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**I Like the Practical Side. Early Career Teachers  
in Catholic Schools, Interpretative Autonomy  
and Negotiating Secular and Religious Boundaries.  
A Preliminary Study**

**Podoba mi się strona praktyczna. Początkujący  
nauczyciele w szkołach katolickich, autonomia  
interpretacyjna oraz negocjowanie granic świeckich  
i religijnych. Studium wstępne**

**Abstract:** This study is a preliminary examination of early career teachers who work in Catholic schools in a regional Australian diocese. By examining early career teachers, the aim is to better understand religious and secular influences on an indicative group of teachers, and how these influences may shape their work in Catholic schools. A number of analytical categories are used to describe early career teachers, including the notion of interpretive autonomy. This allows early career teachers to negotiate their engagement with the school, with reference to their personal choices. Key findings identify the importance of values in shaping teachers' identity, and the place of the school as the most prominent marker of teachers' religious life. A number of recommendations for teacher formation are provided in light of the findings.

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**Keywords:** Catholic schools; early career teachers; interpretive autonomy; secularisation.

**Abstrakt:** Niniejsze studium stanowi badanie wstępne nauczycieli na początkowym etapie kariery zawodowej, którzy pracują w szkołach katolickich w regionalnej diecezji Australii. Badanie tej grupy nauczycieli ma na celu poznanie religijnych i świeckich wpływów na wskazaną grupę nauczycieli oraz określenie, w jaki sposób te wpływy mogą kształtować ich pracę w szkołach katolickich. Do opisu nauczycieli na początkowym etapie kariery zawodowej stosuje się szereg kategorii analitycznych, w tym pojęcie autonomii interpretacyjnej. Pozwala to nauczycielom rozpoczynającym karierę zawodową negocjować swoje zaangażowanie w szkole w odniesieniu do ich osobistych wyborów. Kluczowe ustalenia wskazują na znaczenie wartości w kształtowaniu tożsamości nauczycieli oraz miejsce szkoły jako najważniejszego wyznacznika życia religijnego nauczycieli. W świetle wyników przedstawiono szereg zaleceń dotyczących formacji nauczycieli.

**Słowa kluczowe:** szkoły katolickie; początkujący nauczyciele; autonomia interpretacyjna; sekularyzacja.

## 1. Introduction

In a time of rising religious disaffiliation, the continuing significance of faith-based schools in many countries represents a significant paradox (Rymarz, 2017). While eschewing close and ongoing involvement with religious communities, many parents choose to send their children to faith-based schools and teachers, and others choose to work in these schools (Angus, 2015; McCarthy, 2016). This paradox invites further investigation, as it allows for a reconsideration of how religious affiliation can be understood in contemporary culture. The wider cultural realignment could result in a connection with religious institutions in a more nuanced way – one which sees secular and religious influences intersect more dynamically. This study will examine teachers working in Catholic schools in regional Australia, as a means of better understanding how this intersection between religious and secular influences takes shape.

Zuckerman et al. (2016) point out that a significant phenomenon in many Western nations is the emergence of a large population cohort who, although they may express some type of religious affiliation, also share many charac-

teristics with the non-religious. One of the most important characteristics is seeing morality as primarily an individual choice rather than part of a communal expression. The rise of individualism leads to a fracturing of belief and behaviour, which is most evident in the decline in adherence to previously common views and ritual practices. Many of these views and practices had a religious foundation. There remain commonalities in beliefs and behaviour; however, these are not clustered around religious beliefs, but are more generic and are often readily accepted across the culture. In their study of Canadian youth and young adults, for example, Bibby and his colleagues point to the strong acceptance of moral positions such as the need to not judge others and the need to be concerned about the environment (Bibby et al., 2019). Baker and Smith (2015, p. 25) expand on the notion of belief systems and highlight the diversity in what they call ‘secularities’, as a way of better understanding how many people find meaning. These secularities accommodate a wide range of beliefs, behaviour and rituals, but they do not, aside from nominal associations, have any strong religious narrative, understood as reference to the transcendent or metaphysical.

