



Section 3

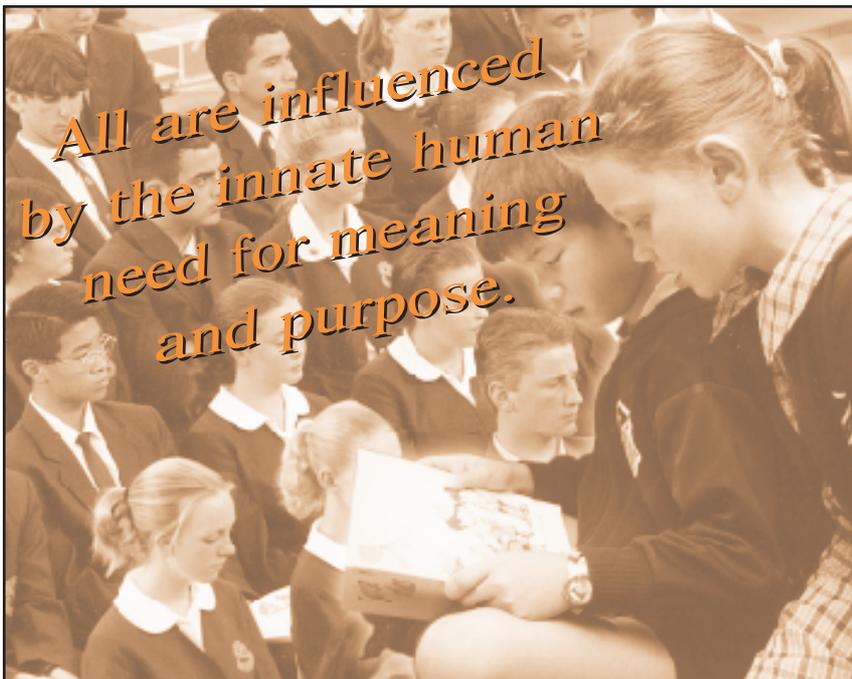
THE 'WORLDS' OF THE STUDENT

'We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live ... of a real and cultural transformation whose repercussions are felt too on the religious level.'

Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, n. 4

3.1 Our Students

- Each individual student is passing through a series of identifiable developmental stages. At each stage all individuals have much in common.
- At the same time, every one is unique, possessing personal traits, abilities, experiences and readiness for more complex learning.
- A wide range of alternative values and ways of experiencing life are offered by the contemporary mass culture, especially through the communications media and advertising.
- Students come from a variety of cultural, economic, social and educational backgrounds. Only a proportion comes from homes where the Catholic faith is regularly practised.



- Families have had a range of experiences, both positive and negative, within the Church.
- For many students, family life is complex and confusing.

'The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ's teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school.'

Pope John Paul II The Coming of the Third Millennium

Influences on the Students

Students of all ages seek to find personal meaning. This is a difficult task in a world where society's institutions are changing rapidly and ways of making sense are constantly being challenged. If teachers are to help young people to integrate their experiences, their culture and their religious faith, they must be aware of the overlapping 'worlds' within which their students encounter life.

Figure 3.1



3.2 The Family



The nature of family life is changing.

Today it is difficult to describe an all-encompassing set of family experiences of a typical child and adolescent.

Some Relevant Facts

1. It is within the family that each person's religious sensitivities are first called to life. Love, trust, wonder, reassurance, belonging, gratitude, a growing sense of responsibility and commitment – all of these set the foundations for a religious education that will, hopefully, continue throughout life.
2. All families strive to provide rich, nurturing experiences for children. At times, families struggle with pressing social and personal problems. Relationships may be fragile; stability and effectiveness may be limited; an interest in the religious development of children may be lacking.
3. While most students live in a traditional family, an increasing number are growing up in step families, blended families, single-parent families or families based on de facto relationships.
4. Marriage remains the preferred arrangement for most people entering a relationship of commitment, but only sixty-five per cent of marriages are first marriages, compared with ninety per cent a generation ago. By the age of sixteen, eighteen per cent of Australian students will witness their parents' divorce.
5. There is an increasing tendency to delay marriage and childbirth, and to have fewer children.

