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TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY-TEACHING ABOUT MARY

This paper details the theoretical basis and structure of a professional development workshop and discusses the content, process and participant response. While specifically designed for the Mary module (D5-3) from the Sydney Curriculum, *Faithful to God: Faithful to People,* the principles, processes and issues raised have value for other settings and other contexts.

The workshop was designed to explore the relevance of Mary to the experience of contemporary women/men, enabling teachers to develop a theological understanding of Mary that is appropriate and meaningful for them and their ministry of religious education in Catholic secondary schools. Designed as a systematic, integrated professional development exercise, the workshop drew on Rossiter's Open-Inquiry Approach, adult education principles and feminist pedagogy.

The workshop consisted of six sessions planned around the key topic content areas of Mary in Scripture, Mary in Church Teaching, Marian Apparitions and Mary in Art. Teacher reflection exercises were also included. The content and process of the day were informed by a teacher survey. Evaluations confirmed that the workshop assisted teachers to increase their knowledge about and confidence to teach the Mary topic.

Rossiter's Open Inquiry Method

Rossiter's methodology for religious education with its educational focus was chosen as theoretical basis of this workshop. Crawford and Rossiter's seminal work (1985) advocated that an "open inquiry study of religion" was more appropriate for classroom religious education than catechetical methods. Liddy and Welbourne (1999, p. 14) summarise this approach:

> Classroom religious education should be interesting and satisfying for students, deepening their knowledge, understanding and appreciation of religion. It should provide an opportunity for students to reflect on contemporary religious and social issues, and experience how religion can make a valuable contribution to personal development and general education. It aims at developing the capacity in students for an objective, sympathetic and critical study of religion.

Crawford and Rossiter's writings anticipated and influenced the adoption of an educational approach which recognises religious education as a Key Learning Area within the curriculum of Catholic schools, specifying outcomes in Knowledge, Skills, Values and Attitudes. Rossiter's general method provided the framework for the planning details of each session of the Mary Module professional development day. It recommends a general sequence that can be used by teachers for teaching religion. The steps are not mandatory and he advises that not all would be needed in every instance.

1. Outline of aims
2. Stimulus material / introductory exercise
3. Focus questions
4. Study; data collection; projects
5. Follow up to study; data presentations and analysis; reports on projects
6. Conclusion

1. Outline of Aims

Rossiter recommends that when outlining the aims for a particular unit of work, words should be used that are consistent with the following principles. "The work will be an open exploration of the topic, with opportunities for examining content, looking at issues that emerge, and reflecting on any links with pupils' interest and experience" (1985, p. 63). Rossiter's guiding principle is that the study is designed to inform.

2. Stimulus Material / Introductory Exercise

Rossiter suggests a film, video, newspaper cuttings, some written materials to be read or individual /group activity for this segment. This step can remind participants that they do have some knowledge of the topic and that participants' knowledge and experience can be a useful starting point for the study.

3. Focus Questions

The introductory exercise may also make participants aware of their lack of knowledge of a topic. In dialogue with participants, the presenter brings into focus some questions that can give direction and scope to the study and keep it 'on course'. Rossiter indicates that restating some focus questions can help the presenter to redirect attention to the main focus if participants stray too much onto tangents in their discussions.

4. Study; Data Collection; Projects

Rossiter indicates that the bulk of the content is handled in this step; often this flows as a follow-up to the focus questions. A study of written materials, a group activity or detailed presentations

by the teacher are the identified scenarios that were transferable to this adult workshop.

5. Follow-up to Study; Data Presentations and Analysis; Reports on Projects

According to Rossiter this is the time for feedback from participants on work covered. This is the stage for participants' reflection. After critically engaging the topic they are better able to think about how it relates to their own experience and needs. Rossiter writes "The follow up is where the most constructive discussion usually occurs" (1985, p. 64). It may involve personal reactions to the study.

6. Conclusion

Rossiter suggests a rounding off process that brings the follow-up discussions to a conclusion. He points out that this may not necessarily mean that all the focus questions will have been answered. More questions and issues may have arisen than at the beginning. Rossiter advises that a process of summarising the main ideas that emerged in discussions can help bring the topic to a satisfactory closure. The choice of Rossiter's method, with adaptations informed by principles of adult education, provided an opportunity to model perspectives and procedures that teachers could use in their own teaching of the Mary topic.