Stoltz and his colleagues (2014) extend this discussion of the interplay between secular and religious by proposing a theory of secular–religious competition. This sees a place for religion in largely secular cultures, but only if it is recognised as a dynamic and fluid relationship. Religion can play a role in people’s lives if it offers something of value at certain points of life. To illustrate their argument, Stoltz and his colleagues studied enrolment patterns in Swiss schools. They found that faith-based schools, largely Catholic schools, attracted applicants because they were seen as offering a good education that was at least comparable to public non-religious schools. The prominence of faith-based schools also offers an opportunity for members of the community, especially teachers, parents and students, to re-engage with a religious institution even if they do not typically associate with a religious community. What is critical in this engagement is the capacity of individuals to negotiate a place for themselves in the school. This negotiation involves taking on some of the religious discourse and practice of the school, but this is limited and is not excessive or burdensome. Importantly, this association is not permanent and is dependent on engagement with the school. This engagement is not personal, in the sense that it is something that individuals choose for themselves, rather than a matter of conviction that will be an enduring influence on their lives.

Personal religious engagement in contemporary culture can be explained using a variety of conceptual positions (Bibby et al., 2019; Clydesdale & Garcés-Foley, 2019). Casson (2011) elaborates on the established notion of

religious bricolage to describe how many young people negotiate meaning, including religious meaning, in their lives. From this perspective there is no overarching adherence to dogma or doctrine, but rather a series of individual accommodations which are fluid and adaptable (Casson & Cooling, 2020). Dillon (1999, 2018) develops this concept, especially in relation to contemporary Catholics. She argues that many Catholics, and not just younger ones, develop interpretive autonomy in relation to how they see themselves as religious actors. This seems to have great relevance to teachers in Catholic schools, as they are prepared to work in and, to some extent, identify with a Catholic institution; but this identification is on their own terms, or to use Dillon's terminology, they act with a high degree of 'interpretive autonomy' (Dillon, 2018, p. 15). Dillon (2018, pp. 15–16) describes interpretive autonomy in the following terms:

For Catholics, the continuity between their Catholicism and their everyday secular roles makes sense: being Catholic is not an overarching identity that eclipses all other aspects of the individual's life. Rather, in most of the everyday contexts in which Catholics move, including church-related activities their social roles ... take precedence. And importantly their secular experiences shape the experiences they bring to religious matters. Thus, the secular is interwoven into their Catholic identity.

This is an important clarification, as it expands on the notion of bricolage but also offers a way of understanding religious and secular influences as being 'interwoven' in the lives of many younger Catholics.

One way in which this interweaving takes place in individuals is that they recognise the importance of identifying how boundaries between religion and secular forces are defined. Hoge et al. (1994) have noted that, in general, the boundaries that religious groups are able to maintain are rapidly diminishing; and this has important implications for the capacity of faith groups to pass on religious beliefs and practices to younger members of religious communities. Sorrell and Eckland (2019) note that religion can be seen as having value even for people who do not see themselves as religious, as they recognise that for many others in the community, religion does retain a higher degree of importance or salience. In a similar vein, it can be recognised that religion has an important historical role and is often readily acknowledged in schools. Religion can also be seen to be addressing common community values, which are important to maintain (Wuthnow, 1987; Eckland et al., 2011).

All of these factors are seen as giving religion legitimacy; and as such, the secular and religious can coexist, as they share some common interests, and the boundary between the two is not impermeable. However, individuals who are associated with religious communities and institutions need to have some mechanisms in place to negotiate the boundaries between the religious and the secular in their working lives. As the secular position is more dominant, an important question concerns how individuals reconcile a religious position within a secular framework of their personal and professional lives.

One useful way of better understanding the dynamic between the secular and the religious is to explore the professional lives of teachers, as they are associated with a religious institution as part of their professional life, and also are enmeshed in the wider secular culture. It will be helpful to discover how they go about their working lives in schools, and in what areas they need further support. Similarly, the satisfaction that teachers express in their role is also indicative of how they negotiate boundaries. Questions such as these will illuminate how teachers see their role, and in which areas they believe they require greater assistance.

This study is a preliminary examination of ten early career teachers who work in Catholic schools in a regional Australian diocese. In particular, the study examines the following research questions. How do early career teachers understand their role in Catholic schools, and in what ways can they be better supported? How do they describe their religious beliefs and practices, and how can these be understood as an example of interpretative autonomy? How do early career teachers negotiate the boundaries of the secular and religious in their role as educators?