General Implications

- Students can be expected to bring different experiences of family life to the study of the Religious Education curriculum. This has relevance for the images we use in presenting religious concepts and for the expectations we have of the students' background, religious knowledge and experience.
- A number of students will be experiencing a sense of confusion and loss because of family dysfunction, conflict and break up.
- Some students will have poor role models and will have experienced limited support in developing an ethical and religious sensitivity.
- Many students will come from very supportive environments; many of these will demonstrate the most positive characteristics of youth: energy, optimism, openness and spiritual sensitivity.

Local Implications

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'... families are treasures in our community: they are the foundations of social, cultural and economic life.'

*Australian Catholic Bishops,
'Family Life in Australia: Our Hidden Treasure', 1993*

3.3 Australian Society



Australian society is being transformed in response to increasing globalisation and accelerating technological change.

Some Relevant Facts

1. As in every age, people strive to find a sense of meaning and fulfilment in their lives and a reason to hope.
2. Societal transformation is experienced in all aspects of life: communication, trade, employment, social and political activity. This impacts on core understandings and values.
3. Society is increasingly multicultural with one in seven Australian residents having been born in a country where English is not the first language.
4. Immigrants to Australia are from a widening background that includes Asia, South America, Oceania, the Middle East and Africa, as well as Europe.
5. There is much unfinished agenda that relates to reconciliation with indigenous Australians.
6. Societal values and ways of understanding life are greatly influenced by the mass media and advertising.
7. Many people experience an increasing sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness; Australia's youth suicide rate is one of the highest in the world. Technology is having an increasing impact on every aspect of communal life.
8. There is increasing sensitivity to the claims of the natural environment and the need to protect the ecosystem.

General Implications

- It can be expected that many students will come from homes where there are significant levels of confusion and uncertainty about societal trends.
- School enrolments will reflect the composition of society. Many cultural backgrounds will be represented.
- Students will be influenced by the values of consumerism and materialism.
- Schools will be increasingly expected to accept responsibilities previously taken by families, and to serve the national economy more directly.

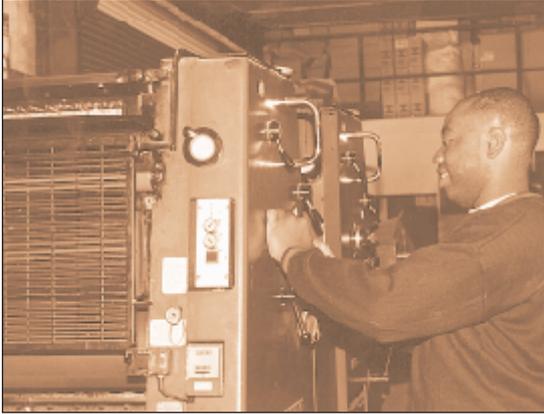
Local Implications

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'... Australians need to change those attitudes and structures which help to create and maintain serious imbalance in our society. In particular, we need to reform our attitudes towards wealth, poverty, greed and consumerism and the structures that underlie them.'

*Australian Catholic Bishops, Common Wealth for the Common Good:
Wealth Distribution in Australia, 1992*

3.4 Employment



The structure and composition of Australia's workforce is changing rapidly.

Some Relevant Facts

1. Economic conditions are generally uncertain.
2. Many businesses and institutions are restructuring and reducing the number of employees. Work is increasingly unevenly distributed.
3. Many families are affected by unemployment and under-employment, especially in rural areas.
4. Changing work patterns impact on family relationships and lifestyles; in many families both parents are in paid employment outside the home.
5. There is a particularly high level of youth unemployment.
6. Vocational opportunities change quickly with increasing demands for new skills.
7. Many students are in part-time employment whilst continuing their studies at school.

General Implications

- Many students come from families suffering financial hardship.
- Many adolescents are anxious about their future employment prospects.
- Adolescents in paid casual employment often face conflicting pressures in balancing work and study commitments.
- A strong vocational emphasis has been included in the contemporary secondary curriculum, much of it associated with employment-related competencies.

Local Implications

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'Human labour has a dignity because of the dignity of the person who works. Through work, women and men realise their humanity through using the gifts of the earth, building community and sharing in the work of the Creator.'

