

Challenges faced by a faith-based school in a rural, predominantly secular setting: Implications

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A new, independent Catholic school in rural Australia has had to face significant challenges in relation to its distinct Catholic ethos and curriculum. The challenges have included resistance from parents of the School with regard to the weekly time allocation for Religious Education, the nature of the faith-based curriculum, and the way in which it is taught. Resistance to the School in general has also been demonstrated from further afield and higher up, including the 'systemic authorities'. The various forces of resistance have created challenges for the School on both a small and large scale. This paper presents the types of challenges met by the School's Directors and Principal. It also presents how the challenges were tackled and explores the implications for the School, at the time and in the future. The implications may also be relevant to other faith-based schools in similar settings.

Explanatory note

For confidentiality and privacy reasons, the School concerned will be named 'Independent Catholic School' (ICS). Its location will be referred to as 'Rural Location' in Australia. The names of all persons involved in the School will also be changed. Furthermore, it must be stated from the outset that the author of this paper was also a former leader of the School, constituting this an 'insider's account'. As such, there are both advantages and disadvantages to this approach:

The responsibility of being loyal to one's own institution, and fear of the consequence of criticising it, are powerful inducements to maintain the standard line. Nevertheless, there are cases where the usual approach may be at least modified, with interesting results. Moving into open challenge against one's own colleagues and employers requires further reflection about the issues involved (McCulloch, 2008, p. 56).

This paper does not set out to present a history, glowing or otherwise, of the School; nor does it intend on being critical in any way of how the various challenges were tackled. Rather, its intention is to present the various challenges related to its Catholic ethos and faith-based curriculum, as they arose; to outline how they were tackled, and to state the implications for the School, at the time but also for the future.

McCulloch (2008, p. 59) warned that:

A more realistic approach could also be considered to be of more value to the institution itself, when considering the lessons of its history, than the flattery and praise that are most common... Ethical issues loom large for the insider historian who wishes to develop a critical interpretation of their educational institution.

The author has given due consideration to these concerns but is apt to agree with the viewpoint that a “more realistic approach” would be of benefit to the School, as well as to other schools in a similar situation and setting.

School background

In his *Address to the Catholic School Children in England* (2010), Pope Benedict XVI stated, “A good school provides a rounded education for the whole person. And a good Catholic school, over and above this, should help all its students to become saints” (p. 2). This was the grounds on which ICS was founded. Its Vision Statement (2012) included statements such as:

(The School) offers an holistic education of academic excellence with a sound formation in Catholic doctrine. The School seeks to develop in its students the competence, conscience and compassion that enable them to strive to fulfil their potential as upstanding citizens of our society and as people of faith. Thus, it assists them to grow in their union with Christ...

The School’s Mission Statement (2012) was even more specific in its aims:

(The School’s) mission is to help students to understand how to obtain “salvation in Christ.” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, p.12)

The School will encourage students to grow in holiness and aspire to become saints through:

- A tender devotion to Our Lady
- A special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and love for the Mass
- Regular reception of the Sacraments
- Love for the Pope and obedience to the Magisterium
- Learning the virtues
- Bearing witness to Jesus Christ through their words and actions

The School strives for excellence in academic and religious studies, as well as in social development and physical fitness programmes. In this way, it will enable its students to become fine Catholic citizens and leaders in Australian society. Parents will also be closely involved in the School by their participation in regular talks on academic matters, aspects of the faith, and parenting skills.

Whilst it may be expected that a school of this nature would come under the auspices of the Catholic Education Office (CEO), in fact, it was established as an independent school under the auspices of the Association of Independent Schools of ‘Rural Location’ (AIS). The key reason stated for this by the Chair of the Board of Directors, ‘Reverend John’, was that the CEO was not ready to endorse a new school in the area, believing that the demand was not present. In an interview on 6 May 2016, Reverend John explained,

There was no intention for the CEO to build on the land in the foreseeable future due to demographics. We then approached the Archbishop at the time about approaching the AIS to build. He had no objections; neither did neighbouring schools.

Another Director elaborated on 6 May 2016,

We approached the systemic schools in the area to let them know what we were doing. It included the Heads of the Education Department and a representative of the CEO. We presented to them what we were doing and there was no objection.