## **2. Methodology**

The participants were recruited to this study on the basis of personal invitations given to all early career teachers in this diocese. An early career teacher was defined as a teacher who has worked, as a teacher, in Catholic schools for less than three years. Early career teachers were selected as a way of focusing the study by narrowing the size of the population cohort. This study is a part of an ongoing project that is examining teachers who work in contemporary Australian Catholic schools; further studies are anticipated which will examine larger cohorts of teachers and others working in Catholic schools. In addition to great focus, early career teachers were selected because of their relatively short experience of working in Catholic schools; this

may enable them to provide some insight into teachers' views on the three research questions, without having been influenced by the experience of working in Catholic schools as teachers. The basis for inclusion in the study was their willingness to talk about their role as teachers and their experience of working in Catholic schools. Interviews were conducted following a narrative interview paradigm (Denzin, 1988). This is especially useful in research of this type, where a comprehensive and contextualised account is required (Bertaux, 1981). The story of a teacher who works in a Catholic school lends itself to an examination of how the person sees their role, and how they negotiate the boundary between their personal views and professional demands. Narrative interviews are well suited to research topics that involve a degree of complexity, and where a range of factors may have contributed to views, behaviours and attitudes (Rosenthal, 2004). This method is especially useful in tracing the development of beliefs, attitudes and practices; and as such, it is appropriate for a study that seeks to better understand how teachers see themselves in relation to Catholic education and the challenges they face (Flick, 2009).

In this study, the initial generative question that each participant was asked was: 'What has brought you to this stage of your life when you are working in a Catholic school?' In addition, there were a series of additional funnel questions which were designed to engage participants more fully with the research questions. These funnel questions were: 'Do you feel supported in your role? How would you describe your beliefs? Can you identify any challenges in your role as a teacher, especially in relation to working in a Catholic school?' Each interview lasted approximately one hour. In some cases, follow-up questions were asked at a later time, in order to clarify points made in the interview. Each interview was conducted at the Catholic School administrative centre in the diocese. Extensive notes were taken during the interview and written up immediately afterwards; as a result, generalised narrative themes were identified (Bruner, 1987).

### 3. Results

To introduce the major results of this study, the following narratives can be considered as encapsulating some of the key themes identified in the narrative interviews.

**Kirstie** exemplifies many of the characteristics of the younger early career teachers in this study. She is from the region and had attended local Cath-

olic schools, where she had what she described as a very positive experience. She trained at the regional university and has very strong ties to the region. She comes from a Catholic family background. In the town where she grew up, her family are well known in the local community, and her grandparents in particular are regarded as stalwarts of the Church. She describes her affiliation as being 'less intense' than her grandparents', and she draws parallels between herself and her parents, and with many of her extended family. She is loath to describe herself as an active churchgoer, but identifies as a Catholic. For Kirstie, being Catholic is strongly associated with having certain values. Less important to her are more theological doctrines, which she can recall, but they have little impact on her life.

She enjoys working in a Catholic school and is keen to know more, as she feels this will help her classroom practice. She feels well supported, although she would always like more assistance, especially by being part of collaborative networks and sharing common resources. Kirstie makes a distinction between her school world and her wider circle; the latter reflects the dominant social forces, and Kirstie sees these as her natural community. There is some overlap between the school's community and her wider network, but in general, she sees them as different spheres.

**Jodie's** story has parallels with Kirstie's, but there are also some important but subtle differences. She is not from the region, but came here for a job opportunity. She enjoys working in Catholic schools, and is prepared to do what is necessary to teach in a Catholic school; this indicates a willingness to learn more about what is required of her as a teacher. She describes herself as a Catholic, but with a more tenuous connection than Kirstie. Jodie did not attend Catholic schools after Year 5; she undertook teacher training at a secular university and does not have a stronger familial connection with the church. As she puts it, 'my family are not that religious, there are no pious grandparents in my family tree; the faith community is not my "home turf" and never really has been.' Like Kirstie, however, she describes her faith in moral terms, 'trying to be a good person with good morals and good values.' She readily sees the need to 'know more,' but this is reflective of her current disposition, to create a balance between her work role in Catholic schools and her wider world, which is very reflective of wider cultural influences. Her reference point for beliefs, values and practices is the wider community, and she is at ease with this.

The interviews revealed several common points that illuminate the experience of early career teachers working in Catholic schools. There was a strongly reported positive experience of working in this environment. For

most of the study participants, their experience of Catholic schools as students was positive, and this reinforced their current positions.

