

Engebretson, K. (2025). Coherent religious education: a curriculum model. *Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools*

MACS Religious Education Model

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Coherent religious education: a curriculum model

Introduction ⁱ

In Australia, religious education methodologies in Catholic schools have evolved from the time of European settlement in what has been called “pedagogical drift” (Buchanan, 2005,1). Ways of teaching religious education have been carried along by social and religious change. In a remarkably short time these have moved from the magisterium oriented dogmatic approach to its opposite, the life experience approach. (Rymarz, 2007).

Every methodology in religious education arises in response to a social and religious culture. Contemporary Australian culture is suffused with secularism, and its accompanying privatisation of religion. It is argued that certain related conditions exist in Catholic schools that warrant a re-thinking of religious education methodology in favour of a deliberately coherent curriculum.

This paper argues for a coherent methodology in religious education curriculum development against a background of: a) low levels of religious literacy among students in Catholic schools; b) hesitancy and lack of confidence among teachers to be ambitious in the religious knowledge they plan for and teach; and c) confusion over appropriate theories of religious education in view of the multi faith nature of many Catholic schools.

The historical context

The present situation has a certain history which I will try to describe briefly. In Melbourne a life-centred or experiential model of religious education was compulsory from 1973 until 1995 (Amalorpavadass, 1971). There is no doubt that there were benefits in this approach, not least among them being that the rigidity of earlier more dogmatic approaches (Lovat, 1989) could be ameliorated with concern for the student's life experience linked to faith. However, reflection on life experience tended to take over the pedagogy, understandably, for this was safe ground for the many lay teachers who in the years following the Second Vatican Council had to carry RE curricula in schools. These teachers were often not trained to teach RE and would mostly have lacked the depth of knowledge they needed to use such a methodology well. A result was that the emphasis on life experience in the pedagogy diminished, intentionally or otherwise, the importance of knowledge in and for itself, and not only as a direct means to faith. (Engebretson 2014; Rymarz 2007; Buchanan, 2005.)

Along with other professional religious educators Rymarz (2007) has supported this contention. He also claims that often an important reason behind the lack of religious knowledge among students is the reluctance of teachers to move beyond the experiential world of students and to pass on objective knowledge. This reluctance Rymarz says can be explained by the fact that the many of the generation X teachers now working in Catholic schools were themselves educated in a methodology that affirmed relevance and experiences above historical, scriptural sacramental elements. This has left them too with limited knowledge about the faith traditions, something many of them they readily admit.

In the late 1990s with a new archbishop the experiential approach fell out of favour and the archdiocese developed its own religious education textbooks, the acclaimed *To Know Worship and Love* series which is currently being developed to its third edition and fully digitalised. However, a textbook series is a resource for a curriculum not a curriculum itself. (Engebretson, 2002)

Towards a curriculum model.

Fragmentation of knowledge

All of the issues noted earlier confronted me when I was tasked with developing a model for the new curriculum. In particular I was aware of the fragmentation of knowledge in disciplines that is a result of data and information overload. The field of religious education particularly suffers from fragmentation of knowledge. With secularism comes suspicion of meta narratives, those overarching stories that explain history, culture, collective identities and of course religions. A religion is a meta narrative, such as the total vision of Christianity, that purports to explain the meaning of existence. But secularism distrusts holistic claims and is open to many and varied interpretations of reality. So instead of taking Christianity as a package, the tendency among many Catholics is to select from Christianity, and indeed other religions, the aspects that suit one's values and lifestyle (Smith and Denton, 2005). This fragmentation of religious knowledge and experience leaves young people with an unconnected and asymmetric view of religion, (Chapin, 2008), which is exacerbated by the relentless data stream (Chapin, 2008) that inundates students at every moment of their lives.

Fragmentation of knowledge in the religious education curriculum

Nowhere is fragmentation of knowledge seen more clearly in a school than in religious education. It is evidenced in some of the following ways.

Disjointed topics: In my experience as an academic and teacher educator for religious education over almost 20 years I have seen religious education curricula that feature mindfulness studies, new and emerging religions, models of masculinity, personhood, relationships, alongside more traditional topics such as scripture and Church history. Many of these are valuable in themselves but do they belong in a religious education curriculum?

Lack of depth. My experience has been that many religious education teachers avoid topics that demand specialised theological knowledge and opt for those that appeal more to students. The result too often is a religious education curriculum without breadth or depth in fundamental but more challenging topics. (Rymarz and Engebretson, 2005)

Conflicting views about the nature of religious education. Some teachers view religious education as a purely academic subject while others see it in terms of pastoral care. Along with these theoretical differences there are many differences between teachers in the ways they value and are committed to teaching religious education, a situation not helped by a shortage of teachers we are currently experiencing.