Hence, efforts to open the new School commenced with fervour and ICS opened its demountable doors to the public on Wednesday 1 February, 2012. Interestingly, the School was established on Archdiocesan land, leased for 99 years, posing some further issues for the Directors in terms of collateral and future builds on the site.

Curriculum

One of the defining factors of independent schools is that they can "...develop their own culture, ethos and values system that is reflective of each Independent School's belief structure" (AISWA, 2015, p. 2). The curriculum of the School was typical of that of any other independent school in the State, with the exception of its areas of speciality, inclusive of the Catholic faith, its distinct Tutorial System, and Languages Education (Modern Greek). As a new school in 2012, it made sense to offer Phase 1 of the Australian Curriculum (AC) from the outset rather than to wait to introduce it further down the track. Hence, English, Mathematics, Science, and History from the AC were offered, along with the remaining learning areas from the local Curriculum Framework. These included Society and Environment (which incorporated History from the AC), Languages Education (Modern Greek), The Arts (inclusive of private tuition in piano for those who wanted it), Health and Physical Education, and Technology and Enterprise, integrated throughout the learning areas.

Over the four years, and as Phase 1 of the AC was endorsed by the State's Minister for Education, the School replaced Society and Environment with History and Geography, both from the AC. In 2015, more learning areas from the AC replaced existing learning areas in a trial capacity. At the start of 2016, all learning areas offered at the School were from the AC, modified by the State's/Jurisdiction's education authorities, except for Modern Greek and Religious Education (RE). Modern Greek remains unaltered by the State's/Jurisdiction's education authorities as an AC learning area. The reason that RE was not an AC learning area is that ICS offers a school-specific RE Program.

The resources used to develop the RE program at the School included: *To know, worship and love* (General Editor, Bishop Peter Elliot); *Christ our light and life* (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine); and the *Bible*, amongst others. The RE Program was delivered by Religious Sisters from the Missionary of the Congregation of Mary (MCM), the Philippines. The Sisters were sponsored by the School and came to Australia on a Religious Worker's Visa. It was the initial intention of the Directors of the School to have RE taught by Sisters and this intention was endorsed by the former Roman Catholic Archbishop of the State, who also blessed the School in March of 2012.

Apart from formal RE lessons, the Sisters were also involved in preparing students from Year 3 and up for the Holy Sacraments (First Reconciliation, First Holy Communion, and

Confirmation), helping to train Altar Servers and Readers for the weekly Mass, teaching hymns to all the students, and providing spiritual guidance to staff and students, as needed. They were also expected to make house visits and to be active in the community, promoting the Faith. Another expectation held of the Sisters was to undertake the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) whilst in Australia to improve their English language skills.

Faith-related traditions practised at the school included a weekly whole-school Mass, a Benediction Mass each month, Processions during the months of May (dedicated to Mary, Mother of God), June (Feast of the Sacred Heart), September (Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross), and December (Feast of the Immaculate Conception), and Blessing ceremonies at the opening of new buildings or facilities.

Another important aspect of the curriculum that was tied to the Faith was the Virtues Program. This entailed teaching a virtue each month, starting with the virtue of 'Respect' at the beginning of the year. The Virtues Program permeated all activity within the School (even the four Factions were named after a virtue; Fortitude, Justice, Prudence and Temperance), and was the foundation of the School's Behaviour Management Plan, which was based on the virtue of Respect. Each month, the students were taught a new virtue, with the mission for that month being tied to the virtue, and the model saint representing the virtue in his/her behaviour. Consequently, students were shown what a virtue 'looks like' in everyday behaviour so that they could emulate the model saint in this regard. Students were clearly instructed on how to behave virtuously through the 'Behavioural expectations' stipulated in the Student Homework Diary and in the School's Pastoral Care and Behaviour Management Policy. "Independent Schools develop their own behavioural management and discipline policies that suit the needs and culture of their school..." (AISWA, 2015, p. 2). Virtuous behaviour was rewarded with a *Kids 4 Jesus Certificate* at the fortnightly assemblies, whilst academic achievements were rewarded with a school-specific *Merit Certificate*.

The Tutorial System of the School was modelled on a program from eastern states schools known as Parents for Education (PARED) Opus Dei Schools.

