

## **STEERING A PATH ALONG A TREACHEROUS COURSE: CHILDREN'S VOICES, COLONIZATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

### **Abstract**

There is a growing body of literature in relation to the need to reconceptualise knowledge, policy, theory and action about childhood and education. However, such notions have infrequently been given serious consideration in religious education in Catholic schools. This paper views religious education in the early years' context of the Catholic school through a decolonizing lens, noting the way in which religious education has often privileged constructed categories of truth (in the form of doctrine), the power of which effectively silences the spiritual voices of children. In drawing upon the notion of shared vantage points, it suggests some decolonial possibilities for religious education in terms of utilizing a dispositional framework and by grounding religious education in the creative process centred on play.

...one must steer carefully between two ancient and deceptive rocks that guard the narrow passage into the open sea that lies beyond ordinary experience. The sharp rocks of blasphemy (thinking that one is God and can know what every individual child needs...) are on one side. On the other side are the dangerous rocks of idolatry (teaching religious language as an end in itself as if it were to be worshipped instead of God).

(Berryman, 1985, p. 127)

### **Introduction**

When it comes to religious education in faith schools, classroom practitioners, either consciously or unconsciously, find themselves in a double bind. Firstly, contemporary education in western culture is predominantly based on a system generated by and responsive to the European context and culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (de Souza, 2011). As an institutionalised system of schooling, education is concerned not so much with learning that enables the individual to make meaning from and to enlighten experience as it is with the dissemination of inherited bodies of knowledge and skills that relate to professional utility and values that are socially cohesive (Erricker, 2001). In this sense, education is a colonizing construct since it privileges particular kinds of knowledge at the expense of other kinds of knowledge, and creates a "subject people" (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 84) – the students – who are viewed as lacking and in need of control by those who have generated the knowledge. And just as the context and culture of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe sought to divide and conquer through its colonizing project, education generated by such a system similarly compartmentalises knowledge and exerts power over students.

Secondly, religions, as institutional structures that conserve and maintain tradition, act as political bodies that are concerned with matters beyond the faith of individuals. They have their focus on the construction of social values and conceptual representations of the world, according to the particular religious tradition (Erricker, 2001). It too is a colonizing concept since it seeks to control its adherents – who are also viewed as lacking and in need of salvation – through constructed categories of truth, usually represented in the form of doctrine, dogma and creeds. Thus, when these two institutionalised forms come together as religious education, the classroom practitioner potentially finds her or himself in a precarious position, engaged in an act which seeks to privilege a particular kind of knowledge (as expressed in the doctrines and

creeds of that particular religious tradition) over other ways of knowing, and in doing so, effectively controls and silences the voices of the subject people – the students.

Steering a path between these two positions is the challenge which confronts the religious educator. Positioning one's self as God by claiming to know what every child needs – the sharp rocks of blasphemy (Berryman, 1985) – reflects much of the colonizing features of both contemporary western education and religion, in as much as religion becomes the panacea for what children need in order to live good Christian lives and to thus be saved. The teacher then “dispenses” this to the children through the various approaches outlined in diocesan syllabi. Teaching religious language as an end in itself – the dangerous rocks of idolatry – stifles children's voices as they become entangled in propositional statements and formulae, albeit that an array of contemporary approaches to learning and teaching are utilised to lead children to an understanding of these statements and formulae. Both positions seek to exert power, to dominate and to silence the voices of dissent, in particular and in this instance, the spiritual voices of children.

It is nonetheless the contention of this paper that, when some of the tenets of decolonizing thought are considered, religious education may be undertaken in ways which seek to reclaim and honour the spiritual voices of children. Further, this may be achieved in ways which also respect the orthodoxy of the religious tradition. The following section considers the notion of colonization and how this concept might be applied to religious education. The purpose is to highlight the ways in which religious education has exerted power over children, treating them as a subject people, in order to then view this learning area through a decolonizing lens which may reclaim the voices of children and yet remain faithful to the orthodoxy of the tradition. In doing so, it is necessary to indicate at the outset that the issue at stake – honouring and foregrounding the voices of children in religious education – is complex. As is the case with all constructs, colonization (and hence, decolonization) has its limitations when applied to this issue. However, the notion of decolonization is useful in highlighting some of the ways in which children's voices may have been silenced through the process of religious education, and for posing some possibilities in terms of how those voices might be reclaimed, foregrounded, and honoured.

