

Made in the Image of God: a view of inclusion from a special school

The often debated question of what makes a school Catholic is sometimes answered in terms that sound a bit like brand loyalty. A school is Catholic if it has a largely Catholic population of students and staff. A school is effectively Catholic if a high proportion of its students attend Mass at the local Church on Sunday. A school is Catholic if its curriculum reflects the Catholic world view.

If however we answer that a school is Catholic to the extent that it follows the apostolic call of Jesus, then quite different conclusions follow. Many Catholic schools in Australia today reflect this by enrolling refugees, Aboriginal students and students with disabilities: by offering opportunities to the socially and economically marginalized in our society. Many more do not.

The reasons, why not all Catholic schools are welcoming the people whom Jesus specifically directed us to welcome, can be readily understood. “Insofar as you do it to one of these little ones, you do it to me”, says Jesus. “Insofar as you have 10% of your students in the top 1% of the State, you are a school of worth” say newspapers, aspirational parents and many school Boards. The people Jesus mixed with and ministered to are social and political death in Australia today. Difference from the norm in ethnicity, appearance, accent or behaviour is less and less tolerated in our increasingly fearful society. Difference, which once was accepted and even honoured as part of God’s creativity, is where possible technologically eliminated. Visual media portray computer-enhanced images of highly regular bodies and faces linked to symbols of happiness and success, such as fast cars and evenly spaced white teeth. What is a school principal, accountable to the market and to the value-added police making judgements based on Basic Skills, HSC or National Testing results, to do?

A time-honoured solution is that of verbal parrying. “Healing people on the Sabbath is breaking the law”; “You can’t take Aboriginal students out of their culture.” “We will take students with intellectual disabilities provided they show good behaviour”. “We want to provide for the poor, the sick and the homeless, but they have to be socially ready”. Behind each of these defences is a fear of that terrifying Jesus whose voice, if listened to, overthrows all the certainties and values by which we structure our fragile and impermanent life stories.

We are the rich young man who did all that could be reasonably asked of him. He gave to the poor, he honoured his parents, he followed ethical standards in all things, and he was so humble, charming and good that Jesus loved him. Isn’t that a perfect description of us school principals? But Jesus the unreasonable says: Sell and give to the poor all that you have, and follow me. Why? Because where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. You cannot serve God and the HSC, the football premiership and the demands of parents for a Creative Arts Centre with a proscenium arch stage and 10 music practice rooms.

What would selling all that you have look like, if you are a school leader in Australia in 2007? I think it would mean selling our commitment to competition. It would mean giving up our belief in power and authority. It would mean walking away from the school leagues tables. It would mean letting go of our concern about image. It would mean accepting Jesus as he is, not as our illustrated Bibles portray him. *He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (Is.53:2)*

Catholic schools like most schools are built on a core value of capitalism, the principle of competition. Fundamental to the concept of competition is the belief in a shortage of supply. There are only so many prizes, so many winners, so many fridge magnets, and he or she who dies with the most fridge magnets wins. Co-operation, collaboration and shared learning (that are natural to Aboriginal children) are alright up to a point, but at the end of the day, you have to assess and be accountable, to sort the sheep from the goats and make sure your sheep command a good price in the market place. Our brand has to worth something so we can't have a lot of students who detract from the brand. This is why we increasingly mimic the old establishment schools with our crests and mottos and lectures about being a 'good St Trinian's student'. There is a real world out there that we are preparing children for. We have to give them the best possible chance of winning. We have to prepare them for the future.

Jesus says God doesn't believe in competition. Just seek, knock and ask and you can have it. There is no shortage of supply, only a shortage of people to bring it in. He says God doesn't believe in winners, or just desserts. He gives to the labourers in the vineyard what he has promised them, whether they work all day or for just an hour. He wants us to plan not for our future, but for our death, when it is not our score in the HSC that will determine what happens to us, but our answer to the question, "Where were you when I was hungry, naked or in prison?"

I was for thirteen years Principal of a school in the established tradition. Then I went to a Catholic Special School. It used to be a school for the blind and this was still how it publicized itself so I did not realize that in fact all the children in it had an intellectual disability. I was rather at a loss therefore, when I spoke to the gathered assembly of children, having expected something rather like my previous school assemblies without the visuals. I knew how badly I had missed my mark when a young Down Syndrome girl came up to me at the end of my brief speech of introduction during which no-one it seemed had paid the slightest attention. She stood in front of me, arms folded, and said witheringly, "*Miss Bossy*".

