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# A case study of parent perspectives on interreligious learning and teaching in a diverse Catholic school context: 'Building a civilisation of love'

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## ABSTRACT

In the pluralised contexts of many contemporary Australian Catholic schools, cultural and religious diversity is a reality that could be ignored or potentially utilised to enhance learning. This case study probes the perceptions of parents regarding their children's engagement in Religious Education in a Catholic school and in particular, engagement in interreligious learning and teaching. The small qualitative study utilised interviews with parents that were analysed and coded to reveal themes that are then discussed in light of the literature reviewed. Four key themes emerged: engagement, diversity, voice and agency, and identity revealing potential for enhancing partnerships with parents and families in the educative project of growing young Australians into their humanity and working towards the creation of a civilisation of love. The study points to a potential for the 'wider Church' to engage families in dialogue through articulating the why and how of Religious Education in Catholic schools (including interreligious learning and teaching) and enhancing parental engagement in such learning and teaching to resource the spiritual/religious identity of all as they grow into the fulness of life.

## PLAIN ENGLISH SUMMARY

Australian Catholic schools, like many schools across the globe, are populated by learners from a large variety of cultural, religious, and non-religious backgrounds. The teaching of Religion can choose to ignore this reality or to embrace it. This case study explores the insights of parents into their children's participation in Religious Education in a Catholic School and in particular interreligious learning and teaching. The small quantitative study used interviews with parents that were analysed and revealed themes that are discussed in relation to approaches to Religious Education, parent engagement in schools and the framing of religious identity. Four key themes emerged from the data: engagement, diversity, voice and agency, and identity and revealed potential for the enhancement of partnerships with parents. These partnerships potentially working

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towards growing young learners into being the best people they can be and the creation of a 'civilisation of love'. The study points to the potential for the 'wider Church' to participate in dialogue with families and to enhance the learning of parents and their children potentially resourcing their spirituality/religious identity as they continue to grow into the fullness of life.

## Introduction

The perspectives of parents regarding their children's engagement in interreligious learning and teaching may not have been a consideration for many Australian Catholic schools until more recent times. However, the diversifying school contexts provide multi-faith and multi-cultural learning and teaching opportunities that are a real-life context with rich content that can be utilised for the benefit of all. Parent perceptions of their role in the education of their children may impact how engaged they become in their children's schooling and in particular their religious education. The importance of the development of identity (including spiritual/religious identity) is embedded in the Australian Government's goals for all Australians and developing partnerships with parents in realising this may produce favourable outcomes. This small study explores the understandings of some parents of Primary aged children (4½–12 yrs) in a school with a diverse population, regarding their children's engagement in interreligious learning and teaching within Religious Education. In particular, how this may or may not influence their developing spiritual/religious identity.

## Parent populations in Australian Catholic schools

The students and families of Australian schools, including Catholic and Independent schools are progressively becoming more diverse. McCrindle et al. (2021) propose '[a]s a result of shifting migration patterns from Europe to Asia and Africa, there has been an increase in Australia's religious diversity despite the overall decline in religious affiliation' (11). The diversity of worldviews in Australia is realised via the increase in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism, a decreasing affiliation with Christianity, including Catholicism, and the increasing affiliation with 'no religion' (ABS 2022). The Independent Schools Council of Australia (2018) reported from the 2016 ABS Census results 'when it comes to religious affiliation of students the most notable trend is the continued growth of the no religion category across all three sectors [Independent, Catholic and Government schools]' (3). Philip Hughes, a researcher for the Christian Research Association, proposes:

No religion means many different things to Australians. However, most fundamentally, it means that they do not want to identify with any particular religious institution. For many Australians, religion is simply off their radar and not something they think about. Other surveys indicate that many Australians are not at all sure about the existence of God, although many still describe themselves as 'spiritual'. What the Census does not tell us is how these Australians find a sense of meaning. (Hughes 2022)

The populations of Australian Catholic schools are reflective of this wider societal reality and students and their families potentially navigate their meaning-making in very different ways than in the past. The family inheritance of religious traditions and the sense of identity that can accompany this is less prevalent and perhaps less overt than in the past. How contemporary parents understand their role in their children's education within the Catholic school may shed some light on how they view and value Religious Education, and particularly of interest is interreligious learning and teaching which for the purposes of this study refers to 'the potential reciprocity between individuals and various convictions (religious/non-religious/spiritual/cultural)' (Foley et al. 2020, 145). (see Foley et al. 2020, 2023 for further clarification).

