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Richard M. Rymarz

BBI-TAITE, rrymarz@bbi.catholic.edu.au

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Catholic schools and subsidiarity: Some teacher observations from a small, regional school system

Abstract

This research uses subsidiarity, a key principle of Catholic social teaching, to better understand teachers in a small, regional Australian diocese. Nine teachers with at least three years' experience working in Catholic schools in the diocese were interviewed. The interviews focussed on three research questions: How do teachers come to work in this Catholic school system? What is their experience of working in Catholic schools? How do they feel supported in Catholic schools especially in regard to teaching religious education and identifying with the ethos of the school? Results indicated that the life journeys of teachers that brought them to work in Catholic schools in this region are complex but a number of salient features stand out. For many teachers, working in Catholic education is associated with opportunities that may not have arisen if they had not moved to this region. Teachers reported that they enjoyed working in Catholic schools, supported schools' religious identity and expressed satisfaction with the levels of support they received both within the school and from the central Schools' Office. The size of the Catholic school system allows for networks of personal relationships to be developed and this brings with it a collaborative and participatory sense. The teachers feel that they are part of a system that takes into account their own backgrounds, needs and interests. This is a good example of the practical application of the principle of subsidiarity.

Introduction

When Catholic School Offices (CSO) provide ongoing support to teachers an important point to consider is the principle of subsidiarity. This is a central aspect of the Catholic Church's social teaching and is defined as such in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, para. 185):

Subsidiarity is among the most constant and characteristic directives of the Church's social doctrine and has been present since the first great social encyclical. It is impossible to promote the dignity of the person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, local territorial realities; in short, for that aggregate of economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth. This is the realm of *civil society*, understood as the sum of the relationships between individuals and intermediate social groupings, which are the first relationships to arise and which come about thanks to the creative subjectivity of the citizen. This network of relationships strengthens the social fabric and constitutes the basis of a true community of persons, making possible the recognition of higher forms of social activity.

Central to the notion of subsidiarity is that for growth and formation of individuals to be most effective, serious regard should be given to the relationships that are developed in work and

social situations. These situations help give a sense of the person in a totality of settings and sees them as multifaceted beings with a range of concerns and needs. In addition, there is an understanding that subsidiarity brings with it a sense of an appropriate scale. It is more likely that this type of human interaction is best achieved in organisations that are not too large and where individuals can see common connections with others and certainly with those who they interact with in a professional capacity. In these circumstances, trust, positive engagement and on-going teacher formation, amongst other things, are much more likely to be engendered (Shields, 2018).

The importance of trust, personal interaction and inclusivity in formation and development is supported by a range of studies (Barth, 2003; Bouckenooghe, 2010; Madsen et al., 2005). A key aspect of individual formation and growth is an awareness that there is a personal stake in the enterprise and that assistance is available from others in the group who have a personal interest and relationship with other parties (Podolny & Baron, 1997; Vakola, 2013). Relationships across an organisation are important for individuals to feel that their input is valued and also that they have the capacity to make changes to their workplace practice in a constructive way. These changes are more likely in an organisation where the scale of the operations is not so large that individual relationships can become distant and impersonal unless properly managed (Manley et al., 2011). The synergy with the idea of subsidiarity is that here too there is a strong emphasis on human relationships as a basis for development and change, a point often stressed in leadership in Catholic education (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2013; Duncan & Reily, 2002; Neidhart & Lamb, 2013).

One of the key goals of Catholic schools is to provide for open and engaging exchanges between all members of the school community. An analogy that illustrates this openness to engagement is that of the school being like the courtyard in the old temple in Jerusalem; a place of encounter and dialogue (Franchi, 2014). In this analogy, Catholic schools are

attempting to establish relationships between the school with its educational and religious aspirations and to the wider community who have entered the courtyard with various expectations. Many of these expectations reflect an emerging cultural paradigm which does not reflect a strong connection with religious institutions. What the school then aspires to, is to journey with those who have chosen to be a part of the school community. This journeying is assisted if key principles of subsidiarity, such as concern for human relationships, are manifested and valued.

A key question for Catholic schools then is how to maintain a religious identity in a changing cultural context (Arbuckle, 2017; Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2014; Sharkey, 2015). This is a complex discussion. One aspect that will be focussed on in this paper is the human dimension of Catholic school identity and most particularly the role of the teacher. A wide range of studies have shown that younger teachers in Catholic schools, while eager about working in Catholic education, share many of the traits of their peers in the wider culture (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Cook, 2004; Rymarz & Belmonte, 2014). Catholic schools, therefore, place considerable importance on forming teachers who work in the system (Franchi & Rymarz, 2019). A part of this support is assistance in better understanding the religious dimension of Catholic schools. How this is carried out is dependent on local conditions and other political and cultural factors. Many of the studies of teacher support and formation have focussed on large schools systems in major urban centres (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008). The smaller school systems often found in regional and rural areas. They are also ones which are more likely to have a close association with principles of subsidiarity. In these places there is a tendency to have a narrower bureaucratic structure, with closer associations between the various educational dimensions of schools (Belmonte & Rymarz, 2017; Clarke & Wildy, 2011). In addition, some smaller schools systems are also often in relatively remote areas and this may require teachers to move into the region (Starr, 2016).

