[CHAPTER 3: THE WORLD OF THE LEARNER]

Awakenings RE Curriculum Core Document Revised Text Development

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3.1 A Meaningful World

People of all ages seek to explore and construct personal meaning in and through the various experiences of being human and being alive in the world. From the perspective of the Catholic worldview, this meaning-making capacity of the person has a religious and transcendent dimension. It has always been a challenging task, and is even more so in contemporary culture where social life-forms and traditional roles are changing rapidly, ever-new modes of experience are opening up, and diverse ways of making meaning of life are followed by individuals and groups.

A fundamental understanding of the Catholic worldview is that the human quest to understand the world and to live meaningfully and purposefully is not futile. Since it is the loving gift of a gracious Creator, the universe and all that emerges within it is ‘good’, as described in the first chapter of Genesis. It is good because it shares in the coherence, integrity, and purposefulness of the Creator. Human existence, too, is fundamentally good and meaningful. In the history of biblical Israel, through the event of Jesus Christ, and by the witness of the Christian church through the generations, we learn that God is constantly calling human persons in a history of saving encounter, drawing us into a communion of life and love with the mystery of the Triune Persons – Father, Son and Spirit.

The Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) outlines a set of attributes for students that should inform all educational programs and experiences in the current context. The aspiration of the Declaration is that as a result of the learning opportunities they are given all students will become:

- **Successful learners**
  - develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning
  - have the essential skills in literacy, numeracy, technology as a foundation for success in learning
  - are able to think deeply in a disciplined way and to use knowledge creatively and collaboratively
  - able to make sense of their world and progress towards achieving their full potential

- **Confident and creative individuals**
  - have self-awareness and a sense of personal identity and self-worth
  - manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing
  - develop values and attributes that enable personal integrity and interpersonal relationships
  - are well prepared and skilled for responsibilities in family, community, workplace

- **Active and informed citizens**
  - act with moral and ethical integrity and respect the principles and procedures of democracy
  - appreciate Australia’s social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, its history, culture and system of government
  - value the Indigenous peoples and cultures of the land and develop the social skills required for ongoing reconciliation
  - promote environmental sustainability and participate as responsible global and local citizens

1 The World of the Learner
A Catholic educational vision strives for these attributes in the development of all students. It will embed these goals in a more fully articulated and theologically-informed understanding of the human person in all its dimensions. With its distinctive understanding of who the learner is and how the learner relates meaningfully to the world around us, the Catholic school embraces the diversity of worldviews in Australian society, and seeks to enter into transformative encounters of meaning-making with all members of the school community.

The *Melbourne Declaration* shows the impact of the *turn to the learner* that has occurred in educational practice in recent decades (Biggs & Tang, 2007). This paradigm focusses on the learner as an active subject of awareness, experience and reflection, and places the active learner at the heart of structured learning activities. While discipline content, teacher instruction, and transmission of information are all components of effective learning, these dimensions contribute to learning most effectively when they promote and deepen the intentional engagement of the active participant of learning. Constructivist paradigms express this student-centred approach to learning, although an overly-individualistic and functionalist model of constructing knowledge from experience can lead to an impoverishment of the learning experience.

A key aspect of placing the learner at the centre of the educational experience is allowing students’ ‘voices’ to be heard in all aspects of the school’s curriculum and culture. In ways appropriate to their stage of maturity, students become co-creators and co-designers of the learning journey by expressing, interpreting and integrating their self-understandings and learning intentions. This calls for an educational style based on deeply human encounters with others through appropriate and respectful dialogue, including interaction in the domain of personal meaning-making and religious identity. Children and young people are active subjects of their maturing self-understanding, including religious experience and belonging to a faith community, and this development occurs through meaningful engagement with others (Dillen, 2007).

Learners’ voices can be expressed and listened to in a variety of school routines and practices:

- students are involved in decision-making that affects their experience of learning
- student-led conversations in the classroom to share worldviews and perspectives
- using evidence of student understanding provides feedback for teachers in learning process
- students’ voice can be both oral and textual, spoken or performed
- observing student engagement through posture, facial expression, mood and behavior
- students are partners in developing learning goals and identifying how to achieve them
- students are subjects of personal meaning and religious experience

Self-awareness and personal meaning is only possible within a narrative framework. We discover and negotiate our personal story within a broader, more inclusive story that situates us in relation to others and to the world around us. It is the narrative horizon within which we live that invests our experiences with value and purpose, that enables us to understand and interpret ourselves and our world, that provides coherence and ‘sense’ to our lives. Personal identity and meaning is as much received as constructed, and it is within a narrative horizon that learners both receive and intentionally create a sense of self and meaning.
3.2 The World of the Learner

If this meaning-generating engagement with self and others in the world is to help learners integrate their experiences, culture, and religious learning, they must be invited into learning activities that investigate and interpret the overlapping ‘worlds’ which constitute their life context.

a. Families and households

The structure and experience of family life is changing in many ways around the world. It is impossible to presume a homogenous set of family arrangements and circumstances for all members of the school community (ABS, 2016).