### Parents as partners in the school community

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration sets out the educational goals for all Australians, articulating the Australian Government's vision and responsibility to improve educational outcomes (DESE 2019). This declaration highlights:

Parents, carers and families are the first and most important educational influence in a child's life. They have a critical role in early development, including social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical wellbeing. They instil attitudes and values that support young people to access and participate in education and training and contribute to local and global communities. It is critical for the education community to work in partnership with parents, carers and families to support a child's progress through early learning and school.

(10)

The importance of parents, carers and families working in partnership with educational communities are acknowledged, highlighting the primal role they play in formation of values and attitudes enabling access and participation in education. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) declaration advised educational institutions to 'ensure that education promotes and contributes to a socially cohesive society that values, respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social, linguistic and religious diversity' (DESE 2019, 5). This aspiration is for all Australian learners across the Catholic, Independent and Government school sectors.

In addition, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) declaration advocates that the education community be committed to developing in every young Australian 'a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, cultural, spiritual and physical wellbeing' (DESE 2019, 6). The development of personal identity is an on-going process, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper, however Crawford and Rossiter (2006) propose for educational purposes, 'personal identity can be conceptualised as a process in which individuals draw on both internal and cultural resources for their self-understanding and self-expression' (126). The cultural resources might include factors such as family, religion, school, television, the internet, ethnicity and more, while internal resources might include emotions, beliefs, attitudes and values to name a few (Crawford and Rossiter 2006). The spiritual aspect of one's identity is core (Crawford and Rossiter 2006; Stoppa 2017) and a religious culture can inform an individual's identity. Stoppa (2017) proposes 'a spiritual sense of self may be part of religious identity for some young people, but for others, may be created and

expressed outside the context of formal religiousness' (154). Hence, resourcing the spiritual and religious dimensions for young people could prove fruitful for their developing identities. This is an opportunity for the school community to invest in contributing to the identity development of our future citizens by supporting or building on the family's impact.

Parents' role in connecting the learning at school with learning at home and in the wider community is recognised as critical (Emerson et al. 2012) for student outcomes. One of the factors that impacts the degree to which parents engage with this role and sustain the engagement is *parental role construction* (Emerson et al. 2012). Emerson et al. (2012) propose that research indicates:

The way parents perceive their role in education is generally determined by the following factors

- Beliefs about appropriate and desirable child outcomes,
- Beliefs about who is responsible for these outcomes,
- Perceptions of what important group members (e.g family, teacher, other parents) expect from them as parents, and
- Parental behaviours related to those beliefs and expectations (Emerson et al. 2012, 11).

Parental role construction can support or undermine parents' decision to engage with or be involved in their child's education. Beliefs about what desirable outcomes might look like and who is responsible for these outcomes may influence how parents engage in their children's learning and their aspirations for their children's schooling. Goodall (2013) in reviewing the literature on the interaction between parental engagement and parental belief, proposed 'engagement in children's learning has beneficial effects on children's achievement' (95). However, in relation to parental beliefs, the literature (almost entirely from the United States) suggests 'belief has an effect on outcomes which is most positive for children from Jewish backgrounds and least positive for those from Conservative Protestant homes' (95). Goodall (2013) advocates future research is needed in this area, to look beyond religious affiliation to what goes on in the homes of different groups to produce differences in educational outcomes so that all children have the opportunity to achieve well.