Australian Catholic Bishops, Statement on Unemployment, 1991

3.5 Religious Experience



There is a growing tendency for people to search for spiritual meaning and significance both within and outside the mainstream churches.

Some Relevant Facts

1. Families reflect a range of attitudes towards conventional religious practice.
2. While the parish is of great importance to many families, Catholics vary significantly in their current religious beliefs and practices.
3. Some parents and other family members have had negative as well as positive experiences with organised religion.
4. There are tendencies towards more fundamentalist attitudes and practices in all religions.
5. There is a hunger for spiritual experience and an interest in what might be termed 'New Age Alternatives' to mainstream religion amongst some young people.
6. Positive societal forces – 'signs of the times' – stress the dignity of the human person and promote such values as compassion, inclusivity, tolerance, justice and reconciliation. Efforts are made to improve social structures, to value and celebrate cultural cohesion and diversity, to build community and to protect the environment. These reflect a spiritual reality which energises many people, including youth.

General Implications

- Many students arrive at school with limited experience of Catholic cultural traditions and symbols.
- While they may lack significant religious background experiences, a number of students wish to explore life questions of meaning and purpose.
- Students coming from a rich religious background and from families involved in parish life need appropriate educational and catechetical support.
- Students can be motivated to explore their own experiences and the major societal issues in the light of faith.
- Teachers are challenged to draw on the range of cultural experiences and expressions of faith of the various students.

Local Implications

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‘The diversity of the religious situation should be kept in mind: there are young people who are not even baptised, others have not completed Christian initiation, others are in grave crises of faith, others are moving towards making a decision with regards to faith, others have already made such a decision and call for assistance.’

General Directory for Catechesis, n. 184

3.6 Catholic Schools



Catholic schools exist as part of the evangelising work of the Church. They have their particular distinguishing characteristics and orientations.

Some Relevant Facts

1. One in every five Australian students attends a Catholic school.
2. While the majority are Catholics, students and teachers in Catholic schools are from a range of faith backgrounds, are at different stages of faith development and have various levels of faith commitment.
3. As with all schools, parental expectations of Catholic schools are increasing, so schools are often expected to address many of the personal, social and religious issues once seen as the responsibility of home, parish and the wider community.
4. Catholic schools are constantly seeking to clarify their own identity and purpose amidst the pressures of materialism, consumerism and individualism.
5. Catholic schools are affected by contemporary social change and by the national remaking of Australian education.

General Implications

- It is important for teachers in Catholic schools to understand and support the purpose of Catholic schooling, to be familiar with Catholic beliefs and practices, to understand the parish context of the school and to be sensitive to the significance of Catholic symbols and celebrations.
- Because it is based on a Catholic educational philosophy, the curriculum should be permeated by a religious dimension in all learning areas.
- Developments in educational practice, especially those designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning, can be expected to exercise a positive influence on Religious Education.

Local Implications

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‘A teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirit of human beings.’

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, n. 19

3.7 The Peer Group



Their peers exercise a powerful influence on students at all stages of schooling but especially during the adolescent years. This has a most significant impact on religious development.

Some Relevant Facts

1. The peer group can contribute to the growth of the individual, strengthening a sense of identity, self-esteem and self-confidence.
2. The group has considerable influence on the individual's development of moral judgement as well as attitudes and values. This influence varies in nature and intensity from stage to stage.
3. The group provides an important context for interpreting life experiences and for developing new concepts.
4. Failure in peer relationships can have serious effects on the individual.
5. The peer group itself is influenced by wider cultural forces, including those of the mass media and the entertainment industry.



General Implications

- Helping students to develop better relationships with peers can be of major pastoral significance for school, parish and home.
- Teachers act supportively when they strengthen the communal dimension of the classroom, assisting students to learn together in a safe and respectful atmosphere.
- The provision of opportunities for cooperative learning and group work is particularly appropriate in Religious Education.
- At times it can be most unrealistic to expect students to work and to express themselves outside the frame of reference of the peer group.