Adult Education Principles

While the original context for Rossiter's approach is the school classroom, adult education principles suggest that "congruency (or matching) between an educator's explanations of sound practice and the actual carrying out of that practice" in the learning environment is an important factor for effective adult learning (Saunders: 1999, p. 34). In his research with Australian teachers on best practice in teacher professional development, Gaffney (1998, p. 55) also cites the importance of teachers' learning by:

> 'hands-on' practical experiences, and by observing others modelling behaviours which are based on sound theoretical underpinnings. Highly effective implementation practices also have a coherent sequencing of components and time frames which allow teachers to reflect upon their learning experiences.

The professional development process was designed to facilitate a supportive, safe and respectful social learning climate. Cooperation and collaboration are key terms in social learning theory which emphasises both the person and the environment as sources of learning. "Adult educators can encourage everyone to communicate to each other that the range of values, attitudes, opinions and behaviours expressed are respected within the context of the social learning environment" (Saunders, 1999, p. 42).

Small group discussion was a key feature of the workshop. This provided teachers with opportunities to self-disclose, reflect on feedback and test their ideas and assumptions in a social context.

Feminist Pedagogy

The approach to the professional development was also influenced by insights from feminism and feminist pedagogy. According to Ruether (1983, p. 18) the critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is not redemptive, not of the divine. Shüssler Fiorenza writes that a critical feminist liberation theology begins with a reflection on the particular experiences of women, hence with regard to Mary "it attempts to name and to reflect critically upon both the negative and positive mariological experiences of women" (1995, p. 178).

Informed by feminist pedagogy, this workshop took as a guiding principle the honouring of participants' experience: "Learning builds on the experience of the participants and moves on to seeing our experiences in different lights, to relating an experience to other or new evidence, to thinking about out experience in different ways". (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 9). Shrewsbury describes feminist pedagogy as inviting "students to integrate the skills of critical thinking with respect for and ability to work with others" (1993, p. 9). The emphasis is on critical thinking not as abstract analysis but a reflective process grounded in the everyday experiences. Shrewsbury acknowledges that while feminist pedagogy aims to be empowering and transformative it can be phased into traditional teaching approaches

Thus the plan of the day used Rossiter's Open-Inquiry Approach for a basic framework informed by insights from adult education and feminist pedagogy. "As good teachers know, effective teaching draws on a number of approaches depending upon the needs, interests and abilities of students and teacher" (Liddy & Welbourne, 1999, p. 17).

The Workshop

According to Rossiter's method the aims of day were outlined as:

1. to provide an opportunity for participants to critically engage the Catholic church's teaching about Mary;

2. to increase their knowledge and appreciation of the role of Mary in the Catholic Tradition;

3. to generate appropriate teaching/learning strategies for teaching about Mary using an approach that was informed by Church teaching since Vatican II and in the light of insights of contemporary feminism.

The emphasis was that this workshop was part of a process rather than input from completed research. The Mary Module D5-3 from *Faithful to God: Faithful to People* served as a point of reference throughout the day. Key Concepts content statements were constructed from the outcomes for each topic area.

- Mary as Mother/disciple
- Representations of Mary as reflecting, theological/social/cultural movements in history versus Mary of Nazareth
- Mary's relationship to Christ and the church
- The influence of Mary in Catholic Spirituality (life and worship)
- Evaluate the message of the apparitions in light of church teaching

Session 1: Teacher Reflection Exercise

The Teacher Reflection Sheet handout contained three questions for reflection and later discussion. It asked participants to describe themselves in terms of ethno-cultural background, gender and age-range and recall some early memories of family/ parish / school religious practice. Question 2 invited participants to comment specially on their early memories and understanding of the Virgin Mary – prayers, hymns, statues, pictures, medals, rosary, novenas, feast days and so forth. The third questions focused on family and cultural gender roles and expectations. The activity required that each participant complete individual written responses. Approximately fifteen minutes silent reflection/writing time was allocated. This was followed by small group discussion then large group sharing/processing.

The teacher reflection exercise had four aims;

- to open up teachers' past knowledge and experience about Mary (Rossiter's step 2) as a useful starting point for the day;

- to raise awareness of the usefulness of social analysis in the educational context through a process of individual reflection, small group sharing and large group evaluation;

- to raise awareness of the importance of family and culture on gender roles and expectations;

- to introduce a process of social analysis that participants could later apply to their students.

The variety and diversity of participants' background and experience emerged in the large group discussions. Examples ranged from growing up in the 1950s in rural Australia to growing up in central Europe and Egypt to a teacher in her early twenties of Chinese-Australian background and Protestants who became Catholic at the time of marriage.

