Section 3

The World of the Student

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

(Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, n. 4)
Effective Religious Education is responsive to context and sensitive to the lives of the students. At times the Church stands in solidarity with society and supports movements towards, justice, peace and wholeness. However, there are also practices of oppression, poverty, discrimination and violence that must be challenged. The naming of significant influences on our students prompts us to share a vision of Christian hope: the good news of God’s love, incarnated through Jesus Christ in the community of the Church and animated by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the world.

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

Some of the key influences affecting students are as follows:

![Figure 3.1](image)

**OUR STUDENTS**
Our Students

- Each individual student is passing through a series of identifiable developmental levels. At each level all individuals have much in common.
- At the same time, every one is unique, possessing personal traits, abilities, experiences and readiness for more complex learning.
- A wide range of alternative values and ways of experiencing life are offered by the contemporary mass culture, especially through the communications media and advertising.
- Students come from a variety of cultural, economic, social and educational backgrounds.
- Only a proportion of students come from homes where the Catholic faith is regularly practised.
- Families have had a range of experiences, both positive and negative, within the Church.
- For many students, family life is complex and confusing.
- Adolescence can be a particularly challenging time.

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

(Pope John Paul II, The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium n. 9)
3.2 The Family

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

Some Relevant Considerations

1. It is within the family that each person’s religious sensitivities are first called to life. Love, trust, wonder, reassurance, belonging, gratitude, a growing sense of responsibility and commitment—all of these set the foundations for a religious education that will, hopefully, continue throughout life.

2. All families strive to provide rich, nurturing experiences for children. At times, families struggle with pressing social and personal problems. Relationships may be fragile; stability and effectiveness may be limited; an interest in, or understanding of, the religious development of children may be lacking.

3. While the majority of students may live in a traditional family, an increasing number are growing up in blended families, single-parent families or families based on de facto relationships.

4. Marriage remains the preferred arrangement for most people entering a relationship of commitment, but only sixty-five per cent of marriages are first marriages, compared with ninety per cent a generation ago. By the age of sixteen, eighteen per cent of Australian students will witness their parents’ divorce.

5. There is an increasing tendency to delay marriage and childbirth, and to have fewer children.

6. There is an increasing diversity in the cultural and religious backgrounds within families.
General Implications

• Students can be expected to bring a variety of experiences of family life to the study of the Religious Education curriculum. This has relevance for the images we use in presenting religious concepts and for the expectations we have of the students’ background, religious knowledge and experience.

• A number of students will be experiencing a sense of confusion and loss because of family dysfunction, conflict and break up.

• Some students will have poor role models and will have experienced limited support in developing an ethical and religious sensitivity.

• Many students will come from very supportive environments; many of these will demonstrate the most positive characteristics of youth: energy, optimism, openness, resilience and spiritual sensitivity.

• Some students will be able to develop the attributes of resilience through the influence of significant adults outside the family, through developing high expectations, and being able to contribute to something beyond themselves.

Local Implications

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

(Australian Catholic Bishops, Family Life in Australia: Our Hidden Treasure, 1993)
3.3 Australia within a Global Society

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

Some Relevant Considerations

1. As in every age, people strive to find a sense of meaning and fulfilment in their lives and a reason to hope.

2. Societal transformation is experienced in all aspects of life: communication, trade, employment, social and political activity. This impacts on core understandings and values.

3. The gap between rich and poor – both individuals and nations – continues to widen.

4. Society is increasingly multicultural and multi-faith with one in seven Australian residents having been born in a country where English is not the first language and Christianity is not always the dominant religion. This, however, is not reflected in all places, particularly in rural Australia.

5. Immigrants to Australia are from a widening background that includes Asia, South America, Oceania, the Middle East and Africa, as well as Europe.

6. There is much unfinished agenda that relates to reconciliation with indigenous Australians.

7. Many people experience an increasing sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness; Australia’s youth suicide rate is one of the highest in the world.