'Parents for Education' (PARED) manages several schools in Sydney, Australia through the PARED Foundation. PARED was established in 1982 by Opus Dei as an initiative of parents and educators to operate schools and other educational projects which assist parents in their task as the primary educators of their children. PARED Schools are characterised by many features. Prominent among these are: One of the main means of parent/teacher/student communication is through the tutorial system. Each student is allotted a tutor who meets the student regularly (ideally fortnightly) to check on the student's advancement academically, socially, spiritually, etc. The tutor may or may not be a qualified teacher and tends to keep tutees over a period of years. The tutor/parent meeting replaces parent/teacher interviews so it is important that the relationship between student, tutor and parent is copacetic to ensure it provides the intended value (Parents for Education, 2016)

At ICS, the tutor (one of the Directors of the School) aimed to spend time with each student once a fortnight, checking on their academic, social and spiritual progress, and

reporting home to parents about this progress. However, the Tutorial System metamorphosed over the four years, focusing more on academic progress and, thus, taking on the more traditional format of a tutor's or Education Assistant's approach to teaching and learning.

As a faith-based school, therefore, ICS stood apart from its counterparts in a number of ways, including being an independent school rather than a systemic school, having a particularly strong Catholic ethos that permeated the daily practices and events at the School, having RE taught by Religious Sisters from the Philippines, and devoting a significant portion of the weekly timetable to formal RE lessons and related religious activity. As Buckingham (2010, p. 1) stated, "The defining change in schooling over the last two decades has been the diversification of religious schools". She explained further,

A number of surveys show that while parents make a commitment to the school's Christian ethos and values to secure their child's enrolment, their primary reason is not the school's religious affiliation but other factors. Religious affiliation does feature strongly in some surveys but, for the most part, it is outweighed by educational factors (such as a 'holistic' emphasis on children reaching their potential and teacher quality) and perceptions of the school's environment (such as values, discipline and security) (p. 1).

Despite the other influencing factors of parental choice in schools and, as a consequence of the relatively unique attributes and qualities of ICS, the School met with opposition from various quarters at different times during its initial years, creating new and unexpected challenges for the Directors, the Principal, and the Staff in turn, resulting in challenges that needed to be overcome. An outline will now be provided of the various religiously-based challenges that were met by ICS over the first four years of its existence. These have been categorised as 'challenges from within' and 'challenges from without'. Following this exposition is a discussion on 'future implications' for ICS and similar schools.

Challenges from within

From the outset, one of the biggest challenges faced by the School was that it needed to convince the parent body of the importance of the Catholic ethos and faith-related curriculum. The ABS Census of 2011 indicated that Catholics in 'Rural Location' totalled only 18.2%. Furthermore, of the parents at the School who were Catholic, the majority were self-proclaimed 'non-practising' or 'lapsed Catholics'. In 2015, the School's enrolment statistics indicated that 60% of students had no religious affiliation, 31% were Catholic, and 9% were from other Christian denominations. Therefore, whilst most parents seemed to be welcoming of a Catholic primary school in the area, it wasn't long before some started to complain about the number of periods dedicated to formal RE lessons (initially 4 x 30 minute lessons and later 3 x 40 minute lessons) during the week. They also complained about the length of the weekly Mass (45 minutes), questioning why a weekly Mass was necessary and comparing it to their own experiences of a monthly Mass at the Catholic schools that they had attended.

The typical arguments put forward by parents included:

- a. The time spent on RE could be better spent on other learning areas, particularly English and Mathematics;
- b. A weekly Mass was not necessary as it was taking time away from other learning areas;
- c. The content matter of the RE Program was often inappropriate for younger children.

This final complaint was an outcome of the perception that there was too much RE in the weekly timetable and that, as a result, the lessons became too involved, delving deeper into the faith and, as such, presenting information to the students that was deemed to be too detailed and inappropriate; for example, discussion on the subject of Heaven and Hell at an early age.

