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• Towards New Priorities in the Formation of Faith
• Catholicism, Curriculum and Connectivity
• The Contribution of Children’s Literature to School Ethos

• Prayer and Religious Education in the Nursery
• Religious Education and the Revised Curriculum
• St Paul’s: A Community School
Mission Statement

- To seek to articulate the vision of Catholic education.
- To identify, explore and promote ways in which this vision can be lived in Catholic schools.
- To empower teachers with a renewed and revitalised sense of the vocational nature of teaching.
- To aid student and recently qualified teachers to understand and embrace the fundamental spirituality of their lived work and mission.
- To help promote the school as an integral and intrinsic part of the Church and wider community.
- To celebrate and share the lived experiences in schools as realisations and practical expressions of the Gospel values of justice, service, understanding and outreach.

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Cover picture: St. Paul, a Roman mosaic,  
from the Vatican.
One frequently hears teachers commenting that they feel incessantly monitored by the state. This is perhaps unavoidable since schools are publicly funded institutions always accountable to government and its various agencies. There seems to be no end to the stream of educational reviews and curricular revisions; and this is probably no bad thing if they lead to a better education for our pupils and students. But it is far from clear that this culture of control is always so conducive. School inspections, with their predominant focus on empirical fact finding, often undervalue or even overlook some of the most worthwhile work that any school can do. How, for example, can their necessarily limited terms of reference adequately assess what is done in the ongoing work of caring, relationship building and faith sharing that are so critically important to our Catholic schools? That inspections do not tell the full story of what is happening in any school is hardly news to any of us. As a consequence we in Catholic education, while always striving to maintain the highest academic and administrative standards, should also be particularly clear on the distinctive contribution that our schools make in terms of their social and spiritual visions; and then tell this to government, media, academia and other interested parties. At the heart of our educational project is the conviction that our schools exist not only to communicate the curriculum but to invite and assist everyone - pupils, teachers, parents - into a living faith. Together, we are the builders of God’s kingdom. We seek neither to reject nor accept uncritically the values of wider secular society, but to provide an environment where faith is in conversation with the broader culture in ways that serve the common good.

Le Chéile seeks to promote that conversation by telling the story of Catholic education locally and by being a platform for ideas and perspectives that seek to stimulate and inform us in our work. In this issue an international perspective on what elements should be included in faith formation today is provided by the Rome-based theologian, Michael Paul Gallagher. With specific reference to education here, Louise Long explains how the Personal Development Curriculum ties in well with aspects of Catholic education’s commitment to the holistic development of pupils. Geraldine Magennis recognises the contribution that good children’s literature makes to equipping children with insights and skills that will help them develop as well-rounded people. Brenda Banney advises on how the revised curriculum can best be adapted and implemented in accordance with our schools’ values and she envisages an important role in this for RE Departments. Sr Lucina Monaghan and Cathal O’Dowdery explore how the ethos of their respective schools enriches their pupils and the wider community. Three recently confirmed pupils from Swatragh give an insight into how their school, parish and families are working more closely together in preparing pupils for the sacrament. Three student teachers at St Mary’s write about their experiences of World Youth Day in Sydney last summer and Fr Feidlimidh contributes an article on St Paul to commemorate the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle locally.

Let me take this opportunity to thank you for your support for Le Chéile and to invite you to submit articles to us about your thoughts and good practice for future editions.
Towards New Priorities in the Formation of Faith

Michael Paul Gallagher, SJ was born in Co. Sligo and is Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. He taught English Literature in University College Dublin for nearly twenty years.

I have to confess at the outset that I have never in my life had to ‘teach religion’ on a regular basis in a school. My pastoral contacts have been nearly always with university students in Dublin and, in recent decades, I have been teaching theology at the Gregorian University in Rome. So it is from the point of view of a relative outsider to the school classroom that I offer these short reflections. I do not know anyone who would hold that faith can be nourished in today’s world with more or less the approach of fifty years ago. In particular, the old triangle – of school, parish, family – seems to have broken down, radically or less radically, depending on one’s context. Perhaps in rural areas the triangle is less fragmented. In such a situation it is obvious that an exclusively doctrinal or moral approach to religion risks being a foreign language for the younger generation. If they have not encountered a living language of faith, then much of our talk about sacraments or Christ or Church is in danger of remaining tired or unreal for them.

Against this background, so changed from my childhood, I try to ask myself what new pedagogic or catechetical priorities could be proposed to meet the challenges of today.

In brief, I want to suggest giving special attention to five dimensions: culture, spirituality, justice, faith as-decision. In recent years these themes have been explored by many writers in this field, ranging from popes to teachers on the front line. However, I hope to propose a certain convergence of the five areas and to raise questions about how they could be approached fruitfully in the religious classroom.

