

Educational trends in Catholic high schools

Author: Robert R. Newton

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2443>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Published in *Contemporary issues in Catholic high schools*, pp. 18-23

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.

EDUCATIONAL TRENDS IN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

This is a time of unusual interest in and serious examination of the curriculum in Catholic high schools. Caught between the surge for a more socially relevant and distinctively Catholic curriculum on the one hand and the pull back to the basics and higher SAT scores on the other, Catholic high school educators are searching for ways to integrate these competing demands. The educational horizon seems to offer no apparent or easy solution to these 'environmental pressures' nor to the question of how scarce resources should be allocated to produce a balanced educational program. At the same time, in the past four or five years certain trends have taken root in Catholic secondary education and either directly or indirectly are altering the direction of the high schools.

How can these trends be described? Many approaches are possible; I prefer to approach the topic by focusing on what I consider to be the essence, the defining characteristics of a Catholic high school--schooling which takes place in a highly personal and religious environment. There are three elements: the academic, the human, and the explicitly religious. Obviously, these dimensions are interwoven and to some extent inseparable in the actual operation of a school. However, for purposes of discerning trends, it is useful to regard them as separate spheres.

A Prenote. In thinking about the educational program in a Catholic high school it is important to remember that students very much pass through their high school experience and are actually present in school for a very limited time over a period of four years. A school is in contact with the student minimally for 30 of the 168 hours in the week (18%). With summer vacation, this figure is reduced to more like (12%) of the year actually spent in the high school. Obviously, the influence and goals of Catholic high school educators, no matter how lofty, how energetically pursued, must be limited.

I. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

There are four trends which have had and will continue to have an important impact on the religious dimension of Catholic high schools: increasing awareness and application of the insights of developmental psychology, insistence on education for social justice- a redefinition of the responsibilities for religious formation, and the systematization of planning procedures for religious goals.

Developmentalism - Influenced by the work of developmental psychologists such as Piaget, Kohlberg and Fowler, Catholic schools have gradually drawn back from the notion that the product of the Catholic schools should be a 'once and for all complete Catholic', a person who emerges from his/her Catholic schooling with all of the religious ideas, values and practices he/she needs to live out a fully Catholic life. Rather, it is now clear that adolescents can comprehend religious and moral realities only within a relatively narrow framework.

Students must be taken at their present stage of development and be prepared to move toward the next stage into which, at some time in their life long after they have left the high school, they may develop. This realization has dramatic implications for high school programs.

It means a shift away from an attempt to communicate a 'complete body of religious knowledge and practice' to an emphasis on developing skill in how to grow and learn in the various areas of religious development. For example, instead of attempting to give answers to all of the moral dilemmas which are currently regarded as important or which the school thinks will eventually face a Catholic in his/her lifetime, the emphasis has shifted to developing the student's ability to reason morally and to interpret dilemmas from a Catholic perspective. Content is not abandoned but is seen as the context in which students develop a personal capacity to solve moral dilemmas. The same approach to developing capacities can be emphasized in other areas of religious growth: stressing skill in how to read the scriptures, emphasizing the ability to grow spiritually (e.g., to pray) rather than solution of all the religious problems of adolescence, stressing the capacity to understand how speculative theologians give contemporary understanding to traditional beliefs rather than thorough knowledge of all possible dogmatic statements, etc.

Obviously, I am overemphasizing the importance of developing capacities for future growth at the expense of an emphasis on communicating more content. There is a legitimate tension here. In the long run, however, I am convinced it is more important to teach a person how to grow spiritually. If Catholic schools were preparing students for a stable Church environment (as they were 15 years ago), greater emphasis on accurate communication of the content of the tradition would be appropriate. However, today students must be prepared for a changing Church and a shifting religious environment and must be able to devise creative Catholic responses to religious and moral challenges about which their high school mentors can only speculate today. An unstable and rapidly changing environment calls for a socialization process which equips the person to adapt.

Social Justice - No one who is aware of the emphases emerging from official sources in the Church--from bishops conferences to statements of religious congregations--has failed to notice the shift in emphasis towards the social justice dimensions of the Christian vocation. Obviously it is not something new as much as an aspect of the tradition which has been brought into higher relief by the Christian conscience as it responds to contemporary problems. As it has emerged, this new emphasis has been as problematic for Catholic schools.

