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‘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

„A teraz uczę w szkole katolickiej” – doświadczenia początkujących nauczycieli (Early Career Teachers [ECT]) w szkołach katolickich w Lismore i wynikające z nich wnioski odnośnie do wsparcia formacji.
Badania pilotażowe

Abstract: This study is a preliminary investigation of early career teachers (ECT) working in Catholic schools in a large regional Australian diocese. The key aim of the study is to better understand the factors influencing early career teachers, who begin

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their teaching careers in Catholic schools, and to apprehend their early experiences as teachers to cater for their continuous formation needs. Key findings identify the openness of ECTs to faith-based experiences and the challenges faced in teaching in a Catholic school. Recommendations for early career teacher support and formation are provided considering the findings of this study.

Keywords: Catholic schools; Early Career Teachers; formation; secularisation.

Abstrakt: Niniejsze opracowanie relacjonuje badania pilotażowe nauczycieli na początkowym etapie kariery (Early Career Teachers [ECT]) w szkołach katolickich w diecezji Lismore w Australii. Głównym celem badań było lepsze poznanie czynników, warunkujących decyzję o rozpoczęciu kariery nauczycielskiej w szkole katolickiej oraz zrozumienie pierwszych doświadczeń, będących udziałem nauczycieli w szkołach katolickich, tak aby lepiej zaspokajać ich bieżące potrzeby formacyjne. Wyniki badań wskazują na otwartość ECT na doświadczenia oparte na wierze oraz wyzwania stojące przed nauczaniem w szkole katolickiej. W świetle wyników badań przedstawiono zalecenia dotyczące wsparcia i formacji nauczycieli na wczesnym etapie kariery.

Słowa kluczowe: szkoły katolickie; początkujący nauczyciele; formacja; sekularyzacja.

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to contribute to the discourse surrounding the formation needs of ECT working in Catholic schools. To sharpen the research focus in this study, a large-scale Australian regional school system was chosen as an example of the social context wherein Catholic schools operate. Key questions for this study revolve around the decisions of ECT to begin their teaching careers in Catholic schools and apprehend their early experiences as teachers. In order to better understand ECTs, consideration of the wider social context with respect to Catholic schools is necessary.

The religious landscape in several Western countries has shifted in recent decades (Demerath, 2000; Stoltz, 2009). One of the most significant of these changes is the rise in the number of people, especially among younger adults, who express little to no religious affiliation (Glendinning & Bruce, 2011; Zuckerman, 2020). However, it is imperative to realise that such development is not coterminous with an equivalent rise in atheism or complete detachment

from religious narratives (Stoltz, 2020). Wilkins-LaFlamme (2016a, p. 727) has succinctly summarised this position. She notes:

[T]his severing of regular contact with religious groups does not necessarily imply an immediate removal from all aspects of organized religion. Many of these individuals who no longer participate in regular religious activities often still maintain a religious identity, specific beliefs, and practise rites of passage within church doors. In other words, they still retain cultural and family ties to their religion.

A key marker of this severing of regular contact is the demise of strong religious socialisation, which is broadly understood amongst large sections of the wider community (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021). In order to achieve a lasting impact, such religious socialisation must occur in the family home and should not be devolved to other social structures (Bengtson et al., 2013).

In the absence of strong and abiding connections to religious communities, new patterns of socialisation have emerged that reinforce detachment from religious communities (Tromp et al., 2022). Inglehart (2020) notes an increasing alignment of large numbers of people across the Western world to 'individual choice' norms. These norms are becoming culturally dominant and can be contrasted with other norms that are more reminiscent of historical religious derivations. For those more closely identified with a religious tradition, a pattern of continuous association tends to see religious affiliation in terms of acceptance of a strong moral code along with a deistic understanding of God (Denton & Flory, 2021). Clements and Bullivant (2021) believe this acceptance of religion to be a moral system that is filtered through a personalistic sense of an individual's priorities. Simultaneously, the authors note that those who identify as religious also exist, who, although in a distinct minority, retain a much stronger sense of association with the beliefs and practices of religious communities.