Interestingly, and in contrast, parents did not complain about the Virtues Program, accepting that this program offered their children positive examples of behaviour and role models to emulate (the model saint). However, some objected to a line in the School's Mission Statement which states, "The School will encourage students to grow in holiness and aspire to become saints..." (2012). An innate fear and inherent suspicion began to grow in some parents of the true mission of the School. Subsequently, a number of parents started to time the weekly Mass, complaining to the Principal if it went past the 45-minute mark, and questioning the reasons for this purported "waste of time". Many questioned the RE curriculum and the details of the daily lessons being taught by the Religious Sisters. A number of parents were also concerned about the Processions (a 'foreign' concept for many) that took place three to four times a year. In this regard, they queried the purpose of such Processions, with the chanting of hymns and prayers, and why their children had to be out in the sun without hats, walking around the grassed area behind a statue of Mary and the School Priest leading the way. They were cynical about the entire process and even likened it to 'cult' practices.

Convincing a predominantly secular parent body of the virtues of such a faith-based school was not easy. Some of the measures taken by the School in dealing with the above-stated challenges included:

- Calculating the actual percentage of time taken in the weekly timetable to teach RE, to offer the weekly Mass, and to teach Hymns to all the students (1 x 30 minute lesson each Friday afternoon), and comparing this to the AIS policy of specialist learning area time that independent schools can offer during the week. By articulating the actual percentage of time (12%) dedicated each week to formal RE lessons and other faith-based practices, and by stating that this was well under the 20% that independent schools can offer to specialist learning areas, it helped to quell fears of loss of time in relation to other learning areas.
- Offering Catechesis classes to adults so that they can learn more about the faith and, therefore, understand what their children are learning.
- Adding 'The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church' (The Compendium) and, later, the 'Catholic Youth Catechesis' (YOUCAT) segment to the

monthly newsletter so that religious topics and/or explanations of the Bible could be accessible to the parent body.

- Explaining to the parents that whilst the School's aim was to "...encourage students to grow in holiness and aspire to become saints...", as articulated in the School's Mission Statement, this was an aspiration that could only lead to ongoing virtuous behaviour from their children, benefitting everyone.
- Reducing the number of Processions in a year from four to two, with a maximum of three.
- Involving parents in the Processions by asking them to assist with the sewing of the capes for the female students and sashes for the male students, worn on such occasions, sending in flowers and/or rose petals for students to throw on the statue of Mary, and also inviting them to join the Mass and the Procession on the day.

Whilst most of these measures proved to be successful over time, others, such as the Catechesis classes for adults were not. Very few parents showed interest in these so that they were eventually abandoned, replaced instead by the written word (The Compendium and, later, the YOUCAT). This problem is seemingly not unique to 'Rural Location', as Buckingham (2010, p. 1) explained,

Indeed, atrophy in the religious character of schools is a real problem facing Catholic schools in Australia. The number of non-Catholic families in Catholic schools in NSW and the ACT increased from 9% in 1986 to 20% in 2006 and the Catholic education system is struggling to remain true to its cause.

These trends shed further light on the problems faced by an independent faith-based school in a rural, predominantly secular setting.

Another challenge met by the School was growing resistance from some parents regarding the work being done by the Religious Sisters. The two Sisters at the School shared the teaching load for RE, whilst also conducting other duties such as leading the Hymn session each Friday afternoon, teaching the students the words to the Hymns and how to sing them, as well as playing the guitar to accompany the singing.

The key challenge to the work being done by the Sisters was in relation to the content of their lessons. In what can be described as a 'cultural gap', the Sisters would sometimes delve deeply into areas of the faith that were commonplace in their homeland but otherwise untouched in Australian schools. For example, discussion on the existence of 'Hell' as a concept for Kindergarten and Pre-primary students proved to be a volatile situation that led to some parents removing their children from the School. Another example of inappropriate discussions held in class by the Sisters included that of animals not having a soul and, therefore, not being able to ascend to Heaven. This too resulted in some disgruntlement, even anger, and led to some students being removed from the School. Yet another example of inappropriate content matter being discussed by the Sisters was students being asked to respect their Heavenly Mother more than their 'Earthly Mother'. This caused great confusion and angst, and led to heated discussion amongst the parents on the matter. In addition to all of this was the concern that the Sisters did not speak 'the Queen's English'; rather, that they spoke English with a strong

Filipino accent and often used incorrect grammar. This also proved to be the case in writing so that Report comments had to be vetted very carefully. Parents were particularly concerned that their children were hearing incorrect English and that this would affect their language skills in a negative way.