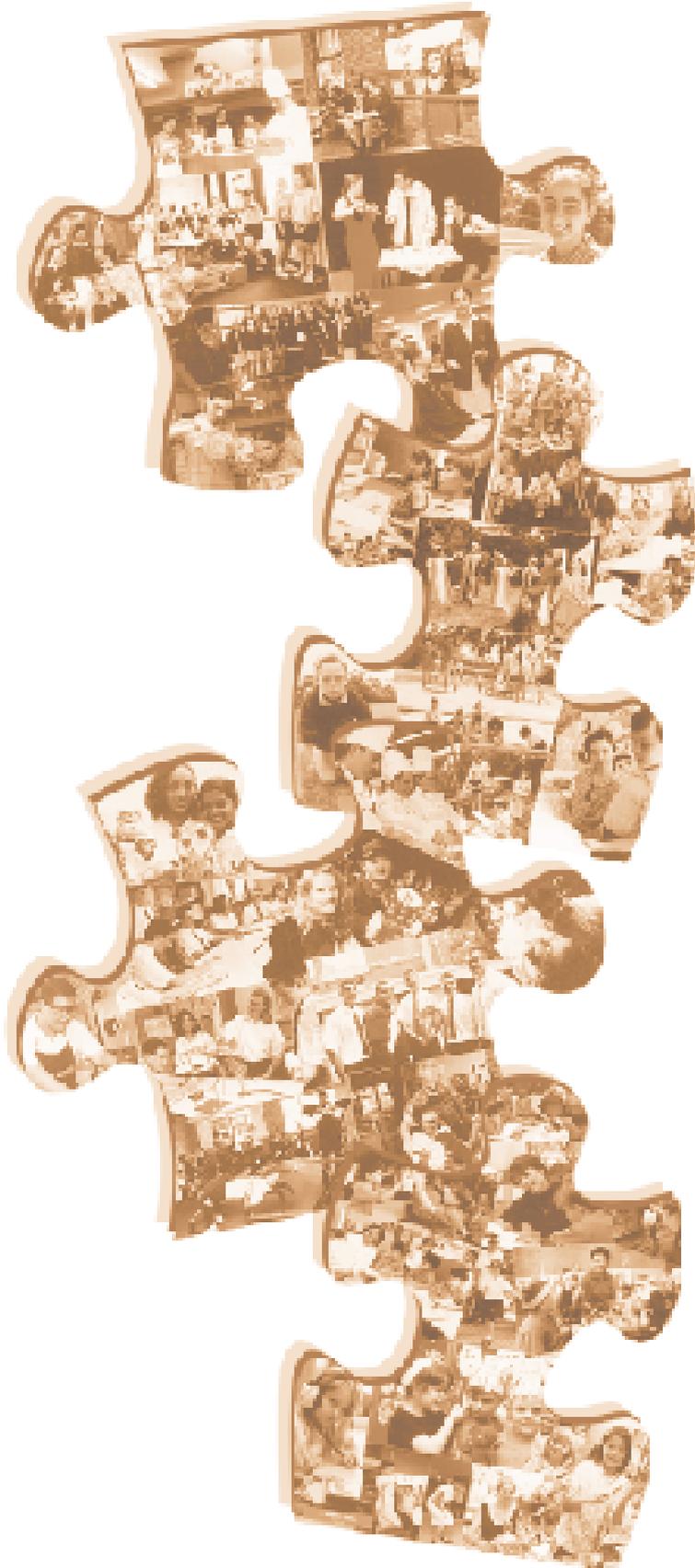
Local Implications

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'Although often surrounded by emptiness, they have a deep hunger for meaning and justice... Australian society has much to gain and to learn from its young people, if only it would listen more often.'

Australian Catholic Bishops, Lean On Me, 1996

3.8 Growth and Development



Students differ from each other in temperament, abilities, achievements, maturity, styles of learning and in many other ways. However, they share a common journey towards maturity, passing through recognisable stages of growth.

The developmental stages from early childhood to late adolescence approximately coincide with the six stages around which the general curriculum is organised in N.S.W.

In each stage, individual development results from the interplay of maturation and experience, occurring in the context of a particular society and culture.

A central requirement of good teaching is that it be developmentally appropriate

Descriptions of typical characteristics of learners in the different stages can often stimulate identification of desirable teaching practice. Such descriptions are provided in the Stage Teacher Support documentation and are summarised here.