A way of conceptualising this new social landscape that allows for a range of connections with religious narratives is to consider the general concept of culturised religion (Astor & Maryl, 2020). In this view, the place of religion and personal religious identity is considered multi-faceted, fluid, and responsive to developing cultural patterns. In the most ardent secular cultures, there can still be a place for religious rituals and inculcation if they are deemed as a part

of what it means to be actively involved in that culture. Another important implication of culturised religion is that it allows for a range of personal expressions of belief and practice. The dominant pattern tends to reflect communal practices, which are often placed at a distance from traditional dogmatic beliefs. However, more schematic expressions of religious identity also exist, which place a higher value on faith expression and codes of moral behaviour and common ritual expression (Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2016b). The manner in which culturised religion is manifested is dependent on a wide range of complex social and historical factors. An area of interest for this study is the place of ECTs in faith-based schools in a cultural context, where communal culturized religion is dominant and the instrumental strength of religious communities can vary considerably.

Stoltz and his colleagues (2015) believe that despite rises in levels of religious affiliation and communal expressions of culturised religion, interest in faith-based education remains strong. This reflects the instrumental importance of religion in several contexts, especially those with a long history of faith-based education. This logic can be extended to teachers in Catholic schools. While much of the logic will be formed using strongly culturised expressions of religious belief and practise that lack strong religious socialisation, it still seeks to work in schools that retain a strong identification with a religious tradition. An important question is regarding how best can a faith-based school system work with ECTs who are new to the system to help them understand and meet the aspirations of the system. Such a school system is typified by the teachers involved in this study.

The local context

The Diocese of Lismore stretches along the coastal strip of New South Wales from Tweed Heads in the north to Laurieton in the south and west to the foothills of the Great Dividing Range. The Catholic Schools Office (CSO) provides a range of services to support approximately 2,500 staff in 45 vibrant and dynamic school communities with more than 18,000 enrolled students.

The formation of staff has been an ongoing focus of the CSO. The Strategic Framework and the Fullness of Life Framework underpin the system expectations and remind the diocesan mission “to accompany students through

Jesus Christ in educational centres of excellence that foster faith, learning and wellbeing outcomes where all students are cared for, respected and valued to become active members of their community.” The Fullness of Life framework further explains:

Our mission is ‘to enable each student to achieve the fullness of life.’ This enlivens, guides and directs all the domains within the ‘Fullness of Life’ Framework. Working in mutuality with each other, these domains call us all to lead, inspired by the Gospel. They invoke a Christ-centred way of living that fosters experiences of pastoral care, respect, and valuing each other as human persons in a Christian anthropology that informs all aspects of school life. This is known as a Catholic Worldview, a ‘lens’ that promotes an optimal learning environment that engages, empowers and enables learners while supporting families, schools and the community to nurture partnerships that are authentic and rich to support Catholic schools. In embedding the framework we accompany students in their journeys toward abundant life.

For graduate teachers, who are beginning their careers in the Lismore diocese, the development of an understanding of this mission takes place in the intentional and strategic formation days that are conducted over a period of two years as part of their transition from provisional to proficient teacher accreditation. As well as meeting the NES curriculum accreditation requirements, these days include two retreat days (Signum Fidei – Signs of the Faith in Year 1, Cresente Fidei – Growing in Faith in Year 2) along with particular sessions that reveal key diocesan directions and frameworks. Over the course of this two-year induction program, participants take part in eight formation and induction days. The formation program introduces participants to the diocesan context and background and is targeted to ensure a detailed and explicit understanding of being a teacher at a Catholic school in this particular system.

2. Methodology

First- and second-year ECTs from the Lismore Diocese were approached at a professional learning and formation event in early 2021 and were invited to participate in the research project. Attendees were contacted via email following

the professional learning day and were asked to complete a survey designed to elicit broad perceptions of their early experiences in Catholic education. Demographic data, such as age, gender, qualifications, university of study, religious affiliation, religious practice, prior experience in Catholic education and length of residence in the Lismore Diocese were also gathered. In addition, respondents were also invited to provide a rating of the level of received support and their confidence levels with respect to working in Catholic Education. Two open-ended questions were also included, which asked the respondents to provide three aspects of working in a Catholic school that worked well for them and three aspects that they found challenging.

Thirty-one ECTs elected to respond to the online survey, with 19 opting to be interviewed for the research project. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted virtually through teleconferencing software. Semi-structured interviews were determined as the most advantageous method for this research as they provided flexibility to follow themes that emerged during the interviews while also allowing time for interview depth (Minichiello et al., 1995).