Measures that were put in place immediately following such occurrences included the following:

- Strict checking and vetting by the Principal of the Teaching/Learning Programs prepared by the Sisters for each term;
- Weekly meetings with the Principal to discuss the RE lessons for the week that lay ahead in an effort to pre-empt inappropriate matter from being discussed in class;
- An agreement amongst the Directors of the School, the Sisters, and the Principal that the main theme of a loving and forgiving God would be projected to the students, and that discussion on the topics of death, Purgatory, Hell, etc., would be held only with students in more senior years, and that these topics would be dealt with sensitively and with great care;
- That the classroom teacher, who was always in the room during RE lessons, would have the right to intercept a teaching point or discussion if he/she deemed it to be inappropriate for the age of the students;
- Encouragement of the Sisters to undertake the IELTS to improve their English language skills.

Whilst these measures were put in place immediately, they did not quell all fears held by some parents so that, eventually, these parents withdrew their children from the School for fear of repeat situations in RE lessons. In time, the weekly meetings with the Principal to discuss the RE lesson ahead fell away as it became more and more clear to the Sisters what would and would not be tolerated by Australian parents in terms of the teachings of the Faith. Thereafter, the Sisters avoided discussion relating to Hell and other sensitive topics.

The mistrust held by parents of the religious content and workers in the School was widespread. For example, some parents were also suspicious of the role of the Parish and School Priest (who was also the Chair of the Board of Directors). This mistrust was not grounded in any particular action; rather, it was an offshoot of a general mistrust of the clergy, accentuated at a time when the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was at its peak of investigations.

An ensuing problem that arose at the School, for example, was that of local parishioners being allowed on the school grounds to attend the weekly Mass. Parents were particularly sensitive about the presence of these adults, even if they were gone by 8.30 am (when students were permitted on the school grounds). The suspicion of some parents even turned to hostility as they eyed the visitors with mistrust and disdain.

Another example of the extent of the mistrust held towards the adults in the School who were not directly teaching their children was that of the circumstances surrounding the

students who were learning to play the piano. Their individualised (one-on-one) piano lessons were held in a room in the Parish Office. The designated room was chosen for the reason that it was the closest room to the Hall, which was part of the School. Nevertheless, the proximity of the Parish Office room to the Hall did not satisfy many parents, some of whom withdrew their children from the piano lessons, or chose not to enrol them in the first place, so as to avoid any perceived risk.

Once again, the School put various measures in place to combat such fears held by parents. These included:

- Enlisting the School Priest and Directors to undertake professional learning in the areas of child protection, mandatory reporting, and other related topics;
- Creating a Sign-in/Sign-out Register for the local parishioners, positioned outside the Chapel when it was on the school grounds;
- Eventually moving the Chapel into a room of the Parish Office, which was adjacent to the School, so that the parishioners did not have to be on the school grounds;
- Asking the Piano Tutor to walk with the students from their class to the Parish Office and back again after the conclusion of every piano lesson, and also inviting parents to be present throughout the duration of the piano lessons each week;
- Eventually moving the piano to a room in the Hall, once there was availability, thus removing all concern with regard to students being in the Parish Office building.

All of these measures proved to be successful, particularly the relocation of the Chapel to the Parish Office and the piano to the Hall.

A related issue that existed from the outset and which still surfaces to this day is the division of opinion in the local and wider community with regard to the church being built on the same site as the School. Keen to create a Catholic Parish Centre in the area, Reverend John set about building a church at the same time as a school. The church, whose design was based on cathedrals in Italy and other parts of Europe, is grand in stature. The concept of building a church that elevated one's thoughts and sentiments towards the heavens was the driving force behind the grand architectural feat; a building befitting of being the 'house of God'. Yet, many families of the School and other community members disliked the church, labelling it a "monstrosity" that did not seem to fit in with the natural surrounds of the rural setting. There was also confusion regarding the religious affiliation of the church which some mistook to be a mosque, others an Eastern Orthodox Church, and others still as something else altogether. The negative sentiment towards the construction was enhanced by rumours that the money spent on building such a grand structure was money that could have been spent on the School. Instead, demountable buildings housed the staff and students of ICS in the first two years, adding fuel to the fire where these negative sentiments lay.