### **Colonization**

In attempting to describe terms such as colonization, postcolonization, decolonization, and the like, it is necessary to note that such descriptions and definitions themselves invoke the kinds of images that are challenged by postcolonial critique, those being “an enlightenment/modernist dualism...a colonialist scientific heritage...and a way of organizing thought that is alien to many people around the globe” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 13). However, it is necessary to address and to offer a description which articulates how the author intends to apply such terms to religious education.

Colonization is a concept which has tended to be associated with the physical taking over or settling of land by a so-called dominant nation, the intentions of which were to civilize, exploit, establish an empire, and to create imperialist structures (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). For example, the British colonized Australia, and the Portuguese colonized Brazil with such aims in mind. It is also a concept that tends to be associated with the past and with conquests that no longer occur. However, as Swadener and Mutua (2007) caution, when colonization is limited only to its geopolitical and historical experience, many similar experiences whose impacts on marginalised people all over the world are consistent “with those produced at the site of geohistorical colonialism” (p. 186) are missed. There remain today many unchallenged legacies of colonialism, typically expressed in the fixing of socially constructed categories as truth.

The notion of colonization has often been associated with indigenous contexts, and its history has been well document in terms of its effect (see for example, Battiste, 2000; Smith, 2001) and in terms of research agendas (Vidich & Lyman, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). However, Swadener and Mutua (2007) also stress the importance of extending the concept of colonization beyond indigenous contexts, thereby recognising its representation as being more than a spatial-temporal experience. Such a broadening of context understands colonization as a way of “representing, producing/inscribing, and consuming the Other through silencing and denial of agency” (p. 191) which stretches beyond the geo-spatial and historical

experiences<sup>1</sup>. That is to say, the process of colonization is recognised as being at work whenever particular structures seek to silence specific groups of people, such as children, through the ways they construct and consume knowledge and experiences about such groups.

### **Children, society, and colonization**

In recent years, the child's voice has been on the political agenda, and in particular brought to the fore by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It gave children the right to participate in decisions which affect them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), and the right to thought, conscience and religion (Article 14) (Handley, 2005). Today, children are increasingly heard in both formal and informal contexts, including opinions in matters of teaching (Wood, 2003), health, family separation and child protection. In general terms, children now have more opportunities to express their views and to shape their experiences than ever before in history (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008).

Yet when it comes to religious and spiritual matters in western culture, children's voices are effectually silenced. Much has been written about this in terms of society's silencing of children's spiritual voices, the mechanisms by which this achieved, and how the spiritual voices of children might be reclaimed (see for example, Adams, 2010; Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Hay with Nye, 2006; Scott, 2004). Western society regards spiritual matters as a taboo topic. The silencing is then brought about by western culture's attitude towards the spiritual, which incorporates a lack of empathy with children and how they experience and perceive the world. In short, children learn not to speak about their spiritual lives because it is not considered to be an acceptable topic of conversation.

While to some extent the way in which children's spiritual voices have been silenced may apply to religious education, it may also be attributable to the particular structures that actively seek to silence the voices of the participants (children) through the ways in which they construct and consume knowledge and experiences about children. In religious education the learners, albeit unintentionally – although some would argue intentionally (see for example Gearon, 2006) – are treated as a "subject people" (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 84) who are viewed as lacking and in need of control by those who have generated the knowledge. As such, this silencing and denial of agency amounts to colonization. A particular kind of knowledge – typically cognitive and expressed in the form of doctrines and creeds – is privileged over other ways of knowing, including the experience of the learners themselves. In doing so, the voices of the Other – the students – are effectively controlled and silenced. This form of colonization begins in fact with the very documents which have been produced to guide classroom religious educators in their practice.

### **Religious education, Church and school documents, and colonization**

Grajczonek (2008) examined the intertextuality and alignment among Church, local diocesan and school religious education documents. While the focus of much of her work was concerned with the extent to which diocesan directives and the classroom RE program reflected and authentically translated the official Church policy in relation to religious education, significant aspects of her study also revealed the extent to which these documents and syllabi perpetuate the colonization of the learners. Using a process adapted from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Grajczonek analyses a number of statements from such documents, examining who and what participants are placed in the foreground agent positions of the text, the processes and circumstances with which the foregrounded agents are linked, as well as what participants are in recipient positions noting what is done to them and by whom.