Sharratt (2019) proposes 'schools build strong relationships with parents by keeping them informed about their children's progress and by involving them in the why and how the school is teaching' (22). Informing parents of the 'why' and 'how' gives them clarity about what is important to the school learning community and the ways in which this is achieved. The Australian Catholic Primary school has Religion as a compulsory addition to the eight key learning areas of the Australian curriculum and hence the clarity on why and how of Religious Education, offering the Catholic school a point of difference.

## The Catholic school

The church document, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, acknowledges 'parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural

responsibility for their children's education belongs' (CCE 1998, para 20). The document goes on to propose that in the contemporary world, there is a pervasive tendency of parents to delegate this role to the school and hence dialogue with, and support of families, needs to aim to foster their involvement in the school's educational project (CCE 1998, para 20). This may involve supporting parents to understand the Catholic school as an educating community and religious education as important for learners regardless of their religious/non-religious affiliation. The CCE (2022) instruction, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, advocates the Catholic school become:

an educating community in which the human person can express themselves and grow in his or her humanity, in a process of relational dialogue, interacting in a constructive way, exercising tolerance, understanding different points of view and creating trust in an atmosphere of authentic harmony. Such a school is truly an educating community, a place of differences living together in harmony. (CCE 2022, para 30)

This CCE instruction places emphasis on the role of education and the process of dialogue and critical thinking for enabling differing perspectives to be considered and respected in the individual's growth in humanity.

In an earlier document *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, the CCE (2013) proposed:

Education contains a central challenge for the future: to allow various cultural expressions to co-exist and to promote dialogue so as to foster a peaceful society. These aims are achieved in various stages: (1) discovering the multicultural nature of one's own situation; (2) overcoming prejudices by living and working in harmony; and (3) educating oneself 'by means of the other' to a global vision and sense of citizenship. Fostering encounter between different people helps to create mutual understanding, although it ought not to mean a loss of one's own identity. (CCE 2013, intro para 2)

This document proposes it is the school's responsibility to have intercultural dialogue in its pedagogical vision (CCE 2013, intro para 3) and acknowledges that 'awareness is lacking of how precious the religious dimension is for fruitful proficient intercultural dialogue' (CCE 2013, para 9). The CCE expresses that such dialogue starting 'from an awareness of one's own faith identity, can help people to enter into contact with other religions. Dialogue means not just talking, but includes all beneficial and constructive interreligious relationships, with both individuals and communities of other beliefs, thus arriving at mutual understanding' (CCE 2013, para 13). In the current social context, a challenge for some parents may be that they don't have a clear understanding of their own faith or non-religious worldview (Rymarz 2017) and so passing religious understandings on to their children could be problematic. The tradition-ing process of faith in the home (Scott 2015) may be somewhat abdicated and the responsibility placed on the school. Scott (2015) suggests one's 'religious identity is created by turning to face the other. Religious Education now is inter-religious' (267). Thereby greater clarity of the individual's religious identity can potentially be brought to the fore when one is faced with who one is not.

## Framing religious identity

Many schools across Australia and the world, including countries such as The Netherlands, England, Ireland, Germany, Lithuania, The Philippines, and the United States of America have begun to engage with the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014) as a way to measure and develop strategies to improve the Catholic identity of their school and promote the religious identity of individuals. This research includes questionnaires that operationalise three multivariant scales, the Post Critical Belief (PCB), the Melbourne, and the Victoria, along with surveying the general religious profile and attitude of the participants. The scales propose to measure the individual religious identity options (PCB), the school identity options (Melbourne) and the Professional/pedagogical options (Victoria) of the school community (see Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014; Sharkey 2017, 2019, <https://ecsi.site/au/foundations/for> detailed explanation). These are ways in which a school can measure current levels of identification with a Catholic worldview and look to the options for the future for personal, professional, and institutional religious identity.