The interview was focused on a range of key themes with the core priority of capturing the life history narrative of the way each ECT had arrived as a teacher in a Catholic school in the Lismore Diocese (Rymarz & Belmonte, 2014). Interviews were analysed by identifying key clustering into dominant response categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

An initial question sought from the interviewee was regarding their story, encompassing their background and the narrative leading to their employment in a Catholic school in the Lismore Diocese. Secondly, participants were asked about the hopes they shared for the future, as well as their career aspirations. This question sought to elicit from the interviewees a deeper sense of their worldview and their commitment to Catholic education. The third line of questioning drew participants back to their open-ended responses from the survey, asking them to elaborate on what they found challenging in their time in Catholic school and the favourable aspects. From here, participants were asked to describe a lesson they either taught or witnessed that they felt was an exemplar of what it is to engage in Catholic education. This question sought to provide insights into the participant's understanding of Catholic identity and the school. A forced response was also included in the interview, based on a 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.

Respondents were encouraged to take their time to read the quote and offer their honest opinion on the sentiment expressed. The aim behind this activity was to incite the participants to bring forth any latent views.

Finally, interviewees were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed again as a part of this research project in twelve months to track changes in their perceptions of their experience of Catholic education over time.

3. Results

To introduce the key results of this study, the following narratives were provided as they encapsulate many of the key themes identified in the interviews conducted with ECTs. These themes refer to composite figures and are illustrative of several dominant response categories. It is important to note that the majority of survey respondents and interviewees were female; this is representative of the demographics of teachers in the diocese.

Tanya's background was nominally Catholic, and her family did not attend Mass. It was at her Catholic high school where she was exposed to the program of student discipleship that was developed and supported by the Catholic Schools Office. Over the past decade, the Lismore Catholic Schools Office has introduced a continuum for student discipleship and formation from Years 4–12. This program is grounded in peer-to-peer ministry and aims to provide

students with an encounter with Jesus Christ and a supportive environment to explore their faith. This helped Tanya to join the elective ministry-focused Religious Education classes in Years 9 and 10, which enabled her to engage in peer-to-peer ministry with younger students. For her, these experiences were formative for her faith development and fostered a connection to her local parish, where she began worshipping regularly.

Tanya's interaction at school with school-based Youth Ministry Officers also significantly impacted her narrative. These were past students who returned to their school as full-time ministry officers, supporting Religious Education teachers with formation opportunities for students. Following Year 12, Tanya elected to defer acceptance into a bachelor's degree to undertake a Youth Ministry Officer role.

Through this role, Tanya attended World Youth Day, where she met several other young teachers. Her experiences encouraged her to study secondary education online while continuing her school ministry role. She was successful in acquiring a Catholic Schools Office scholarship. This program was introduced in the diocese to encourage past students to return to the diocese as well-formed teachers. In addition to financial support, the scholarship provides a day of employment each week as an aide in a diocesan school. The group is supported with ongoing spiritual formation throughout their degree. Tanya was one of the first ex-Youth Ministry Officers to receive employment upon completion of this program, with the number of ex-Youth Ministry Officers joining this scholarship program growing.

After her education degree, Tanya was employed in a secondary college in the diocese as a specialist Religious Education teacher. Beyond earning her teaching accreditation and growing in-classroom experience, her short-term ambition is to begin her post-graduate studies in Religious Education. In the longer term, Tanya feels that she possesses the necessary leadership qualities and personal traits to seek a role in pastoral leadership and would like to become an Assistant Principal-Mission.

Tanya revealed that her religious profile in the school of being recognised as a Catholic with a strong faith and a commitment to practice might be perceived by some other teachers, who operate out of a more secular frame of reference, as unusual. She suggested that she sometimes felt alienated from some of her teaching colleagues; however, she acknowledged that it might be only in her mind.

In many ways, Tanya's story exemplifies the long-term vision and strategy set forth by the Lismore Catholic Schools Office. Her involvement in youth ministry classes, student discipleship events, and engagement with Youth Ministry Officers behaved as catalysts for the deepening of her own faith, which led to her decision of pursuing a youth ministry pathway. Her trajectory into education, particularly the Religious Education specialisation, was also borne from diocesan initiatives and will hopefully lead to a long and fruitful career in education and leadership in the diocese.

Simone is a first-year teacher who moved into education following a successful career in another field. Her undergraduate studies were conducted at a renowned university, where she resided in a Catholic college.