While space does not permit a detailed discussion, the third step in Grajczonek's (2008) adaptation of the SFL process – a consideration of what participants are in recipient positions and what is being done to them and by whom – does indicate that these documents tend to place children in the passive voice. That is, children are acted upon by the Church, by the school, by teachers, and by parents, and are associated with circumstances that seek to develop faith. This can be seen in an extract taken from the Church document titled *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988). This document states "As young people come to a better knowledge of the Church they belong to, they will learn to love it with filial affection; this has obvious consequences for life, for apostolate, and for a Christian vision of the world" (n.

77). Similarly, the document titled *The Catholic School* (1977), in articulating the Catholic school's role in the importance and need for catechetical instruction, states that "Here young people are helped to grow towards maturity in faith" (n. 51). Rather than viewing children as having agency and their own voice, these two documents perceive them as being recipients, and as being acted upon by those who will assist them in their maturing of faith – assuming that these children do, in fact, have faith.

Another instance may be found in one particular school's policy document which formed a part of Grajczonek's (2008) study. This document stated that "children are guided in understanding the uniqueness and centrality of God in their lives" (p. 7). In other words, children in this document are largely constructed as recipients, subject to the school, teachers, parents and the parish. They are also associated with circumstances that seek to develop their faith, and they are presumed to be members of their local parish community.

In each of the above instances, children are viewed as a subject people (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). By constructing children as being recipients and by associating them with circumstances that presume and seek to develop faith, their voices have been silenced and they have been denied agency. They are not viewed as being active participants who are able to understand their world and act upon it (Waller, 2005). Nor are they viewed as having already successfully managed interactions with their peers and with adults, and as being capable of pursuing agendas of their own (Ansell, 2005; MacNaughton, Smith & Davis, 2007). Instead they are perceived as lacking in some way by those who have generated the knowledge. In effect, this amounts to colonization in its most blatant form.

### **Viewing religious education through a decolonizing lens: reconceptualising religious education as decolonial practice**

Viewed from a postcolonial perspective, religious education may then be seen as a discursive practice that creates unequal power structures. Those who possess the privileged knowledge (as expressed in one particular privileged form) attain power over the learners, who are viewed as lacking and, in ecclesial terms, in need of salvation. It is, however, the contention of this paper that religious education can engage in and employ decolonising practices which honour the agency and voices of the Other – the learners.

Although viewed and interpreted variously (see for example Eze, 1997; Spivak, 1999), decolonization essentially concerns the process of valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding the voices of those who are silenced through colonizing practices (Swadener & Mutua, 2007), in this instance, children. More than this, it raises questions in terms of agency and how the marginalised are capable of interrupting or resiting the dominant discourses (Subeda & Daza, 2008; see also Goodson & Deakin Crick, 2009). It concerns questions of privilege, and of the decentering of privilege (Rogers & Swadener, 1999). However, decolonization does not consist of a neat set of simple solutions. There can be no one model for decolonial practice, since, as Cannella and Viruru (2004) note, such a model would in fact be likely to colonize. Those who attempt to create such models would create for themselves positions as colonizers. Rather, decolonial practice must hold in tension a series of polar opposites. It must be emergent while at the same time planned. It must be individual while at the same time community-based. Further, it must "recognise dominant discourses while at the same time turning them upside down" (p. 124).

These tenets also hold true when viewing religious education through a decolonizing lens. Decolonial practice will not involve a linear trajectory. It is likely to be messy, complex, and context dependent – what is deemed appropriate and effective in one particular context may not hold to be so in another. It will have to hold in tension the dominant and powerful discourse, particularly as expressed in the doctrines and creeds of the Tradition, while at the same time turning these upside down by challenging the dualistic thinking created by constructions of colonizer and colonized (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). In other words, the way forward does, in fact, involve steering a path along a treacherous course.

Adapted from the work of Cannella and Viruru (2004), the following questions may provide a critical disposition from which religious educators in various and diverse contexts might begin to view (or at least to consider) religious education through a decolonizing lens:

- Are religious educators/how are religious educators producing and perpetuating forms of exclusion through practices in this subject area?
- What is the position of privilege that is created by unconscious ways of functioning that is/are Western and/or dominant (for example, knowledge, theories)?
- How can religious educators honour the voices of the participants (the children) without imposing predetermined ideas of saving, as well as who needs saving, from what, and why?
- How can religious education be conceived of in ways which places value on the learner's experiential ways of knowing?
- Can religious education honour both the creativity of the learners as well as being faithful to the orthodoxy of the Tradition?
- How can religious educators critique their own practice to ensure that power is not generated for one group over another?