8. There is increasing sensitivity to the claims of the natural environment and the need to protect the ecosystem.

9. Rural Australia is facing significant changes and challenges, including a drift in population to cities, declining income, seemingly unusual climatic conditions, the loss of government, commercial and health services, and higher levels of suicide.

10. There is increased awareness of the impact of terrorism and military conflict throughout the world.

11. Sensitivities relating to the maintaining of Australia’s national borders are increasing.
General Implications

- It can be expected that many students will come from homes in which the trends within society are causing significant levels of confusion and uncertainty.

- School enrolments will reflect the composition of society. Many cultural backgrounds may be represented.

- Students will be influenced by the values of consumerism and materialism.

- Schools will be increasingly expected to accept responsibilities previously taken by families and to serve the national economy more directly.

- Students will be influenced by the more immediate reality of terrorist activity and its impact.

- The fragility of peace in the world will be a significant issue for many students, with some feeling a degree of insecurity and others being moved to various forms of action.

- Students will be affected by economic imbalance in both local and global society and may be actively involved in action for justice.

- International and national natural disasters will touch students, families and broader communities and demand a generous response.

Local Implications

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

  (Australian Catholic Bishops, Common Wealth for the Common Good: Wealth Distribution in Australia, 1992)
3.4 Employment

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

Some Relevant Considerations

1. Economic conditions are generally uncertain.

2. Many businesses and institutions are restructuring and reducing the number of employees. Work is increasingly unevenly distributed.

3. Many families are affected by unemployment and under-employment, especially in rural areas.

4. Changing work patterns impact on family relationships and lifestyles; in many families both parents are in paid employment outside the home.

5. There is a particularly high level of youth and rural unemployment.

6. Vocational opportunities change quickly with increasing demands for new skills.

7. Many students are in part-time employment whilst continuing their studies at school.
General Implications

- Many students come from families experiencing long working hours.
- Other students come from families suffering financial hardship, including unemployment.
- Many adolescents are anxious about their future employment prospects.
- More adolescents are in paid casual employment than ever before, and often face conflicting pressures in balancing family, study, work, recreation, community and church commitments.
- A strong vocational emphasis has been included in the contemporary secondary curriculum, much of it associated with employment-related competencies.
- Change in workplaces, including flexible hours and a broadened scope of the nature of work, allows some parents and students to thrive in a globalised work force.
- The provision of before- and after-school care is necessary for an increasing number of families.

Local Implications

- 'Human labour has a dignity because of the dignity of the person who works. Through work, women and men realize their humanity through using the gifts of the earth, building community and sharing in the work of the Creator.'
  
  (Australian Catholic Bishops, Statement on Unemployment, 1991)
There is a growing tendency for people to search for spiritual meaning and significance both within and outside the mainstream churches.

Some Relevant Considerations

1. Families reflect a range of attitudes towards conventional religious practice.

2. While the parish is of great importance to many families, Catholics vary significantly in their current religious beliefs and practices.

3. Some parents and other family members have had negative as well as positive experiences with organised religion.

4. There are tendencies towards more fundamentalist attitudes and practices in all religions.

5. There is a hunger for spiritual experience and an interest in what might be termed ‘New Age Alternatives’ to mainstream religion amongst some young people.

6. Positive societal forces – ‘signs of the times’ – stress the dignity of the human person and promote such values as compassion, inclusivity, tolerance, justice and reconciliation. Efforts are made to improve social structures, to value and celebrate cultural cohesion and diversity, to build community and to protect the environment. These reflect a spiritual reality which energises many people, including youth.
General Implications

• Many students arrive at school with limited experience of Catholic cultural traditions and symbols.

• While they may lack significant religious background experiences, a number of students wish to explore life questions of meaning and purpose.

• Students coming from a rich religious background and from families involved in parish life need appropriate educational and catechetical support.

• Students can be motivated to explore their own experiences and the major societal issues in the light of faith.

• Teachers are challenged to draw on the range of cultural experiences and expressions of faith of the various students.

