

‘Change Management in Catholic Secondary Schools in Australasia’

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Teach NZ for selecting me for a Principals’ sabbatical in 2018. The experience was invaluable and this initiative is one which I encourage all other Principals to consider being a part of.

I wish to thank all of the secondary school Principals of the eight schools that I interviewed. The collegiality of all of you was much appreciated – thank you all for being so free with your time and allowing me to talk with you for several hours each. I enjoyed very much the comment from one of our Australian counterparts when they referred to Australia as being the East Island of New Zealand!

Finally thank you to my Board of Trustees for allowing me to have the time off school which gave me time to evaluate change in our school and what needed to be addressed in the near future.

Preamble

As a Principal in a small isolated Catholic secondary school I found 2017 to be a challenging year in terms of changes in education legislation including changes in the Health and Safety Act that align to the education sector. I was interested to know if other Catholic secondary school Principals in New Zealand and Australia had similar challenges to me and what other unique, if any, challenges they and their schools faced in recent times. Were there different challenges for New Zealand and Australian Catholic secondary schools?

I decided on four quite open questions that I would ask Principals in a range of Catholic secondary schools to obtain qualitative data. By comparing and contrasting data from the eight schools I visited, four in NZ and four in Australia, I was able to identify some common issues and some other issues that were specific to the various schools.

I found that I had to remove pre-presumptions from my questioning and keep an open mind. As is the case with any research, my experiences and previous change management challenges could have influenced my findings.

I do not intend this report to be long-winded nor in the form of a thesis write-up. I will not be supporting my findings with references etc. however I do include some recommended readings at the end of my report.

Methodology

Four Questions asked

1. What major challenges has your school faced over the past five years?
2. How does your school keep focussed on its Special Catholic character?
3. What have been the major change management issues you as Principal have faced at school?
4. What does 21st Century learning look like in your school?

Notes were taken down by me during my interviews with the Principals and most interviews were recorded with their permission.

The secondary schools were selected based on them having a Marist or Mercy Sisters' background which is the background of my school. I chose schools that were in areas of interest to me and were in locations that I had either relatives or friends to stay with.

The types of school, coeducational or single sex and old or new, did not have any bearing on my selection of them although I did unintentionally end up with a good spread of school types.

In Australia I visited two schools in Canberra and two in Sydney. In New Zealand I visited two schools in Wellington and one each in Dunedin and Invercargill.

The schools and Principals that I visited were as follows;

School	Description	Principal
John Paul II College (Canberra)	Coeducational, Year 7-12, Roll 800	Catherine Rey
Daramalan College (Canberra)	Coeducational, Year 7-12, Roll 1420	Rita Daniels
Paramatta Marist High School (Sydney)	Single sex boys, Year 7-12, roll 1050	Mark Pauschmann
North Shore Marist College (Sydney)	Single sex boys (Coed from 2019), Year 7-12, roll 850	Tony Duncan
St Mary's College (Wellington)	Single sex girls, Years 9-13, roll 640.	Catherine Ryan (absent) (Acting – Helen Hardwick)
St Parick's Town (Wellington)	Single sex boys, Year 9 – 13, roll 816	Neal Swindells
Kavanagh College (Dunedin)	Coeducational, Year 7-12, Roll 802	Tracy O'Brien
Verdon College (Invercargill)	Coeducational, Year 7-12, Roll 706	Jarlath Kelly

Findings

1. Major challenges the schools have faced over the past five years?

All schools have faced significant challenges over the past few years. The use of computer technology in schools has created on-going demands on resources although most of the schools reported that BYOD (Bring Your Own Devices) had helped ease the costs to the school.

All schools visited had some staffing issues but it was interesting to note that there were less issues for the Australian schools that were visited.

The changes in teaching pedagogy have been a challenge for all schools visited and that issue varied from school to school depending on what approach they had adopted when implementing the change. Basically, the way I see it, schools have the option of three teaching pedagogies – being traditional and teacher centred, being cross curricula with contextual learning (often involving project based learning) and finally being a mixture of both of these teaching pedagogies. At John Paul II College in Canberra, for example, about a third of the students' lessons were timetabled into vertical classes (Houses) for individual learning time (ILT). The vertical classes had around eighty students with three house teachers supporting them. It was an interesting comment made by the Principal there that their system of open for learning with the vertical classes work well but it was a challenge for new staff that hadn't worked that collaborative way before. "The success of this style of teaching is dependent on the staff-staff relationships". The Principal there experienced a staff member leaving as they were not familiar with, nor comfortable with, team teaching or team student support. John Paul II College is a new school and they have had a blank canvas to work on in regards to their teaching and learning strategies.

