

From the Vatican to the classroom PART 2: examining intertextuality and alignment among Church, local diocesan and school religious education documents

Abstract

“Contemporary educational practice is saturated with texts... ”(Freebody, 2003, p. 204) They inform, guide and shape policy, procedures and practices within schools both systemically and locally. Religious education is filled with such texts: Church and diocesan policy documents, curriculum documents and classroom religion programs. But to what extent are these documents aligned with each other? Does the classroom religion program reflect diocesan curriculum documents and policy and in turn, do diocesan policies and curriculum documents authentically translate official Church policy? This presentation demonstrates how an analysis of the crafted language in educational texts can reveal how that text both reflects and constructs a particular reality. What messages are conveyed? Do the documents in fact say what the authors intend? Do they relate to, and support, other relevant documents? Systemic Functional Linguistics is a rigorous analytic tool that affords clear insights into the crafted language of educational texts. As one way of portraying the usefulness of such a tool in gaining insights into how language constructs particular messages, this presentation will exemplify what it reveals about the conveyed experiences and realities among Church, diocesan and school religious education documents.

Introduction

It can be recalled that in a previous issue of this journal, Part 1 of this topic, “From the Vatican to the Classroom” analysed extracts from the Church documents, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) and the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). In an effort to create continuity between Parts 1 and 2 of this topic, the discussion of the findings of the analysis of these extracts is repeated here:

Discussion of Findings - Church Documents

Both Church documents state that religious education in the Catholic school comprises two processes: (1) religious instruction, and (2) catechesis. However, both also emphasise these two processes distinct but at the same time complement each other. Two further aspects are also made clear in both documents: first, religious instruction is the work of the school, as it is not linked to either the family or the parish; and second, religious instruction for the most part is an academic, educational process. In saying this though, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) presents a clearer understanding of religious instruction than was presented in the earlier 1988 document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education), as it directly assigns agency to religious instruction. It explicitly describes and qualifies its nature and purpose by linking academic and educational attributes directly with religious instruction.

The relationship between catechesis and religious instruction is articulated explicitly in both documents: they are each distinct but at the same time complementary. *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) refers to this complementarity in terms of students’ own faith, indicating that for believing students religious instruction will strengthen their faith, just as at the same time their knowledge of the faith is increased by catechesis. The *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) goes further than this, suggesting that religious instruction’s confessional character (§74) is dependent on how the message is received and responded to by students. To educate is clearly the role of the school. However, the school is also required to play its part in the work

of catechesis, but how it is to achieve this remains ambiguous. Overall though, according to both documents, religious instruction is the prime responsibility of the school, and catechesis the prime responsibility of the parish.

Part 2 now concludes our examination of the intertextuality and alignment among Church, local diocesan and school religious education documents. In this second part of the topic, the focus shifts to the local level in which diocesan and school documents concerned with religious education are analysed to ascertain their conveyed meanings, and a process to assist in the construction of more clear text is also suggested.

Analysing Diocesan and School Documents

Ideally, school religion programs reflect diocesan religious education policy and curriculum documents, which in turn are shaped and guided by relevant Church documents, such as those analysed in Part 1. The following process adapted from the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis used previously, offers a way that allows those who formulate policy to both construct, and then evaluate, the conveyed meanings in their texts. In terms of religious education in Catholic schools, the key considerations are: *what* is to be done, *who* is to do it, and *to whom* is it done. The process involves the following basic steps:

1. Examine *who* and *what* participants are placed in the foregrounded agent positions of the text;
2. Focus on the *processes* and *circumstances* with which the foregrounded agents are linked; and
3. Examine what participants are in *recipient positions* noting what is being done to them

4. by whom.

These steps are exemplified in a brief example of the data collected from a document that formed part of a wider study (Grajczonek, 2006). It is to be noted that this document is no longer relevant as circumstances for its implementation have changed. Nevertheless, it is a good example to use for this purpose, as it provides some insights into how key people and activities can be positioned within policy, in terms of two essential questions:

- first, to what extent do the constructions of both people and activities in documents convey either *clear* or *ambiguous* meanings; and
- second, to what extent do such conveyed constructions/meanings align with other related documents?

Step 1: Who and what participants are in the foregrounded agent positions?

In this first step the foregrounded agents and their associated processes are listed as shown in Table 1. Such a table enables an overview of the document's field. Of the twenty-eight participants that are in the foregrounded agent position, fifteen are human or institutions, such as parish and school, which represent collections of humans. The remaining thirteen participants are abstractions and nominalisations (Collerson, 1994), such as *preschool learning*, *preschool environment*, *Catholic atmosphere*, *factors* and so on.