Our schools are founded on the concept that the people in authority, the teachers and especially the Principal, must have and retain power. As a school Principal, I used to be committed to democratic government, with the SRC and the year representatives sharing in decision-making. I thought of myself as sharing power. But at the special school I found out what it is really like when you don't have power. I came to see how much of our authority in schools rests on social conditioning that we take for granted. It is rightly said that most of what we need a child to learn, they learn in Kindergarten: that you go to the toilet not when your bladder tells you, but when the teacher does; that learning is kept in a book, and also in the teacher's head; that you know something when you can write it down in correct sentences. And in these days of neo-nationalism: that we are Australian and that's the best thing to be. That being Australian is flying the British flag in the sky with diamonds, winning at cricket and football and shedding a tear for Simpson and his donkey.

Not so in a special school. Once, in the bad old days, institutions for the disabled no doubt resorted to physical force and medical intervention to get their disabled clients to do what they wanted, but in these enlightened days of The Child Protection Act and the Ombudsman's powers, a child has to want to do what you tell them. Many children with a moderate intellectual disability don't understand consequences and even if they do, they lack the self-regulation to stop themselves doing whatever will invoke the consequence. Authoritative teacher talk, - instructing, directing, threatening, compelling – that keeps most schools running according to social expectations, is a waste of breath in a special school. Children with language processing problems take too long to work out what is being said, so they give up and stop listening. Or they wait for a word they understand and engage with that in an effort to manipulate the authority figure into compliance, which can be hilarious or infuriating depending on your mood. Very often, language heightens their anxiety and tantrums or aggression result. We have learned, in a challenging situation, to use four words or less, preferably less.

In a special school you have no choice but to listen and learn from the children what they need, what is interesting, what works for them. You become an excellent teacher because the children teach you. You have no power. But when they love you, and these children love unconditionally, they give their power over themselves to you.

Parents don't ask me these days about my school's exam results. However when I was principal of a mainstream school, I found it hard to remain indifferent to the school's HSC performance, knowing that in the newspapers, around dinner tables and in mothers' groups, my school's dedicated efforts to educate our students for a rich and meaningful life would count as nothing if we didn't have students gaining over 99 in English and Maths. Parents whose children have significant disabilities learn sadly and with recurring grief to give up the secret dream of all parents that their child will be brilliant, admired, successful and want for nothing. They come to hope only that their children will have relationships, security and a sense of contentment with their life. When they say, "*I just want him to be happy*", they really mean it.

Usually by the time we are old enough to be parents, we have learned the truth of the Gospel teaching that the things of this world do not give you happiness, but we don't apply this learning to our children. Instead we buy the line from the media that success in exams means success and happiness in life. Research evidence is clearly to the contrary. No correlation has been found between school success and success in life after school. No correlation has been found between material success and happiness. Why don't we as school leaders tell our parents that? Perhaps we do. Why then do we not proclaim it and live it. Why do we give detentions when homework isn't done or done well? Why do we give prizes and scholarships for good exam performance? Why do we toe the line when we are told to rank our children from A to E.? Why do we go on acting as though the HSC is very important? We know the truth, we know what Jesus taught, but we say and do the opposite. Is this what being a Catholic school means? Is this Catholic leadership?

The last of our riches that Jesus calls us to give up in order to follow him is our commitment to image. Humans come in all shapes and sizes but we diet, colour, exercise and modulate ourselves to fit the increasingly narrow parameters that society says define attractiveness. In a special school, the diversity is even richer than in your average Catholic school. Down syndrome, Williams Syndrome, Bardett-Biedl and Cordelia de Lange, Fragile X and Kubuki: all produce their own wonderful typology. Those with cerebral palsy may drool and those with dyspraxia may move awkwardly. Like their parents, we who work with them find them irresistible. I don't remember hearing a teacher say in my mainstream school, *I just love that child* or *I miss that child so much*, the year after she leaves. In a special school you hear it all the time. There is a cold reality though, that these children we love and are enchanted by, are shunned in 'normal' society. As humans, we fear what we do not know. Unfamiliarity breeds avoidance. How do we challenge our sad society's commitment to image, image that is often artificially created by digital enhancement? A critical evaluation exercise in English is not enough. To expand our students' parameters of normal to include the wide variety of images that disability, ethnicity and cultural dress present, we need to draw them into the circle of our schools. If our students do not experience friendship with the full range of difference in their childhood, they will grow into adults who allow those who are different to be persecuted or marginalized because of their difference.