These challenges were met in the following ways:

- A thorough explanation of the funding sources for the School versus the church was disseminated verbally and in writing to all parents of the School, as well as in discussion with members of the local Shire;

- Regular reminders, over time, of the fact that the Parish and the School were two separate business entities;
- Architectural drawings of the church, showing it clad with local stone, were displayed widely so that parents and other members of the local community could see that a concerted effort was being made to construct a church that fitted in well with its natural setting.

These efforts helped to quell concern and to quash myths about the finances of the School versus the church. Visits from tourist buses from around the country also helped to engage locals in re-considering the beauty and significance of the church in the area. Continued work on the construction over time helped to make the church more appealing as it neared its completion.

As a direct result of the strict Catholic ethos of the School, certain areas of the curriculum were restricted or not permitted to take place at all. These included end-of-term or end-of-year ‘discos’, loud music, the playing of drums, students wearing stage makeup, visiting musical performers, such as other school bands, and even nature pedagogy. After the one and only disco ever to be held at the School in its second year of operation, and despite its enormous success and popularity, as well as the vetting of the music that was chosen to be played by the DJ on the night, the Board of Directors ruled that no other such discos would be offered at the School. Instead, suggestions of country-style, rotational bush dances were offered in lieu of the traditional disco. One of the key reasons for this ruling was that some damage was inflicted in the ablution block during the disco, reflecting a lack of respect for the School’s facilities. This, the Directors believed, was a direct result of the “break down of order” ignited by discos. They also felt that discos were preparing students for future ‘night club’ type entertainment and that the music played at discos evoked sexually-provocative dancing.

Many parents were displeased with this outcome, particularly the ones who had spent considerable time with the DJ, selecting ‘clean’ and age-appropriate music to be played on the night. Some parents even stated concern over what would happen once ICS became a secondary school, predicting that the typical school ball of most schools, which was a commonplace ‘rite of passage’, would be hampered by such strict religious ideology. This concern translated into some parents making an early exit from the School before their children could become entrenched in the School’s culture and/or be faced with the potential disappointment of no School Ball.

When peripatetic music teachers were considered by members of the Parents & Friends (P&F) Association, the issue of no drums being allowed at the School was disconcerting. Hence, plans to invite certain music teachers for interview were shelved. The reason behind the restriction on drums at the School was because the School was situated near the Parish and it also housed the Religious Sisters in upstairs accommodation in the Hall; hence, it was considered to be a place of peace, solitude and worship, and drums would disturb this serenity. The Principal was, therefore, very selective in terms of the musical incursions that were booked for the students, ensuring that the ruling of no drums was adhered to. Even loud music in class performances was tempered so that the peaceful

environment could be sustained. Students were discouraged from wearing stage makeup and new members of staff were inducted in this as being the norm at the School.

One of the key areas of friction between the Board of Directors and the Principal was the stalling on the nature-based play areas and the related pedagogy. This caused much consternation and delayed the project from advancing for a few years. The reason behind the delay in constructing nature-based play areas was an innate suspicion by some members of the Board of Directors regarding the ‘freedom’ given to children to explore the natural environment and to self-direct their learning. This deviated considerably from the initial concept of the School which was based on a traditional model of teacher-centred teaching; an approach where teachers chose the content of the curriculum, with overriding Board approval, and one where they directed the teaching/learning process. Allowing children to explore the environment freely in a ‘constructivist’ mode ran against the grain of the philosophy held by the Directors with regard to “teaching the truth”; the central faith-based reason for the School’s existence.