On the one hand, Catholic high school educators have their hands full just worrying about the personal religious development of students. On the other hand, it seems the social justice emphasis is being proposed as the overriding purpose of Catholic schooling--that the schools produce Christian social reformers, faith which does justice, etc. Obviously, personal religious development and concern for others are not completely distinct goals but they are different.

emphases; and it is not immediately clear how they can be joined. There have been many worthwhile efforts: service program, programs, curriculum materials to insert justice issues into the curriculum (hunger kits, peace studies, liberation theology courses, international development simulations, etc.), programs to put students (and faculty) into contact with the realities of social injustice, etc. All of these efforts have been good but most seem to have been 'pasted on' to the existing school operation, to be an inadequate response to the dramatic challenge the Church is posing to the schools. The 'trend' toward social justice will continue in Catholic high schools, not only in terms of the activities mentioned but also in a search of a more theoretical integrating vision which, without doing violence to the integrity of the academic program and sensitive to the adolescent's stage of development, identifies the way in which the total school process promotes an active personal sense of Christian justice.

Responsibility for Religious Formation - More and more it has become clear that the explicitly religious goals of Catholic high schools are not solely the responsibility of the religion department or chaplain or members of the religious group operating the school; rather the school's pastoral goals are the responsibility of every member of the faculty. Though faculty members may not be expected to teach religion since this requires technical knowledge both of content and methodology, each faculty member, no matter what his/her subject area, can be expected to contribute to the religious formation of students. This means active interest and participation in the pastoral programs of the school: retreats, liturgical events, service programs, personal religious discussions with students, etc. No longer is it out of place to ask applicants for teaching positions what they expect to contribute to the religious goals of the school; nor is it inappropriate to evaluate current faculty members on what they have contributed to this important and distinctive aim of the school. The expectation that all faculty will share the responsibility for religious formation is one of the major trends which is changing our perception of how the contemporary Catholic school achieves its religious aims.

Systematic Planning - The final trend which has emerged in the religious dimensions of the Catholic high school curriculum is the systematic way in which the schools are currently pursuing their religious objectives. Attempts have been made to apply, sometimes poorly, but nonetheless seriously, a variety of methods which involve more rigorous planning, implementation and evaluation of religious education and formation programs. Lofty but often vague goals are being reduced to specific, carefully sequenced objectives; alternative programs have been reviewed in the light of predetermined objectives--with the obvious implication that, on the basis of evaluative data, programs will be modified or changed. It is an important and pervasive trend which has the potential, if applied properly, to make Catholic high schools more purposeful and effective in achieving their religious goals.

II. PERSONAL DIMENSION

A Catholic school was defined as a place where schooling takes place in a religious and personal environment. Two emerging major trends are discernable in the 'human environment' which are strengthening the personal dimension of the Catholic secondary school apostolate: 1) a variety of programs and innovations which give contemporary expression to the concern for the individual, and 2) an emphasis on the community aspect of a Catholic school.

New Forms of Personal Concern - Catholic schools, many of which have grown in size and complexity, have realized that it is not enough to assume that a Catholic school will, without further planning, provide the means for personal concern for each student. The response has been to structure into the normal operating procedures of the school mechanisms which devote time and resources to creating and maintaining personal rapport with each student. The teacher/advisor concept is such a mechanism; it communicates two messages: to the student--that there is a faculty member who will take special interest in you; to the faculty member--you are the focus of the school's personal interest in and responsibility for this student.

Concern for the personal dimension has also resulted in a wider knowledge of and concern for the affective growth of students. Many counseling staffs have added group dynamics experiences which allow students to probe interpersonal issues more deeply and to understand more fully their relationship with their peers. Small group sessions in various disciplines have also promoted a closer, more personal atmosphere.

The realization of the impact of family on student success or happiness has meant the expansion of the role of the school as a referral agency for community resources to assist students and their families in dealing with personal or family problems.