An initial point of interest to be noted regarding this document is the number of different terms that are used rather than *religious education*. Such terms include: religious development, spiritual development, spirituality, religious literacy, but none in the foregrounded agency position.

Table 1 Foregrounded Agents and their Associated Processes.

Agent	Process
<i>preschool learning</i>	forms part of the wider community
<i>It (preschool learning)</i>	includes
<i>the preschool environment</i>	presumes
<i>that (an all-encompassing Catholic/Christian atmosphere)</i>	supports and nurtures
<i>It (the preschool environment)</i>	
<i>The following factors</i>	has
<i>preschool children</i>	require
<i>the child's spiritual development</i>	develop
<i>the child's spiritual development</i>	must be considered
<i>the child</i>	is closely dependent
<i>parents</i>	experiences
<i>This community (parish)</i>	are encouraged to initiate
<i>parents</i>	includes
<i>preschool liturgies, rituals and the Preschool Religious Education program</i>	work ... to nurture
<i>the teacher's personal faith, principles, Christian values and beliefs</i>	support
<i>the teacher</i>	
<i>The teacher</i>	are
<i>The teacher</i>	fosters
<i>The teacher</i>	nurtures...establishing and maintaining
<i>This (professional practices with Christian values)</i>	supports...maintaining
<i>The teacher</i>	strives to align
<i>The RE Guidelines</i>	occurs
<i>This (direction regarding children's religious literacy)</i>	develops
<i>The school</i>	provides
<i>The teacher</i>	is fostered
<i>The preschool teacher, principal and APRE/REC</i>	
<i>The parish</i>	encourages
<i>the parish</i>	strives
	discuss
	supports
	encourages and supports

As this document essentially focuses on the roles of the key participants involved in religious education, it is worthwhile noting who is doing the activity. In other words which human

participants are assigned agency in this statement? Table 2 lists the frequency of the fifteen human participants listed as foregrounded agents.

Table 2: Frequency of Foregrounded Agents

Agent	Numerical Frequency	Percentage Frequency
Teacher	6	40.0%
Parish	3	20.0%
Children	2	13.5%
Parents	2	13.5%
School	1	6.5%
Teacher, Principal & APRE	1	6.5%
TOTAL	15	100 %

The document describes the roles of the key participants in relation to “the religious development of the child”. As indicated in Table

2, the teacher is clearly a significant person in the preschool. Whilst it is noted that this document focused on other persons, given the scope of this

paper the following examples focus primarily on the role of the teacher and in a minor way the roles of children. One way of deciding on the level of clarity of a document's conveyed meaning, is to consider two essential questions:

- i. to what extent do the constructions of both
- ii. people and activities in documents convey either *clear* or *ambiguous* meanings; and

- iii. to what extent do such conveyed constructions/meanings align with other related documents?

Let us analyse how the classroom teacher is positioned in the following sections of this policy. We do this by focusing on the processes and circumstances with which teachers are linked.

Step 2: With what processes and circumstances are the foregrounded agents linked?

The Role of the Teacher in the Religious Development of the Preschool Child

The teacher's personal faith, principles, Christian values and beliefs are an important model for the spiritual development of the child, evident in the teacher's attitude of reverence for life and activated primarily in informal ways. While maintaining professional competence through opportunities for professional and personal development in areas including spirituality and religious education, the teacher actively fosters the notion of a loving and caring God through the development of a welcoming and respectful Catholic Christian learning community.

The teacher nurtures the spiritual development of the child through establishing and maintaining effective relationships and collaborative partnerships with the children, parents, families, centre staff, school and parish community. The teacher actively supports the family's role as the primary faith educators of their children, while maintaining the ethos of the school.

The teacher strives to align professional practices with Christian values. This occurs primarily through the respect and understanding the teacher develops for each child as a complex individual within a community of learners. It also occurs through the development of a shared vocabulary, shared understanding and a shared vision. (p. 11)

And further on in the document under the section, "The Role of the School in the Development of the Child":

The teacher strives towards establishing mutual links with the APRE, working collaboratively with him/her in the implementation of the preschool religious education program. The preschool teacher, principal and APRE discuss the participation and involvement of preschool children in various liturgies and celebrations during the course of the school year.

In this step then, we first note where the teacher is positioned as the foregrounded agent, and in that position what is he/she doing. Table 3

outlines the processes and circumstances with which the teacher is associated.