There were consistently strong connections between family, school and parish. Catholic families across the ethnic cultural groupings reported numerous family gatherings to celebrate religious occasions. Many of the participant memories were linked to their Catholic primary school devotions. Praying the Angelus, ritual crowning of Mary statutes, processions and flowers in May were commonly remembered. The over 40s reported that the rosary was a devotion that had been encouraged to be prayed at home. Mary was held up as an ideal model of womanhood, her faithfulness especially was emphasised. Hymns, holy cards, the miraculous medal and Lourdes water were part of the Marian associations for participants in this age group. There was a rich, colourful sense of awe and mystery attached to these devotions.

There was a difference in teachers' understanding and experience of Mary that seemed age related. A woman, early 20s summed up the younger teachers' views when she stated, "I don't have an extremely strong understanding of Mary. She has always been there, but never has been explained to me." Another teacher in her 20s from an Asian background commented critically that Mary "was always portrayed as white and blue-eyed, beautiful and perfect". Donnelly's (1994) observation that different women's insights about the experience of motherhood influences their appropriation of symbols around Mary, seems supported by the comments of one forty-year-old woman "Now I concentrate more on praying to Mary especially where my children are concerned, mother-to-mother talk".

The third question of the Teacher Reflection Exercise asked participants to identify and reflect on family and cultural messages regarding gender roles and expectations over three time periods: in the early years, as a teenager and now. In the large group discussion themes of women being primarily carers and nurturers of others were common: as one

participant summarised: "Women will marry and men will look after them". A significantly different perspective articulated was the view that education was important: "My mother always said I must rely on myself not on my husband." Common to both views was the underlying assumption that women would be wives and mothers. The response of a female teacher, aged 45, with a very Catholic upbringing seemed representative of many. In her early years she was taught to 'fit in' as a member of a large family; as a teenager the message received was to undertake a female career like teaching, marry, have children, be a good wife and look after men in her life. Her last comment was "I have changed and my family have coped well."

This exercise opening up teachers' experience of Mary asked for personal reflection that turned into autobiographical narrative exploring personal images of Mary as expressed in prayers, liturgical practices, celebration of feast days, veneration of statues, icons and so forth. As they shared stories in small groups, they were telling their story of what Mary means for them. Saunders (1999, p. 44) emphasises the importance of educators and participants learning through disclosure of information, past experience and stories. This reflection exercise was linked later to the teacher analysis of their student ethno-cultural background.

Session 2: Church Teaching
The key concept content statements, Mary's relationship to Christ and the church, were constructed from the outcome for Mary in Church Teaching. In step 3 of his method Rossiter recommends the use of focus questions that give direction and scope to the study area. This session opened with a brainstorm using the focus question: What does the church teach about Mary? Answers were taken for a few minutes and responses recorded on a white board. Responses included the following: mother, virgin, purity, Immaculate Conception, the Assumption. In the next stage of the brainstorm participants were asked what they understood these teachings to be. Responses revealed a basic confusion with many mistaking the Immaculate Conception of Mary with the Incarnation of Jesus. Other responses included the idea of praying to Mary as the Mother of Jesus to ask Jesus if he would ask God to grant something.

This brainstorm was followed by presenter input on overhead which was made available as handouts to participants. The main points overviewed four church doctrines: Mary the Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception, Mary as virgin and the Assumption. Each of these doctrines was examined in the historical and socio-cultural context of its proclamation. The focus then moved to a consideration of possible contemporary

understandings. The purpose was to assist teachers to grapple with these doctrines in order to teach them to students in a way that makes sense to them. The input session of about 40 minutes included discussion in small groups, which considered the question: What have been the consequences for women of the patriarchal interpretation of the virginal motherhood of Mary? After small group discussion some of the key points that emerged in the large group were:

- difficulties for women and their sexuality;
- ordinary motherhood as second best;
- sex somehow seen as dirty;
- purity and virginity set up as the model of perfection/perfect women.

These points were discussed with reference to cultural views of virginity and the symbolic meanings of paternity, maternity and procreation in Mediterranean culture as outlined in the input session. Participants concluded it is important that teachers are aware of common distortions in understanding of Marian doctrine so that they can recognise and challenge them. The research on the participation of women in the Australian Catholic Church, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* identified faulty Mariology as a barrier to women's participation in the Catholic church (MacDonald et al., 1999).

The session concluded with an examination of the suggested teaching/ learning strategies listed in the Mary module that might be used in the classroom to facilitate teaching about the doctrines of the Catholic Church about Mary. Responses indicated a high level of engagement with the material. Additional suggestions that emerged included: exploring ideas about virginity, the role of women and men in Mediterranean culture and the use of a calendar to highlight and research major Marian feasts. The use of names, particularly girls' names' arose in the context of group discussion as a way of introducing the topic of Mary. Participants reflecting on their own names began to make connections with the topic area and the insight developed into a teaching / learning strategy. Names associated with Mary that were listed included: Mary, Maria, Virginia, Immaculata, Regina, Assumpta, Carmel, Lourdes, Fatima, Bernadette and Lucia and Jacinta. Discussions around names led to a realisation of how the Catholic cultural milieu is permeated by the person and symbol of Mary.