**Culture**

Michael Warren, the Irish-American writer on catechetics, has argued that ‘culture is the greatest and most overlooked educational influence in most lives’. He is not thinking primarily of the ‘high culture’ of literature or philosophy, but rather of the ‘lived culture’ of the street and of the media. We are all surrounded – teachers and pupils alike – by images that communicate priorities and values. How can religious education reflect on the hidden assumptions of our life-styles? How can it foster a Christian critique of the dehumanising aspects of the dominant culture? Perhaps it is a matter of raising the right questions with the younger people and letting them search for insights and answers. One could start, for instance, by taking any set of advertisements on television and asking about the complex message being communicated. There is much talk today about the need for faith to be more ‘counter-cultural’, and there is an important truth here. However, it should not become a merely negative exercise, or even a form of irresponsible scape-gooting on the part of the Church. We have to recognise that the Church has learned from so-called secular values, for example, concerning human rights or ecology. And before leaving the topic of culture, we have to be honest and discerning also about the tacit ‘success agenda’ of the school’s own sub-culture.

**Spirituality**

Finding a way of integrating cultural awareness into religious education leads naturally to reflection on ‘spirituality’. It has become, surprisingly, a buzz word of contemporary culture. Some people say that in our post-modern moment we are more ‘post-materialist’ in our secret hopes. Even popular music contains a strong strand of spiritual searching. What does this imply for religious education? That some attention to interiority is an essential and practical doorway towards faith today. That doctrines and sacraments need deeper roots in skills of stillness and listening in order to become ‘real’. That if young people can experience prayer in a personal way then they have a foundation for growth and understanding of their faith. That exercises in biblical meditation can be very fruitful in initiating people to the power of Christian revelation (one thinks here of the vast success of the books of Cardinal Martini, former archbishop of Milan).

**Justice**

The third dimension that seems crucial for faith formation today concerns justice. At the beginning of his encyclical, Spe salvi, Pope Benedict XVI insisted that Christian faith is not only ‘informative’ but ‘performativ’, adding that the Gospel ‘makes things happen and is life-changing’. In this perspective young people seem particularly conscious of living in a tragically divided planet (or even a painfully divided society closer to home). Intuitively they know that Christian faith can never be separated from some form of commitment to transform our wounded world. In recent years this strand of religious formation has come to the fore – with many educational projects about world poverty or opportunities for hands-on involvement in situations of deprivation. My emphasis here is that an integral faith formation needs all of these dimensions working together.
Hence reflection on or action for justice should be rooted in the Gospel, in a personal commitment to Christ, and hence connected with formation in spirituality.

**Intelligent faith**

One could say that those last two dimensions are more nourished in pastoral settings such as a retreat or a religious group. Our fourth suggestion certainly suits the classroom. Pope Benedict has often highlighted the fact that faith involves a special kind of logos or reason. It has its own intelligibility. It is in tune with all our questions and intelligent questing. But in today’s culture perhaps there is a tendency to a certain fideism, in the sense of merely accepting faith passively and avoiding any attempt to think it out or ‘give reasons for the hope that is in us’ (1 Peter 3: 15).

In this respect what can the teacher of religion offer? Some reflection on how we make important life-decisions in general is appropriate. Are we free from pressures? Have we recognised the danger of drifting with the tide? Are we really free to hear the Word of God? Above all, do we realise that a decision to believe in Christ always entails living in a different way? It was so in New Testament times. And today it is obvious that the courage to embrace a different way of life has to be rooted in a mature decision. Otherwise faith will be in danger of the weakness evoked in the parable of the sower, the shallow earth where faith without personal foundations cannot survive the heat of the sun.

The five dimensions mentioned here need one another and therefore rise or fall together. Cultural alertness and spirituality are important in nourishing the capacity for a faith decision today. Without some openness to the calls for justice and some capacity to explore religious truth intellectually, faith could remain too personal and distant from the complexities of the world. Let me end with a striking quotation from Cardinal Ratzinger, in an interview some months before he became Pope. He was asked to comment on the challenge of communicating faith today:

> 'The core of Christianity is a love story between God and humanity. If we could understand this in the language of today, everything else would follow... Life-styles now are very different and therefore an intellectual approach on its own is not enough. We have to offer people living spaces of communion and of traveling together. Only through concrete experiences and existential witness is it possible to make the Christian message real today.’

I think we can read here a very positive invitation to renew our religious teaching in order to meet a new situation, and the five dimensions briefly outlined here could hopefully help to make concrete the challenges involved.

**References**


Catholic Education
Catholic education has a rich heritage of commitment to the development of the whole person. This encompasses the promotion of spiritual, mental, social, moral, physical and cultural growth and requires the provision of affective and creative learning experiences that should lead pupils to have a sense of integrity and autonomy; concern for others and the environment; and fulfillment in life and work. I am sure, therefore, that the recent emphasis on Personal Development in the Northern Ireland Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) is being warmly received by Catholic educators as they continue to embrace a holistic model of education that promotes the welfare, well-being and well-being of their pupils.

The Personal Development Curriculum
The fundamental goals of the Personal Development Curriculum include the development of self-confident, trusting and caring pupils who are able to understand and use the concepts of justice, equality and human rights in service to the parish and wider community. These goals are concomitant with the nurturing and respectful ethos that is at the very heart of Catholic education.

