

RELIGIOUS ETHOS/CULTURE

Scope: This policy applies to St Patrick's College ('the College') Mackay conducted by Catholic Education, Diocese of Rockhampton (referred to as Catholic Education in the document).

1. POLICY STATEMENT

Background: The ECSIP finding (2015) conducted by the University of Leuven in Belgium, clearly identifies the College as a 'Dialogue School' among the four types of Catholic school cultures. This is defined as a Catholic school in the midst of cultural and religious plurality. This school deliberately puts emphasis on its Catholic inspiration, while it simultaneously takes the multicultural world seriously. A multiplicity of voices, views and perspectives are recognised and engaged as contributions to the dialogue. A preferential option for the Catholic story and message sets the tone for this dialogue. Receptivity and openness to what is different is a prerequisite to re-profile the Catholic faith in the middle of plural culture (*Recontextualisation*). In other words: in the midst of plurality we search for what it means to be Catholic today; as Catholics we search for a way to live in the middle of plurality.

Challenges: The College recognises the danger of slipping into Secularisation whereby in daily school life Catholic specificity fades away. Catholic signs and symbols disappear, rituals no longer take place and references to religion vanish from everyday discourse. At the same time, it recognises not to succumb to the temptation of Reconfessionalisation, a culture which expresses little desire to engage with diversity or to develop the Catholic tradition in interaction with changing times.

Policy: Instead St Patrick's opts for a *Recontextualisation* of its Catholic school identity. This model is fitting for a Catholic school with a diversifying school population. The school includes a significant and recognisable group of Catholic believers. *Recontextualisation* aims at a reinterpreted understanding of the Catholic faith in the contemporary diversifying world (*tradition development*). The encounter and conversation between different views is being moderated by a clear preferential option for the Catholic faith. Out of its own inherent strength and depth, Christianity's voice is allowed to resonate amid a multiplicity of voices (*multi-correlation*). *Recontextualisation* re-interprets the Catholic faith in a pluralised, contemporary cultural context. Plurality is recognised and valued as such, while the focus on Catholic identity is maintained.

2. DESCRIPTION

According to the ECSIP Research findings (2015) the College shows itself to be a Catholic college within which a strong faith community is present. The majority of the teachers and school leadership share a religious affiliation with Christianity and, more specifically, with the Catholic faith 59.9% of the adults and 45.6% of the students support the Catholic faith, though not without a critical eye. Most of the respondents support the Catholic identity of the College. 80.3% of the adults and 37.5% of the students clearly support its religious identity. Importantly, 23.7% of the students do not really care about the College's Catholic identity, while 25.4% support it only passively. Additionally, most of the respondents have a personal prayer life of some kind: 86.7% of the adults and about three fifths of students pray either regularly or irregularly. This association is a key factor for enhancing the College's Catholic identity.

At the College, it seems that while students have mostly outgrown their *Literal Believing* style, they tend to start *Relativising* faith or begin discarding it altogether instead of entering into a hermeneutical, symbolical way of relating to faith (i.e., *Post-Critical Belief*). In other words, while ideally the drop in *Literal Belief* would be compensated by a rise in *Post-Critical Belief*, these students drift towards the non-believing cognitive attitudes.

A close look at the ECSIP results also points out some potential challenges and critical questions in the area of Catholic school identity. While adults and students currently recognise that the College is currently a Dialogue school, the students most highly favour *Relativism*, a cognitive stance that is religiously unbelieving. As *Relativism* is the predominant perspective of today, these results are not entirely unexpected for students in a senior secondary college. Decreasing resistance to *secularisation* among the students is also an ever-developing challenge. It is a general trend that students, as

they grow older, are inclined to show more support for *secularisation*, which becomes especially evident in secondary colleges, 41.3% of the students indicate that they would prefer to attend a *secularised* school. While internal plurality is taken to heart in a secularised environment, a preferential option for Christianity over and above other religions and life philosophies is rejected, because it is considered to hinder personal freedom and free interaction.

3. IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

The College therefore faces the challenging task of supporting its students in successfully making the transition from *Literal Belief* to *Post-Critical Belief* rather than the non-believing options of *External Critique* and *Relativism*. It entails helping them to nurture a symbolic and hermeneutical way of thinking.