These challenges were dealt with in the following ways:

- End-of-term or end-of-year discos were replaced by more subdued and controlled class parties, mainly revolving around food.
- The Principal initiated an ‘End-of-year Water Fun Day’, with various water-based activities, held on site and including staff, students and parent helpers.
- The Music Program at the School expanded by many instruments, including guitar, though it did not include the playing of drums. The peripatetic music teacher taught piano whilst the class teachers taught students the basics, using a variety of other instruments. The Religious Sisters offered guitar lessons after hours. A school choir (involving all students from Pre-primary onwards), led by the Religious Sisters, was formed in the first year of the School’s existence and performed successfully at school and various public events.
- The piano was eventually moved from the Parish Office and was located in a room in the Hall, away from classrooms, and with other musical instruments so that students could practice without disturbing the peace.
- Musically-related incursions were selected carefully by the Principal. They were chosen on the basis of helping to inspire students to be motivated to make their own music from everyday items. Whilst playing the drums was part of this inspiration, it was not the central purpose of such incursions; rather, rhythm, rhyme, and being creative with music were the key concepts promoted.
- New teachers to the School were properly inducted into the school culture so that mistakes regarding loud music and stage make-up could not be made by them. Music chosen to be played at the Year 6 Graduation Ceremony, for example, was appropriate and fitting. The Principal also ensured that the Directors were informed of the music that had been chosen in advance of the ceremony.
- The Directors were encouraged to attend PL on nature-based play and related pedagogy so as to understand the benefits of such opportunities afforded to students. Given time, the Directors understood and appreciated certain aspects of nature-based play, approving the construction of various pockets of nature-based play areas in the

School. However, related pedagogy, such as the use of 'Floorbooks' took longer to be accepted as a form of self-directed teaching and learning.

- The Directors were also encouraged by the Principal to attend the annual conference regarding school governance, so as to gain insight into the distinct role of school boards.

As part of the overall catechesis of the adult community of the School, the Directors expected all staff to attend the daily Mass, offered in the morning before school. In the School's first year of operation, most staff abided diligently by this expectation, knowing that they had agreed to the expectation in their interview for the job, and also because they accepted it as part of the ethos of the School. For the majority of staff being of the Catholic faith, it meant that it was an opportunity for them to attend the Mass and to partake of Holy Communion on a daily basis. However, during the second year of the School's operation, the toll of this daily expectation started to manifest itself with staff members not attending on a regular basis. Eventually, it was raised at a Staff Meeting as an issue that impinged on preparation time in the morning, particularly for those with students in younger year levels, such as Kindergarten and Pre-primary, where the preparation at the start of the day was of a more concentrated nature than in other year levels. The other point made by the Staff was that attendance at Mass should be by choice, not compulsion. These matters were raised by the Principal with the members of the Board of Directors.

In addition to the daily Mass each morning, the staff of the School were also expected to attend an hour-long Catechesis session once a week after school. Again, whilst the staff abided by this ruling in the first year, they later voiced their strong concerns of time limitation in terms of classroom planning and preparation being consumed by this weekly expectation so that in the third year, Catechesis was held once a fortnight. This proved to be more popular with all staff members and the average rate of attendance was higher than in previous years. However, in the School's fourth year of operation, the Directors requested that Catechesis return to being offered once weekly as they deemed it important to do so. The compromise made was that it would last 45 minutes on average rather than an hour or so each week.

The challenges raised by the resistance offered from the staff on the daily attendance at the Mass and the weekly attendance at the Catechesis session was dealt with in the following ways:

- The Principal conveyed the sentiment of the staff to the Board of Directors, supporting the staff in their viewpoints. The Board of Directors made an effort to cooperate with the strategies put forward by:
 - a. Giving staff the freedom to choose the days on which they attended the Mass each week (attending, on average, two to three times per week), and
 - b. Limiting the Catechesis to 45 minutes each week rather than an hour or longer, allowing the staff more time to plan and prepare for the following day.

The above-stated measures proved to be more favourable with the staff of the School. Attendance at the Mass and at the Catechesis session was regular and steady each week.

The following section deals with two key external challenges that affected the School in significant ways.

Challenges from without

As stated from the outset, ICS was established as an independent, coeducational primary school, teaching the Catholic faith. It was established in this way due to the vision of the Chair of the Board of Directors who wanted the School to grow at the same time as the new Catholic Parish Centre in 'Rural Location'. As a result of the CEO not endorsing the School from the outset, due to its belief that demand for a Catholic primary school in the area was not yet evident, the School was established as an independent school, falling under the umbrella of the AIS.