If we give away our commitment to competition, give up our reliance on power, let go the world's concept of success and stop caring about appearance and image, what do we gain? What is the treasure in the field for which we sold all our goods? The answers I have, I have learned from my special school students, who have taught me that if we don't have competition, what we have is the capacity to do things together and to value each other and everyone. They have shown me that because we don't have power, we have to work with each other's inner drivers, including the drive to know and to do. I have come to think about life in terms of today, judging 'success' by the quality of relationships and the capacity for joy. I have learned to see how the spirit in a child is made manifest more by the difficulties he conquers than by the triumphs for which he earns praise and admiration. I look at the children who have survived when their parents were told they would never go home from hospital, who have learned to walk when the doctors said they would be immobile all their lives, who have begun to read when they were labelled 'vegetables'. In them I see success such as I never saw in my high achieving mainstream school. I embrace the physical reality of these children, the awkward gait, inarticulate speech and unusual faces, and I see beauty that means much more to me than the regular, polished features of a super model. In them I find playfulness, simplicity, humour, joy and truth. These are the treasures I have found hidden in the field for which I sold my riches.

My thesis is simple. I base it not on research but on my lived experience. If we as Catholic schools truly hear Jesus when we draw up our vision and mission statements and endeavour to be 'Catholic', we will make it our goal to include children with disabilities in our school, not just one or two, but all who apply and we will go out into the highways and byways and invite them to come in. We will not tremble at the effect of this on our school's reputation for academic rigour and social acceptability. We will speak out to our communities, our parents and our students, and give them the message they have been longing, sadly, desperately, to hear. "Everyone is loved, everyone is beautiful, everyone is treasured, because everyone is a child made in the image of God". I know there are difficulties and it is these difficulties that I plan to address in the rest of my talk today, because there are solutions that Catholic schools, mainstream and special, have not begun to attempt or even talk about.

Catholic schools as part of the Church have several strengths that they can call on to make this path possible. First, they have a shared commitment to give priority to the marginalized and disadvantaged and from this shared commitment comes the possibility of a shared vision, a collaborative prophetic journey. Second, they have the professional and committed support of the Catholic Education Commission. Third, they have the passionate commitment of the Congregational leaders. Finally, they have in their midst seven Catholic special schools which earnestly desire to support mainstream schools in their provision for children with disabilities.

Studies of inclusion in the United Kingdom have frequently urged that the resources and expertise of special schools be used to support inclusion in mainstream schools. Rita Chemenais, in *Closing the Inclusion Gap*, lists the benefits of partnership between mainstream and special schools as:

- . Providing greater support and diversity for all pupils
- . Enabling children in mainstream to develop greater understanding of diverse needs
- . Sharing creativity, risk, responsibility and resources
- . Becoming more effective in curriculum delivery
- . Attracting more and different funding
- . Making more effective use of teacher assistants

She describes as best practice the following services from a special school:

- . Training centre for teachers and aides working with children with special needs
- . Provision of demonstration lessons from leading teachers in numeracy, literacy and technology for students with intellectual disability
- . Inclusion outreach services from early years to HSC
- . Curriculum loan resource service
- . Parent advice and information centre and workshops
- . Assessment guidance and placement
- . Support and advice for mainstream schools regarding specific students included
- . Joint activities, initiatives, projects and social events with mainstream partners
- . Flexible enrolment to allow a student with special needs to move to the setting which at different stages of schooling best meets her/his needs.

The seven Catholic special schools in NSW are keen to develop the skills and services to provide this support to inclusion in mainstream Catholic schools. They are aware that where partnership has happened successfully overseas, the initiative has come from the special school. To understand why it is not happening in NSW, it is necessary to look at the barriers to partnership. One of the barriers has been found overseas to be the difference in the way mainstream and special schools deliver learning. Special schools tend to focus on in-puts shaped by the child's pressing needs, mainstream schools focus on outcomes required by external authorities. Special schools are adapted to daily flexibility in all aspects of delivery. Mainstream schools have commitments and structures that are necessarily inflexible in order to provide for large numbers. Special schools provision is based on assumed radical difference of individual needs, mainstream schools are geared to a general average and allow for individual difference at the margins. These differences need not be a barrier to collaborative support of inclusion by the special school but a rich resource of alternative practices on which to base creative solutions to the challenges of inclusion.