Generally the Australian schools had fewer issues when recruiting teaching staff than their New Zealand counterparts and Wellington schools had less problems in this area than the South Island schools.

2. How do the schools keep focussed on their Special Catholic Character?

All of the Principals spoken to had clear expectations for their schools in this area. The selection of staff was seen as paramount in maintaining the Catholic ethos in their schools. The Australian schools had a different attitude towards employing non-Catholic staff and while they do not have a quota/formula to work to like the New Schools in regards to tagged and non-tagged teachers they still maintained a significant proportion of Catholic teachers in their staff but they are very much interested in the best person for the job – be they Catholic or otherwise.

Interestingly the role of the Boards of Trustees for the Australian schools had much more of an advisory nature when appointing staff and in the general running of the school. This compared to the New Zealand school system in which the Principals are often seen more as a CEO than the leader of the school, which in recent times has become more the role of the chairperson of the Board in many schools based on my observations.

3. The major change management issues Principals have faced in recent times at their schools?

With the Boards of Trustees having more of an advisory role in Australia it was interesting to hear of the various challenges that the visited schools in both countries have had in recent times.

Without exception all of the schools in Australia faced growing rolls and an increase in demand on their resources. The Australian schools were all looking to the future, at least five years ahead, and were looking at major building plans. The Australian schools were very focused on leadership capacity and they targeted individuals at an early stage in their careers for future school leaders.

Collusion between the Catholic schools, especially regionally, was found to be strong in Australia and this is also the case in New Zealand, although in NZ possibly due to the smaller number of Catholic secondary schools here, the national Catholic secondary schools association from my observation may be stronger here in terms of the dissemination of information and regular contacts with each other (the Principals).

Gaining suitable staff for their schools was a common theme for all the NZ secondary schools especially in specific learning areas such as Religious Education, Mathematics and the Sciences. The Australian schools had no major issues gaining suitably qualified staff.

The Australian schools seemed to be overall better resourced than their the NZ schools and I couldn't help but wonder if our present diocesan -funding model for many of our Catholic secondary schools in NZ is flawed and needs to be up-dated to better suit 21st century teaching and learning.

4. What does 21st Century learning look like in the schools?

21st learning in all of the schools visited in Australia and New Zealand involves students using Bring Your Own Devices (BYOD) in all of their subjects. It involves contextual learning to varying degrees. Some of the schools had continued with a traditional curriculum, often teacher directed, while others embraced student centred and project based learning.

Non of the schools visited were totally immersed in digital learning. The salient point here is that all of the school Principals in Australia and NZ saw the value in student –

teacher relationships and they considered this to be a key component of what made their schools Catholic.

Full school masses as a collective celebration of Christ was seen as being central to the Catholic ethos of the schools. All of the schools used Christian symbolism to reflect their Catholic base. The schools all sounded Catholic, evident from the way students and staff mixed and spoke to each other. All of the students that I spoke to at the schools were proud of their school and their school's traditions.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by the Catholic secondary schools in Australia and NZ are very similar. Gaining suitable staff in Australia on the surface does appear to be easier and I suspect that is a numbers game and quite possibly also due to better pay rates. Working conditions I felt were very similar in both countries. League tables are a big issue for the Australian schools, more so than for the NZ schools.

All of the schools going into the future will have to grapple with the 'traditional teaching and traditional curriculum' versus 'cross curricula project and inquiry learning' problem. The answer to this being what is required by their communities as it is clear to all the Principals interviewed, there is no one best way of doing things but one should not be afraid of change. Neither however should change be made for changes sake.

The question communities have to answer is 'what is best for our students?' There is no magic bullet! If schools are considering working with cross-curricula and vertical form/subject classes in an open for learning environment staff relationships are essential if they are to work well.

Reading works by John Hattie in relation to 'inquiry and project based learning' and works by Russell Bishop on 'teacher – student relationships' are recommended as support and back-ground information for my project.