To suggest definitive answers to these questions would, as indicated above, serve to position ones' self as a colonizer. However, Cannella and Viruru (2004) propose the notion of "shared vantage points" (p. 124) which may be created, and which may provide decolonial positions and possibilities in the contemporary educational milieu. With such a view in mind, two possible vantage points are briefly outlined below which may create possibilities for re-thinking the practice of religious education in early years' contexts.

#### *Learning dispositional frameworks as a corrective to the imposition of standards and learning outcomes*

Outcomes-based philosophies, with their emphasis on the achievement of demonstrable competencies, typically measured against benchmarks and "progression points" through some type of standardized testing, have become commonplace in western education, and they have influenced the design of many contemporary religious education syllabi (Ryan, 1998; Welbourne, 2000). Student achievement and progress is defined according to the achievement of specified learning outcomes, which usually focus on cognition to the detriment of other ways of knowing.

When postcolonial critique is applied to the measurement of outcomes-based syllabi, the first point to note is that such syllabi assume particular forms of knowledge, and further, that these can be measured (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Therefore, those particular forms of knowledge which are deemed to be measurable are privileged, usually to the exclusion of other ways of knowing which, although non-cognitive in nature, are nonetheless valid ways of knowing. Therefore, only those learners who are able to master these particular knowledge forms are privileged. Secondly, thinking within such constructions is deterministic. It serves to create categories into which learners can be placed, and so accepts labelling of the Other a natural occurrence. There are those who succeed. Other learners who do not achieve the specified outcomes are placed into other categories, for example those who are "at risk", or those who are "in the lower percentile". Thirdly, the standardized testing which usually results from outcomes based approaches becomes an avenue for "corporate capitalism, and colonialist control through market perspectives, domination, and material resources (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 144). That is to say, the imposition of testing benefits a range of companies who commercially produce and market such materials.

A way forward may be to consider a *dispositional* framework for learning rather than an outcomes-based approach. Claxton (2008) proposes such a dispositional framework, with a focus on learning rather than thinking, on dispositions rather than skills, on capability rather than attainment, and on infused culture-change. Carr (2001) maintains that learning dispositions comprise a set of participation repertoires from which the learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs learning opportunities. Put another way, learning dispositions indicate that a learner is "ready, willing and able to participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge" (p. 21). Dispositions are a different type of learning from skills and knowledge. They can be thought of as habits of mind, or tendencies to respond to situations in particular ways. In drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Comber (2000) argues that young children bring with them to school their "economic, cultural social, symbolic and linguistic capital and their *habitus*, sets of dispositions acquired in daily life, that incline people to act in particular ways" (p. 46, my italics). Although children bring these sets

of dispositions with them to school, Claxton (2008) argues that education can and should influence the development of these particular inclinations, as well as influencing the development of the knowledge and skills associated with different curriculum subject areas.

In building upon the work of both Claxton and Carr, Hyde (2010) has applied the notion of a dispositional framework specifically to religious education, and has identified five possible learning dispositions – curiosity, being dialogical, persisting and living with uncertainty, meaning-making, and taking responsibility – which may form a dispositional framework for religious education in Catholic primary schools.<sup>2</sup> In this framework, the focus is not on the outcomes attained by the learners, but rather on the ways in which learners are disposed to learn. It explores the processes by which students learn, and ways in which religious educators can nurture and encourage these processes and dispositions within the learners.

The notion of a dispositional framework (as opposed to an outcomes-based approach) represents one possible decolonial position, or vantage point from which to create possibilities for re-thinking the practice of religious education in early years' contexts. Such a framework does not attempt to deny agency and voice, since the focus is on the learner and the particular dispositions that she or he brings to the learning context. Several of the questions posed earlier in this paper are considered in the application of such a framework, including those concerning privilege created by particular ways of functioning, and honouring the voices of the participants – the learners who are viewed as already being capable (as opposed to lacking in some way), and who bring with them a set of dispositions to the act of learning, which renders them as being “ready, willing, and able to participate in various ways” (Carr, 2001, p. 21).