Stage 1 (Kindergarten to Year 2)

In this period of early childhood, children typically approach the world with a sense of natural curiosity and wonder. They have an enthusiasm for fantasy and play; in fact, play and interaction with others provide dominant forms of learning. Learning in general occurs through direct experience and any abstract ideas must be presented in the context of concrete experience.



Stage 2 (Years 3 and 4)

Again, the dominant form of learning is hands-on experience: collecting, matching, contrasting, grouping, predicting, drawing conclusions. Language, a great tool of learning, now displays greater variation in vocabulary and syntax. There is growing interest in what is literally true (as distinct from 'just a story'). While some children see rules as unchangeable and established at the whim of adults, a growing proportion sees reciprocal fairness as a core moral principle.



Stage 3 (Years 5 and 6)

These children may be less spontaneous but are generally more self-motivated and capable of absorbing considerable information. More sophisticated reasoning gives them greater understanding of consequences and a greater capacity for using talk to justify assertions and opinions. Values and judgements are now more strongly influenced by peers, and self-esteem is partly determined by mastery of tasks.



Stage 4 (Years 7 and 8)

During these early years of secondary school, many students move into the challenging period of adolescence. The physical and emotional changes of puberty create new opportunities for growth. New intellectual capacities become obvious with students being more capable of formal, logical thinking in which they interpret data, predict, generalise and draw conclusions. They begin to experiment with a range of roles as they seek to clarify personal identity. The conventions of the peer group provide a powerful framework for interpreting the world and making meaning.



Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10)

Confrontation and questioning characterise many students at this stage as they ‘test the limits’ and come to terms with massive physical and psychological change in their lives. The peer group remains extremely significant, providing identity and security yet demanding extreme conformity. The values and expectations of the adult world face critical questioning, and negative attitudes to organised religion are often expressed.



Stage 6 (Years 11 and 12)

Many of these students demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated sense of responsibility concerning social, environmental and ethical issues. The final years of school life are heavily influenced by preparation for examinations and for meeting the entry requirements of post-secondary courses. Students are challenged to organise time and resources more efficiently and are aided by a stronger sense of their own strengths, weaknesses and goals.



‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child ...’

1 Corinthians 13:11

A Guiding Imperative: Respect for the Individual at All Stages

The students in Catholic schools do not comprise an homogeneous group. They exhibit a rich diversity in terms of their most pressing individual needs, their cultural, social and economic backgrounds, their personal qualities, their stage of development and the experiences they have encountered in life.

Christians are called to respect the dignity and uniqueness of each person. The gospel imperative directs attention to the just claims of those in need of support, including those who are disadvantaged by societal prejudice and a deficiency in financial or other resources, along with those with language, learning or developmental difficulties.

In response to this, the Catholic school seeks to develop an overall curriculum that will cater for individual differences and build the self-esteem of all its students.

This commitment is particularly appropriate in Religious Education programs which should be genuinely inclusive, responsive to the needs of learners, and employ a wide range of teaching and learning strategies so that all students might participate with a heightened sense of worth and achievement.

This is especially relevant to students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and students in Special Education programs and to those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.



General Implications

- Religious Education must work in harmony with the normal maturing processes of the individual.
- Students need help in developing intellectual frameworks by means of which they reflect on experience, and search for personal meaning in the light of the Catholic Faith and Tradition. Discussion, story-telling, rituals, symbols and the imagination generally are indispensable elements of Religious Education.
- The peer group exercises powerful influence and can be effectively utilized in Religious Education by means of discussion, collaboration, planning and practical activity.
- The aims of Religious Education cannot be separated from the overall academic program which seeks to develop such truth-seeking skills as reflection, critical thinking, problem solving, analysis and discernment.
- There is need for sensitive awareness of the particular challenges experienced by students at every stage of development and of their need for acceptance, patience and tolerance.
- Teachers who have a specific responsibility for students with special needs should, where appropriate, be drawn into collaboration by Religious Education teachers.
- School policies that serve students with special needs should include reference to Religious Education.



What are the important characteristics and background experiences that must be considered in developing the Religious Education policy and programs for students at your school?