



LINK 19: Case study.

Our Lady's Primary School, Sunshine, Victoria

Lynley Walters

The School

Principal: Peter Moore

Address: 32 Station Place, Sunshine, Victoria, 3020

Parish Priest: Fr. John Maher.

Assistant Principal: Patrizia Bertani

Web Site: www.olpssun.melb.catholic.edu.au

Method

The case study was conducted during term 4 2009. The school was nominated by the Catholic Education Office. The nomination was based upon the observation that the school served a highly diverse community and was strongly oriented towards serving its community. The school had been strongly commended through reviews and appears to achieve strong outcomes against a number of criteria.

The principal, Mr Peter Moore, approached the University of Melbourne upon the request of the Catholic Education Office. Lynley Walters and Jack Keating met with him on two occasions before the case study. He was open in his welcome and spoke freely about the history and mission of the schools, and its successes and challenges.

During the second visit the researchers were invited to address a staff meeting. The staff received the researchers well, but showed a little apprehension about the purpose of the case study. Following a discussion the staff opened up and indicated a strong welcome and an open attitude towards requests to observe lessons and conduct interviews.

The school made available all relevant school documents and several staff agreed to being interviewed and to allowing their classes to be observed. The researcher was also invited to participate in some discussions with students. Some parents were also interviewed.

Details of the interviews and discussions and the classroom observations are listed below:

Interviews Held:

Principal – Peter Moore

Assistant Principal – Patrizia Bertani

Leading Teacher – Sue Burke

Year 5/6 - Helena Lipski

Student Discussions:

With Luke and Kathryn, both grade six students in Ms Lipski's Class. Children from grade two.

Classroom Observations:

Glenda Wellington, 2L

Rozana Cavka, 3M

Helina Lipski, Year 5/6

Tim Wickham, Year 5/6

Dominic Fecteau, ICT/Librarian

Three sets of interviews were held with the principal, the last of which was audio recorded.

Context

Sunshine and the region

Our Lady’s Primary is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The area is a traditional post world war II industrial and working class suburb. It gained its name from the Sunshine Harvester Company, which was the largest employer in the area, but along with much of the former industrial base has now closed.

The suburb, which is located about 12 km from the central business district of Melbourne is still a low income area, but with mixes of more upwardly mobile families. The escalation in housing costs in Melbourne has led to some different patterns of social geography. As a consequence the suburb has a mixture of traditional working class families, more upwardly mobile families, and a high number of migrant families, including refugee families and households.

Located in what was once the manufacturing heartland of Australia – the Western suburbs of Melbourne – the suburb was populated to a large extent through the post war migrants who provided much of the industrial workforce. Many of these migrants were from southern Europe and a large proportion were Catholic families.

Sunshine is located within the local government area of Brimbank within which 46.7 percent of the population was born overseas, and 56.9percent of the population 15 years and over speak a language other than English at home.¹ Approximately 20.2 percent of residents are aged 0 to 14, which is a high figure by national comparisons. Of the 80 Victorian municipalities it is the third most disadvantaged, and Sunshine is in the middle bracket of disadvantaged within the municipality.

Basic demographic data drawn from the 2006 Census and the labour force survey are provided in the table below. They suggest that despite some observations of social progression within the wider municipality that overall the region is relatively poor with high rates of unemployment.

	% of labour force employed full-time (2006 Census)	% of labour force employed part-time (2006 Census)	% of labour force unemployed (As at Quarter 1 2008)	% of persons participating in labour force. (As at Quarter 1 2008)
Brimbank	59.3	24.9	7.7	49.4
Melbourne Metro	61.0	27.7	4.3	53.7

Source: Department of Human Services, Brimbank Profile, online: <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/operations/regional/north-west/regional-information/demographic-information/northandwestregion3>

Catholic education

Catholic primary schools such as Our Lady’s Primary School are not located within a Catholic teaching order, as are many of the secondary schools. Under the principle of subsidiarity, under formally part of the parish and are accountable to the parish priest.