Session 3 Marian Apparitions
The next session opened with reference to the key concept identified as evaluating the message of apparitions in light of church teaching. The introductory exercise consisted of stimulus

material, a five minute video clip from Unsolved Mysteries on the Marian Apparitions at Fatima. The focus question asked was: What do you know about what the church teaches about Marian apparitions? Participants named apparition sites as Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, Knock and Medjugorje. Reference was made to recent claims of alleged Marian apparitions in Queensland. From the discussion arose the issue of evaluating the merit and authenticity of these claims. This led into direct input from the presenter emphasising that Marian apparitions were private revelations and outlining the criteria the church gives for investigation of these (see Jelly, 1993). Handout summaries were distributed to all. The 15 minute input was followed by a group activity designed to relate the church norms for judging presumed apparitions and revelation to four apparitions that have been approved by the Catholic church for devotional purposes. Stories of four apparitions – Catherine Laboure 1830, Guadalupe 1531, Fatima 1917, Lourdes 1854 – were handed out .The material for this exercise was sourced from McBrien's *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (O'Neil, 1995, pp. 79-82). Participants were allocated one of the four apparition stories. A period of silent reading followed. Participants reading about the same apparition then formed into small groups to discuss the socio-historical context of the accounts using a who, what, where and when framework. Different small groups were formed consisting of at least one member from each of the four apparition specific groups. Each participant in turn reported the results of discussion from the apparition specific groups. This allowed an overview and comparison of each of the four apparition accounts for every participant. The small group work facilitated discussion and consolidation of the previous input material. Finally, in the large group, participants reflected on the content and process of this exploration of Marian apparitions. Participant feedback indicated a high level of satisfaction and many comments were made about the application of the content, method and resources provided to their own classrooms.

Session 4: Teachers' Perception of Their Students' Understanding and Experience of Mary

To contextualise this study of teaching Mary in the contemporary Australian situation some demographic data were explored. This involved teachers' exploration of the cultural influence on their students and reflection on its possible implication. Teachers were asked to describe the ethno-cultural background of students in their school populations and reflect upon the implications for the teaching of this topic.

Feedback from participants included the following examples:

School A	Anglo Saxon 70%, Middle East 25%, South East Asian 5%;
School B	Lebanon/Maronite 25%, Asian 25%, Australia 12.5%, Other 12.5%;
School C	Italian 20%, South East Asian Lebanese 20 %, Combined Spanish-Portuguese-Latin-America 10%, Australia 35%.

The regional differences in the Sydney archdiocese were highlighted through this exercise. Through subsequent large group discussion on these figures the idea of teachers engaging in a process of reflective analysis of their school and particular classroom settings was reinforced.

Participants were then asked to think about particular students (perhaps from a similar class/ethnic background as themselves) and on a handout, detailing the question, to write out as much demographic detail as they could: country of birth of mother/father, language spoken at home, occupation of father/mother, parents' marital status, Christian denomination, age. Teachers then discussed what 'messages' such a student may be receiving with regard to his/her status and expected role from their family and cultural milieu. This exercise extended the insights from the teacher reflection exercise to provide a perspective on the role of ethnic and class background with a view to examining the expectations and status of women in particular ethnic/class groups.

From the large group discussion it emerged that the majority of the students chosen by teachers were female. Many were from Middle Eastern or Eastern European culture. Male students discussed were often seen as problematic for teachers, coming from families with well-delineated traditional gender roles and expectations. Girls from these families were seen as caught in a cultural bind with coexisting yet divergent gender role expectations. There were the migrant aspirations that children do well academically and gain professional qualifications and employment coexisting with the cultural, gender role expectations that a girl's responsibility is primarily nurturing others within the home as wife and mother. Teachers then discussed the advantages of raised awareness of the ethno-cultural influences within their classrooms.

The last part of this exercise related to the perceived particular student interest in religious education classes dealing with Mary as the topic area and implications for teacher/learning strategies. In large group discussion it was noted that while there would be significant interest in the topic area of Mary, particularly amongst the female students, teachers would need to be cautious in the

manner they critically examined aspects of Marian tradition, piety and popular practice as Mary was an important constituent element in the faith/family/cultural identity of these students.