It is important to be aware of the decreasing support for the *Dialogue* School and decreasing resistance against secularisation among the students. The school must emphasise its Catholic identity and communicate this identity clearly to the students. Students should be encouraged to actively participate in the processes of dialogue, both as listeners and speakers. The ECSIP research indicates a growing student affinity for a secularised school culture where the relation between individuals remains free of engagement or obligations. It is a College which adopts a 'neutral' stand: philosophies of life or religions should never be imposed top-down and should never suggest what another person should or should not think or do.

4. SOME ECSIP RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nurturing of *Post-Critical Belief*

Students are gently guided towards *Post-Critical Belief*. In their short time at the College, some students will be coming from a *Literal Believing* education, others from a predominantly *Externally Critical* angle, while most, as the survey research shows, will be of a more *Relativistic* outlook. In addressing these various perspectives, it might be helpful if staff members witness of their own faith and of the way they experience the presence of the transcendent in their own lives. Nothing is more powerful than the testimony of the teachers' own passion for religion. After all, from the early beginnings the Christian faith itself spread primarily through people who testified of the importance of Christ and God in their lives. Spreading faith happened particularly *ex auditu*: by speaking and hearing about it. This remains a powerful strategy today. Rather than glossing over personal difficulties, the teachers could demonstrate to their students a way of believing that is both aware of the multiplicity of belief options (*Relativism*) and the failures of religion (*External Critique*), but ultimately sees the Catholic faith as a journey buoyed and sustained by fresh interpretations each new day (*Post-Critical Belief*). Early on, the adults might allow the students to participate in their own faith experiences through both the highs and lows, instead of relaying a *Literal Believing* attitude of which students would be incredulous. However, it is vitally important that this witnessing of faith by school staff is expressed in a context without any compulsion. Openness for other ideologies, religions and life philosophies remains crucial. The main goal of Catholic schools, after all, is offering a thorough education based on a Christian pedagogy – not the evangelisation of its students.

2. Caution for unilateral *Reconfessionalising* and *Monological* tendencies

Many adults and students recognise *Reconfessionalisation* on the factual level, while strong opposition towards this type increases among the students on the normative level. A *Reconfessionalising* approach attempts to offer and represent the strength and beauty of the Catholic tradition in a pure, unadulterated way. Although some *Reconfessionalisation* is needed – especially in a *Secularising* context where the students' affinity with the Catholic faith is slowly waning – it must be undertaken with caution.

3. Diversity as an opportunity to explore and strengthen Catholic school identity

ECSIP suggests taking the existing diversity at school and in society as a positive opportunity to affirm a *Dialogical* and *Recontextualising* Catholic school identity instead of a threat. From the perspective of Catholic identity, respect and openness for otherness must be highlighted. It is recommended that St Patrick's College would actively search for opportunities to welcome the "other" into the school community. After all, only when we are confronted with someone who thinks, acts or believes differently, do we feel ourselves encouraged to think about and articulate our own specific identity. As the students and adults at the College already indicate a wish for more openness to diversity, it is recommended that the school should continue to nurture a spirit of mutual, open and respectful *Dialogue*.



4. Grounding social justice in its Catholic roots

ECSIP suggests that the College continues to explicitly point to the Catholic inspiration for the community's social justice activities. It is recommended that the school staff clearly demonstrate how Catholicism inspires and motivates social actions. After all, concern for the 'other' is not merely the Catholic faith keeping up with the times, but has been an essential part of Christianity from its beginnings.

5. The primacy of prayer

ECSIP holds that one of the most fitting ways to communicate the Catholic faith to a new generation and to foster a vibrant Catholic school community is to encourage the development of Catholic spirituality with inherent solidarity. While a majority of respondents have a personal prayer life of some kind, some more active while others are less regular, and they desire to foster their school as a place to grow closer to God, we strongly suggest that these aspects be continuously developed so that it clearly shows a Catholic faith marked by solidarity.

6. Staff formation

Staff formation is vital to the future of Catholic school identity. Ongoing training and formation for school leaders and teachers on a cognitive, but also on a personal and spiritual level, should enable them to relate to the Catholic faith in a *Post-Critical and Recontextualised* way.

7. Implementation: creating a Catholic school identity team

When feasible, we suggest establishing a College team that can facilitate the review of St Patrick's ECSIP report, to plan and envision a contextual response, identify priorities, implement plans, provide leadership, and promote collaboration.