#### *Reconceptualizing religious education in early years' contexts as a game to be played*

Play-based learning is an accepted practice within early years' contexts, but is also becoming a more common feature within the primary school curriculum generally<sup>3</sup>. Given its relevance to learning, Berryman and Hyde (2010) argue for the centrality of play in religious education. They maintain that one of the fundamental purposes of religious practices throughout history has been to enable communities of people to creatively cope with existential issues and, in pre-historic and ancient times, to celebrate instances of survival. They draw on the seminal writings of Guardini (1953), who maintains that the liturgy is, in essence an act of play, Rahner (1965) who posits the notion of *Deus vere ludens* – God who plays, and Miller (1973) who conceives of the notion of *theologia ludens* – a theology of play, to propose that religious education then ought to centre on play and creativity.

Focusing on the notion of creativity, Berryman and Hyde (2010) suggest the idea of *playful orthodoxy* in religious education as a means by which to honour both the creativity and playfulness of the learners, as well as the orthodoxy of the religious Tradition. In fact these authors note that the creative process itself consists of a continuum between two opposing tendencies – an expansive, creative tendency and a conserving tendency. These are referred to as “the opening and closing tendencies of the creative process” (p. 39) and in fact are complementary elements of the one process.

The expansive tendency honours the agency and voice of the learner and privileges the learner's own ways (or predispositions) of knowing. This tendency enables learners to play and to create meaning for themselves in relation to the religious tradition. The conserving tendency represents the orthodoxy of the religious tradition. Such orthodoxy provides the rules and structure which guide the play. All play has rules and structures, even if, as is often the case with young children, these are made up by the players as the play progresses (see for example Brewster, 1971; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Therefore, such orthodoxy is needed, and has a necessary role of the closing tendency in the creative process.

There is no one way in religious education may be reconceptualised as a game to be played. There are many possibilities. One particular approach which has been shown to honour both the opening and closing tendencies in the creative process, and which has been developed and refined over a period spanning more than thirty-five years, is Godly Play<sup>4</sup>. In this particular process, the participants engage and play with the language of the Christian tradition as an art form, the purpose of which is to enable them to discern meaning in relation to issues of meaning and purpose. The Christian language system itself, and the

prepared environment of the Godly Play classroom, which is itself infused with this language system, provide the rules and structures – the orthodoxy – which guide the play.

Viewing religious education as a game to be played also represents a possible decolonial position, or vantage point from which to create possibilities for re-thinking the practice of religious education in early years' contexts. Questions posed earlier in this paper which are considered in this particular vantage point include the notion of whether religious educators can honour the voices of the participants without imposing predetermined ideas of saving, religious education being conceived of in ways which places value on the learner's experiential ways of knowing, and religious education honouring both the creativity of the learners as well as being faithful to the orthodoxy of the Tradition.

## Conclusion

The treacherous course between the sharp rocks of blasphemy and the dangerous rocks of idolatry pose both significant and complex challenges for the contemporary religious educator. Both represent colonizing projects which may serve to disempower the learners by denying them agency and by silencing their voices. Both view the learners as lacking in some way, and in need of control by those who generate a particular type of knowledge, which is privileged over other ways of knowing, including the experiential knowing of the learners themselves.

Although there may be some limitations in applying the notion of decolonization to education, there are, however, possible shared vantage points which may provide some decolonial positions and opportunities for religious education in the contemporary educational milieu. Those briefly outlined in this paper represent some initial possibilities, for to prescribe them, or to indicate them as definite solutions would in itself amount to colonization – a point with which the author is only too well aware. The hope in presenting them is that they might provoke much needed discussion and debate among both scholars and classroom practitioners in early years' context so that the voices of children might be valued, reclaimed and foregrounded in religious education.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Edward Said's (1979) seminal work in this area in which he notes that the western representation of the Other as exotic, deviant and different contributed largely to dominating and having power over the Other.

<sup>2</sup> The dispositional framework developed emanates from two larger ongoing projects funded by the Victorian Bishops' Grant for Excellence in Religious Education, and presently involves two Victorian dioceses – the Archdiocese of Melbourne and the Diocese of Sandhurst.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of play in the curriculum has now extended beyond the early years' with play and project-based philosophies having application from Kindergarten/Prep through to Year 6. There are a growing number of primary schools who now utilize the work of Kath Walker (2007) and her notion of a play based curriculum across the entire school as a legitimate means of learning in which the students, in negotiation with their teachers, devise their own play and project-based undertakings.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive guide to the Godly Play process, see Berryman (2009). In this work, both the theoretical underpinnings and practicalities of Godly Play are detailed.

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