• Teachers are challenged to provide opportunities for students to develop their spirituality.

Local Implications

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

(General Directory for Catechesis, n. 184)
3.6 Catholic Schools

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

Some Relevant Considerations

1. One in every five Australian students attends a Catholic school.

2. While the majority are Catholics, students and teachers in Catholic schools are from a range of faith backgrounds, are at different levels of faith development and have various levels of faith commitment.

3. As with all schools, parental expectations of Catholic schools are increasing, so schools are often expected to address many of the personal, social and religious issues once seen as the responsibility of home, parish and the wider community.

4. Catholic schools are constantly seeking to clarify their own identity and purpose amidst the pressures of materialism, consumerism, secularisation, individualism and the privatisation of belief.

5. Catholic schools are affected by contemporary social change and by industrial issues, government educational initiatives and legislation.
General Implications

- It is important for teachers in Catholic schools to understand and support the purpose of Catholic schooling, to be familiar with Catholic beliefs and practices, to understand the parish context of the school and to be sensitive to the significance of Catholic symbols and celebrations. It is also vital for teachers who are Catholic to be actively involved in parish religious and social life.

- Because it is based on a Catholic educational philosophy, the curriculum should be permeated by a religious dimension in all learning areas.

- Developments in educational practice, especially those designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning, can be expected to exercise a positive influence on Religious Education.

- There are increasing opportunities to create and develop partnerships between parents, teachers, clergy and education authorities in the work of the Catholic school. This is particularly evident in the increasing role of School Boards within Catholic schools.

- There is increasing variation in expectations relating to the purpose of Catholic schools.

Local Implications

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

  (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, n. 19)
3.7 The Peer Group

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

Some Relevant Considerations

1. The peer group can contribute to the growth of the individual, strengthening a sense of identity, self-esteem and self-confidence.

2. The group has considerable influence on the individual’s development of moral judgement as well as attitudes and values. This influence varies in nature and intensity from level to level.

3. The group provides an important context for interpreting life experiences and for developing new concepts.

4. A very important subset of the peer group is the friendship group, which not only provides a sense of belonging but also contributes significantly to the psychological well-being of the student.

5. Failure in peer relationships can have serious effects on the individual.

6. The peer group itself is influenced by wider cultural forces, including those of the mass media and the entertainment industry.
General Implications

• Helping students to develop healthy, positive relationships with peers can be of major pastoral significance for school, parish and home.

• Teachers act supportively when they strengthen the communal dimension of the classroom, assisting students to learn together in a safe and respectful atmosphere.

• The provision of opportunities for cooperative learning and group work is particularly appropriate in Religious Education.

• At times it can be most unrealistic to expect students to work and to express themselves outside the frame of reference of the peer group.

• The uniqueness of the individual and the rich variety of human differences should be celebrated and affirmed.


Local Implications

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

(Australian Catholic Bishops, Lean On Me, Youth Report, 1996)
In the recent past, options available for recreation and entertainment have increased dramatically. These occupy more space and time, and help define identity. One of the contributing factors has been increased affluence for many Australians and different attitudes to spending and incurring debt. This has also affected interactions within families and within society.

Some Relevant Considerations

1. Organised team sport can be significant for some students, but is no longer as dominant for all. Less structured and more individual activities such as skateboarding and computer games have increased in popularity.

2. With some exceptions, the reading of books is less common. What reading is done often involves influential pictorial magazines produced for particular interest groups.

3. Music is very important to students, but is now commonly experienced with video imagery, either at home or in entertainment centres.

4. There are more options available to many students to create music and video, both through traditional and electronic means.

5. Options in audio-visual entertainment have been extended beyond television and cinema to videotape, internet, CD, DVD and other digital technology.