A second barrier to partnership has been competition for the insufficient financial resources available to support the education of children with disabilities. This has been particularly the case in NSW where funding for children with special needs in mainstream and special schools has come out of the one bucket of money provided through the Catholic Education Commission. Recently this situation was changed so that direct competition for the same dollar no longer occurs. More significant, perhaps, has been the change in special schools which have begun to seek funding through corporate grants and philanthropic donation. Partnership for the mainstream school makes available potential new sources of funding for specific inclusion projects and specific students.

The third barrier to partnership lies perhaps in the fundamental difference in the way the child with intellectual disabilities is viewed and treated in the two different settings. Where inclusion goes well, the child with special needs in a mainstream setting receives special consideration. A teacher's assistant or learning support teacher mediates for the special child. Other children are kind to the special child, and if they aren't, they learn that this is a particular crime, so the child with special needs gets away with more in any conflict with his peers. The special child is no-one's best friend but everyone's acquaintance. "Everyone loves him" is what is said about the child with special needs where inclusion in a mainstream school is particularly successful. In a special school, the same child is one in a hundred. There is no-one to mediate: the teacher and aides are there for all the children because there are no special needs, only needs. Peers are as demanding, competitive, manipulative and conflictual as in any human group: the rules are the same for all and the children have to learn to defend themselves and to negotiate and compromise as much as normal children in normal settings. Not everyone loves him, the child with disabilities in a special school, but he gets lots of birthday invitations, sleep-overs and phone calls at home. In a mainstream school, the special child loses equality but gains opportunity, especially the opportunity to have role models who raise the ceiling of what he expects of himself. These differences must be accepted if the partnership is to work and the way forward is flexible enrolment between the mainstream and the special school.

The fourth barrier to partnership is that it is hard. Visionary leadership is needed from both the special schools and the mainstream schools. Leadership which does not define being Catholic solely in terms of enrolment ratios, curriculum principles and school families' attendance at Mass. Leadership which has the courage to lead the school community to a concept of education evaluated not by the standards of makers of the league tables but by principles that every parent wants to espouse if only school leaders would help them do so. Deep down every parent would like their child's life to count for something, to make a difference, to be joyous. Deep down, every parent knows that this is how to be happy. But until we stand up and say it, again and again, in every medium we can find, parents' fears will make them howl for HSC results, football premierships and large performance spaces with proscenium arch stages. The challenge is ours. We are the ones who hear the call of Christ. We are the ones who have been brought to leadership of Catholic schools. We are the rich young man being given a second chance at the Kingdom.

The fifth barrier is the reason that I have written this paper and come here to talk to you. In mainstream, including children with special needs is championed – where it is championed – because it is the right thing to do, it is charitable and humane. These children are not quite normal but we will make their lives as normal as we can. In special schools, the policy of 'normalcy' which is embraced by philosophers and politicians of the inclusion movement, denies the rich difference of children with special needs. They are not seen as deviants from the norm but as uniquely made children of God with gifts that result from their intellectual disability. In Corinth, the intellectually brilliant cultural centre of Greece in the first century, Paul gave thanks to God that He had hidden His truth from the clever and the wise and revealed them to the simple. That is what we find in special schools. We work with children who live in the present because they don't remember the past and they cannot conceive the future. Our children and young adults embrace life openly and directly, with laughter and tears, joy and anger, because they have no agenda and only one goal, to be happy. They will not do what we say because we say it, but only because we love them. They do not know the value of money but they know the value of love and they give it, with open-hands, because they are made in the image of God. Best of all, they have a huge capacity for belief. God enters their hearts and finds no door closed, no barriers up, only a beautiful innocence that welcomes Him without fear or qualification.

When a child with intellectual disabilities enters a mainstream school, it is the school which receives the gift. Jesus himself brings the child into the school and says, *unless you become like this little child, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven*. Mainstream school principals and teachers say that when you have a child with disabilities in your school, when you enter partnership with a special school, it is the mainstream students and school that benefit most. The reason is that they have Christ in their midst. The door to a different way is opened. The way of love, of simplicity, of innocence, of truth. This is an image of God we don't otherwise know. To say so is leadership. To bring all children, all those different images of God, into our midst, not to make them normal but to value them as they are, is to fulfil our identity as leaders of Catholic schools.

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