According to Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2014), the optimal options for enhancing Catholic religious identity are Post Critical Belief (symbolic affirmation), Recontextualisation and the Dialogue School. While respondents may possess elements of all the options for each scale, they are likely to have a predominant individual stance and in profiling a group, a preferred group option is identified. For Post Critical Believers, the content of faith is engaged within a symbolic way through mediations such as scripture, prayer, and the natural environment. For such individuals, God is not encountered 'literally' but through 'symbolic' intercessions which draw one into a loving relationship with God. The option for Recontextualisation identifies how schools engage with the complexities of culture and Christianity, engaging in multi-correlative ways to genuinely grapple with the plurality of the contemporary contexts and the integrity of Catholic Christian faith. This option is realised through the use of a Dialogue school pedagogical perspective which actively connects a Catholic Christian worldview with the multiple religious and non-religious voices within the community to assist the community to come to new or nuanced understandings that give meaning to life.

The ECSI researchers acknowledge that their research has revealed that Christian Values Education (CVE), one of the strategy options for establishing and enhancing the Catholic Identity of a school, is one that is a popular preference for both students and adults (staff and parents) in primary schools across Australia (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014). The researchers suggest this strategy can be popular when a school is still diversifying and tries to link the Catholic faith to values that are generally accepted in the broader society. This has the effect of reducing the Christian message to values that are easily compatible with everyone. This according to the ECSI researchers, ultimately leads to secularisation because the particularity of the Christian message is reduced to basic ethical values and loses the richness of its contribution. Anecdotally, values continue to be a popular drawcard for parents choosing Catholic Education in Australia (Rymarz 2017), though this may not necessarily equate to the Christian Values Education strategy articulated by the ECSI researchers.



## Context of study

The parents in this study are part of the Good Shepherd Primary school community, a Brisbane Archdiocesan school. The school engaged in the Enhancing Catholic School identity (ECSI) surveys and qualitative data analysis conducted by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2019, with parent participants invited to be part of the research. There was a 10.4% parent participation rate which the researchers acknowledge makes it difficult to generalise results, however they propose that if these parents are a random representation, then ‘some insights can be potentially gained’ (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019, 2). Additionally, the researchers acknowledge that parents have been difficult to engage in surveys and that the participation rate at Good Shepherd is quite good relative to other schools that have engaged in the project (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019, 2). The results of the research report have been shared with the staff and parents of the school community.

Through the ECSI research analysis of a wide variety of questions across the three multivariate scales (PCB, Victoria, and Melbourne) and the attitudinal and profile questionnaires, sub-populations which indicate the main trends within the surveyed population, are identified. The predominant sub-population, identified for students, staff (leadership and teachers) and parents at Good Shepherd, is one that chooses Recontextualisation, therefore a large portion of the population are seeking to ‘understand the Catholic faith re-interpreted in a contemporary cultural context’ (Pollefeyt and Bouwens 2014, 56) (see Foley et al. 2022, 2023, for further exploration of staff and student data). The dominant Recontextualisation sub-population of Good Shepherd parents is supported by 43.5% of surveyed parents, which compares to 37.7% of parents in Queensland-wide surveyed parents choosing Recontextualisation (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019, 26). The dominant Queensland-wide parent sub-population (44.9% of surveyed parents) was Christian Values Education (CVE) (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019, 26). At Good Shepherd, 21.7% of the surveyed parents opted for CVE (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019, 26). The CVE sub-populations of staff and students at Good Shepherd were also significantly lower than the dominant Recontextualisation sub-populations.

The learning and teaching of Religion in this school context, acknowledged the pluralised context as their starting point and accepted and celebrated the presence of multiple religious and non/religious voices in their midst. The learners were encouraged to bring knowledge, symbols, and/or practices from their home cultures/religions to the learning and teaching in Religion to enhance and expand the learning about the Catholic tradition.