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All of these factors lead to student disengagement, confusion, and lack of complexity in discussion of moral, ethical and spiritual questions, with relativism being often the easy position taken by students.

Here is an example of a fragmented religious education curriculum at Year 7 (This is a generalised list not taken from any particular school).

1. Interpreting Old Testament texts
2. The Creeds of the apostolic and ancient Churches, including the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed,
3. The Second Vatican Council
4. The Prophets in Israel
5. The Australian Church
6. Advent and Christmas

The problem is clear. There is no chronological consistency, the units do not clearly build on each other, and there is no unifying thread that connects them. This kind of moving around among the centuries, this lack of historical perspective, can lead students to misconceptions such as that Moses and Jesus were contemporaries, or that Jesus was a Catholic. It fails to tell the great story well or consistently.

Coherent curriculum.

All of this took me to the literature on coherent curriculum and to consideration of its key characteristics (Fortus and Krajcik, 2012; Smith, R. thinkforwardeducators.org) which I summarise here.

1. A coherent curriculum is knowledge rich. Knowledge is a pre-requisite for critical thinking, problem solving, comprehension, all forms of inquiry-based learning as well as a basis for informed classroom discussion.

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2. Knowledge is sequenced and mapped deliberately and coherently so it is stored in long term memory to be built on as required (William 2018). *Knowledge is what we think with.* (Ashman n.d.)
3. Teachers are **ambitious** for students in the knowledge they select
4. There is an emphasis on learning progressions (sequenced learning) and clearly defined learning outcomes
5. Content and skills build sequentially
6. There is horizontal alignment across a year level and vertical alignment from year level to year level.
7. Formative and summative assessments reflect cognitive outcomes (Hattie, 2003)

Coherent religious education

Most of the literature on coherent curriculum comes from the disciplines of Science and Mathematics, although I have seen in practice examples of it being used to teach the mechanics of English grammar and even to explore themes in an English text. Nowhere could I find an application of coherent curriculum to religious education, until I was introduced to the work of the Italian religious educator, theologian and philosopher Luigi Giussani (2019).

Fr Giussani is the founder of *Communion and Liberation*, an ecclesial movement in the Church, but it is his philosophy of religious education that helped me begin to see a link between the literature on coherent curriculum and curriculum in religious education.

For Giussani religious education begins with the human longing for meaning and its associated questions such as what is truth; what does it mean to love; what is my final destination; what might a better world be like; all questions that

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dissolve into the air of uncertainty when submitted to the gaze of the secularist. The response to these questions for Giussani is what he calls ‘an explanatory hypothesis of reality’ (2019, 28) which consists of the steps and connections that lead to **a total vision of reality**. This reality is proposed as the salvific event of God’s intervention in human history in the person of Jesus Christ, held in the earthen vessel of the Church which protects, nurtures and teaches the total vision. **The total vision is the Incarnation and its salvific and eschatological significance for humanity.** Religious education then consists of proposing to children and young people the total vision of the Incarnation as held in the Church.

While Giussani’s explanations tend to be philosophical, his proposal for religious education is that the Christian vision of life with Jesus Christ at its centre is the key to reality, and that the religious education curriculum proposes this reality to students in ways that systematically unfold the Christian story as a total vision of meaning.

An Australian scholar and religious educator, Dr Paul Chigwidden has distilled Giussani’s philosophy into these principles of coherent curriculum in religious education.

1. The religious education curriculum is a complete proposal of the Catholic/Christian vision of life as centred on Jesus Christ.
2. Rich knowledge is presented in a connected and chronological way rather than scattered and fragmented
3. Knowledge is cumulative from year to year with each year’s content recalling and building on the content of the year before
4. Knowledge is presented in unified themes to which every unit in a year level contributes

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5. Explicit instruction is a necessary form of pedagogy along with other forms (MACS Vision for Instruction 2023)
6. Knowledge is sequential across each year level and from year level to year level

The Model

Drawing then on the literature on coherent curriculum, on Giussani's theory of religious education as the proposal of a total vision of reality, and Chigwidde's application of this to religious education, we have developed a model of coherent curriculum in religious education on which we are building our new religious education curriculum. It is:

Kerygmatic. It proposes the Christian gospel as the response to the deep desires of the human heart (See Acts 17:22-34).

Christo-centric: Every unit of the curriculum elucidates in some way the story of Jesus Christ

Cumulative: Every part of the curriculum draws on what has gone before and is the foundation for what comes after. Knowledge proceeds cumulatively and sequentially within a year level and from year level to year level

Chronological: Knowledge coheres across year levels and from year level to year level

Thematic: There is a theme across each year level to which every unit contributes

Sequential: The units are in a logical and chronological sequence across the year level

Conclusion

Perusal of the themes and topics at each year level illustrates the model.

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