Despite being an independent school, the Catholic Archbishop of the State endorsed the School and even blessed it formally at a special Blessing Ceremony held in March of 2012. However, following the Archbishop's retirement soon after this event, an Archbishop from another state was offered the post. The new Archbishop could not understand why the School was not under the CEO and, thus, refrained from offering his support. He did, however, invite the School to become a systemic school, a matter which needed to be discussed at Board level by the Directors. Further to this, as the School was situated on Archdiocesan-owned land, and despite it having secured a 99-year lease of this land, it was without collateral. This prevented the building project of the School from materialising for a number of years, costing the School dearly in terms of enrolments.

The challenge of the lack of support and collateral was dealt with in a number of ways:

- The Chair of the Board of Directors and the Principal met with the new Archbishop, requesting his support for the School as an authentic Catholic school, even if under the AIS.
- When support was withheld, the Board of Directors and the Principal set about trying to find benefactors and donors, working hard to secure funds in order to proceed with the first permanent primary school building on the school site.
- The Principal and Directors continued to inform the parent body and also the local government shire of the School's predicament and the ways in which it was trying to secure funds, appealing to them to assist the School in its endeavours.
- The Board of Directors remained resolute that the School was important for the purpose of teaching the Catholic faith in an 'undiluted' way, and that its independent status offered an alternative to existing education providers.
- The Directors and Principal were able to secure the financial support of a benefactor in the School's third year of existence, making the first permanent primary school building possible.
- The Board of Directors continues to seek support from its benefactor, and other benefactors and donors so as to proceed with the next building project. It also continues to seek support in all respects from the Catholic hierarchy.

The final segment of this paper discusses the possible implications for ICS as well as for schools that are similar or in a similar situation.

Future implications

In an era dominated by events such as The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, schools in general, and Catholic schools in particular, remain under great public scrutiny. Hence, a new school in a rural, predominantly secular setting is likely to suffer a greater deal of scrutiny than an established school, for example, in an urban setting. This is as a result of human nature being what it is; the gossip machinations of a small township and the doubt of a few spreading further afield, influencing others in its wake.

The challenges met by the School were also testing of the School's leadership team; the Directors and, more so, the School's Principal. Striepe, Clarke and O'Donoghue (2014, p. 90), on factors shaping leadership in a faith-based school stated that, "...values which are connected to the school's faith affiliation and/or their personal faith formed the very foundation for their leadership practice". The researchers went on to affirm that,

The influence of faith on the participants' perspectives affirms the importance of context and the need for research to give due attention to various factors that influence a leader's work. The individual and collective perspectives of the participants take into account the way in which educational leadership can be informed and shaped by values and influenced by factors such as the school's faith affiliation, ethos and mission (p. 95).

To this end, the Directors and the Principal of ICS remained true to the initially-intended vision and mission of the School, despite opposition on many fronts and some changes having to be made to the implementation of this vision and mission.

ICS was established as an educational provider offering two focus areas; academic excellence and instruction in the Catholic faith. Approved through formal registration processes as a new school; then as a school in its first year of operation, and subsequently in its fourth year of operation, the School proved that, against all odds, it could develop and even flourish in its particular setting. However, past experiences and ongoing challenges met by the School offer lessons for ICS and also for other schools in similar circumstances and settings. Some of these lessons or implications include:

- An understanding that whilst an individual or even a small group of people hold a set vision for a school, there will be resistance from some quarters and that this will, in turn, necessitate changes (minor or major) to the implementation of that vision in order to make it work;
- That a collaborative approach, transparent but also true to the vision held for a school, is the best approach, providing outcomes that are acceptable to the majority of stakeholders in a school; and
- That it is important to hold on to the key aspects of the original vision and mission of a school so that it does not 'lose its way' through changes occurring over time.

ICS managed to achieve the above-stated three points in its first four years of existence. Whilst the School did suffer a loss of student enrolments along the way for reasons outlined in this paper, it also held fast to its original vision and mission statements, despite some changes made along the way in the implementation of these; an important trait that ensured that the School remained true to the purpose of its existence. As Buckingham (2010, p. 1) stated, “The fact that religious schools are schools of choice is crucial. Indeed, religious schools play a valid role, and their contribution is best achieved through public accountability and cooperation, not coercion.” Hopefully, the lessons learned by ICS will be lessons from which similar educational providers can also learn and benefit.

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