The effective delivery of the Personal Development Curriculum is through a pupil-centred approach which calls on a pupil’s ‘Emotional Intelligence’. This term first emerged in the context of Gardner’s (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences, where a range of intelligences including linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic and personal (emotional, interpersonal, intrapersonal skills) is postulated. The personal aspect was further elaborated by Goleman (1995) in what we now know as Emotional Intelligence in terms of: knowing one’s emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; and handling relationships. Further, the development of these personal skills relies crucially on one’s ability to empathise and on one’s self-esteem: Empathy, ‘an affective response to another’s affective state’ (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983, p. 202) is a vital component in reflective understanding and tolerance, while self-esteem is important with regard to ‘movement to action’ - low self-esteem militates against active participation in community and the fulfilment of personal potential (Bottery, 2000).

In essence, the lived experience of the values of self-regard, tolerance, empathy, and community spirit is all about relationships: with oneself, with others and most importantly, the relationship with God. When teachers and learners work together to explore these values, the meaningfulness of their lives and the one true relationship with the transcendent, they are realising the spiritual dimension that is critical to Catholic education. Spirituality was recently identified as a key element in the Northern Ireland Curriculum and its overarching framework requires that teachers should help learners develop a sense of wonder and awe in life as well as an internal resiliency. A resilient child is one who loves well, works well and expects well, and these dispositions are in harmony with the Catholic mission of compassion, service and respect for the dignity of the individual.

Connectivity
Turning now to an examination of the teaching and learning methods that are conducive to broadening the pupils’ knowledge, skills and values. The effective delivery of the Personal Development curriculum requires teachers to move away from a didactic model to embrace a more facilitative one that is based on shared interaction. As you well know, such pupil-centred ways of learning require a high level of emotional commitment from the teacher because experiential learning is a complex process including the personal and the professional, theory, practice, action and reflection (Geary & McNamara, 2005).

Specifically, levels of engagement on the part of learners require teachers to use skills such as listening and attention: methods intended to enhance a state of being and awareness; creative thinking and accelerated learning; enactment; simulation and expression; encounter; self-awareness; group work; the imaginal; using imagination and intuition for exploration (Tosey, 2002). This range of experiences is frequently offered in the context of group work. Teachers using group formats should therefore be familiar with models of group dynamics, also with group roles, stages and phases and the need for ground rules, the process of contracting, which serve to make learning environments safe and secure for students.

When educationalists use these person-centred methods to help pupils build connectivity with self, others, the wider community and faith, they create the conditions necessary for them to reach their true potential and, ultimately, embrace adulthood with higher levels of social, emotional, and academic self-efficacy. We in Catholic education believe that with God’s help and grace, all the pupils in our care have the capacity not only to accept responsibility for their own holistic well-being but also for the well-being of others in order to protect what is universally good.

References
The Contribution of Children’s Literature to School Ethos

Dr Geraldine Magennis, St Mary’s University College, Belfast

Catholic primary schools are frequently noted for their ethos of caring and sense of community. While these may be difficult to define, they can, nonetheless be tangibly experienced on entry. For these reasons schools are often referred to endearingly as ‘safe havens’ for young children. Few would dispute this as being rightfully the case since by the time they reach school age many children have endured as well as enjoyed their short lives. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed, however, that creating a positive ethos is about shielding young children from life’s hard knocks. On the contrary, it is about providing them with skills and tools to help them navigate the harsh realities they might encounter as they grow into adulthood. After all, as teachers we are legally obliged by the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) and morally compelled by our vocational callings to help equip young children to survive and thrive in a complex and changing world beyond the classroom. Consequently, this article advocates the power and potential of good children’s literature to help young children, especially those in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage One, to negotiate the myriad of experiences they will undoubtedly live through. A variety of well-known texts are cited as a means to address some universal themes they will encounter as they begin to form. This is often a fraught process demarcated by uncertainty and sometimes angst. It can be difficult for a child to know what or how to simply ‘be’ as they come to find their place in the world. They relentlessly receive value judgements from adults but as Tony Ross’s book I Want To Be... illustrates, this is a place everyone must reach on their own. Whatever the outcome, it is essential that they are reassured of their potential and power and potential of good children’s literature to help young children, especially those in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage One, to negotiate the myriad of circumstances while other important themes such as diversity will be dealt with in a later article.

Children’s Need for Comfort in Literature

As young children mature, their identities begin to form. This is often a fraught process demarcated by uncertainty and sometimes angst. It can be difficult for a child to know what or how to simply ‘be’ as they come to find their place in the world. They relentlessly receive value judgements from adults but as Tony Ross’s book I Want To Be... illustrates, this is a place everyone must reach on their own. Whatever the outcome, it is essential that they are reassured of their potential and power and potential of good children’s literature to help young children, especially those in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage One, to negotiate the myriad of circumstances while other important themes such as diversity will be dealt with in a later article.

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The loss of a parent or significant other can be a devastating event in anyone’s life but especially for a child. The resultant trauma can be deeply and sensitively addressed rather than briefly acknowledged or even ignored. Validation of legitimate feelings of loneliness and anger followed by healing might best be initiated though stories such as Posy Simmonds’ Fred. Siblings Sophie and Nick’s initial sadness at the sudden and unexpected death of their pet cat is dampened as they share fond memories of its laziness with family and neighbors. However, it is only after his demise that they learn of Fred’s rambunctious character, famous in the cat underworld for singing and entertaining by night. Through this simple tale, young children can be encouraged to remember loved ones in a richer and more varied way than simply by dwelling on the grief. The separation synonymous with death and its inevitable perversity is treated delicately. Given the funeral ritual which can be a daunting event in real life is dealt with in a positive and celebratory manner despite being tinged with sadness.