¹ ABS
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/LGA21180Population/People12002-2006?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LGA21180&issue=2002-2006>

The relationship between the parish priest and the school leadership is central to the philosophy and aspirations of the school. It was apparent that there have been good relations in the past and this good relationship continues. The Parish Priest also has a say in how the school is run but he has only been at the school for about three weeks and has not had much input, to date.

The school has a 55% Catholic enrolment. An additional 10% are of Christian background and a variety of other faiths are also present, including 23% with no religion. Of those with no religion, some are 'lapsed' Catholics and wish to re-connect to the Catholic faith. All religions present are respected. They don't have to be Catholic to be enrolled and staff don't have to be Catholic to teach here.

Our Lady's Primary School

The schools

The school opened in 1920, making it 90 years old. It was originally located in the parish hall. Subsequently the church acquired the adjoining property and built a convent which also housed the school. In 1933 a new brick school was built. The most recent buildings were added in 1999 and the school is currently renovating several buildings, including those funded under the Commonwealth Government's Building Education Revolution. The school is located within close walking distance of the railway station and is within walking distance of the main shopping and business centre.

Despite the new building work the school facilities are relatively basic and there is limited playing space. There is some astro turf, but most of the playing space is asphalt. There is a sandpit and some constructed play equipment

The school does not have school board, but has a high level of parental participation. Equality or openness of parental access and representation is a challenge with such a high percentage of parents who are migrants and refugees, and the obvious difficulty of language hurdles. The school leadership is trenchant in its views that the school should open its doors to all comers. There has been some pressure to restrict or discourage the high numbers of students from migrant and refugee families. However, these pressures have been strongly resisted.

The school's stated vision is:

“To provide an excellent education for all. To develop the ‘whole person’ in a spirit of unity and harmony. We aim to integrate faith and life through the development of each child’s spiritual, intellectual, moral, physical, social and emotional dimensions.”

Its values statement is:

“We want our children to think beyond their own needs. To think of the community that they’re in and to find joy in being part of and giving to that community. We want to empower our students so that they can have choice in their lives, enjoy their lives, form good relationships with others and also to know that we all have something to offer and we can all make a difference.”

We aim to:

- Improve social competencies and resilience.
- Build connectedness among members of the whole school community.
- Develop positive relationships within our community.
- Maintain a safe and supportive environment.

The school was presented with the only school-based award in the State Government's *Multicultural Awards for Excellence 2007*. The award recognises initiatives and practices that support and raise awareness of the educational and settlement needs of migrants and refugees and the promotion of multicultural initiatives in school communities. The nomination came from the Catholic Education Office and the citation reads as follows:

'Through the leadership and guidance of its principal, Peter Moore, this school provides an atmosphere that is welcoming of all people. Most recently, particular support has been provided to Sudanese families. All involved have worked collaboratively to create a school community environment which is a place of learning, safety and belonging for students, staff and parents.

Peter has worked with agencies such as Foundation House to respond to housing, health and social needs of the students and their families. A range of educational initiatives, staff professional learning and cultural awareness programs have been developed and implemented. These include the oral language in the playground, the artists in schools program and the development of a produce garden representative of the school's many cultural groups.

Enrolments

The school has an enrolment of 345 students. Of these over half come from families where English is not the first language at home and a large number of students are from refugee families, predominantly from North Africa. The heterogeneous nature of the enrolments is readily observable in the school yard. Approximately 30 percent of students attend Saturday school to continue learning their first language. The socio economic status of the region is reflected in the schools enrolments with 49% of families receiving the Education Maintenance Allowance

The school has two broad groups of families: The increasingly wealthier local families, and the low-income strugglers. The principal noted that "*Sunshine is rated as the 54th most disadvantaged suburb in Victoria. Our children often lack rich and varied life experience and lack of access to basic resources. In contrast, however, Sunshine has small pockets experiencing 'gentrification' and this tension exists within the school, when values of a small number of middle class families are at odds with those of new arrivals and refugees.*"

