, out of, and gone from the Church.* New York: Oxford University Press.

- Stoltz, J., Purdie, S., Englberger, T., Konemann, J. & Kruggeler, M. (2015). *(Un) Believing in modern society: Religion, spirituality, and religious-secular competition*. London: Ashgate.

- Taylor, S., Bogdan, R. & DeVault, M. (2016). *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.