When a loved one passes away, family members deal with the loss differently. Although the death of anyone’s nearest and dearest can be difficult to fathom, that of a child is particularly distressing. Stillbirth, a very painful and for many a taboo subject is addressed in Pat Schwiebert’s book, We Were Gonna Have a Baby, But We Had an Angel Instead. This beautifully simplistic yet profound story told from the baby’s brother’s point of view recounts the excitement usually associated with pregnancy. Young children can identify easily with the little boy’s hopes and expectations as he looks forward to playing with his new sibling. This particular text also handles very sensitively the raw emotions experienced by the parents and grandparents which illustrates to children that adults hurt too sometimes. Added to this, the death of a child can bring with it a flurry of questions that are difficult if not impossible to answer. Jim Dainty’s book

Difficulties in not being able to articulate and share painful recollections with others is explored and effectively reflected through muted illustrations.

Bereavement

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Difficulties in not being able to articulate and share painful recollections with others is explored and effectively reflected through muted illustrations.
Mudge, Gill and Steve explores this necessary part of life from a spiritual angle. He creates a scenario where Gill and Steve’s parents support their neighbours Simon and Miriam as they come to terms with the death of their year-old son, Joe. Important theological concepts such as the fragility of the human body and the Christian notion of resurrection are discussed in terms accessible to children.

A New Baby and Mixed Emotions

On a more joyous note, the birth of a baby is usually a momentous and much anticipated occasion. Despite causing obvious changes in family routines, this new addition is normally greeted with love and excitement. Young children, however, can feel displaced in the affections of their parents, especially the mother’s. The very real fear of being usurped by someone you are supposed to love and accept can be daunting. Realising this to be the case, Elizabeth O’Loughlin wrote A New Baby Came Home. This honest account of the mixed emotions that can accompany such an upheaval in a little one’s life serves to vindicate those children who may not feel so delighted about getting a new sibling. It also highlights to those who are experiencing feelings of jealousy and rejection that often their friends struggle with these emotions too and that it is important to talk openly when having a challenging day. Such conversations fit perfectly into Circle Time where the children’s interests frequently drive the agenda.

Embedding Literature in the Curriculum

Choosing appropriate literature for use in the primary school requires careful planning on the part of each teacher. It is vital that the stories move educators in some meaningful way rather than merely fulfil the function of supporting a topic. Only by engaging on various levels with the materials and probing their potential can teachers truly utilise texts fully to promote and strengthen their school’s ethos. It is imperative that the literature chosen should reflect the complexities of life so that young children are enabled to build their capacity for recognising personal feelings that are mirrored in others’ experiences. This will help add much-needed comfort to those children who can feel bewildered and frightened by unfamiliar events in their lives.

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The Year of St Paul: ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor 11:1)

Fr Feidhlimidh Magennis, St Mary’s University College, Belfast

The Year of St Paul is a time to celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles and to reflect on the significance of his message for Christians today. We often share the feelings of the author of 2 Peter 3:15-16 who speaks of ‘our beloved Paul’ and the ‘wisdom given to him’, yet admits ‘there are some things in his letters which are hard to understand.’ Most teachers would consider that an understatement, yet there is much that Paul can teach us about the role of the teacher as we attempt to shape young communities of believers into mature Christians. I want to focus attention on a key element of Paul’s strategy and suggest how it may inform our engagement with young people today.

At the beginning of his first letter, he celebrates the success of his mission in Thessalonica and sums up the response of those believers saying, ‘And you became imitators of us, and of the Lord … so that you became an example to all the believers’ (1 Thess 1:6-7). Repeatedly in his letters, Paul exhorts his readers to imitate him, as he imitates the Lord Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9). To communicate the gospel, one does not simply pass on a message. The gospel is a lifestyle and is passed on by action and gesture, by the manner in which one acts and responds to others and to events. As Paul urges in Phil 4:9, ‘Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.’

Paul has modelled himself on Christ, and he expects his converts to model their lives on him. But what exactly does this modelling involve? And why is it so central to formation in the faith?

The second question takes us to the heart of Paul’s gospel. Paul the Jew lived in faithful obedience to the God of Israel. He lived according to God’s commandments as presented in the Law of Moses and encouraged others to do likewise. For Paul, Jesus was a menace who led the people astray with false claims to teach God’s ways – and he had been executed for this crime. Paul’s encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus turned his world upside-down. This Jesus was manifest to him as risen from the dead and now experiencing the fullness of life that God promises to his faithful people. Jesus is not the enemy of God but the very embodiment of God’s future life to be shared by all those who belong to him. The life that Paul strove to attain by faithful obedience to the Law was offered to those who accept Jesus as God’s messiah and commit themselves to him. ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live through the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20). To commit to Christ is to receive the gift of his Spirit; a share in his life, and that life is patterned by love and self-giving. In his faithful obedience to the Father, Jesus lived that pattern with absolute commitment and made it a living reality for all those who accept Christ’s call and attach themselves to him. This pattern of life is most visible on the Cross. It is at that moment of death that Christ lives life to the full and so enters into the fullness of life, the resurrection which he shares with all believers.