Many of the parents are recent refugees, particularly from Sudan. They are quite complex people who have experienced violent and tragic circumstances. They need special assistance which the school seems to be able to supply. If families cannot afford a voluntary contribution, the school will not take any action against them. Indeed, if they are in need, they are supported in many ways. The school website notes that: "*Our multiculturalism is a very special feature of our school and an asset which gives Our Lady's a richness from which we can all learn.*"²

² Accessed from: <http://web.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au/index.php?sectionid=60&searchfor=E1096>

Staff

The staff that were spoken to are very accepting of their diverse community and have an extremely positive attitude. The staffing at the school is relatively stable, and this seems to reflect their comfort with and support for the school culture and community. It was a considerable challenge to them a few years ago when they had an influx of Sudanese refugees which required them to make many changes in their practices. They reached out to other community organisations for help and guidance. They adapted their teaching and learning methods and developed a strong Student Wellbeing program. This has been a focus for the past few years and is on-going.

When introduced to the staff by the principal there was some initial hesitation about the idea of a case study. However, this quickly dissipated when the purpose of the project and the case study were explained. Staff were very open in their comments and willing to share their views and allow their teaching to be observed.

The principal has a strong sense of the school as an inclusive school and school community and has strongly resisted any attempts to restrict or filter enrolments. He appears to have strong support from the staff in this policy. The deputy principal has taught only at the school and is a strong source of support and advice for the principal. There appears to be a harmonious relationship between the school leadership and staff and a sense of shared mission. The staff appear to be a cohesive group, whose shared vision helped them to move forward in achieving their common goals.

Community

The school has effective links to the following external networks of care:

The Catholic Education Office,
School Focused Youth Service,
Foundation House,
Western English Language School,
Sisters of St Joseph,
Centacare and the
Edmund Rice Centre.

The school also has an active partnership with the 'Police In Schools' Program.

The school holds regular to support specific charities. There is a strong sense of responsibility for people in difficulty or need, including and beyond those in the immediate community. There is a sense of global belonging.

The school displays the Australian flag, as has been required by the Commonwealth. The Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Island flag is also displayed. This was suggested to the principal in the playground one day, by one of the Sudanese students. The suggestion was taken up immediately with the children arranging the necessary fundraising. The school does not appear to have a school song. However the students do sing Advance Australia Fair at school assemblies.

The school does not have a school council. Parents and especially new parents do have open access to the principal, Peter Moore. There is a Parents and Friends group that meets formally twice a term, to organise social events that are directly linked to services for the children. Parents have ready access to class teachers, who are always accessible, whether immediately or by appointment.

Every Friday, parents are warmly welcomed and the students themselves play a leading role.

Other forms of parental involvement included parents who were interviewed by their children, for their Inquiry topic, about why they came to Australia, and helping to teach special skills: e.g. a father who had no English at all volunteered to coach the soccer team. He was very successful in using hand gestures and a whistle.

Other forms include fundraising; assisting on school excursions; helping in the library; weekend working bees; dress up days; church services, etc.

The principal indicated that” *We have put considerable time and effort into the promotion of parents as members of our daily school community and parent helpers are common in classrooms.*”

Curriculum

Formal curriculum

The schools curriculum goals are:

- Improve our Literacy and Numeracy practices to achieve higher standards.
- Increase our use and knowledge of information and communication technology.
- Enhance our approaches to student wellbeing and developing restorative practices.
- Further develop social competencies of interpersonal, personal and thinking dimensions across the curriculum.
- We see value in Leadership building reflective practices of teachers, so that teachers can build reflective practices with students.
- We want to continue to look for ways to involve students and parents in dialogue about, and celebration of, teaching and learning.