## Study design

A single case study design was employed in this study, with Good Shepherd Catholic Primary school being the single bounded case, selected because its ECSI data highlights the surveyed population’s support for enhancing Catholic School, and individual religious identity. The population of the school is 398 students (194 boys and 204 girls aged between 4 ½ and 12 years) with a projection to double in



**Table 1.** Adult participants' background information.

Parent	Gender	Age Bracket	Year levels of Children	Cultural Background	Religion
1	Female	30–40 years	Prep & 2	Australian	Catholic
2	Female	30–40 years	Prep	Australian	Catholic
3	Female	30–40 years	2 & 6	Aboriginal Australian	No Religion
4	Female	30–40 years	6	Australian	Catholic
5	Female	40–50 years	4	Australian	Anglican
6	Female	30–40 years	2 (Identified ASD)	English	Anglican
7	Female	40–50 years	1, 3 & 5	Australian	Catholic
8	Female	40–50 years	2 & 4	European	Not stated

size due to its location in a population growth corridor. The staff include 23 teachers (22 female and 1 male) and 16 non-teaching staff (14 females and 2 males). The school is more educationally advantaged than 68% of Australian schools with an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) percentile of 68. Students identifying as having a language background other than English make up almost a third (31%) of the student population and 4% of students identify as First Nations (Indigenous) (see My school website <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/50581>).

After University and Brisbane Catholic Education ethical clearance was granted, information sheets regarding the research project were circulated to parents with the Principal's permission, and via the school processes. Because of COVID restrictions, access to parents was restricted and a researcher-led discussion outlining the project could not be conducted. Consequently, 8 parents volunteered to be interviewed individually. The parent group were all female and a relatively homogenous sample (Patton 2015). Nuzzo (2021) proposes 'females are more likely to participate in many kinds of social science research', (85) with this notion supported in this project. Congruent with the ethics conditions, the interviews were conducted for approximately 20 minutes and then transcribed. Participants were offered the opportunity to adjust the transcripts as necessary or clarification sought from the researcher. (See Table 1 for participants' details.)

## Analysis

The researcher utilised content analysis to make sense of the transcribed texts guided by the research questions (Patton 2015). The key questions probed were: How do parents describe their children's role in interreligious learning and teaching? With sub-questions investigated including: What things do your children do in the classroom when learning in this area? How do or why don't you think the ways in which the learning and teaching is presented plays a role in your children's ability to participate in interreligious learning and teaching? How might this learning assist your child/ren in developing their spiritual/religious identity? The interview transcripts were considered as a whole to ascertain initial impressions and the subsequent readings uncovered relevant words, lines, phrases, or sentences. These were coded and further readings, reflection, and analysis, revealed key themes. These themes were then considered with reference to the literature reviewed.

## Findings

Descriptions of human experience are rich texts for the investigator's search for understanding (Stake 1995). These captivating conversations revealed the stories of parents' perceptions of the religious education learning, including interreligious learning, in which their children engaged. Appropriate interview excerpts indicating the themes are offered and will be discussed. Four main themes arose from the data, these being: engagement, diversity, voice and agency, and identity.

### Engagement

The parents in this small study shared that they believed their children were engaged in Religion because there was good learning and teaching happening and their children enjoyed it. The students were interested and had a variety of ways of working and were not just required to 'sit and listen'. Parent participants offered:

I think the teachers know the students well. It's not just filling in colouring-in sheets and answering questions in a book. They engage through song and through stories, but they're also then encouraged to create their own songs and stories, and situations where this could be the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do. They're quite engaging tasks for little people as opposed to just being told this is what you do, and this is what you don't do. (Parent 2)

I just think she really takes it in. She just talks, she loves the prayer ... she draws, not just a simple drawing – it's very detailed about what she has done for the day. (Parent 6)

They don't always learn from the Bible and then do an activity. It's interconnected and interconnected throughout their other learnings as well. (Parent 7)

They do prayer and meditation. They have access to that each day. (Parent 1)

Both my children love religion ... there's a lot of stories. They really engage and love the religion side of schooling. (Parent 8)

The parent participants felt that the learning was active, engaging, and enjoyable for the learners and not just information being deposited.