A somewhat neglected research area is how do teachers in smaller Catholic school systems regard teaching in Catholic schools and how do they articulate the expectations on them in regard to promoting and maintaining the Catholic identity of schools. In this study an examination of the experience of teachers working in such a system will be examined. The original contribution of this research is to explore the experiences of teachers working in these Catholic schools within the wider conceptual framework of subsidiarity. The original contribution extends into the aim of the study, which is to investigate the utility of the concept of subsidiarity as a formative principle in Catholic education. Three questions will be addressed: How do teachers come to work in this Catholic school system? What is their experience of working in Catholic Schools? How do they feel supported in Catholic schools especially in regard to teaching religious education and identifying with the ethos of the school?

The context of this study is the ongoing discussion on the role and identity of Catholic schools in a changing cultural context and how existing Church structures are able to address these emerging contexts. Catholic schools in many parts of the world continue to attract substantial enrolments in a variety of social conditions (Brennan, 2011; Jofre, 2014; Wanden & Birch, 2007). This presence brings with it enduring bureaucratic structures that mediate the variety of services that schools provide (NCEC, 2016). The scale of these supporting structures can vary significantly. In Australia, for example, the larger central agencies in major urban centres are referred to as Catholic Schools Offices (CSO) and can cover hundreds of schools with tens of thousands of students. In contrast, CSO in regional areas have a much smaller scope with far fewer schools and students (Belmonte & Cranston, 2007). In both urban and regional contexts, however, the concept of subsidiarity may be useful in providing a broad framework on which further discussion of Catholic identity can take place.

Methodology

This study utilises an action research approach within a constructivist epistemological framework. Teachers with at least three years' experience working in schools in the diocese were invited to take part in the study by the CSO. The school system is in a relatively remote region with high levels of residential transience. There are a small number of Catholic schools in this region and no more than one teacher from each school was interviewed as part of the study. The approach here is indicative of a privileged sub group methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this approach, a group is identified as having some special insight into the issue that is being investigated. As such it is not a representative method of data gathering, but relies on a clear reason for selecting a particular group. It was reasoned that teachers with some experience working in Catholic schools in this region had special insight into the research questions.

In this study, nine teachers were interviewed. As there is a high turnover of staff in the diocese teachers with the most experience working in the diocese were invited to take part in the study by the CSO in the area. All teachers worked in, the major population centre. Each teacher was interviewed for no more than one hour. Interviews were seen as an effective way of gaining insights from educational leaders on parental school selection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Interviews are well suited to this task as they are a means to delve into the complex issues (Minichiello et al., 1995; Wuthnow, 2016). The interviews followed a semi-structured, in-depth pattern (Minichiello et al., 1995). After each interview, participant responses were analysed in detail, using contemporaneous notes and recordings. On the basis of this analysis, thematic response codes developed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These codes were related to common responses and dominant categories identified. These categories then informed the next interview, and response categories became more and more refined (Silverman, 2013).

Results

Teachers responses to the three research questions will be reported in turn.

How do teachers come to work in this Catholic school system?

The life stories of the teachers in the study were varied and this was reflected in the story of how they came to work in Catholic schools in this region. One theme did, however, emerge. For many of the teachers a common expression that arose in their response to this question was, “opportunity”. The opportunity narrative took a number of forms. For some it was the chance to secure ongoing employment with a permanent teaching contract. One teacher expressed this in the following terms; “I was from and wanted to work in this area but I just couldn’t get a permanent contract.... I had to move around all the time and being settled was very hard.... [also] there was nothing on the horizon”. In this account it is worth noting that the area where the participant was unable to secure ongoing employment was also a smaller, regional diocese, but in this area, it was still difficult to obtain employment in a Catholic school.

It was clear that many of the teachers interviewed had senior positions despite what in other places would be seen as a lack of experience and seniority. One teacher explained how she had come into her current role. “I was working in and was considering my next move when [a relative who lived in the region] suggested I come up here. I applied for a religious education leadership position and after the interview was given the job... I have so many opportunities here to progress, that wouldn’t have happened where I worked before”. An additional opportunity that emerged in the life stories of participants was what was referred to as, “the big adventure”. This concept encapsulates well the notion that coming to work in this region brought with it a range of intangible benefits such as seeing a part of the country that many would only ever visit or even never see at all. For one teacher this chance

for this adventure was something that came along at a particular moment in life one that corresponded to a significant milestone in his life. It was, “a chance that came along at a time when we could both say yes to it”. A similar sentiment was expressed by others who saw the opportunity to come and work in Catholic schools in this region as a chance to make a new beginning again at a precipitous moment in their lives.