6. For senior students, nightclubs have become popular centres for meeting, socializing and recreation.

7. The development of the Internet and mobile telephone technologies has led to an explosion in their usage. It has introduced new, popular means of communication by young people and impacted on written language.
General Implications

- It is important for teachers in Catholic schools to understand the role of recreation and entertainment in the lives of their students.
- Students today are involved in more unstructured and passive recreational activity.
- Technology is very significant in the recreation of students, particularly audio-visual media and the Internet.
- The written word is less significant in the recreational lives of students with it being largely replaced by visual moving images. This has an impact on how students derive meaning.
- Technology is affecting the ways in which the written word is used and understood.
- Young people are identified and targeted as a market for advertising.

Local Implications

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3.9 Technologies and Media

Much of the reality and experience of students is mediated through electronic technologies and media.

Some Relevant Considerations

1. Electronic technologies have become central to much of the leisure and work of students, whether it be computers, sound and vision equipment, console games, mobile telephones, calculators or personal organizers. These technologies are becoming more sophisticated, accessible and affordable.

2. Electronic technologies are increasingly important in schools, both as areas of study and as tools for learning.

3. The rate of change in all technologies and media (particularly electronic) has accelerated increasingly, tending to weaken a sense of permanence.

4. Means of communication have been transformed through digital technology, mobile telephones and the Internet.

5. Access to electronic information crosses national and cultural boundaries. Horizons are now both global and local.

6. Electronic information tends to assume a high level of authority and acceptance. It is sometimes difficult to determine its validity.

7. The sources of information, conveyed in both image and sound, have increased in number. Meaning is often conveyed and received in small discrete units, as in advertisements and news stories.

8. Media are being revolutionised through digital technology and the Internet. SMS facilities provide a new mode of communication which may lead to a lessened degree of personal contact.
General Implications

- Technology is having an increasing impact on every aspect of communal life. In particular, computers have become essential to modern life – home, work and school. Those without access or skills are increasingly at a disadvantage.

- The way electronic technology is valued and discussed often gives it a status greater than that of other tools and instruments of learning, communication and entertainment.

- Societal values and ways of understanding life are greatly influenced by the mass media and advertising.

- Language is changing as the terminology and conventions of the Internet and technology cross over into the general community.

- The availability and access to almost unlimited communication and information may challenge established centres of values and morality.

Local Implications

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

The developmental levels from early childhood to late adolescence approximately coincide with the six levels around which the general curriculum is organised in Victoria/Tasmania.

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

Descriptions of typical characteristics of learners in the different levels can often stimulate identification of desirable teaching practice. Such descriptions are provided in the resource booklets – Support Documentation for Teachers and Parents – and are summarized here.
Level 1 & 2 (P - Grade 2)

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

Level 3 (Grades 3 & 4)

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

‘The various school subjects do not present only knowledge to be attained, but also values to be acquired and truths to be discovered.’

(The Catholic School, n.39)
Level 4 (Grades 5 & 6)
These children may be less spontaneous but are generally more self-motivated and capable of absorbing considerable information. More sophisticated reasoning gives them greater understanding of consequences and a greater capacity for using talk to justify assertions and opinions. Values and judgements are now more strongly influenced by peers, and self-esteem is partly determined by mastery of tasks.

Level 5 (Years 7 & 8)
During these early years of secondary school, many students move into the challenging period of adolescence. The physical and emotional changes of puberty create new opportunities for growth. New intellectual capacities become obvious with students being more capable of formal, logical thinking through which they interpret data, predict, generalise and draw conclusions. They begin to experiment with a range of roles as they seek to clarify personal identity. The conventions of the peer group provide a powerful framework for interpreting the world and making meaning.
Level 6 (Years 9 & 10)

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

Post-Compulsory (Years 11 & 12)

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

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

1 Corinthians 13:11
A Guiding Imperative:

Respect for the Individual

The students in Catholic schools do not comprise an homogeneous group. They exhibit a rich diversity in terms of their most pressing individual needs, their cultural, social and economic backgrounds, their personal qualities, their level of development and the experiences they have encountered in life. They are also from a range of faith backgrounds, are at different levels of faith development and have various levels of faith commitment.

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

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

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

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

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

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