Simone was raised in a practising Catholic family. Having completed her entire schooling in the Catholic system, Simone was naturally drawn to work in Catholic schools as they felt familiar to her. Simone identified the holistic care for each child, the nurturing environment, the focus on individual strengths and the positive relationships as the most attractive aspects of Catholic education. Simone was able to verbalise these reasons since commencing work in a Catholic school. Although she did not identify as an active participant in the religious community, she felt cared for as a staff member, and her own children attended Catholic schools.

Simone struggled to explain Church teachings in the classroom context. She liked the general ethos and philosophy of the Catholic Church; however, she found it difficult to understand and agree with some of the events and teachings. Simone wished to observe a lesson that unpacked the Catholic lens in a genuine and authentic manner, rather than solely mentioning the Catholic view or teaching. She believed that ensuring authenticity and a genuine way of teaching the Catholic view in the classroom was a real challenge. She also found it difficult to answer student religious questions as 'it's natural to [her], she grew up with [the religion]'. She was unable to explain some actions, such as the Sign of the Cross and parts of the Mass. Nonetheless, Simone perceived these questions positively and was keen to find out the answers. Simone identified the Religious Education faculty as one area of support since these colleagues were always open to robust discussions and responding to questions and challenges.

Simone also felt that new teachers who were not Catholic or were new to Catholic schools struggled with clarity around their role. They were often

unsure about what was expected of them, particularly around the concept of 'evangelisation' that was emphasised during the formation days. At times, these teachers felt overwhelmed and struggled more than her in how best to respond to student questions.

In several ways, Simone's story is quite familiar as it draws on her own experience of Catholic schooling and acknowledges the positive aspects of a strong sense of community and holistic educational offerings as well as the challenges presented by student questions and limited teacher knowledge and formation.

Emily is a committed Christian who was born into a Pentecostal Christian family. She completed her qualifications more than a decade ago, and since then, she has worked in various educational settings, including summer camps, outdoor education and school administration roles, both in Australia and overseas. Emily has acquired previous experience by working in Catholic schools on a casual basis, and this was her first full-time permanent position in a Catholic school.

Emily is a well-formed person of faith and is strongly connected to a faith community in which she is active and involved. While not Catholic herself, Emily recognised the depth of the Catholic tradition and did not see any major conflict with her own faith. She appreciated that students and staff in Catholic schools are encouraged to develop and foster their own faith. She was also impressed by the time and resources invested in the faith formation of staff. The retreat, being a part of the graduate teacher formation days in the diocese, was a particularly moving experience for her, and she also enjoyed the various opportunities offered to staff to develop and deepen their faith throughout the school year.

Similar to Tanya, Emily noticed an interesting tension between those staff with no faith and the culture of the school. She wondered how the staff can have no beliefs. In fact, during her graduate teacher days, she was surprised by an interaction with a teacher who was particularly negative regarding the religious aspect of working in a Catholic school. Emily was aware that in employment applications, there is a reference to the Catholic ethos of the school, but she was not aware of any real discussion regarding a person's faith for that role. She had a sense of disconnect between what is written on paper and the reality of the school. She understood that some people may work in a Catholic school because of the good environment, and the tension between the expectation and the lived reality is of note to her.

Emily also explained a similar confusing tension in the Catholic component required in teaching programs. Each program required explicit links to Scripture and Church teaching along with explicit teaching points in the unit of work that align a Catholic worldview with relevant syllabus outcomes. Emily's perception was that although this may be clear on paper such explicit teaching rarely occurs outside of Religious Education. While she recognised the challenges of teaching content-heavy syllabuses, she was also surprised by this disparity.

Emily's experience highlights both the opportunities in Catholic schools to be a place of real faith formation and reflection and the disconnect between what Catholic schools may espouse to be and what is the lived reality in some cases.