The opportunity narrative was also evident in comments on length of involvement in Catholic schools here. The opportunity to work in the diocese was taken but this could be described as a segment in a journey which may eventually lead to other places. This is also, perhaps, a characteristic of people who are prepared to move into a relatively remote area to take advantage of a particular life circumstance and to make the most of this experience. It is consistent with this mentality to then move on to other opportunities as they arise. As one teacher described it... ‘I’m not risk averse!’ For another, her work in a Catholic school was driven by the employment opportunities that have arisen but, in the future, these may change as career prospects emerge in other areas.

What is teachers’ experience of working in Catholic schools?

The experience of participants working in Catholic schools was positive. Teachers were often able to articulate a link between the size of the school and how this made their experience a positive one. One participant put it in the following terms, “I really enjoy coming into work every day...it’s the community feel in the school no one seems to be a stranger here...”. Another teacher expressed a similar idea in the following terms. “My experience working here has been good. I know all the other teachers really well ...and it’s not just in this school, I still am close to teachers in other schools I worked in here”.

The experience of teachers working in Catholic schools in this region builds on their work in other places. The commitment to Catholic education is strongly expressed and this is part of a sense of mission that the teachers bring to their teaching. When one teacher, for example, was asked about whether she had ever worked, or would consider working in other school systems, she appeared puzzled. In response she noted, “I see myself as working in Catholic schools, that’s what I’ve always wanted to do”. Or another participant commented, “I’ve always had good experiences as a teacher in Catholic schools...all good!”

The connection with the religious ethos of the school was one that most of the participants in this study could identify with and felt that they had a role in maintaining and promoting. The religious aspect of the school was often expressed in terms of difference or as one teacher put it, “what it is that we do... that makes us offering something that is part of our identity”. The key aspect of what makes Catholic schools different and one major reason that teachers enjoyed working in them was that the schools were seen to embody key values. These values were something that teachers could readily identify with. Teachers did not articulate a similar close identification with Catholic beliefs. This finding is in keeping with the wider cultural paradigm that sees religious affiliation as not being closely associated with specific beliefs and behaviours but in markers that are not restricted to faith based schools. Values, for instance, were seen to be the key dimension of Catholic school identity especially as a distinctive marker of school culture. As one teacher remarked, “[the school] is all about values, the values we are based on and how we share these with all the students”.

How do teachers feel supported in Catholic schools especially in regard to teaching religious education and identifying with the religious ethos of the school?

Teachers recognised that working in a Catholic school brought with it certain responsibilities and obligations. One teacher put this well when she commented on religious identity as being “part of the job”. Another expressed a similar view that “the religion part is

something that I am coming to terms with.... very much on a journey”. What makes this journey analogy pertinent is that some of the participants in the study were in leadership roles in religious education. These roles come with expectations about providing leadership in a discipline closely connected with the ethos of the school. With the opportunities that are offered in working in this regional area come responsibilities that are not placed on many teachers with similar life histories in large urban centres.

Participants felt strongly supported in their schools. Other staff and school leadership were well known to them and provided personal engagement and a range of practical assistance. A key here was the personal interaction between the teachers in this study and others in the schools where they worked. One teacher commented, “It’s great here, [principal] is always around when I need something, she takes a great interest in what I do”. This type of comment was also made about other Catholic schools in the region that teachers had worked at and suggests a general disposition. This is also a good example of the principle of subsidiarity, that is, the sound delivery of programs of formation at a local level where there is an opportunity for personal interaction and engagement. In addition, many of the leaders in schools had been involved in religious education themselves so when it came to offering support in this area they had the advantage of having recent practical experience that could be passed on to others. The efficacy of this type of support though was once again premised on the personal relationship between teachers and those in school leadership.

Another example of subsidiarity in action is the small metaphorical distance between those who plan and offer programs in teacher support and formation and those who are involved in these programs. Because of this intimacy, teachers in schools expressed the view that they felt part of the system and the collaborative mentality that it cultivates. One participant remarked, “We all know [person’s name] she comes out to our school all the time ...and it’s not just the teaching side she does, she knows us as people and where we are at so

it's a big help". Other aspects of the personal relationships that are cultivated is the openness and availability of the bishop. Many of the teachers remarked how they knew him well and that they could approach him and ask for assistance and guidance. Relative personal familiarity between teachers and educational leaders is a very prominent feature of smaller school systems. It is very unlikely that the same intimacy is possible in larger systems as the number of schools and individuals involved is far greater.