The school’s Self-Reflection Report states that “We endeavour to weave our School Values and Vision into all we do.” This was reflected in dialogues with the school leadership and staff who attempt to provide a rich and varied curriculum using an integrated curriculum, based on an inquiry model of learning. The goals were being applied in all the classrooms that were visited.

The school focuses strongly on developing the children’s social and emotional competencies with a whole school focus on personal, interpersonal and thinking skills. These areas are woven across the curriculum. At the beginning of each year they have a focus on developing a shared ‘classroom culture’ which explicitly involves all children having a voice in creating their classroom environment. There is a strong sense of student voice across the school curriculum and governance culture.

An example of a topic that was observed in the classrooms was ‘*You’re the Voice:*’ The purpose of this topic is to lead the students to the understanding that “All people have the right to be heard” and that “It is important to have justice in our society”.

Other understandings included –

- Our world has charters, individuals and groups that look after the rights of individuals.
- There have been people and groups throughout history, who have fought for justice, human rights and equity.
- In our society there are systems, laws and processes that ensure we live in a just society.
- In a just society there are values that protect the rights of individuals
- We can all contribute to society
- There are obvious features of a just society
- We have a responsibility to ensure we protect the rights of all.

The students studied who justice is for – animals, children, women, the disabled and indigenous members of society.

The idea of justice is central to this philosophy. It is a values or a purpose construct that is strongly located in human relationships. Fundamental to this is the character of the person and his/her behaviour towards others. As a consequence there is less direct emphasis upon more abstract constructs such as nation building and civic participation, and upon 'problems' such as the environment. These constructs and issues are not regarded as unimportant. However, they are seen as being dependent upon the core factor of personal values and behaviours. Central to this factor is the person's attitude towards others.

Parent survey data showed connectedness to school was in the 50th percentile and connectedness to peers was in the top 25th percentile. From this we can infer that most parents perceive their children as having positive relationships with other students and that they see their children as enjoying and wanting to be a part of the learning at school.

One third of the students are in a structured school environment six days per week, due to attendance at Saturday schools offering instruction in first languages. The most common of these are Vietnamese, but also include Cantonese, Greek, Italian, Maltese and Croatian.

All classrooms have computers in them. There is also a section of the library dedicated to a number of computers. All of the rooms visited had a happy and calm feel to them. The children appeared to be active and engaged learners, without a great deal of noise and confusion. They are encouraged to work in various types of groups. Children's work was displayed prominently in the school corridors.

Extended curriculum

The school has what it terms Comprehensive and Inclusive approaches to Teaching and Learning that include:

- New Arrivals Program and Refugee Support Programs
- Special Needs Program (Coordinator and 4 Integration Aides)
- The provision of additional staffing (Multicultural Education Aide, Refugee/New Arrivals Teacher)

- The provision of a school-based qualified Psychologist for one day per week (In conjunction with COEM and Centacare)
- Engagement through the Song Room Program

Interactive whiteboards are in use in every classroom.

Parent consultation is carried out both formally and informally, on an on-going basis. There is a weekly parent newsletter and a daily message is written by the principal, on the whiteboard. It adds a personal touch. The school website is in the process of being further developed. An open day is held every year.

The school promotes itself through Leaflets, word-of-mouth, newspaper articles and presentations by the principal at educational conferences. All members of the school community expressed a pride in their school and community.

The school has a special education program. The focus here is not so much on specified disabilities but upon students who have faced difficulties in their learning. This includes students from refugee families who often have had little or no formal schooling before they came to Australia. Many of these students also have limited background in English.

Processes

Each class discusses what is important to them. The outcomes of the discussions are prominently displayed in each room. For example:

“Four steps we take to restore broken relationships –

1. We recognise and regret our wrong doing.
2. We admit what we have done.
3. We say sorry to the people we have offended and are forgiven.
4. We do something good to make up for what we have done.