Table 3: The Teacher's Associated Processes & Circumstances.

Participants	Processes	PROCESS TYPE	CIRCUMSTANCES
The teacher's personal faith, principles, Christian values and beliefs	are	<i>relational - attribution</i>	an important model for the spiritual development of the child, evident in the teacher's attitude of reverence for life and activated primarily in informal ways.
the teacher	(actively) fosters	<i>material - action</i>	the notion of a loving and caring God through the development of a welcoming and respectful Catholic Christian learning community.
The teacher	Nurtures... establishing and maintaining	<i>material - action</i>	the spiritual development of the child through establishing and maintaining effective relationships and collaborative partnerships with the children, parents, families, centre staff, school and parish community.
The teacher	(actively) supports	<i>material - action</i>	the family's role as the primary faith educators of their children, while maintaining the ethos of the school.
The teacher	strives to align	<i>material - action</i>	professional practices with Christian values.
This	occurs	<i>behavioural</i>	primarily through the respect and understanding
↓ the teacher	develops	<i>behavioural</i>	for each child as a complex individual within a community of learners.
Support	is also available	<i>relational - attribution</i>	for teachers and parents, primarily through the role of the Principal and the APRE.
The teacher	strives towards establishing,	<i>material - action</i>	mutual links with the APRE,
	↓ working collaboratively	<i>material - action</i>	with him/her in the implementation of the preschool religious education program.
The preschool teacher, principal and APRE	discuss	<i>verbal</i>	the participation and involvement of preschool children in various liturgies and celebrations during the course of the school year.

Highlighting and separating specific elements in a document affords clearer insights into how those elements, whether people or activities are constructed by the text. Once separated from other participants, the role of the teacher in this document becomes clear. The teacher, when in the foregrounded agent position, is associated with mostly material processes of action: “actively fosters the notion of a loving and caring God”, “nurtures the spiritual development of the child”, “actively supports the family’s role”, “strives to align professional practices with Christian values”, “strives towards establishing mutual links

with the APRE working collaboratively with him/her in the implementation of the preschool religious education program.” What is significant here is that a closer examination of these circumstances reveals that they are faith related; not one of them is an educational activity. Whilst two educational circumstances, “the XXXX Religious Education Guidelines provides direction regarding the development of children’s religious literacy” and “in the preschool years this is fostered through introductory exposure and immersion in areas including the following...”, are inserted into the policy, the teacher is not the

foregrounded agent in either activity. The teacher's responsibility in fostering children's religious literacy is implied but it is not explicitly stated.

Later in the document, the teacher, along with the APRE, is more explicitly charged with an educational activity, "working collaboratively with him/her in the implementation of the preschool religious education program." Other aspects of this collaboration include: "The preschool teacher, Principal and APRE discuss the participation and involvement of the child in various liturgies and celebrations during the course of the school year", which is in the faith dimension of religious education.

The most significant aspect of this document, highlighted by the SFL analysis, is that teachers are never directly engaged in any material action processes to do with the development of educational outcomes, that is, religious literacy or religious instruction. The function of the language indicates that the interpersonal function focuses on teachers, the school, family and the parish and the ideational function is within preschool learning, more specifically religious education within *the faith dimension*. There is no human foregrounded agent engaged in any active process of developing children's religious literacy, which is the educational aspect of religious education. The only reference to religious literacy was that the "XXXX Religious Education Curriculum Guidelines provides direction in the development of children's religious literacy."

The dilemma for teachers is that it is stated in the document "Religious Education in Preschools", that children's religious literacy is to be fostered, but teachers' roles in this requirement are not articulated. The SFL analysis of these paragraphs shows that the responsibilities of the teacher are

more to do with fostering faith development, placing the teachers' activities in the faith dimension of religious education, indicating that this section of the document promotes and supports a catechetical approach rather than an educational one. However, this is not in line with the Church documents, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) and the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997), both of which, whilst they do not specify the teacher, do clearly place the school and school's directors central tasks within religious education as implementing the academic classroom religion program. Further, these conveyed realities contradict the diocesan religious education guidelines, which explicitly state that the classroom religion program is underpinned by an educational outcomes-based approach, the aim of which is to develop students' religious literacy. On the one hand, this document requires that children's religious literacy be fostered, but on the other, teachers' roles in this development are unclear. Billig (as cited in Gill, 1996) argues that it is not only what is stated that is critical, but also what is not said is as equally critical (p.146). The roles of the teachers as shown by SFL are more concerned with the spiritual development of the children, rather than their religious literacy.