- it is within the family that each person’s human awareness, including religious sensibilities, are first called to life. Love, trust, wonder, reassurance, belonging, gratitude, and a developing sense of responsibility and commitment provide the foundations for emotional, cognitive and spiritual lifelong learning.
- families strive to provide rich, nurturing environments for children, at times families struggle with pressing social, economic, technology and media and personal problems. Relationships may be fragile; stability and effectiveness may be limited; an interest in the religious development of children may be lacking or seek to be expressed in non-traditional ways.
- while the majority of students live with their birth-parents and siblings, an increasing number are growing up in step families, blended families, or single-parent families.
- there is a slow decrease in the marriage rate in Australia, and many people are entering into first marriage at a later age. Four out of five couples live together prior to their marriage. About three out of four marriages are celebrated in civil ceremonies.
- there is increasing diversity in the cultural and religious backgrounds of Australian families and among family members.

b. Australia within a globalising society

Australian society is being transformed in response to increasing globalization and accelerating technological change.

- societal change is experienced in all aspects of life – communication, trade, employment, political and cultural activity.
- the gap between highest and lowest incomes, both within and among countries, continues to widen (Society of St Vincent de Paul, 2016).
- Australian society is increasingly multicultural and multi-religious. However, this pluralisation is not reflected in all regions of the country. Immigrants come from increasingly diverse countries of origin.
- rural Australia is undergoing significant changes as a result of national and international factors, including a drift in population to cities for employment and housing, declining income and access to services, issues of health, ageing and mental wellbeing, challenges of soil and water management and regeneration. Some regional areas, particularly in coastal and high-tourism regions, are experiencing growth.
- the challenge of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is widely recognized, although legal, symbolic and practical steps toward reconciliation remain difficult to achieve. Employment rates, social conditions, and health and
wellbeing standards in Aboriginal communities present urgent and major challenges all Australians
o there is increasing awareness of the fragility and degradation of the natural environment and the responsibility for sustainable management of the resources of land, water and air. Churches and other religious groups are contributing to this raising of awareness; many have drawn inspiration from Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si’: Care for our Common Home*

o Australia has been affected by increased global flows of people, highlighting challenges of immigration and national security policies, national and international responsibilities for protection of asylum-seekers and safeguarding against people-smuggling and human trafficking, and public attitudes towards the presence of refugees and migrants in local communities

c. **Technologies and Media**

   Much of the experience and learning of all members of the school community is mediated through electronic technologies and media.

   o new technologies bring new opportunities and new risks. As the most frequent users of social networks and online services, young people are exposed to both the benefits and the dangers of digital life (OECD, 2016)

   o digital and electronic technologies are employed in all dimensions of school activity and accountability; they are an indispensable means of maintaining relationships between all members of the community

   o social and communications media are a regular dimension of young people’s experience and self-understanding

   o access to electronic devices and internet service are a major indicator of advantage and disadvantage in Australian society, and worldwide

   o some research indicates a correlation between extensive use of new media and depressive symptoms and suicide-related outcomes among some young people

   o critical analysis and ethical assessment skills are an essential component of living with technology and new media

   o cyber-crime and cyber-security are recognized risks for public organisations, including schools. Schools are challenged to ensure e-safety policies and procedures are implemented and reviewed (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2018)

d. **Peer Groups, Sport and Recreation**

   Peer relationships are an essential element of young people’s self-awareness and development, within the school community, and in leisure and entertainment activities.

   o friends play a significant role in young people’s personal lives and their sense of wellbeing and security in the world. Young people notice the religious or spiritual dimension of their friends’ lives, and their attitudes to religion in society

   o for many young people sport and physical health are key factors in their happiness and well-being; professional sportspeople and sporting associations and codes are influential role-models and opinion-makers for young people

   o trends towards gender, racial, and social inclusivity and recognition in sport, and the representation of diversity in cinema and art, have an impact of young people’s participation in these activities

   o some researchers indicate that new media and digital life reduce the physical activities and social sporting groups young people are involved in

   o domestic and international tourism and travel is a regular leisure activity for some young people, with their families in in school-organised trips.
e. **Employment and Training**

The structure and composition of Australia’s workplace and patterns of employment and training are changing rapidly (Foundation for Young Australians, 2017).