Zoe had secured a contract to work in a Catholic primary school. This was her first position since leaving the local university, where she did her teacher training. She saw this initial appointment as a key step to her career goal of a permanent position in Catholic education. She noted, "My partner and I have bought in the area, and we are keen to make this our home; I just need to land that permanent job! We love living here, and our families are so close by." Her family was an important part of her life story. Her family had lived in this area for generations, and they all attended Catholic schools. They were also prominent members of the local Catholic community. Her grandparents also retained this link. Zoe mentioned a medal she wore and stated, "This is from nan, it's religious and I wear it as my necklace." For Zoe, the involvement of her siblings and parents in the parish is no longer a major part of their lives. She noted that her parents attended Church on special occasions, but this was not the case for her. Zoe commented that growing up, "[they] made more of an effort and [they would] go to Mass at Easter or Christmas but even that stopped when [they] were in primary school. It is not that anything happened, it's just that other things cropped up and it became the "thing" to not go to Church." Zoe still identified as a Catholic and for her, the decision to work in a Catholic school was a natural one. She had always wanted to be a teacher, and as all her experiences related to Catholic schools, it was a progression to see her career unfolding in the system she was familiar with. When asked about what being a Catholic means to her, she noted it to be about being a good person, making good choices and trying to help others. She saw God as a benign presence in the world. She was unable to use more theological language to describe her views,

but was happy to engage more with the Tradition if it helped her to become a better teacher. For Zoe and many other ECTs, the school is the point of contact with the Church. She noted that she did a placement in a Catholic school as part of her education degree, and it “all came back.” “I have my values and I can work within the Catholic system as I feel really at home with the teachers and with the students,” Zoe said. She saw teaching Religious Education as part of her job as a primary teacher, although she was glad that this year did not pose “anything too heavy.”

3.1. Further themes

The interviews highlight several experiences shared by the ECTs who participated in the study. Both interviewees and survey respondents had a strong positive response to working in the Catholic school environment. ECTs generally identified feeling welcomed into the life of the community and a sense of belonging as community members.

Early Career Teachers strongly reported a sense of support in their transition into teaching in Catholic schools. One ECT noted, “Communication and support are top-notch... I feel like I have a dozen different people at my school alone that I can go to for advice.” Many interviewees and survey respondents acknowledged, in particular, the support provided to them by their school-based mentor teachers, a system-initiated role. Interviewees responded that they felt they could approach other teachers for help, support and guidance. The interviews and survey responses also indicated that ECTs valued the annual system-led and-supported the provided professional development and formation opportunities and appreciated the opportunity to engage with the faith of the Catholic community and develop their teaching practice. However, some respondents and interviewees reported that they felt there was too much ‘assumed knowledge’ regarding school-based procedures and processes without explicit training, which was difficult to navigate. Moreover, despite strong reports of feeling supported, several ECTs felt that the administrative demands of working in a school were significant and challenging; however, some acknowledged that this challenge may not solely exist within the Catholic education system.

Another emergent theme from survey responses and interviews was a strong feeling that students were offered a holistic education through their

Catholic education experience. We see this exemplified in Simone's narrative, where she values the nurturing environment provided by the Catholic school. There was a perception that their Catholic school placed a strong emphasis on building positive relationships between teachers and students as well as providing pastoral care for students and a strong academic focus. One ECT noted that they felt "like [they] have a much more student-focused approach" than other experiences of teaching they had undertaken in the past. Some interviewees spoke of ensuring that their lessons were student-centred in nature and allowed for dialogue, which came across strongly when interviewees were asked to recount a lesson that they felt was an authentic representation of what it is to teach in a Catholic school. Additionally, many ECTs recognised the importance of students having the opportunity to learn about their faith and to engage in liturgy and prayer. One ECT noted that they "enjoy pastoral care and seeing students participate in the Catholic community." This also emerged strongly in the interviewees' answers to the forced response item in the interviews. Some, typically those who were less engaged in their faith, felt that Religious Education lessons were beneficial for students as they exposed them to strong moral norms.

3.2. Interviewee responses to the provided quote

Interviewee responses to the forced response, based on the quote from the pastoral letter from the Australian Catholic bishops, provided key insights regarding ECTs views of Catholic education in Australia. Several participants were drawn to the quote's reference to the Catholic schools as the "principal meeting point with young people" (ACBC, 2021). There was broad awareness among ECTs that student engagement in the life of the parish is relatively low, and that for most students, their encounters with faith were predominantly facilitated through the work of the school. A participant argued that Catholic schools for many students are the "only meeting point" for young people to encounter an authentic expression of the Catholic faith, as their parents were non-practising. This participant, who practises their Catholic faith actively, believes that all teachers should have a responsibility to "embody the values" the Church presents. She also acknowledges that this is not the lived reality among many teachers. Another interviewee felt that in this respect, Catholic schools

acted as a “leading doorway” for many students into a deeper experience of and appreciation for a transcendent worldview.