### Diversity

The parents were keenly aware of the diversity that was the reality of the school context, and this seemed to be perceived as a positive aspect of the school community. Parents proposed:

It [the school] is so multicultural ... we do have several religions across the school ... there is opportunity for these children to be included and they all learn a little more. (Parent 8)

They're learning different customs with different religions because in religion, they look at different things. With the Indigenous one you have different customs and laws ... (Parent 3)

... (my daughter) learns a lot about the faith of her friends because they're from different cultures ... She has the privilege to be able to have that communication ... (Parent 4)

The participant parents, though mostly Catholic or Christian in religious affiliation, expressed an appreciation of what could be learnt from the multicultural/multifaith context in which their children were learning.

### ***Voice and agency***

Learners being able to have their say, use their voice and make some choices about how they demonstrate their learnings and understandings was appreciated by the parents interviewed. They shared:

Because it (Religion) looks at values and it acknowledges that even if you're not all Catholic, our values are very similar – you have a faith. So I think that it helps her speak openly about what she values and her faith, although it's still developing. Because she feels that what she says is valued, she can talk about it openly, she can share it and discuss it and won't be judged and she can practice it as well. It's practiced in meditation or in values of sustainability. (Parent 5)

[my daughter] really likes Venerable Catherine McAuley. She said if she was around now, she thinks that she could be a friend with her. That generosity of spirit and heart is something I think my daughter connects to. We had a little conversation about that this morning. (Parent 4)

The parent participants expressed that they valued that their children could learn and make meaning for themselves with the support of information shared by the teacher. They were appreciative that the learners could share their ideas, enjoyed the subject, and could make choices about their learning.

### ***Identity***

The parents articulated a synergy between what they valued and the young people their children were becoming through the learning and experiences that they have at Good Shepherd. Parent voice:

My daughter didn't have a great background of knowledge of religion before she came here. I think she's come away with not just knowing prayers and curriculum-based knowledge but with a really good understanding of creation and caring for others and showing kindness. She talks about it and she enjoys it. There's a genuine love of it. (Parent 2)

... because (at this school) they've got to own it, show it, live it every day, pretty much in everything, not just in that religion space, but throughout the day. (Parent 3)

... that communication [with others] enhances her own understanding of her own faith, as being Catholic. (Parent 4)

... it aligns really well with our values as a family – that's why we chose a Catholic school. For example, at the moment they're looking at moral choices, and my daughter discusses all aspects of the learning with us. So then it sort of plays out in the choices we make as a family, too, or we discuss making moral choices as they relate to our values as a family. (Parent 5)

Identity is hooked into being able to mirror ourselves on other people that speak the same language ... my big boy hasn't come to me yet to ask about any sacraments, and if that comes, so be it, and if doesn't, so be it, especially because my husband's not Catholic. That's diversity happening ... and tolerance. (Parent 7)

The alignment of the school and home was appreciated by the parents interviewed and they could see how the religious identity of their children was being shaped and formed through opportunity to learn through diversity and engaging in enjoyable learning and teaching that privileged the Christian story and Catholic tradition.

## Discussion

The data gathered from this small group of volunteer participants voiced ideas and opinions that appear to align with the Recontextualising subpopulation identified in the parent population surveyed in the ECSI research (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019). The current study participants expressed their openness to the religious and cultural diversity of the community, they appreciated the focus on a Catholic perspective and the exploration of texts and practices that afforded their children a voice in investigating and seeking new religious meanings and potentially personal and/or social transformation. This study's parents were mostly Catholic or Christian and articulated an appreciation that the school leads the Religious Education of their children and that they could take a more supportive role. While they did not express that they were relinquishing their responsibility to religiously educate their children, they indicated that it was helpful that the school could take the lead and parents could 'learn' with their children. This may be a consequence of a detraditionalising society and many of the current parents of Primary school-aged children, potentially not having the benefit of home tradition-ing (Scott 2015) or an engaging Religious Education in their own schooling.