To imitate Christ means imitating this loving self-giving to others, this willingness to embrace the condition of others and transform that condition from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from suffering to salvation. Imitating Christ does not mean copying his every action and word, but embodying his pattern of love, selfless giving and faithful obedience to the Father. As the wonderful poem of Phil 2:6-11 suggests, such a pattern is not cheap and easy. It will involve letting go of self-interest and privilege, even to accepting the condition of a slave. But that is exactly what Paul did. He regularly points out the hardship he endured in order to carry out his mission. He insists that he never was a burden to the community but sought to support himself by his own labour. He hints at his efforts to let go of his traditions, customs and learned way of life in order to enter into the life-experiences of those whom he meets. Modelling the life of Christ did not come easily. It was not a matter of following a template of set actions and gestures. Rather, one must constantly learn to manifest that life of Christ in the circumstances of daily living with all its challenges and trials.

Paul sums up his strategy in 1 Cor 9:19-23. He imitates Christ by engaging fully in the conditions, experiences and hopes of those to whom he preaches, and by doing so he embodies faithful obedience to the Father, love of neighbour and selfless giving of the Spirit so as to transform the lives of those around him. He follows the example of Christ who entered a human condition fully to transform it from within. It is this ethos of imitation – of Christ and of those whom we teach - that enables today’s teacher to be an apostle to all people, and a formative influence on communities of young people.
Prayer and Religious Education in the Nursery

Helene Murtagh is principal and Cathy Tual a teacher at St John the Baptist Nursery School, Portadown, Co. Armagh

At St John the Baptist Nursery School prayer and faith formation permeate all aspects of our pre-school education programme. Our school identity is shaped by our commitment to the education ministry of the Catholic Church and it is our aim to help foster children’s personal, academic, spiritual and moral development through the delivery of a developmentally appropriate curriculum. We establish and maintain close connections with the parish, parents and the wider community by embracing The Vision outlined by the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (2006). Our caring ethos is expressed in our relationships within and beyond the school.

Being the first educators in the school system, we in the nursery school sector are in an immensely privileged position as we have considerable influence in young children’s lives. It is, therefore, our duty as Catholic educators to nourish and protect the faith of the children in our care in order to prepare them for life as well-adjusted and responsible adults. A curriculum with a well-grounded religious foundation profoundly enriches what the nursery has to offer.

Our Values and Approaches

The Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education (DENI, 2007) focuses on six areas of development in which children’s skills and concepts can be observed and assessed: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Early Language Development; Early Mathematical Development; Physical Development; The Arts and The World Around Us. In our role as nursery teachers we also integrate religious education and prayer throughout this curriculum, ensuring a more faith-based approach to learning. Helping children to take turns, share, express themselves and their feelings and become increasingly considerate to those around them is essential for lifelong learning. This is practised through the implementation of daily rules and routines and throughout all areas of play. Through discussion and stories, children are made aware of God’s presence around us – in nature, the environment and people’s acts of kindness.

In our nursery school, children are introduced to a culture of tolerance where people of diverse identities are recognised, welcomed, respected and cherished. As children begin to learn about the world around us, they are encouraged to care for, and respect the environment and celebrate the opportunities and wonders of God’s creation. Furthermore, young children are astutely aware of adult interaction and the behaviours they are exposed to. Modelling appropriate conduct such as using good manners, giving respect, showing compassion, using praise and generally leading by example is therefore an essential aspect of teamwork from the staff.

The Faith Dimension in Our Monthly Planning

Extensive planning and preparation is invested in the delivery of our curriculum. Each month a theme or topic is explored in relation to the areas for development set out by the Curricular Guidance. We know that the children’s spiritual and moral development is enhanced through the general ethos of the school, yet we recognise the need to provide, specific aims and objectives in relation to Religious Education in our monthly planner, focusing on teaching and learning strategies. This planner helps us both to evaluate our roles as Catholic educators in order to help children gain a deep and more reverent understanding of the principles of their faith, and also to recognise how we can improve upon our practice. One result of this is that we now visit the church more often throughout the year. Integrated into our monthly planning is the need to provide a new prayer and a new symbol of our faith each month: e.g. ‘The Angel of God Prayer’ and a candle to represent night and day – dark and light in January.

The Parish Priest visits the school regularly and talks to the children about our parish and his ministry. Finally, the highlight of our year is a Prayer Service which is held annually in the church so children can proudly sing and recite the songs and prayers they have learnt. Family members are invited to attend and we have welcomed the increasing presence of parents, guardians and grandparents who in return have praised the work of the school and our endeavours at sharing the teachings of the Church with the children. They are grateful that our religious programme has been very successful in promoting the children’s faith.

Children easily recognise the importance of God and the necessity of religious faith when religion and prayer are supported by their parents. The role of parents in the promotion of children’s faith is paramount. It is our privilege at St John’s to work closely with parents to intensify and reinforce their teachings so as to help ensure that their children grow up to be truthful and just in their dealings with others. This can be difficult for families, especially in today’s climate of challenging and changing cultural and moral contexts. It is, therefore, essential that we as teachers establish and maintain strong links with parents, effectively communicating the importance of sharing a common vision with all children.