The school is clear about what it wants to achieve now and in the future. It thoroughly and rigorously measures and examines its performance in all the areas of school life, academic and social wellbeing. The staff and parents, and the students, have a real sense of shared purpose which helps them to achieve their goals. Their goals and values are freely displayed around the school, not just in written policies. The school believes that it is preparing its students to be active and effective citizens of the future.

Student Voice:

This school practices what it preaches. The children are engaged in giving their opinions and establishing rules and regulations at every level from Prep to Year 6. This was not a tokenistic thing, it was observed in action. There is a strong sense of fairness and sharing in the school. Each class holds a weekly class meeting where any concerns or ideas for improvement are taken directly to the principal, by the class representative.

Roles

The principal has been at the school for ten years and the deputy principal has been at the school for a longer period.

There are three leading teachers

The school has **EOs (Education Officers, previously known at SSOs)**: They have one Sudanese Educational worker who has enabled the school to communicate information across all spheres of the school life to their most marginalised and disadvantaged families. By employing this person the school has been able to respond quickly to some of the urgent needs that some of the Sudanese families have experienced. She has also supported the staff in developing a deeper understanding of the Sudanese culture and the refugee experience.

Of the 23 teaching staff almost 14% of the teaching staff have Masters Degrees, which is double the average for a Melbourne Catholic Primary School.

Professional Development:

The school plans extensively to improve areas of its operations through the use of a wide range of professional development opportunities. Some examples are:

- Personalising Learning in the 21st Century
- Metaphors for Leadership (ACEL Conference)
- The Song Room – Performing Arts PD
- Assessment and Interpreting Data
- VELS – Science, Humanities and Civics and Citizenship PD
- Literacy Advance PD
- Student Wellbeing PD
- Extensive local and regional area network meetings.

Culture

The school has ‘official’ boundaries but often take children from outside this area if there are strong pastoral reasons for doing so e.g. the child may come from another suburb because the parents may work near-by or because a grandparent lives locally and can easily take the child to school and pick them up after school. The principal is very aware of this community’s special needs. Many parents do shift work in other suburbs and grandparents are often primary carers.

“Enrolments are increasingly being sought by parents who attend Mass at our church, but do not reside in the Parish.”

School Self-Reflection Report – ‘It has been our goal to build connectedness amongst members of the school community. Parent data for approachability came out at 83 (in the top 25th percentile)’. This implies that parents feel that the school is reflective of, and understands the views and concerns of parents.’

Perceptions of culture

The case study involved interviews or discussions with the school leadership, staff, students and parents. The following are a set of illustrative comments from these interviews.

The principal and staff told several stories as example of the culture of the school, such as:

- The Chinese Medical Association brought a badly burnt woman to Australia, as a Humanitarian project, for her to be treated. Her son was Vietnamese and couldn't get a visa? Sunshine residents billeted them and the school allowed him to be enrolled for the duration, even though he didn't have a visa.

The school has produced a DVD of the experiences of two boys who came to Australia as refugees from Somalia. The DVD is very well done. No adults spoke in the video. Only the boys spoke about their journey from one culture to another. Photos were also used. This moving story has been shown at conferences around Australia.

The principal:

“Welcoming and supporting newly-arrived families is one of our highest priorities, especially for our families who have come from war-torn Africa. Families appreciate being able to take time to ‘tell their story’.”

“Through the Mary MacKillop Foundation we have on-going funding which has allowed us to support many newly-arrived families by providing a brand new uniform and new leather shoes for each child. This sense of belonging and gesture of support has been warmly received.”

“Staff know that a welcoming smile and hello, first thing in the morning to the children and their families, is a powerful way of building community.”

“The perception is that Sunshine is not highly regarded as a suburb and it surprises visitors to our school, how genuinely respectful, inquisitive and thoughtful our student are.”

The Assistant Principal:

“I think you get a good feeling when you enter our school because there's a shared commitment and shared purpose amongst the staff. We all bring our individual qualities but we have a very clear vision and purpose for our existence here.”