There appeared to be genuine support from these parents for Religious Education that engaged their children and offered them learning that was interreligious and intercultural to broaden their understandings of religion and faith. Parents did not speak of their personal engagement in their children's interreligious learning, though the school does invite parents to share their cultural/religious knowledge and practices with the community (see Foley et al. 2022). The interviewed parents appeared open to the learning themselves and were keen to support their children's learning in Religion and possibly with support and encouragement, open to further developing their partnership role.

The diversity of the community was widely acknowledged, and the parents conveyed the positive effect they believed this had on the community. They felt that the additional perspectives their children could gain from the diversity of the student clientele, gave them a richness that supported the social capital of the school and the wider community. The students were able to broaden their understandings about each other and this, the parents could see, supported them getting along with one another better and also helped them to know themselves and their own beliefs through comparison to others.

Whilst the parents agreed that diversity was a positive for the school context, one parent wondered if the appreciation of it would be 'outgrown'. The parent proposed:

I feel like the kids seem to be more tolerant and open to diversity and other religions at this stage, and I think when they get older, maybe it becomes a little bit more sheltered (closed), because they care what people think and the peer pressure as they grow up (Parent 7)

This pondering may allude to the AHRC (2019) indication that 'racism is an ongoing problem in Australia' and 'is damaging to Australia's social cohesion' (5). The AHRC (2019) suggests that a 2018 survey revealed 'one in five surveyed

Australians reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of their race or religion during the past 12 months' (27). This may signal that on-going appreciation of cultural/religious diversity may need to be attended to explicitly in Australian schools and possibly beyond into higher education. McCowan's (2017) research into the Building Bridges Programme in Melbourne, Australia, an interfaith dialogue in secondary schools' programme, proposed that there may be value in experiential interfaith education, 'that is critically needed to address widespread ignorance, (and) religious prejudice' (276). McCowan (2017) proposed in schools where there was no 'non-partisan general study of religion' (276) such a programme would be of value in addressing ignorance and prejudice. A similar effect could potentially be achieved through continued effective interreligious learning and teaching in Catholic schools, supporting the positive opportunities that diversity may offer.

Parents in this small study articulated awareness that their children's engagement in Religious Education allowed them a voice and some agency over their learning. The parents appreciated that the learning was not all teacher directed and that their children had the opportunity to use their creativity and imagination and could verbalise their own thinking on topics or issues being explored. The latest ABS data (2022) indicates that Christian affiliation has declined through all age groups, hence there are less parents and children identifying as Christian than there were in the past. How such individuals find meaning becomes an interesting question and while most parents in this research identified with a religion, their commitment to religious practice is not known. Many of the parents identified as Catholic or Christian, though not all, yet there seemed quite unified support for allowing their children the opportunity to question and critique in Religion and to consider the Christian perspective in light of other perspectives. The parents appreciated that their children could contribute their own ideas and experiences to the building of their knowledge about religions and religious practice. This may be indicative of one of the ways contemporary individuals attempt to find meaning in their lives regardless of their religious affiliation (Hughes 2022). Perhaps the openness of the parents speaks of a willingness to allow their children to explore and find out for themselves rather than enculturating them in their own religious/non-religious perspective. The study parents appreciated that their children explored ideas for themselves and that what they were discovering/learning aligned with their parents' perspectives.

The resourcing of one's developing religious identity through the inclusion of exploration of who one is not, is supported by contemporary scholars (Crawford and Rossiter 2006; Jackson 2018; Moran 1989; Rossiter 2020; Scott 1984, 2015, 2020) and encouraged by the CCE (2013) as a first step in developing 'a civilisation of love'. Coming to a developing understanding of personal identity, including spiritual/religious identity is central to young Australians becoming confident and creative individuals (Alice Springs Declaration, 2019, 6) and the parents in this study acknowledged the contribution of religion to this development. Parents suggested that the school was able to assist them in helping them to grow in religious understandings along with their children. This may be a result of parents not having accessed the religious tradition/s of their parents and now choosing to explore meaning with their own children. The parents supported a Religious Education that offered knowledge and experience and was open to the re-interpretation of faith traditions in the lives of contemporary individuals and families.