- casual labour, the gig economy, and self-employment offer more flexibility in work, but also more risk of underemployment and loss of income
- internationalization of labour and new technologies are disrupting traditional workplaces and job skills, creating both risk and opportunity for young people entering the workforce
- enterprise skills such as digital literacy, creative thinking, problem solving, and people skills, are highly regarded by employers, with less emphasis on manual and task-related skills
- more older Australians are retiring out of the workforce than there are young people entering it, with implications for the productivity and living-standards of all Australians
- career-long training and re-skilling for a succession of roles and skillsets will be a feature of the workplace, creating ongoing connection with education and training providers
- young indigenous Australians, and young people in some postcode areas, remain over-represented among the unemployed and unskilled in the society

### 3.3 Young People, Religious Experience and Church

According to the *ECGI* survey data (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2014), 85% of primary (yrs 5-6) students and 69% of secondary student indicated full or moderate support for the Catholic identity of their school. Many students in both primary and secondary schools indicated full or moderate support for the Catholic faith. Among students, support for a distinctively Catholic school and for the Catholic faith wanes in the senior years of schooling, with a significant minority expressing a neutral or negative attitude to the religious dimension of schooling.

Among teachers in primary schools, over 93% indicated strong or average faith in Christ, over 86% support the Catholic faith, with many also critical of some elements of it, and over 90% support the Catholic identity of the school. Secondary staff overall indicated somewhat lower levels of support for Catholic faith and school identity, although still largely positive toward it.

At the same time, the *ECGI* survey results also show that factors of secularisation and pluralisation are clearly at work within Catholic school communities, especially as students’ progress through the levels of schooling. Senior students and adults in school communities demonstrate weaker support for the distinctively Catholic ethos of schooling, are less resistant to secularising influences in school curriculum and activities, and are less likely to engage in explicitly religious practices such as prayer, attending liturgies, or seeking to grow closer to God.

These trends are consistent with other studies of the religious affiliation and practice of young Australians. In the 2016 Australian Census, 38% of 15-24 year olds and 39% of 25-34 year olds indicated that they have no religion. The 2011 National Church Life Survey showed that 4% of Catholic 15-19 year olds and 6% of 20-29 year olds attended church services (Mollidor & Power, 2013). Social researchers report a wide range of transcendent beliefs among young people, including beliefs about
God, a higher power, reincarnation or life beyond death; others hold no transcendent beliefs. Hughes, Reid & Fraser (2015) describe a *mid-narrative* of life-meaning (i.e. between a meta-narrative and no narrative) that represents about 85% of young Australians’ views. In this narrative, the goal of the good life is to successfully negotiate the challenges of doing well at school, using the resources of family, friends, music, and perhaps some transcendent or religious beliefs, in order to secure a satisfying and well-paying job to provide a lifestyle of fun with family and friends. Young people hope to achieve this goal within a society that is peaceful and cooperative, sustainable and secure, and provides ‘a fair go’ for all (p. 3). This narrative of *practical secularity* strongly influences the worldview and personal meaning of senior students and adults in Catholic school communities.

The strongest influence on young people experiencing a personal faith relationship with God or Jesus Christ and a positive association with the church is belonging to a believing and participating family (Mark 2016; Bengston, 2013; Smith, 2014). Similarly those brought up in a nonreligious household are highly likely to remain disaffiliated from religion as adults (Zucherman, 2016). However, the quality of the parenting style and relational dynamic is also a significant influence of whether young people embrace their parents’ faith stance.

When children perceive their relationship with parents as close, affirming, and accepting, they are most likely to identify with their parents’ religious practices and belief, while relationships marked by coldness, ambivalence, or preoccupation are likely to result in religious differences (Bengston, 2013, p. 98).

This is the also case with other adult models of religious identity: grandparents, other family members, teachers and mentors, priests, religious and other pastoral ministers. Of particular importance, as children transition into the teenage and emerging adult years, is that adult religious models present an open and enquiring attitude to religious beliefs and practices, offering warm support while young people explore questions and tensions in their religious worldview. In research over several generations, Bengston (2013, p. 186) found that ‘children responded best to parents who were unconditionally supportive, who provided consistent role modeling of religious practices, and who did not force their beliefs or practices on their children.’

Other factors also contribute to a maturing faith stance in young people, especially as they negotiate the teenage years. Christian Smith (2014, p. 268) identifies three major domains of influence on religious identity as teenagers transition to emerging adulthood:

- close relationship with religious parents and other adult religious models
- internalised religious beliefs and personal religious experiences
- consistent and positive engagement in religious practices

Catholic schools strive to contribute to these factors that enhance the faith formation of young people. Catholic adult models witness to a religious worldview that is personally experienced, intellectually rich, and authentically meaningful. They relate to students and young teachers in a genuinely warm and open manner, engaging in non-judgmental dialogue about Catholic beliefs and practices. They are instrumental in offering opportunities for students and young staff to participate in prayerful faith encounter with the Triune God in internalized and reflective experiences, such as liturgies, meditation, retreats, and personal testimony. The witness of believing adults in the school community, lived out in a mature, consistent and intellectually-enquiring manner, is a source of *credibility enhancing displays* (CrEDs) of the beauty and vitality of the Catholic worldview.