Session 5: Mary in Art

The purpose was to raise the teachers' critical awareness that all images are constructed within a context. Key questions underpinning the presentation were: What is our context? What are Marian images reflecting back to us about the place of women in contemporary society and culture and the place of Mary within Catholic culture? What are these images saying to us about the dialogue between Catholic culture and the broader culture? The key concept for Mary in Art was identified as an understanding of representations of Mary as reflecting theological, social, cultural movements in history. The outcome specified that students will be able to "choose a range of visual representations of Mary that have been responses to various theological developments in the church". The *Essential Reading for Teachers* suggests:

> Teachers could reflect on the messages and symbols in images of Mary, for example. body language: what qualities does it express, and what does this say about the current image of ideal womanhood? Examine the symbols used in pictures of Mary (historical and modern), and explore their significance (*Faithful to God: Faithful to People*, 1996, p. 174).

The session consisted of a dialogue between participants, the presenter and the image. There were 24 images projected as the historical and iconographic details were outlined. Images used included art from the Catacombs, Eastern icons, Celtic, Renaissance, Reformation, Baroque, Victorian and contemporary periods. Participants were then invited to respond to the images discussing with the presenter and each other the significance of the art. Among the responses to the images arose the insight that, in a post-modern age where it cannot be presumed that all share in one meta-narrative, people draw from many sources. This reflects the rich tradition of Catholicism as individual Catholics draw on a wide variety of visual representations in the forming and expressing of their spirituality. Background notes and small colour reproductions were provided as a resource to participants. Discussion concluded with feedback from participants indicating that the resources and the process used would be suitable, with some adaptations, to the teachers' own classrooms.

Session 6: Mary in Scripture

The session, Mary in Scripture, opened with a brainstorm: What do you think Scripture tells us about Mary? Responses included: "gutsy woman", "woman of courage", "not much" and "Mary as the first disciple". References to Mary in each gospel were provided and a period of silent reading followed. A handout of four drawings was used to facilitate an overview of the differing perspectives of each gospel. (See diagram The Gospel Portraits of Mary) In relation to these drawings questions were posed, what do you see? What might this mean?

Three pieces of written material providing background to Mary in Scripture were distributed to each participant. These were *Mary in the New Testament* by Raymond E. Brown et al., S.S *Inform* No. 58, *A Modern Mary: Sister, Companion, Friend*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Praying* No.54 May - June 1993, pp. 4-8 and *A Historical Picture of the Jewish Woman Mary of Galilee*, notes prepared from the *Women's Bible Commentary*. Participants were asked to select an article after an overview of the contents of each was presented. They were then divided into groups based on article selected and given time to read the article individually. This was followed by small groups, sharing key points from the article. Each small group was then asked to collaborate to produce a poster that illustrated insights that emerged from the reading and discussion. Each poster was then presented to the whole group prompting further discussion and reflection and the generation of teaching/learning strategies.

The *Inform* article, *Mary in the New Testament*, by Raymond E. Brown et al. offered participants an opportunity to explore and consolidate the differing scriptural perspectives on Mary in each of the four gospels. Participants presented a visual summary of how Mary features in each gospel. For example one drawing used the metaphor of colour to express the different presentations of Mary in each gospel, Mark was seen as dark, Matthew as neutral and Mary in Luke-Acts and John as warm.

The notes, *A Historical Picture of the Jewish Woman Mary of Galilee* from the *Women's Bible Commentary*, were intended to facilitate participants' understanding of the role of women in Hebrew society at the time of Jesus. This group made a fold-out poster with a door shaped entrance. On the outside was a road sign, "Welcome to Nazareth". When the door was opened up, scenes from women's lives were revealed. Small sketches illustrated their tasks and responsibilities, for example, caring for children, preparing food, drawing water.

The article by Elizabeth Johnson, *A Modern Mary: Sister, Companion, Friend*, outlined some contemporary perspectives on the scriptural

portraits of Mary. One poster showed a pathway with Mary on a journey of faith. Another poster displayed a face divided as its central motif: standing in tension with the traditional view of Mary as patron/mentor is the other side of Mary's face, a woman in solidarity with a community of witnesses linked through baptism.

Weaving It All Together
The day concluded with individual teachers weaving together and commenting upon insights gained from their autobiographical narrative, reflection upon the context of their teaching and new information, skills and strategies gained from the group work. Participants then completed a formal evaluation sheet. The processes used in the workshop provided participants with teaching/learning strategies that are appropriate and professionally consistent with the curriculum guidelines.

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THE FOUR GOSPEL PORTRAITS OF MARY

MATTHEW

MARK

JOHN

LUKE

Drawing: Courtesy of Lynnette Todd–Used with Permission