Related to this point was a willingness to explore further what it meant to be a teacher in a Catholic school. This was largely seen as a professional requirement; something that was very much 'part of the job.' As the narrative vignette of Kirstie illustrated, most of the participants in this study were from the region and had an empathy with the issues and challenges that face Catholic schools in regional areas. This was an important response to the initial probe question of 'How did you come to be working in a Catholic school?' For most of the participants, this was a type of natural progression, which started with their own experience in Catholic schools, allowing for a hiatus of further study, and then returning to teach in Catholic schools.

When discussing their own beliefs and practices, clearly the strongest response was when describing religious affiliation in moral terms. Being religious was seen as being a 'good person.' When they were probed about what a good person was, the answer overwhelmingly was that they lived by a set of values. These values were generally seen as generic, as part of a wider common community understanding. The two most prominent of these values, as articulated by teachers in this study, were not being judgmental, and trying to help others, especially those in need. Jesus was seen as the exemplar of these attitudes, and it is his life that is the model of proper conduct. This is a good illustration of boundary negotiation, as the aspects of religious belief that are most proximate to community values were given great prominence. By contrast, more theological and specific aspects of belief were downplayed and not articulated well.

When asked about beliefs which had a stronger theological foundation, participants in this study were not readily able to engage with these questions. Their journey to work in Catholic schools had been premised on their desire to be teachers, and in most cases, on their positive experience of Catholic schools. For early career teachers, working in a Catholic school was seen as something that allowed them to live out the values that were important to them and, in particular, to their appropriated sense of religious faith. The more theological aspects of faith were 'crowded out' by this strong moral sense of religion. As one participant remarked when asked about beliefs such as the resurrection of Jesus, he gave prominence to 'the practical side of religion.' This is what appealed to him. The discussion on religious beliefs, in general, lacked engagement, as this was not something that participants saw as an important part of their lives.

This lack of salience can be seen more clearly if we consider the social networks that the teachers in this study are embedded in. Their relationships outside school are reflective of those of their peers in the wider culture. As one participant put it, her friends are 'normal people.' By this, she was not disparaging those who work in Catholic schools; rather, she was acknowledging that the type of theological discourse that is common within Catholic education is very unusual outside Catholic schools. More than one participant referred to this as 'in-house' conversations, or as 'God talk', which is not something that 'normal' people do. By working in a Catholic school, the teachers are immersed in another world and one that they are pleased to be in. It is, however, not reflective of life. Mass attendance is another illustration of the school world / other world distinction. As one early career teacher remarked, 'on the weekend it's my time, time with friends and family ... going to church is not part of this, it's not what we all do.'

Most of the participants were not active members of worshipping communities. The contrast between Kirstie and Jodie is instructive here. Kirstie feels much more at home in the Church, given her early socialisation, whereas Jodie is far less familiar. Importantly though, both are not part of parish communities on an ongoing basis. Here we see a strong example of negotiation of religious affiliation. Being a Catholic, for many of the participants, is not in opposition to personally held views, but it is not an active aspect of their lived experience. It is seen as being more important to live according to the values that are generally held as part of the wider, secular culture. One early career teacher put this well when she commented that for her, faith was an expression of morality: 'it's all about trying to be a good person with good morals and good values.'

Not being part of a worshipping community on an ongoing basis is also a strong illustration of the principle of interpretive autonomy. Many of the participants encapsulated this view in terms of the utility of going to Church. Comments such as 'I don't get anything out of it,' 'I don't see the point,' 'I can think of better way to live out my faith than going to Church on Sunday,' and 'I go to Mass enough at school,' are indicative of autonomous interpretation in action. It is significant, however, that this is not a hostility towards being involved in the parish or in liturgy; it is merely not a high priority, especially in life outside school. This leads to a major finding, which concerns the distinction between the professional and personal lives of teachers.

The distinction between the personal and professional was not something that the early career teachers in this study precisely articulated. It becomes evident, however, if we consider the broad range of responses given.

Personal prayer is a prime example of this. While ‘saying prayers’ and similar activities were seen as part of the life of the school and teachers were willing to take part in these, this feeling did not extend to praying readily away from the school. Hence, the personal religious and spiritual practices of early career teachers outside school warrants further investigation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the three research questions will be reviewed, and summative comments on each will be made. Firstly, how do early career teachers understand their role in Catholic schools, and in what ways can they be better supported? Early career teachers in this study were largely from the local area, had a positive experience of Catholic schools, and expressed enthusiasm about working in the schools. They commented on the high levels of support provided to them both at a local school and system level, and were willing to learn more about Catholic education and their role in it. This openness to further training and formation is a significant finding. How this future training and formation can be best configured is an important question, and will be discussed further in reference to the following two research questions.