As nursery teachers have the opportunity to help shape and influence very young children and assist them to develop into adaptable and well-rounded individuals. Our young children are the Church of today and tomorrow. It is therefore our aim and responsibility at St John’s to provide them with the opportunities to develop their personal, moral, spiritual and academic needs in light of the message of Christ. In our ever changing society, we welcome children of all faiths into our school and while helping children to reach their full potential, we encourage them to learn about themselves, about their relationship with others and about their relationship with God. It is wonderful work and it is an extremely rewarding profession.
Religious Education and the Revised Curriculum

Brenda Bannon is Head of RE at Loreto College, Omagh, Co. Tyrone

For those of us who recognise that Catholic Education is always more than curriculum content, we hold a great treasure in Religious Education. No matter what changes are introduced in schools in a rapidly changing world, RE acts as a conscience and a witness to eternal truths. This is not to suggest that RE lives in opposition to all change but rather that it provides a still-point and a challenge. We are constantly referring to the speed of change but in another sense, nothing changes. In many respects, educational initiatives are cyclical – constant re-inventions of the wheel.

A Limited Approach

At present in Northern Ireland, we are working with a ‘revised’ curriculum which places emphasis on cross-curricular skills, thinking skills, personal capabilities and ‘Assessment for Learning’ in order to enhance motivation and ensure connected learning across the curriculum. No longer is it sufficient for a student to excel in knowledge and understanding of a subject area. Employers require them to focus on key skills which prepare them for the world of work. The NI Curriculum aims to empower students to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives. It is about helping them prepare for life and work as individuals, as contributors to the economy and the contributors to society and as young citizens for learning across the curriculum. No longer is it sufficient for a student to excel in knowledge and understanding of a subject area. Employers require them to focus on key skills which prepare them for the world of work.

The Expertise and Creativity of RE Teachers

So, are we to despair? No. Our first response must be to embrace all that is on offer in the revised curriculum. Teachers of RE are among the most skilled in employing engaging and active teaching and learning methods. More than most traditional subjects, RE has always encouraged the development of personal capabilities and the importance of self-esteem, problem-solving and team work. Role-play and debate are not new methodologies in a subject which has always been pupil-centred. It is important for teachers of RE to share expertise and creativity with other colleagues and to find exciting ways of leading cross-curricular projects and suspended timetable days. For example, the planning of a theme like Justice could include Art, Geography, History and English. There are many opportunities to deepen learning which RE should seize.

Our second response must be to be vigilant. Without any intention to do so, Catholic schools can gradually, and almost imperceptibly, erode their own mission by buying heavily into the ‘new’ way without any deep reflection. For example, some of the content of Citizenship and Personal Development has been gleaned from RE course content, but with morality removed. How can a Catholic school live comfortably with some aspects of LLW if it is counter-cultural to a Christian view of the same issues? We must live with it, as it is prescribed by law, and that has been inevitable when so many schools have not properly invested in good RE teaching and when the government deems it necessary in a pluralistic society. It is essential though for Heads of RE to alert Senior Management Teams to the need to conduct regular audits to uncover areas of overlap and trespass; to monitor the confusion of two subject areas covering the same ground from two different philosophies. ‘Obey the Law as a good citizen’ versus ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Or more worryingly, in the area of sexual relationships – ‘By law, it is your right to have a consensual sexual relationship with anyone’, versus ‘God desires us to live as his beloved children.’ It is possible to deliver both messages when schools are vigilant. We need to dialogue. In this way, we do not end up in conflict with teachers who are sincerely trying to deliver Citizenship but instead, we attend their meetings, share our concerns and seek compromise.

Our third response is to be prophetic. There is little space in the busy world of schools for prophets (and certainly not for those who spread doom or hold back change!) However, there is a responsibility for Catholic principals and RE teachers to be voices of Gospel truth and eternal values. Where there is prayer, there will be witness. Real happiness for students does not lie in self-reflection and introspection but in generous service of others. In a culture of accountability, producing evidence that they have used skills to serve is becoming more important than the act of serving – which is not a Christian view or path. With humour and with gentleness, prophets must state the case. While many wonderful things are happening through the revised curriculum, the virtues of simplicity and humility are being neglected and sometimes, even scorned.

In conclusion, RE provides rich contexts for the revised curriculum and we must share them for the benefit of all. Our primary responsibility though is to keep asking those who promote the ‘Big Picture’ whose big picture it really is.
Our Ethos

In CCMS’s *Life to the Full: A Vision for Catholic Education* (1996), ethos is referred to as ‘the fundamental purpose of the school, its ultimate meaning and reference point for its value system.’ This challenges us as educationalists to think beyond the legal requirements of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

Academic attainment is only one part of what we do. Lord Adonis, a British Education Minister, addressing a Catholic Education Service conference in London in 2006 put it well when he said: ‘Your schools are strong on ethos, unashamed about propagating values as well as standards, and resolute in their mission to children and families of all backgrounds, including the least advantaged in society.’