Discussion

The experience of teachers working in Catholic schools in this small, regional school system was affirming. Many expressed themselves in animated terms when it came to commenting on working in this system. Of interest is how this positive response was associated with the nature of Catholic schools in this region. The teachers in this study were aware of the disparity between this religious ethos and the expectations and background of many in the school community, most notably the parents. Most parents are not part of parish communities and an increasing number are non-Catholics. Indeed, some teachers recognised that they too were not actively involved in worshipping communities outside of school. This recognition confirms the changing demographic pattern of those involved in Catholic education (NCEC, 2016).

This changing pattern does not, however, detract from the satisfaction of teachers working in Catholic schools. Participants in this study displayed high levels of satisfaction with their work in Catholic schools and felt well supported in their roles. In addition, it did not create undue tensions between the stated goals of the school and how this was lived out in the day to day life of the school. This harmony reflects an understanding of the Catholic school as a special type of meeting place in contemporary culture where a range of people, many without strong religious affiliation, are drawn together in a community. This

community is much more open to religious expression, belief and practise than is the norm in the wider culture.

The openness is in keeping with the analogy of the Catholic school in the wider culture as a courtyard (Franchi, 2014). In this study teachers are often seen as pivotal in providing accompaniment to parents and students, but at the same time they too are being accompanied on their faith journey. Identifying with the religious ethos of the school is not something that alienates the teachers interviewed here. An important aspect of working in Catholic schools is being able to recognise and promote the ethos of the school which is often expressed in religious terms. Schools in the region, for instance, were clearly identified with religious images and symbols. This religious identity is also expressed in formal documents prepared by the overseeing school authority in the region. Being able to better support religious identity is one consequence of the support that teachers feel that they receive for their role in Catholic education (D'Orsa & D'Orsa, 2013). What is proposed here is that in a school system where the subsidiarity principle is evident, manifested by the network of personal and collaborative relationships this support for teachers may be more fruitful.

A theme to emerge in this study is what can be referred to as an opportunity narrative being a dominant feature of the experience of teachers working in this diocese. Opportunity was the chance to take up fulltime, permanent employment. It also involved the chance to move into position of seniority far more quickly than in other school systems. In large urban centres, for example, the pathway to a position in the leadership team of a Catholic school can be a competitive, complex and drawn out process. It was clear that many of the teachers interviewed had senior positions despite what in other places would be seen as a lack of experience and seniority. The prominence of this experience has implications for Catholic schools. Teachers in small, regional dioceses often are in a somewhat unusual positions because of these opportunities. They can take on significant responsibilities, especially in

helping to consolidate and promote the religious identity of the school. A key consideration is how teachers can be assisted in meeting these responsibilities. This is in accord with one of the key challenges for Catholic schools in the future, which is, maintaining religious identity in a changing cultural context (Arbuckle, 2017).

Teachers expressed beliefs, practises and aspects of worldview that are in keeping with broader trends in the wider community. The pertinent point here is that many of these teachers in this school system are in positions that require them to provide leadership and direction and in this role they need to have ongoing support and formation. This is being given at school level and also across schools in the diocese. This support though needs to be continued and could be expanded to take advantage of the favourable conditions that arise in a smaller school system. Franchi and Rymarz (2019) stress the importance of Catholic schools being adaptable in changing cultural circumstances and a system that manifests subsidiarity may be better able to make the necessary adaptations to better support younger teachers.

There are other advantages of a manifestation of the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity sees teachers as part of a broader social fabric and that their views need to be acknowledged. This personal interaction was also seen in support at a systems level. Many of the teachers commented on how the local administrative centre offered a range of programs that were aimed at helping teachers such as themselves. These programs were commented on with some enthusiasm. An important feature of why these programs were successful was, once again, their personal and human dimension. Those responsible for planning and delivering this support across the system were well known to teachers in schools and often came out to schools to see teachers personally.

Teachers in this study noted that their views were taken into account and that there was a recognition of them as individuals with specialised needs and concerns. They responded

positively when asked about how supported they felt in Catholic schools. This support had two dimensions; support at a school level and support that was more system based. This support may assist them emerge as religious leaders in schools if support could be tailored and responsive to the changes in wider culture. Understanding the “journey” that many teachers described themselves as being on is critical to better understanding and facilitating teacher development and formation. Underlying the journey narrative is the notion that teachers in small regional areas such as this one are willing to embrace new experiences and accommodate different perspectives. This factor is encouraging for those who are working in teacher formation for such an attitude brings with its openness to educational and other formation initiatives (Belmonte & Cranston, 2007). These opportunities also present significant challenges. As the teachers are working in Catholic schools and some have leadership roles in areas such as religious education, an ability to comprehend and communicate substantive issues in theology and related disciplines is important. The challenges, although mitigated by the practical application of the principle of subsidiarity, remain evident.

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