There was also a broad acknowledgement of the responsibility Catholic school teachers have for the “transmission of the faith to the next generation” (ACBC, 2021). The interviewees believed that the Catholic school’s work in religious formation and evangelisation supported the broader mission of the Church. One ECT suggested that teachers’ pedagogical knowledge meant that they were well placed to provide students with engaging Religious Education lessons. Some interviewees acknowledged that although students may not currently demonstrate an interest in Religious Education lessons, the seed of faith was being planted, which would encourage students to return to the Catholic faith at a later point in their lives. One ECT felt that the Catholic school acted as a ‘guiding light’ for students to help them understand and appreciate the foundational beliefs of the Catholic faith.

The interviewees referred to Catholic schools providing students with a “greater appreciation of the true, the good and the beautiful” (ACBC, 2021). Notably, however, interviewees referred to how these virtues formed their own passion for teaching students about the importance of caring for creation.

The final sentence of the quote also drew the attention of interviewees; however, most of their attention was directed to the importance of the Catholic school providing students with a strong moral formation, without significant reference to “evangelisation, catechesis, religious education and spiritual... formation” (ACBC, 2021). Some respondents referred to the importance of supporting their students to become a “good person” or to be a “good, moral person.” The moral teachings of Catholic schools were also an emergent theme when ECTs were asked why they chose to work in Catholic education. Here, some respondents acknowledged that the moral formation of students was a significant role for Catholic schools. This is an interesting response to the quote, given that one of the challenges articulated by some interviewees was the difficulty of responding to student questions because they themselves either found some Church teachings difficult to explain or disagreed with them. This suggests a tension that warrants further unpacking with early career teachers as part of their formation.

Notably, no interviewees referred to Catholic schools as being places where “young people encounter Christ,” or where students come to know the “love of God” (ACBC, 2021).

3.3. Teaching Religious Education and other lessons

The teaching of Religious Education also arose as a prominent theme among ECT respondents. Most early teachers were open to teaching Religious Education, particularly primary teachers, who were expected to teach this course. When outlining a lesson, they felt exemplified regarding what it was to teach in a Catholic school. Most interviewees described a Religious Education lesson or a secular lesson they had successfully permeated with Scripture and Catholic moral teachings. Many Catholic survey respondents reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to teach their faith to their students and appreciated opportunities to discuss their faith and Scripture. The mission of the Catholic school, to evangelise and catechise its students, was also broadly supported by ECTs. This was particularly evident through the responses to the forced response where participants were supportive of the statement outlining the Church's commitment to forming future generations. These responses also highlighted that several ECTs recognised the schools' important role in connecting students to the church. Some ECTs felt that for many of their students, the school remained the only connection to the church specifically and the Catholic faith in general. Despite openness to teaching Religious Education, this was also identified by ECTs as one of the most challenging aspects of their role. Some respondents commented that they were unsure whether they were "doing it right." A number of ECT, such as Simone, commented that they felt they needed a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith in order to teach it well. Others identified a broad lack of confidence in their abilities to teach Religious Education at this stage of their careers. Some ECTs did not feel appropriately equipped to answer the questions asked by their students in Religious Education lessons. It is notable that only six of the 31 survey respondents were currently qualified to teach Religious Education, with a further two currently undertaking studies in Religious Education or Theology. This is not altogether unsurprising, since there is no local Catholic tertiary institution in this diocese that incorporates Religious Education qualifications into undergraduate education degrees. Some respondents felt that undertaking postgraduate study would improve their confidence in teaching Religious Education.

Almost all interviewees were able to identify a lesson that they felt was a good representation of the Catholic ethos of their school. Some lessons

were identified from Religious Education lessons and either taught by the ECTs or their colleagues. Other lessons described were those ‘permeated’ with a Catholic worldview. This is a diocesan initiative that seeks to live out the call from the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory to ensure that in Catholic schools, “other disciplines also consider the Catholic dimension of their subject areas” (Bishops of NSW and ACT, 2007, p. 10). This initiative sees teachers aligning the mainstream academic content of each subject area with Catholic values, beliefs and Scripture for one or two lessons during a unit of work.

