

Permeation of religious identity: Some challenges for Canadian Catholic schools - Part 2

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Abstract

This paper is the second of a two part series which critically evaluates the notion that Catholic schools are permeated with a sense of Catholic identity. Building on the theoretical base established in part 1, this paper sets out some of the practical dimensions of permeation. As with part 1, this article focuses on Catholic schools in Canada with a particular stress on those in the province of Alberta. One of the most important aspects of permeation is the role of religious education in Catholic schools. If religious education in general is not given strong, ongoing and substantial support it is unlikely that claims of permeation of religious identity in Catholic schools can be sustained. A critical aspect of strong support of religious education is in curriculum development and in support of religious education teachers.

In the first part of this paper it was argued that a very common theme in Catholic educational discourse is the idea that Catholics schools should seek to provide an educational vision where the religious dimension is given prominence. This is not just in formal religious education classes but throughout the curriculum and in the wider life of schools. One way of expressing this idea is to argue that Catholic identity should permeate all that is done in the school. This idea is very influential, for instance, in Canadian Catholic schools. While permeation may be a worthwhile goal for Catholic schools to strive for, this must be seen within the context of a number of significant challenges that face Catholic schools today. These challenges include, most notably, the changing demographics of schools where many parents, students and teachers no longer exhibit high levels of religious commitment. This results in a loss of the critical mass needed for effective collaborative action which, in turn, makes the permeation ideal difficult to realise. In this paper three specific and practical examples are given which are fundamental to permeation of Catholic identity being realised. The focus for this paper is on how permeation can be realised through what occurs in the classrooms of Catholic schools.

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Permeation in the classroom: Some practical challenges

If we assume that sufficient attention has been paid to the human dimension, what can be done to realise permeation of Catholic identity in schools? This is a very broad question that cannot be comprehensively addressed here. In this paper three curricular issues will be raised, acknowledging that there are many other important dimensions that could be discussed such as recruitment policies, in-servicing of teachers and the role of school leadership. In framing a Catholic curriculum the major challenge is not a conceptual issue, rather it is the practical application of principles that shape the curriculum as teachers in the classroom deliver it. D'Orsa and D'Orsa (2012), for instance, have enunciated no less than twenty-two principles that they see as critical in shaping Catholic curriculum. This approach does not, however, lead to an obvious path forward in designing a school curriculum that is permeated with strong Catholic identity. This is primarily due to the fact that the field opened up by such a large number of principles is so expansive that it is of limited utility. In addition, there is a real danger in speaking of the Catholic curriculum in such broad terms that the primary importance of religious education as a defining principle of Catholic school identity could be compromised.

The place of religious education

Convey (2012) has identified that one of the key factors in forming Catholic identity in schools as described by US Catholic school teachers and administrators is a strong religious education program. If the goals of permeation are to be met, religious education (RE) must be seen as one of the critical defining features of Catholic schools. The esteemed place of religious education in Catholic schools is a feature of a range of theoretical approaches (Rummery, 1977; Groome, 1980; McDonough, 2009; Rossiter, 2011). Religious education is understood here to be a formal part of the curriculum where emphasis is placed on achieving cognitive goals (Lovat, 2009). Religious instruction is not derivative or ancillary to permeation but, in many ways, is the foundation on which it is established. In Canada there is a lack of empirical studies that examine how religious education is conducted in Catholic schools (Rymarz, 2013). Rymarz (2012b) argued that, in many instances, religious education appears to lack the prominence given to other subjects in school curriculums. If religious education is not strongly supported then a number of implications follow. Most importantly, a general ideology of permeation should never be seen as providing a substitute for a robust, high quality religious education program. The content covered in religious education cannot be adequately covered in other disciplines. Religious education, therefore, must have a permanent, supported, and high profile place in the curriculum of Catholic schools. This is in keeping with the notion that religious education in Catholic schools should be an academic discipline in keeping with the demands and standards of other subject disciplines. This idea is clearly spelled out in General Directory of Catechesis (CCC, 1997):

It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigor as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue. (para. 73)

In order to be able to meet the demands of being a scholastic discipline, religious education cannot be devolved to other areas in the name of permeation. Indeed, the consequences of strong a religious education curriculum in schools would make the task of genuine permeation far easier. Students who have a strong grounding in religious education should be able to use this to inform topics and themes raised in other disciplines within the school (Shulman, 1986). For instance, in the study of literature, many classic texts such as the works of Shakespeare contain numerous references and allusions to both scripture and Christian doctrine. A well-grounded student is much better placed to appreciate and understand these works. This, however, is predicated on students receiving strong and ongoing instruction on, for instance, the nature, form and meaning of the Christian scriptures. Such a study is, of course, a staple of religious education programs in Catholic schools (Hyde & Rymarz, 2008).