At St Paul’s, we seize on every opportunity to promote and cultivate our school ethos. We actively engage our parents to play a visible role within the school. Parents attend each of our assemblies where, they not only listen to the pupils present the Word of God, but also develop their own understanding of faith through assemblies where, they not only listen to the pupils present the Word of God, but also develop their own understanding of faith through assemblies. The pupils play a key role in supporting the pastoral care system of the school. We have our ‘Buddy System’ which ensures that all pupils feel safe and are secure emotionally and physically. In extending our curriculum, we provide opportunities for parents and children to learn together in programmes such as ‘Parent Cook/Child Cook’ and ‘Parent and Child Art and Craft’. It is interesting to note that for these projects we have 100% attendance for each of the six week courses, an indication of the commitment that the parents have to their children and of what we are trying to achieve in the school.

A Place of Welcome

We have over thirty foreign national pupils in the school. Some arrive at St Paul’s with very little English. I recently watched how one child entered her classroom for the first time, clinging to her mum, sobbing as she faced a strange new world, new classmates, new culture, new language. I could only guess what anxiety she must have felt walking through that door. Yes, there were tears. I looked in on her a little while later. She was sitting on her teacher’s knee playing on the computer with other children beside her, communicating with her as if she had always been there. There was something very touching about this scene. It caused me to reflect on why parents from such diverse backgrounds choose to send their children to this school and to ask how we can do more as a school to support such children and families. Good practice is apparent all around the school: the various displays in many different languages; the unconditional love and commitment of the staff that is communicated to pupils from day one. It is found in our celebration of our cultural diversity.

Each year we set aside a day to celebrate our ‘One World Day’: an opportunity for us to learn to appreciate the richness of the various cultures that inhabit our school community. Last Christmas every pupil performed in the annual Carol Service, entitled ‘Christmas Around the World', in the Parish Church. For our pupils, diversity is the norm and we embrace it. It has become a part of our school ethos, our school identity. In our daily prayers we thank God for making each of us unique and we also thank him for making us a unique community.
On Being a School Governor

Sr Lucia Montague is a Dominican sister living in Belfast. She is former principal of Dominican College, Portstewart and St Dominic’s High School; member of St Mary’s University College Board since 1993; chairperson of the Board of Dominican College, Fortwilliam Park and member of the Board of Dominican College, Portstewart. She was also chair of two primary school boards of management in management, one of them a special school for children with dyslexia, Scoil An Cheathrúrraithe Alainn, Mulhuddart and St Rose’s Special School, Tallaght.

My first encounter with Boards of Governors was in 1974 when I was appointed Principal of a small grammar school. I was singularly enthusiastic about being principal and totally terrified by the level of expertise of the members of the Board of Governors – pastoral, legal, educational, financial, parental. At that time members of staff were not represented on the boards.

Very quickly I came to appreciate just what governors offer to schools and colleges and have never ceased to be grateful for the very expertise that so intimidated me when I was young and inexperienced. I have been told that there was a time and that there were schools where the Board merely rubber-stamped the decisions of the principal, whose power had no limits! Happily, that was not the case in my personal experience. I do not like to imagine the disasters I could have caused!

The Duties of Board Members

These involve areas as diverse as the appointment of staff, teaching and ancillary, discipline of staff and students, salaries of staff, internal promotions, expenditure and other matters relating to the actual fabric of the institution. The principal and bursar, the latter now frequently titled the Human Resources Officer, attend meetings and ensure that the agenda includes all relevant matters. They, in turn, are supported by other members of the Senior Leadership Team in the school or college.

That description of duties sounds very clinical and businesslike, and totally omits the whole community and formative aspect of being a Governor. In a Catholic school or college governors are responsible for the living out of the ethos of a religious order, a diocese or a parish, and both imbibe and disseminate this sense of the values of the institution. Sometimes this involves specific formation; frequently it is simply learning by example; the whole notion of the holding on to and passing on of a tradition. The actual owners of a school or college in the Catholic tradition are the trustees and the term should be understood as holding the trust and conveying it through the generations.

Probably the most important area of governance is the appointment and promotion of staff. This is where the concept of the ethos of the institution really comes into its own. It is a huge responsibility to make decisions which have such a profound effect on the lives of both the students and the appointed member of staff. Governor training sessions are now part of normal provision and this is very useful, but these deal mostly with the legalities of appointments. The sense of belonging to an institution, of ‘owning’ the institution, is what helps to ensure that appointments fulfil more than the legal requirements.

Financial accountability in the use of public funding is another grave responsibility. Happily, here again governors ensure that the finance officer or bursar is supported by their professionalism and experience. With the help of governors, schools each year have to revise the criteria for admission. This involves decisions that cross the borders of academic and vocational suitability and pastoral and family needs.

Sensitivity and an acute awareness of what exactly constitutes Catholic education are essential. Practising justice and charity within the law is a real challenge, but not an insuperable one.

Why be a School Governor?

Looking at the areas of responsibility of governors, one might well wonder who will do it, and why. There is no remuneration; a lot of each member’s free’ time is required. Meetings and interviews normally take place outside working hours. Those taking place during working time require all kinds of inconvenience and reshuffling. Invitations to various functions make further demands on time, while ensuring that governors have a good overall experience of the life of the school or college.