Step 3: What participants are in recipient positions - what is being done to them by whom?

In this third step then, we examine those participants that are placed in the passive voice or the recipient position paying attention to what is being done to them and by whom. In order to exemplify the crucial nature of where key participants are positioned, let us also examine some ways that students have been positioned in this document.

Within XXX the preschool environment presumes an all-encompassing Catholic atmosphere that supports and nurtures the spiritual development of children. It has an open, welcoming atmosphere where children are guided in understanding the uniqueness and centrality of God in their lives.

In the introduction of this document *children* are placed in the passive voice, that is, they are acted upon: "children are guided in understanding the uniqueness and centrality of God in their lives" by "an all-encompassing Catholic atmosphere". Later in the document, both the children and their parents are placed into the passive voice: "parents

are encouraged to initiate their children into the parish worshipping community". The children are being acted upon by their parents, but who is acting upon the parents has not been made clear. It is significant that an agentless passive, which functions "to avoid mentioning the agent – perhaps because it is unknown or can be taken for

granted or perhaps because it is being concealed” (Collerson, 1994, pp. 51-52) has been utilised in this statement. The agentless passive makes ambiguous the issue of whose responsibility it is to encourage parents to take their children to mass: teachers, principal, or APRE. Also this same statement is an intriguing directive to parents, as in the previous paragraph it was clearly stated: “consideration and respect needs [*sic*] to be given to the fact that there is a wide diversity in the faith lives of families.” On the one hand the document acknowledges that families come from diverse background. On the other hand

however, the document presumes that families belong to the local parish faith community. This presumption contradicts how students are viewed in the document *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) in which students are referred to as believers, searchers and non-believers and it is made quite clear that their religious backgrounds are to be respected (§ 75).

Throughout this entire document children are placed into the foregrounded agent position twice as shown in the following extracts:

The child experiences God through the events of everyday living within the family, community and preschool environments.

Whilst acknowledging that preschool children develop their religious self at varying rates and in different ways, the child’s spiritual development must be considered in relation to real life events within their family life and preschool experiences.

So for the most part children in this document are constructed as recipients, subject to the school, teachers, parents and the parish. They are also associated with circumstances that seek to develop their faith, more than their religious literacy, and further, except for one instance, children and their families are presumed to be members of the local parish community.

Finally then, when all three steps have been worked through, to what extent this document reflects Church documents can be determined. The specific extracts that focused on teachers and children analysed in this document indicate that religious education in the Catholic preschool was mainly the work of the teachers whose roles were predominantly associated with the faith dimension of religious education, rather than the educational one. The educational nature of religious education received minimal attention. The analysis of this revealed that the preschool approach to religious education was a catechetical one in which the overriding concern was with children’s faith development. Further, children for the most part were constructed as members of the Catholic religion whose religious development featured more than their religious literacy.

In these respects, this document did not align with the directives set out in the Church documents, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic

Education, 1988) and the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997). Religious instruction is the central concern of the school and by implication, teachers. Whilst the Congregation for Catholic Education (1988) made it explicitly clear that the school “can and must play its specific role in the work of catechesis” (§ 69), it also made it quite clear that the classroom religion program is an educational activity central and specific to the school. In other words, the classroom religion program is the school’s core business. Diocesan documents impact on teachers in Catholic schools more so than Church documents. However, in this case the diocesan documents presented competing views, which seemed also to place teachers in ambiguous positions in that this policy promoted a catechetical approach to religious education and the curriculum presented an educational one.

Conclusion

Educational policies and documents are essential to educational practice (Freebody, 2003). They convey a myriad of directives and messages that are intended to ‘keep the wheels of education’ in motion; practice is informed by policy. It is therefore critical that the *particular versions* (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004; Gill, 1996) conveyed by policy:

1. authentically reflect and present the essence of significant informing documents;

2. convey the authors' intended messages clearly and unambiguously to all key stakeholders; and,
3. present consistent messages throughout the document.

Religious education is unique within the Catholic school, as its parameters go beyond diocesan and national concerns; the universal Church also informs and shapes religious education. Teachers' classroom religion programs are not isolated documents; ideally they should align with, and reflect school, diocesan and Vatican policy and practice. This places significant responsibility upon diocesan policy and curriculum designers to ensure that documents, which inform teachers' programs and pedagogies, do in fact present clear, correct and consistent *versions*.

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