In a school which strives to permeate strong Catholic identity the strength of religious education within that curriculum could be assessed by a number of indicators. Is, for example, a sufficient amount of time given to religious education in the curriculum? In a similar vein, are RE teachers required to meet the same professional standards as teachers in other disciplines with regard to qualifications, approaches to assessment and ongoing professional development? An especially important indicator is the formal religious education curriculum. Is the RE curriculum on a par with curricular documents in other areas?

Values and the curriculum

D'Orsa and D'Orsa (2012) note that one common approach to promoting religious identity in the curriculum of Catholic schools is to stress and teach values at various places across the curriculum. This approach is worthy of further examination. It rests on the assumption that Catholic schools promote a set of values that are distinctive to them. This distinctiveness is critical. If generic values, common to a wide variety of schools, were presented this could certainly be a positive element in the educational offerings of Catholic schools. Such values, however, would not be a significant factor in promoting permeation of Catholic identity. A detailed examination of whether a distinctive set of values that are unique, or at least predominate, in Catholic schools is beyond the scope of this paper. Some general comments, however, can be made about this proposition.

If values are seen as being of pivotal importance in marking permeation of Catholic identity in schools then there needs to be a deal of precision in the discussion about what these values are. The problem here is how to distinguish Catholic schools marked by certain values from other schools in the wider community. This difficulty seems to be particularly acute when there is strong empirical evidence that those who make up the Catholic school community do seem, by and large, to have similar values to those in the wider community once a range of demographic factors have been controlled for (Dixon 2005; Francis 2002). Indeed, this author is unaware of any study that shows that Catholics display different values than other groups once factors such as socio-economic background are taken into account. As discussed at some length in part one of this paper, if the moral community that is formed around Catholic schools parallels, in many instances, that of other school communities then one probable consequence of this is that it is unlikely that the values espoused by Catholic schools are much different from other schools.

The fact that schools reflect the values of the communities in which they are situated and that these values may overlap significantly for different community groups is not a negative thing. It may lead to a range of beneficial social outcomes such as a rise in community cohesion. The issue for Catholic schools, however, comes in placing too much emphasis on values as a marker of permeation of Catholic identity especially when these values may be relatively generic. The elusiveness of Catholic values is well captured by Greeley (1977) when he wrote:

Every generalization about values that begins with the word Catholic is likely to be misleading, if not erroneous, precisely because the generalization will mask substantial differences in values that exist among Catholic subpopulations. (p. 252)

For Catholic school leaders then, using promotion of values as a decisive factor in the permeation of Catholic identity in schools remains a problematic exercise. This is particularly evident in curriculum innovations that seek to promote so-called Catholic values as distinctive. Teaching about certain values throughout the curriculum, for example, may have some useful purpose but it remains to be seen whether such a program can be seen as playing a decisive role in permeation of Catholic identity in schools.

What does a permeated curriculum look like?

The idea that Catholic identity should permeate all facets of school life has an obvious point of reference in the general curriculum of Catholic schools. A critical question is what does a curriculum that is permeated with Catholic identity look like? This is intended to be a practical and pedagogical question. Catholic schools are much better served if they can point to tangible examples in curriculum documents and elsewhere that make manifest the goals of permeation

(Buchanan, 2005). Assuming that curriculum planners have some flexibility with state mandated courses, permeation of Catholic identity should be reflected in auditable ways in the curriculum outlines of various subjects. *Permeation: Living Eucharist in the Learning Community* (PLELC) published by Edmonton Catholic Schools for instance, has a long section devoted to how other disciplines can be related to the religious dimension of Catholic schools. In the section on mathematics and science, PLELC (p. 33), quotes Pope John Paul II on the fallacy of creating a conflict between science and religion, relying on the theistic argument that truth cannot contradict itself. There is no substantial argument here with the philosophical underpinning of statements such as these. The real challenge lies in realising these goals in the curriculum by way of tangible outcomes (Hyde & Rymarz, 2007). PLELC does make some practical suggestions about how the religious dimension of science can be brought to the fore in the classroom. These are, however, of a rudimentary nature. For instance, in Grade Nine science the only suggested way of integrating Catholic identity into a class on environmental studies is to read Psalm 104, which praises creation (PLELC, p. 75).

Developing a curriculum in Catholic schools that reflects the best aspects of the permeation ideal is no easy task (O’Gorman, 1987). This is also the case in other areas where the goal is coordination and integration of subject content areas. Smith (2001) puts this well when he commented:

Many a high school principal has seen that there may be some merit for teachers of literature and history to collaborate on teaching the Renaissance period. The fusion does not occur automatically or accidentally. The teachers involved painstakingly create a syllabus with appropriate materials in order to accomplish such a unifying experience. (p. 53)

Some of the difficulties in taking an integrated approach to the general curriculum, such as a rigorous approach to assessment and setting appropriate educational outcomes, have direct relevance for integrating Catholic identity across the curriculum (Allen, 2003; Rhodes, 2010). In seeking to move to a more integrated curricular model, planners need to acknowledge that some content areas are more likely to be emphasised than others (Boning, 2007; Boyer, 1982). In a conventional curriculum the place of key disciplines, that is, those that are highly esteemed by parents and educational authorities are assured (Drake, 2007; Meinbach et al., 1995). Religious themes may not have the same prominence and if these are to be included across the curriculum then this needs to be properly planned and coordinated with some type of inbuilt evaluation mechanism. If the goals of permeation are to be realized then there must be an ongoing commitment to develop teacher expertise.