One ECT that spoke of mainstream lessons ‘permeated’ with a Catholic worldview was impressed with the way in which students were able to transfer their learning in Religious Education to make meaning of a concept in their English course. ECTs who described permeated lessons felt that these were generally well-received by their students and that their students remembered the learning they had engaged in through this lesson. While some ECTs felt they were becoming more proficient in ‘permeating’ lessons with a Catholic worldview, it is worth noting that a few interviewees, all from secondary schools, indicated that they lacked confidence in preparing for and delivering these permeated lessons. An interviewee revealed that he was “worried he would say the wrong thing” in these lessons and would be misrepresenting the Catholic faith.

A range of common themes emerged from those interviewees who discussed Religious Education lessons. Some ECTs presented a lesson that was rich in dialogue, allowing students to pose and answer questions and engage in rich dialogue around complex issues. It was considered an engaging approach and allowed students to ask the deep questions that were challenging them. A teacher discussed his use of Project-based Learning (PBL) through a diocesan initiative ‘RENEW’, which introduces PBL into Religious Education lessons in primary and secondary schools. This teacher believed that such a pedagogical approach allows students clear opportunities to investigate challenging theological concepts and provides explicit opportunities for students to make sense of their learning in the context of their own lives.

Other respondents discussed the use of a pedagogy of storytelling to introduce and analyse Scripture, particularly with younger primary school students. This is also a system-supported pedagogical approach. Those ECTs,

who discussed the storytelling approach, felt that it promoted student engagement and questioning with respect to teaching about Scripture.

Finally, some respondents spoke of Religious Education lessons that incorporated elements of ritual, such as lighting candles or the use of physical models (as with storytelling) and other imagery. It was generally agreed that the use of physical media and ritual practice helped to concretise difficult theological concepts for students.

3.4. Catholic identity and the religious life of the school

The survey responses and interviews highlighted that in general, ECTs were open to the Catholic identity and religious life of their school. Elements of the faith life of the school were generally appreciated by most respondents and interviewees, regardless of their religious affiliation. The moral formation and character-building provided through the Catholic context of the school were generally considered to be positive by early career teachers. Several respondents, such as Emily, enjoyed the opportunities provided by their school to engage in the faith life of the church. Moreover, responses in the survey supported this sentiment. Some Catholic respondents felt that working in a Catholic school drew them closer to their faith, which was a welcome opportunity. Finally, a number of respondents and interviewees were appreciative of the opportunities provided by the school and the system for their own faith formation. Despite this openness to the Catholic identity of the schools, some Catholic ECTs indicated that they had not experienced the opportunities for open faith-sharing between staff members that they had expected to be a part of membership in a Catholic community. A small number of interviewees and survey respondents felt that the faith expression of some of their colleagues lacked authenticity; one respondent suggested that many of their colleagues were simply providing 'lip service' when engaged in liturgy and prayer, while another suggested a lack of reverence from some non-Catholic teachers in the lived faith tradition of their Catholic schools.

4. Conclusion

This study seeks to better comprehend what draws teachers into a career in Catholic education and to better understand their early experience of teaching in Catholic schools with respect to the regional Australian diocese. As such, it can be used to inform efforts to support ECTs at the early stages of their career and can be used to guide diocesan approaches to formation.

4.1. Initial engagement with Catholic schools

First, the question that arises is regarding the aspects that draw new teachers towards a career in Catholic education and how have they experienced their early stages as teachers in a Catholic school. ECTs who participated in this study largely belonged to the local region, and many had had positive experiences of Catholic schooling as children. A smaller number had opted to teach in Catholic schools for predominantly pragmatic reasons, such as position availability and convenience. Generally, ECTs felt welcomed into their Catholic school community and were made a part of the community. Overwhelmingly, a strong sense of support in schools among ECTs was observed, as mentors acted as a strong source of assistance and the teachers could turn to staff members for help. Notably, the administrative demands of schools arose as a strong theme among respondents. A strong sense of openness among ECTs was also recognised regarding the faith opportunities provided by their school.

4.2. Teaching Religious Education

A key challenge experienced by ECTs identified in this research was their confidence and competence in teaching Religious Education. This aligns with the general disengagement with religious traditions noted in the introduction. Many teachers were not yet qualified to teach Religious Education, and a number of teachers expressed that they felt unable to satisfactorily answer questions posed by their students in class. Some teachers articulated that they were unsure whether what they were doing in Religious Education classes was 'right.' Opportunities to co-plan and co-teach with experienced school-based

leaders and system support officers and professional learning on appropriate pedagogical approaches in Religious Education would be beneficial.