“Our vision statement, we hope, is not just written on paper, it's written in each child's mind and heart and in everything we do in our curriculum, our work program, our daily interaction with each other as colleagues, in every interaction with each parent and each child. That's what we try to live out, that's our vision.”

Other staff:

“There is good communication between the staff at this school.” ... “We want our students to be lifelong learners, to be functioning citizens of society that will do the best for others.” ... “Some of our children speak two or three languages.” ... “Our Sudanese Education Officer provides extra literacy support to children in all year levels. Everyone loves her.”

“We see our parents as partners.”

“Our weekly assembly is the focal point of parent attendance. It's a time where the students lead the school in prayer.”

“The kids here are really kind and loyal to each other and try to sort out their differences.”

“Our students each have an in-class buddy, for support and encouragement.”

Students:

“My brother and sister used to go to our school. They’re at High School now but they still come back every day and play basketball while they wait for me.”

“We have weekly class meetings where anyone can bring stuff up. Then our class captains take it to the principal.”

“I like the classical music my teacher plays while we work.”

Parents:

“We feel welcome at this school, even if our English is not very good”.

“The teachers are all very friendly and our children love to come to school each day.”

When the school was last reviewed by an external validator, the following observation was made: *In their group, parents spoke glowingly of the clear respect that the teachers have for the children and students commented on the respect teachers show them.”*

Atmosphere

These views are verified through visits to the school. The front office is brightly lit with several stained glass windows and full-length windows overlooking the playground. You feel an instant connection to the children and are able to observe their happy play. The staff in the office greet you with a warm smile and welcome. The principal is warm and generous in his welcome. The deputy principal is pleased to show her pride in the school, and the staff once they knew the purpose of the study were open and friendly.

The grounds were quite limited, due to the school being built next to the church. They have zoned playing areas for different age levels which helps create ‘safe zones’ for kids. A variety of lunchtime clubs are offered.

Children of different racial backgrounds seemed to play happily with each other, especially when playing team games e.g. basketball or soccer, as there are agreed, set rules to play by. Teachers sometimes have to intervene when there are disagreements but the rules are discussed calmly and everyone gets back on with it.

The community

The school defines its community by the families of the students who attend the school. The school does have an enrolment area. However, the students come from a wide variety of post codes. As a consequence its enrolments have a limited neighbourhood basis. On the other hand it was established as and remains a parish school, and the parish can and does have a different community definition to that of a school zone.

In a similar manner the school has a wide range of community connections, of which only some are local. As a consequence, and perhaps in contrast to similar government schools it does not have a lot of information about the local neighbour and local services on display in its foyer.

Overview

Community

A central narrative of Our Lady's Primary School is that of an inclusive community. This concept has several dimensions. The immediate dimension is that of openness to all, and the school and its leadership have been highly protective of this. This has included formal protection to head off any attempts to restrict enrolments, and methods to welcome parents and create a comfort zone within which they can approach and gain confidence in the school. The open door policy of the principle, the conversational relationship with parents and prospective parents, and the network based approach to enrolments are all part of this access policy. Part of the formal openness is the fee exemption policy and other forms of tangible support for families in need.

A second level is connectivity. The school has formal and informal connections with a range of community organisations, both local and beyond. Here the school is both an entity as a community and as part of a wider organisational community that includes the Church and its organisations.

A third level is openness of communication. Central to this is the student voice. This also has formal aspects, such as the classroom discussions and proposals that are then transferred to the principle through student representatives. More informal is the confidence of students to approach the school leadership and other staff with suggestions and request. Critical to this culture is taking students seriously.

A fourth level that was experienced through the case study is the openness of the school to observation and participation. The school principal rather than the researchers initiated the case study, upon the suggestion of the Melbourne Catholic Education Office.