The parents in this study conceded they lead busy lives and finding time to invest in the spiritual or religious aspects was sometimes challenging, thus they appreciated that the school offered this, and their children could subsequently share their learnings at home. This is quite a different way of being religious or coming to religious understandings than may have occurred in the past when Catholic and other religious cultures would likely have been an intergenerational legacy and relatively homogenous. The school Religious Education learning and teaching could thus be an opportunity to extend the education to the family via the students' engagement and voice on religious content and issues. This may be an untapped opportunity to engage parents in the learning and teaching of Religion and while it may not necessarily re-engage parents as 'church goers' it may (re)-ignite a religious curiosity leading to conversations and potentially increased knowledge, faith, and religious tolerance. Attendance at mass may not be the appropriate measure for student or parent engagement in Religion (Rossiter 2020), but instead their way maybe new ways or nuanced ways to foster affiliation.

## Conclusion

This is a small, limited study with a relatively homogenous sample of parents offering perceptions of interreligious learning and teaching in one school context. The school being one that the ECSI Research (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven 2019) proposes has student, staff and parent populations that are open to Recontextualisation. This offers individuals new and plausible ways of reinterpreting understanding of the Catholic faith within the pluralistic culture. Whilst the volunteers in this study are potentially parents who are invested in, or curious about, their children's Religious Education, their insights may offer possibilities for ways to consider interreligious encounters in their own lives.

The recent draft document of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia (5th) (2022) commits the Australian church to the 'development of resources, formation and education programs in the promotion of hospitality, encounter, dialogue and merciful responses to the needs of our society' (Plenary Council of Australia (5th) 2022, Decree 3 September 2022). One of the foundations of the third decree being 'seeking communion'; a call for the Church to engage in interreligious dialogue as a way of building harmonious relationships with those of other religions and no religion. This could work towards 'creating mutual understanding' and building a 'global sense of citizenship' advancing a 'civilisation of love' (CCE 2013). This work, the Plenary Council acknowledges, will include 'educational programs' thus the Catholic school, along with other church entities, perhaps playing a vital educative role. This role, drawing on the pluralised context of the contemporary world, will need to find new ways of communicating with, and understanding the other, enabling all to grow in their humanity.

This investigation probed how parents described their child's role in interreligious learning and teaching at Good Shepherd Primary and how this may or may not assist their child's religious identity development. The study, though limited, points to the potential for open and willing parents of students in Catholic Schools to support their children's engagement in interreligious learning and teaching. There could be an opportunity for Catholic Schools to contribute to supporting parents in their role as religious educators in a contemporary society that is decreasing in affiliation with organised

religion. However, such endeavours would require an appropriate educational framework (Scott 1984) so as not to slide into the work of the Church community.

Assisting parents to understand the 'why' and 'how' (Sharratt 2019) of Religious Education, inclusive of interreligious learning and teaching, could promote the engagement of parents in this educational project and may reap benefits for both students and their parents. The Catholic school's commitment to engaging parents in the Religious Education of their children, inclusive of interreligious learning and teaching, may assist the social mission of the church through supporting families in building knowledge and respect for, and dialogue with, the religious/cultural other. Finding creative ways to engage busy parents will be a challenge as will ensuring the language used is accessible to the plethora of religious/non-religious affiliations. However, it is an opportunity to overcome prejudices and to actualise harmonious relationships potentially awakening a religious curiosity which may resource the meaning-making efforts of our future generations. This potential warrants further research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of James Cook University, Human Research Ethics Committee, ID H8146. Ethics approval also granted from Brisbane Catholic Education Reference No. 450.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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