To take the example of science teaching, how can this be permeated by Catholic identity? This seems to rest on a number of principles. Firstly, science teachers must be given some specialist training to help them integrate a religious dimension into their teaching (Evans & Evans, 2008). Secondly, the interface between religion and science is largely philosophical and so a teacher with qualifications in a scientific discipline may not necessarily be able to explain concepts such as metaphysical truth (Ecklund, 2010). Finally, the science teacher may not fully understand Church teaching on controversial and difficult areas, such as the place of evolution in a Christian cosmology. These principles all point to the need for specialist training of teachers if permeation is to be realised.

As well as specialist teacher training, a science curriculum that incorporates a religious dimension would have built into it specific content areas that are reflective of an integrated approach to the curriculum. These may be incidental, such as a brief account of the life of a Christian scientist in an area that is being examined. It can also be more systematic such as a formal study of theories on the origins of the universe and which are and which are not compatible with a Christian worldview. Such a topic would be framed using conventional educational outcomes for assessment purposes. A final element in shaping a curriculum for Catholic schools that is permeated with Catholic identity is the development of resource material to assist teachers in their classroom pedagogy. Science teaching has been used as an example here but the point to be stressed is that incorporating a religious dimension into the study of diverse subject disciplines must be planned, supported and evaluated.

In any discussion of how the curriculum in Catholic school can be developed to be reflective of a permeated strong Catholic identity, due consideration must be given to the publically mandated curriculum. This is often a common document that regulates what schools, both public and denominationally affiliated, must cover to retain recognised status. It is very unlikely that any Catholic School District would advocate developing a permeated curriculum that deviated too much from the public curriculum, the chief reason being that if this was done then Catholic schools might lose their attraction to parents as the credibility of the education received in Catholic schools might be questioned. In light of this, one way forward for those interested in permeating a stronger Catholic identity across the curriculum is to work with government authorities, in the first instance, to try and offer a greater diversity in state sanctioned curricula. This would allow Catholic, and other schools, to make substantive but appropriate changes to curriculum documents that are reflective of their educational philosophy and at the same time ensure that these changes are within the overarching framework of what is considered to be educationally acceptable for government sponsorship. One instance of such a proactive action in Canadian Catholic schools would be to work with government officials to produce a final high school level religion course that would enable students in Catholic schools to study religion at a cognitive level commensurate with other disciplines. This subject would be assessed in a rigorous fashion and thereby be credited in high school diplomas. In order for these courses to be valid it is imperative that they are seen by the regulating body to be of an equivalent level to what is offered in other areas. It is, therefore, imperative that this course not be developed by Catholic schools working in isolation but in partnership with those responsible for approving curriculum innovations.

Conclusion

Following on from the first part of this paper, here the notion of permeating Catholic identity throughout Catholic schools was addressed by a practical examination of how this might be realised in the curriculum of Catholic schools. Three practical challenges, in particular, focusing on the place of religious education and curriculum development in general were discussed. In light of this discussion two key issues emerge.

Firstly, in practice some schools or school districts may not be able to commit sufficient resources into ensuring the religious education is a strong, well supported discipline and that the religious dimension of all subject disciplines in the curriculum is planned, supported and evaluated. There may be a number of reasons for this, all of which may warrant further study. A careful analysis, however, of some schools could reveal that actual priorities, as evidenced by tangible support, lay in other more conventional areas only tangentially related to the religious dimension of education. In such cases it may be preferable to acknowledge the discrepancies between the rhetoric of those Catholic schools and the actuality. Although this paper has not addressed some of the larger conceptual issues about the appropriateness of the permeation model for Catholic schools a future discussion could directly address this issue. This is particularly important in the circumstances where many Catholic schools are not able to meet the high demands set out in a permeation model.

Secondly, if schools are prepared to commit themselves to strong religious education programs and an integrated curriculum what are the best ways that these commitments can be realised? There are a number of curricular models that could be appropriate and, depending on local conditions, a variety of strategies could be used that have as their aim a better and more integrated manifestation of Catholic identity. The key here is to see this as a practical and educational issue. Curriculum development does have a conceptual edge but its success is very dependent on what happens at the "coalface". Ongoing commitment to curriculum development is essential if the goals of permeation are to be realised.

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