4.3. Ongoing formation

Finally, this research sought insight from the experiences of ECTs regarding approaches with respect to their ongoing formation. It has been previously noted that many of the interviewees and survey respondents were open to further spiritual formation and learning about the Catholic faith. Three key areas of focus have been considered to ensure that formation opportunities are designed to better support ECTs in the future.

a) Understanding of a Catholic worldview

ECTs would benefit from formation to deepen their understanding of a Catholic worldview. Generally, respondents, regardless of their religious affiliation, identified that values and beliefs were foundational to their experience of Catholic education. Despite this, many ECTs had difficulty in defining such beliefs, and these were often understood as moral precepts. Some respondents spoke explicitly of the challenges they faced in fulfilling the expectations of the system-developed approach of Catholic Worldview Permeation; the explicit alignment of some elements of the mainstream curriculum with a Catholic worldview was expressed through Scripture, Catholic teachings and diocesan Foundational Values. Formation opportunities that explicitly expose ECTs to elements that underpin an authentic Catholic worldview would be beneficial and might overcome these challenges with a teaching mainstream curriculum within the Catholic context. Such opportunities should be invitational and dialogical in nature, providing opportunities for ECTs to make sense of the Catholic worldview and allowing them to make connections between this and their own worldviews. The increased understanding of a Catholic worldview would also have an impact on the confidence of ECTs to teach Religious Education, which was strongly identified as a challenge in this career stage.

b) Liturgy and prayer

Secondly, formation opportunities that develop a deeper understanding of liturgy and prayer would assist in building confidence in this important aspect

of the Catholic faith tradition. ECTs are provided with several school- and system-based formation opportunities, including exposure to a variety of prayer forms and liturgical expression. Moreover, as part of the retreat experiences of the formation days, ECTs are exposed to a 'Narrated Mass,' whereby a priest will preside over a Eucharistic celebration, explaining the parts of the liturgical rite. Feedback surveys indicate that this has been well received by ECTs. Despite this, a few ECTs, especially those in the primary context, spoke of their lack of confidence in preparing for a liturgical celebration with students. More practical and explicit instruction in preparing for Mass may bolster the confidence of these teachers. Similar comments were given by respondents in relation to their lack of confidence in preparing and leading prayer with their classes and their colleagues. The formation that helps ECTs arrive at a deeper understanding of prayer forms and provides them with skills in designing and leading prayer may positively impact the ECT confidence levels in both Religious Education classrooms and the school.

c) Encountering Jesus

Finally, formation opportunities should provide ECTs with an opportunity to encounter Jesus. Interview responses to the forced response highlighted an openness to the evangelising mission of the Church, and in some respondents, a recognition of the responsibility of the Catholic teacher to play an active role in leading the mission. Notable by its admission, however, was a significant reference to an encounter with Jesus or an increase in the depth of love for God. Formation experiences at both the school and system level that provide opportunities for ECTs to experience a genuine and ongoing encounter with Jesus Christ should be prioritised.

These recommendations for ongoing formation could be part of an intentional cycle for ECTs. The continuous encounter with Jesus can be prioritised through liturgy and prayer (an experiential dimension), as well as retreat days and other reflective experiences, whereas the development of a Catholic worldview deepens the knowledge and understanding required to respond to student questions and make sense of faith, life and culture. Therefore, this allows openness to learn and encounter more about Jesus and the Catholic faith (cognitive aspect). None of these focus areas in isolation is sufficient for the effective formation of teachers in the early part of their career, as each informs and deepens the understanding of the other. The recent instruction

The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022) clarifies the dual role of teachers:

The work of the lay Catholic educator in schools, and particularly in Catholic schools, has an undeniably professional aspect; but it cannot be reduced to professionalism alone. Professionalism is marked by, and raised to, a super-natural Christian vocation. The life of the Catholic teacher must be marked by the exercise of a personal vocation in the Church, and not simply by the exercise of a profession [24].

If being a teacher in a Catholic school is to become more vocational and not only professional, then the formation and development of early career teachers will need to address both elements in an intentional and considered way. This research has highlighted particular areas of focus for school and system leaders to consider in the future.

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