This witness is offered and received in a differentiated and individual way:
it will reinforce and deepen the faith commitment of those who are actively involved with their families in a Catholic or other religious community;

it will investigate and challenge the practical secularity of many young people in relation to transcendent meaning and religious faith;

it will explain and consider worldviews with the committedly nonreligious.

In all cases, this witness of Catholic faith will be offered with gentleness, clarity, trustful confidence, and careful judgement (Paul VI, 1964). The intention is to invite and engage every student, and all members of the school community, into purposeful and transformative learning through encounter with each other and with the Catholic tradition, since Catholics understand all persons to be subjects of self-awareness and personal meaning, with a spiritual capacity reflecting their origin and destiny in the loving presence of God.

3.4 The human person at the centre of learning experience

The official teaching of the Church in recent decades on the role and purpose of Catholic education has focused on the integral development of the human person within a Christ-centred educational community as the primary rationale of the Catholic school.

The person of each individual human being is at the heart of Christ’s teaching: this is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school. (The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1998, n. 9).

In the Catholic worldview, human persons are both biologically evolved and spiritually created. In the description of Genesis, the Creator God breathes on the face of the creature formed from the earth, who becomes a living being (Gen 2:7). This face-to-face encounter and the giving and receiving of the breath between Creator and creature speaks of the intimate and interpersonal relation between humans and God. In the space opened up by the gift of the Creator’s breath, humans come to consciousness and communication; we become persons through this encounter and interaction of breath. Through language, this ‘breathing-space’ between God and humans is articulated and enlarged; we come to self-expression and purposeful meaning by being drawn more deeply into this space. It is within this space that we sense the attraction of the transcendental qualities of union, truth, beauty and goodness, and that our capacities of cognition and understanding, desire and memory, imagination and creativity, relationality and interiority, are awakened. D. Pollefeyt (2013) has written of this relational openness of the human person in the Catholic worldview in terms of a hermeneutical space:

This anthropology assumes that every human being, without exception, religious or nonreligious, Christian or otherwise, is characterised by this openness and that, by way of this openness, this indeterminacy, the given of existence, everyone has to sort out his or her own thinking, and that everyone can create, discover and exchange sense, nonsense, meaning and orientation with this openness. It is through this shared openness that all people are structurally linked as relational beings (p. 2).

Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et spes (nn.12-22), reminds us that the human person, created by the breath of God and living as God’s image within creation (Gen 1: 27), is called to his or her personal existence in all its dimensions. The human person integrally and adequately considered (Selling 2016) includes the following aspects, all of which have been

- human persons stand in relation to everything, to the whole of reality, and to God
- human persons stand in relation to the material world
- human persons are cultural
- human persons are historical
- human persons stand in particular relationships with other persons
- human persons become a conscious interiority, a subject
- human persons are corporeal subjects
- every human person is unique, yet fundamentally equal in dignity.

These interrelated dimensions of human persons constitute the spiritual character of their existence, and are named and integrated in the journey of personal and religious meaning-making.

The Catholic tradition recognizes that human existence in all its integral dimensions has been assumed by the divine Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and that human existence is lived ‘to the full’ (John 10:10) in his ministry, death and resurrection. For believers, the humanity of Christ is the gateway that opens up the hermeneutical space of their own existence. For, ‘it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear.’ (GS n. 22)

3.5 Sites of encounter for dialogue

Researchers of the millennial generation have identified a variety of new sites of meaning-making around which young adults are gathering (Thurston & ter Kuile, 2015a, 2015b). It is suggested that these themes represent valued sources of meaning and purpose in young people’s lives, and offer avenues of engagement with others in the hermeneutical space of meaning-making and religious identity. Can they be seen as signs of the times expressing a new generation’s search for authentic living and spiritual openness? These themes are potential sites for engaging students, and their parents and teachers, in personal reflection on and deeper awareness of the worldviews they and others hold, including religious belonging and faith commitments. Each of these themes have deep resonances in the Catholic worldview, and open up dimensions of the hermeneutical space of human existence that promote self-transcendence, spiritual awareness, and interpersonal responsibility.
Community
Valuing and fostering deep relationships that center on service to others

Personal transformation
Making a conscious and dedicated effort to develop one's own body, mind, and spirit

Social transformation
Pursuing justice and beauty in the world through the creation of networks for good

Purpose finding
Clarifying, articulating, and acting on one's personal mission in life

Creativity
Allowing time and space to activate the imagination and engage in play

Accountability
Holding oneself and others responsible for working toward defined goals

Something More
Reaching for what matters most