Building Community - The most obvious and highly publicized effort has been the attempt to view the school as a community of faith and to establish a sense of involvement on the basis of shared religious beliefs. It is interesting to note that preliminary findings of research conducted at the Center for Research in Private Education at the University of San Francisco has shown the most characteristic element of the Catholic schools in British Columbia is the strong sense of community and of mutual commitment to one another that exists among parents, students and faculty. It is the sense of community which provides the context in which more productive teaching/learning can take place.

A further impetus towards the explicit effort to build community has been the diversity, and in some cases, disunity which has marked the Church in the years since Vatican II. Differing theological and spiritual approaches, as well as a heavy dose of uncertainty about how we express what we believe or what is right, has produced a need to build the community aspect of Catholic schools in a way which was unnecessary when the Church was undisturbed by internal controversy or conflict.

Catholic schools will need to continue to devote time and resources to maintaining a highly personal and communitarian spirit that has always been at the heart of the Catholic school. Clearly the lesson of higher education is that once the concern for the individual declines and the sense of community disappears, Catholic colleges appear to be little different from their secular counterparts.

III. THE ACADEMIC DIMENSION

The immediate purpose of Catholic schools is schooling. When parents send their children to Catholic schools, they expect that they will be educated in a way which will prepare them for the world of higher education or work. Schooling rather than religious or personal development is where Catholic high school educators spend the bulk of their time--on planning, executing and evaluating strong academic programs. Three important trends are emerging in Catholic secondary schooling: a return to traditional content, an emphasis on intellectual skills, and the development of greater self-direction among students.

Content - I foresee a return in Catholic schools to traditional content. This statement should not be equated with the reactionary 'back to the basics movement'. In high schools as well as colleges, too much was 'given away' in the late sixties and early seventies in response to student pressures and demands. There are three principles for determining the content of the curriculum: the structure of the discipline (what the discipline says it is most important to know), what the faculty wish to teach (because of special expertise or interest), and what the students are interested in studying. In the recent past, the emphasis shifted away from the first two of these principles towards the third. I see a return to emphasis on the first of these principles, without eliminating student and faculty interests, but definitely returning to a curriculum with strong content. It will be a curriculum which aims at communicating a significant portion of the cultural heritage mainly through a study of the enduring books, concepts and ideas that are the foundations of Western Civilization.

Intellectual Skills - There will also be a return to an emphasis on traditional skills, e.g., on the ability to write clearly and cogently, on how to study, etc. and on the process of learning 'how to learn'. Once again, the impact of the rapidly changing environment in which students will spend their lives will demand that they be prepared to continue to learn in order to adapt to new demands, and which educators today cannot predict in any accurate fashion. Schools have always, at least implicitly, taught students how to learn. The trend I am suggesting is that this process, instead of being assumed or accomplished implicitly, will be a focus of direct concentration. Teaching students how to learn will become a primary and explicit goal in Catholic schools in a way that it has not been in the past.

Self-Initiation - The final element which has had an impact on Catholic secondary education is the development of programs and educational processes which encourage greater student self-direction in learning.

Though, as suggested above, Catholic schools will return to traditional CONTENT, the PROCESS of education will incorporate many of the insights of recent educational movements which have allowed greater freedom in achieving traditional educational objectives. This has meant and will continue to mean reform of many school structures and the adoption of now familiar innovations such as unscheduled time, resource centers, modified forms of individualization, etc. The aim will be to transfer to the student, to the extent possible and with a strong element of guidance and accountability, increased responsibility for his/her learning. This is an ideal and trend which Catholic high school educators cannot afford not to promote; if the Catholic school cannot develop self-direction in limited fashion in the controlled environment of the high school, it is hardly fulfilling its responsibility to prepare students for college or work experiences which demand that they assume almost total responsibility for themselves and their learning.

CONCLUSION

Obviously there are many other trends in contemporary Catholic secondary schools. You may agree or disagree with those presented here. I suspect that virtually every Catholic high school educator would recognize the impact of each of the trends mentioned on his/her school.

These trends are forces which are influencing the direction of Catholic secondary education. They are permeating its values, its structures, its operational procedures, its materials, its personnel, its curriculum. As influential forces shaping the future of Catholic secondary education, these trends deserve the understanding and critical review of Catholic high school teachers and administrators.

Robert R. Newton, S.J.
University of San Francisco
San Francisco