The second research question investigated early career teachers’ descriptions of their religious beliefs and practices, and asked whether these could be understood as examples of interpretative autonomy. There is evidence in this study of early career teachers using interpretive autonomy when they describe their religious beliefs and practices. This is most evident in the relative importance given to certain beliefs and practices over others. Dillon’s discussion of interpretive autonomy highlights that many contemporary Catholics see religious belief and practice not as an integrated whole, but as something that can be moulded to accommodate individual preference. In this study, religious practices such as regular involvement in a worshiping community outside school hours, were not seen as relatively important. They were not dismissed, but were rather viewed as having little personal relevance. In terms of belief, what have been described as strongly theological beliefs, such as those expressed in formal Church doctrine, are discounted in favour of an emphasis on morality, which is regarded as an emphasis on key values. Religion is seen as being properly expressed when it addresses personal conduct and places a high importance on key values that are often commonly held in the wider community.

The third research question explored whether early career teachers negotiate the boundaries between the secular and religious in their role as educators. This study provides evidence that early career teachers make these negotiations; in particular, two major aspects can be highlighted here. Firstly, such negotiation is most evident in the early career teacher being able to move between two fields. The first is the world of the Catholic school; they are happy to work in this environment and are willing to fulfil the demands of this role, including being involved in religious practices such as prayer, and also taking part in religious discourse. The other field in which they operate is a larger and more influential one: that of the secular world outside school. In the secular world, the social networking, behaviours and beliefs of teachers are much more reflective of their peers in the wider culture. The boundary negotiation takes place when they move between the two worlds; and for most teachers, this is done with relative ease.

The second example of boundary negotiation involves establishing a commonality between the secular sense of values, and those values they see as germane to their understanding or appropriation of the Catholic belief. Establishing these common values gives legitimacy to religion, as it does not run counter to what is widely held as one of the major secularities of modern culture – namely, that certain values are of critical importance, are commonly held, and transcend religious and secular categorisation.

To return to the question of teacher training and formation, it has been noted that the early career teachers in this study were prepared to take part in these activities. What factors need to be considered in making this ongoing training and formation most effective? Three suggestions will be made here. Firstly, a concentration on expanding teachers' understanding of the Catholic worldview. The goal here is to cultivate a better understanding in early career teachers, so that the exchange between the secular and religious worlds can be more fruitful. This needs to be done in a way that is genuinely dialogical, as teachers are well ensconced in their current dispositions, and have negotiated a boundary between the secular and the religious which they see as stable and practical.

Secondly, a strong focus articulated by the participants in this study was seeing values as the key marker of religious belief. As an elaboration on the first point, it is further suggested here that an ongoing dialogue be established with early career teachers, regarding values and how they are understood in religious traditions; and, most importantly, how they are derived, and on what theological principles they are founded. The writings and example of Pope Francis seem very apposite here. The Pope has expressed the importance of

praxis for Christians, and this appears to be an attractive entry point for the early career teachers in this study, as they were prepared to engage in a deeper reflection on values and how they are derived in the Catholic tradition. This focus on values also recognises the value of interpretive autonomy when aiming to better understand early career teachers. Identifying something of great importance to them, as a departure point, is a way of recognising and respecting their choices and preferences.

Thirdly, further consideration could be given to establishing and strengthening links between early career teachers. The social network of early career teachers is reflective of peer networks in the wider culture. Thus, there could scope for establishing other networks; not to replace existing ones, but as a way of supplementing them and offering further enrichment. Replacing existing networks is neither possible nor desirable, as people naturally gravitate to networks that match their interests, values and concerns. There is, however, a point worth considering here, in terms of encouraging early career teachers to establish or engage in other networks based on their professional lives as teachers in Catholic schools. The participants in this study were very happy to be working in Catholic schools and were open to considering a range of avenues that could assist them to be better teachers. More contact with other teachers with similar backgrounds and dispositions could thus provide a further opportunity to develop teachers' sense of what Catholic education proposes, and what it is based on.

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