After an initial discussion the staff accepted the case study in an open and generous manner, allowing access to their classrooms and freely expressing their views about the school. Not one staff member indicated any negative thoughts or feelings about the school. They are genuinely committed to the school and its local community. There is a real sense of purpose amongst the staff

A further and intrinsic sense of community is that of the school as a whole. The school is not a collection of classes, although the formal structures of the classes and timetable play important pastoral roles, and are central to the learning programs. The grounds were quite limited, due to the school being built next to the church. They have zoned playing areas for different age levels which helps create 'safe zones' for kids. A variety of lunchtime clubs are offered. Children of different racial backgrounds seemed to play happily with each other, especially when playing team games e.g. basketball or soccer, as there are agreed, set rules to play by. Teachers sometimes have to intervene when there are disagreements but the rules are discussed calmly and everyone gets back on with it.

Learning

A second central theme is that of learning. With its enrolment from relatively poor households and many refugee families that have had traumatic and tragic experiences the schools might be expected to have weak scholastic outcomes. However, the school has invested in the richness and opportunity of the educational investment for students and families in these circumstances.

The importance of achieving strong educational outcomes for students is stressed consistently in the school narrative. The school website stresses the importance of literacy. This emphasis upon learning is strongly shared across the staff and there is no suggestion of a deficit culture of low expectations. Parents are asked to share in this culture.

Staff

The scholastic program appears to be underpinned by the quality, stability and cohesiveness of the staff, including the relationship of respect, trust and friendship between the school leaders, teaching staff and other staff members. A common vision of purpose, including learning, is the basis for these relationships.

This also is probably enhanced by the stability the school. A highly effective and respected school leadership has been matched by a professional and cohesive staff group. This is not to say that all of the staff think in the same way and have identical value frames. It is clear that there are significant differences in attitudes towards broader social and institutional issues, including the role and nature of the Church. However, these differences in views are respected and do not interfere in the shared sense of purpose.

It is readily apparent that the cohesiveness of the school and its confidence in its purposes and culture would not be possible without the right leadership. The school leaders are quietly assured in their views that the school should be open to all and be especially welcoming to students and families who have faced difficult circumstances. Their concept of community is essentially group and network based. It starts from the family and extends through filial and other relationships. This is partially neighbourhood based, but is premised upon the observation of the Church that society is increasingly pluralist. The pluralism has two implications. One is that there should be the capacity for diversity in schooling – and as a consequence for some choice. However, the other is that there is a need for Catholic education to contribute to the whole, not only as an educator of a large number of students but as a contribution to the whole education ‘system’ and the society.

Public purposes

The concept of public purpose that is intrinsic to Our Lady’s Primary School arguably is different to some other constructs. It is built upon a sense of community, which is only partially neighbourhood based. The underpinnings of this sense of community are democratic in their openness, sense of trust and acceptance of difference. However, they also are protective of exploitation and resistance to group interests that may threaten the interests of all.

The school include a significant number of students who live outside of the school area and a large number of parents actively seek to have their student enrolled in the school. In this sense it is choice based. However, this cannot be seen as an ‘educational consumption’ culture. The nature of the engagement with the school, including the conversations between the principal and parents of prospective students mediates any crude market effect. In this way parents invest in a community with a clear set of values that are culturally inclusive. This foundation is supported by a moral base in Catholic social and educational philosophy.

Public purpose can be manifest in a number of ways:

- *Enrolments and support for students and families in need.* The school has an open access policy as reflected in its enrolment mix. As a faith based school and as a partially fee based school there are potential barriers. However, they appear to have little expression. The key feature of the school approach is to make the enrolments family based through conversation and engagement.
- *The formal curriculum.* The school teaches the formal curriculum through the Victoria Essential Learning Standards. However, a strong theme within this curriculum is multi culturalism and its celebration. A strong emphasis within the school programs is placed upon the concept of justice, and especially distributed justice.
- *The school culture.* This is possibly the strongest expression of public purpose. It has multiple dimensions: students from different backgrounds mixing with each other, courtesy and respect towards students, student voice, and a courteous, supportive and respectful relationship between staff.
- *Relationships with the community.* In this area the place of the school within a local community was not so strongly expressed. The emphasis is more upon a wider and multi dimensioned community.