So, why be a governor? Governors are the unsung heroes of the educational system. At a time when the laity is being encouraged by the Church to take their rightful place in the Catholic community, the role of governor makes it possible to use gifts and experience that on the surface may seem to have more to do with the material than the spiritual. This inclination to separate life into secular and sacred highlights so much misunderstanding of the wholeness of human life and experience and may be the reason behind the reluctance of so many lay people to involve themselves in what they perceive to be ‘merely’ an extension of their secular, professional life. It is so often forgotten that the Church is in the world and that the world, God’s creation, is good.

My experience of Boards of Governors extends across nearly forty years, as principal or board member or both. My commitment to the role reflects the appreciation I have of the support, integrity and professionalism of governors during my years in school.
Our Journey Towards Confirmation
Cathy Harkin, Áine O’Kane and Estella Tohill-Reid are Year 7 pupils at St John’s Primary School, Swatragh, Co. Derry

We have just been confirmed and we would like to tell you a little about how we prepared for the special day. First, everyone who was to be confirmed had an extra special involvement in three Saturday Vigil Masses during the year in our parish as part of our journey of preparation for the sacrament. We belong to the Granaghan Parish and our church is called St John the Baptist’s.

Our first Mass had as its theme, ‘Enkindling the Spirit’. We reflected on how God’s Spirit works through ordinary people. We learned a poem about Moses and the Burning Bush – as you know God worked through him really powerfully. We recited the poem with seven pupils from St Bridget’s Primary School in Tirkane as they are also in our parish. Other children did the Scripture Readings and the Prayers of the Faithful. Two altar servers lit the Confirmation fire. Some pupils sang in the choir. St Bridget’s brought the gifts to the altar.

Our next Mass took up the theme, ‘Moved by the Spirit’. We were asked to think about how God wants us to help other people. In preparation for this Mass we pooled the money which each of us in Year 7 had earned by doing some jobs at home. We used the money to buy some goats to help poor people in Africa through the Trócaire gift plan. We included the Trócaire Gift Certificates in the gifts we presented during the Offertory Procession. The final Mass had the theme, ‘Called by Name’. The idea was to realise that Confirmation means that God has special plans for each one of us. During the celebration our priest, Father O’Doherty, called out our names, and then we went forward to the altar. Meanwhile everyone present was asked to pray for us. God calls us by name!

Other things happened too as part of our journey: just before our Confirmation on 26 April 2009 we had a Ceremony of Light in the Church when our parents lit our baptismal candles again and we all repeated our baptismal promises. There were other meetings for parents when we sang, did role plays and performed some Liturgical Movement – thanks to the help of Sister Perpetua. Bishop Hegarty came to confirm us and we had a great day. It was wonderful having our relations with us at a very special moment in our lives. We went to the school afterwards to have photographs taken with our families. All our preparation for this sacrament made it so much better: we were so grateful for all the involvement of our families and our parish in ‘Our journey towards Confirmation’.
**World Youth Day in Sydney, 2008**

**Shanna O’Neill** is a third year student from Silverbridge, Co. Down, at St Mary’s University College, Belfast.

Every two or three years young people from all over the world gather together in a place with the Pope for what is known as ‘World Youth Day’. It is a very happy occasion allowing young adults to be with the Pope and with each other. WYD 2008 brought 600,000 young people to Sydney. Pope Benedict asked us at the final Mass to bring that energy and enthusiasm home. Pope Benedict asked us at the final Mass to bring that energy and enthusiasm home. Pope Benedict asked us at the final Mass to bring that energy and enthusiasm home.

I was one of the 84 young people from both the Armagh and Dromore dioceses who made the exciting journey to be part of the experience. This was the twenty-third WYD and it followed the same basic itinerary as previous ones. First, the ‘Days in the Dioceses’, a week spent mostly in one of the many parishes surrounding Sydney preparing for a week of youth events and religious celebrations in Sydney. The Armagh contingent was especially fortunate in that we were assigned to the archdiocese of Wellington on New Zealand’s South Island. We spent six exhilarating and uplifting days there among its parishes and people.

Then to Sydney to join over a half a million other young pilgrims. The reality of such a number is hard to comprehend, even when you are part of it at the Opening Mass, the Stations of the Cross, or the events at Randwick Racecourse. The atmosphere was wonderful and unforgettable. The people of Sydney of all religions acknowledged that their city had become primary school teachers. The faith, energy and sense of community shown by the Filipinos was admired by us all, small in number, their impact was immense.

The next opportunity for the WYD will be in 2016.

The Magis Experience in Sydney

**Claire McGrath** from Laurencetown, Co. Armagh, and **Laura Curtis** from Newry, Co. Down, are both third year students at St Mary’s University College, Belfast, studying to become primary school teachers.

**The Magis Experience** in New Zealand, we in the Dromore diocesan group included seven Irish, seven Germans, five Singaporeans and an amazing group of over 20 Filipinos who acted as our co-ordinators; we were known as ‘New South Wales Group’. Our task for the week was entitled ‘The amazing race to God’!

After the preparatory week, it was time for WYD. The Opening Mass, the arrival of the Pope, the enacting of the Stations of the Cross and Closing Ceremony created so much energy and togetherness. To be apart of 600,000 people all gathered for one purpose was such a privilege and it has opened our eyes to a wider world and to so much that needs to be done.
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