The school creates a challenge for the idea of public purpose. Like all schools it does strive to achieve good educational outcomes for its students as the basis for their individual success in social and economic life.

Public purpose and Catholic education

The enactment of public purposes within a school are related to its contribution towards the guarantee of access to schooling for all, the quality of the program that it delivers for all students, the value frames and related learning areas, and nature of the relationships and understandings that it nurtures.

The enactment of these purposes is unlikely to be optimal across most schools. All schools face pressures that lead to compromises. However, these compromises vary in their severity across schools. Generally they are less severe in primary compared with secondary schools.

Some argues that only government schools can fully enact public purposes as only these schools can be without enrolment barriers and deliver a secular curriculum that can be common across the citizenry. Others argue that faith based schools, and especially Catholic primary schools can and should be powerful enactors of public education and public purposes.

The 1997 Vatican document “Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium”³ states that the Catholic school “*has not come into being as a private initiative, but as an expression of the reality of the Church, having by its very nature a public character. It fulfils a service of public usefulness, and although clearly and decidedly configured ain the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics alone...Catholic schools, moreover, like state schools, fulfil a public role...*” (p5)

³ Congregation for Catholic Education (1997) Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium, Vatican, online:
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_27041998_school2000_en.html

The arguments in support of this statement might be supported by some. However, it is not the role of the schools to contest this. As a mostly publicly funded agency it is supported not only by the Catholic Church and its agencies but by government. Within the frame of public purpose as outlined above and within that described through the Vatican statement it clearly provides a powerful enactment of public purpose. The school leadership and staff are justifiably proud of this.

Sustainability

The school has been under some pressure to dilute its highly heterogeneous social mix of students. Being located in an educational market and with a school enrolment that is only partially neighbourhood based there is always a danger of this.

The main protection against this has been the school leadership and the internal strength of the school in maintaining its culture and values. This in turn is supported by the stability in the leadership and the wider staff. The success of the school also provides strength to its culture and its leadership.

This suggests that schools that strive to enact public purposes are more likely to be successful where the purposes are widely shared across the school staff, initially. Subsequently this is transferred to a wider community and to a whole system, such that Our Lady's Primary School is clearly valued and celebrated across the wider Catholic school system. This culture and the school's success are conducive to staff stability.

Lessons

The case study suggests the complexity of the concept of public purpose and the ways in which it can be addressed. The complexity is related to the nature of community within a pluralistic society, and the role of a faith based organisation within both the pluralism of the society and the unity of the commonwealth, or in Australia's case the Commonwealth. This suggests that public purposes need to go beyond regulation. They need to be based within a moral construct, or as Our Lady's Primary School stresses, a principle of justice and distributed justice.

Some possible lessons from the school might include the following:

Clarity of purpose and its construct. In a sense the school's purpose is simple, but clear. It is based upon a principle of distributed justice and central to this is the attitude of people towards each other. Its enactment then has multiple dimensions: enrolment policies, formal curriculum, extended curriculum, student voice, interpersonal relations.

Leadership It would be difficult if not impossible to build and sustain the culture without appropriate leadership.

Concept of community The case study suggests that there are multiple constructs of community, and that communities can be served by schools in different ways. More challenging is the question of how a whole school system serves a whole national community.

Education and social principles. The school serves as a powerful example of the centrality and explicitness of moral social principles that guide the whole operation of a school and its people.

Maintaining the culture The school makes every effort to maintain and build the culture. There is a strong sense that this has to be a deliberate act. Standing still or complacency will inevitably lead to its corrosion.

In the words of the principal it's located at the front door and extends into the school and out into the community.