Human Dignity in Pastoral Care

Jane Bourke, 2016
Introduction
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Over the past decade I have experienced, developed and studied many different Pastoral Care systems. Like many things there is no one recipe for a successful system, there is however, consistent elements that when integrated well into any system will lead to a positive and consistently successful system.

Like any school, state or integrated, Pastoral Care systems are a means to cater for the material, physical and/or emotional wellbeing of a student, both within and outside of the school. This system is often comprised of the guidance teams (counsellors and social workers) alongside deans and Head of Pastoral Care or Discipline. In a Catholic School this should also include those who take care of the spiritual aspect of the school, this could be the DRS or Chaplin if there is one.

In our Catholic context, the Pastoral Care Team should be solutions focused and aiming to ensure that students are seen as individuals whose ‘intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional and social growth’.

The focus of this booklet is to examine the role of the Social Justice principal of Human Dignity at the heart of the Pastoral Care system as a corner stone for the development of the individuals we, as educators, encounter.

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1. New Zealand Catholic School Staff Members booklet, par 4.6.4 (2014)
The Social Justice Principles sit at the heart of the mission of the Church, and by extension should sit at the heart of the mission of Catholic schools. In the 2014 New Zealand Bishops document *The Catholic Education of School-Aged Children* the Bishops outline that Catholic schools are unique in that sense the the Social Justice principles are not just something that can be used within a school but they should be the framework for its organisation and ethos.

While these principles are not explicitly focused on education they are a blueprint for the promotion of human dignity, the good of the individual and in turn the good of the community. As Pastoral Care is directly linked to these three areas and Catholic Pastoral Care practice should be Christ centric, the Social Justice principles are in turn the foundation stones for good, Catholic Pastoral Care.

The origins of the Social Justice Principles stem from Christ in scripture though they were more formally recognised by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. While this document was focused on the working poor it became the backbone for the Catholic Social Justice teachings and the seven principles of Catholic social doctrine, the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, participation, solidarity, the right of private property and universal goods stemmed. These have since been developed on to create 10 principles commonly used across Social Justice Organisations today. For the sake of this writing I will be focused on the principles as they are defined in by the New Zealand Bishops Conference in 2010.

The Social Justice Teachings of the Catholic Church are living and growing ideas. They are developed through observation, analysis and actions and they should then be used as our guides for working with social problems.

When the New Zealand Bishop's document refers to the Social Justice principles as being a framework for a school's ethos it means their integration into a school should be far more than tokenistic. For these to be part of the ethos of the school they require full integration into policy, processes and dialog. They should be most crucially integrated into student care.

The core principles for a school setting, and especially for a Pastoral Care system, are those of human dignity, preferential treatment for the poor and vulnerable, solidarity, participation and the common good.
Human Dignity
At the heart of respect for the human person is the core teaching that God made humankind in His image and made us little lower than the angels, crowned with glory. It is with this in mind that we must acknowledge that each individual student we work with must be treated with dignity.

According to the New Zealand Bishops Conference, the Principle of Human Dignity states ‘every single person is created in the image of God. Therefore they are invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. The dignity of the person grants them inalienable rights — political, legal, social, and economic rights. This is the most important principle because it is from our dignity as human persons that all other rights and responsibilities flow.’

We believe that every person is precious, and that this must at all times be reflected in our practice.

In March of 2015 Angela Mucci published a study focusing on examining teacher’s responses to student behaviour. In the study teachers described their understanding of human dignity to mean that each student has an equal dignity and that they were a reflection of the image of God with unique strengths, gifts and weakness. To treat a student with proper human dignity we must stress the importance of caring for students as individuals, and when caring for them we must value them equally.

As we consider what is means to recognise the dignity of our students we should be aware that it is more than just respecting them as person. Human dignity in fact stems further by showing genuine care, meeting their needs, and setting high expectations.

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3 Genesis 1: 26
Human dignity indicates that each person has value and importance based simply on their creation and not due to any action or accomplishment on their own part and because every person is valued and important they must be treat as such and with genuine care.

To show full respect for our students we need to look deeply into their hearts and minds, we can do no less if we are to be true to the call of the Church

When we look at the work of Hattie we see that he measured the effect of positive student-teacher relationships. In his ranking system this receives an effect size of 0.72, placing it in the high category of influence in Hattie's research. Hattie explains that this effect size, and positive student-teacher relationships, results in more engagement, more respect for self and others, fewer resistant behaviours, greater student-initiated and student regulated-activities, as well as higher achievement outcomes.

What do positive student-teacher relationships look like in the classroom?

- Teachers show their pleasure and enjoyment of students.
- Teachers interact in a responsive and respectful manner.
- Teachers offer students help (e.g., answering questions in timely manner, offering support that matches the children's needs) in achieving academic and social objectives.
- Teachers’ help students reflect on their thinking and learning skills.
- Teachers know and demonstrate knowledge about individual students’ backgrounds, interests, emotional strengths and academic levels.
- Teachers seldom show irritability or aggravation toward students.
- Teachers display student work.
- Positively reinforce students verbally.
- Show off the class achievements.
- Speak to the accomplishments of all their students.
- Teachers look for opportunities for students to be proud in all areas.
- Develop pride in improvement in addition to pride in excellence.
- Are sincere in their pride of students.

(Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos, 2015)
Human dignity and knowing our students

One of the core ways to feel valued as a person is the knowledge that those around us know us well, and that we are not just a number or a face in the crowd.

The New Zealand Bishops outline that as a Catholic teacher it is our role to form our students. In order to do this we must know their background, understand their challenges, recognise their gifts and know their weakness. When we know these things our relationships are built on a positive base and we are less likely to do damage as we work with them. As Graeme George puts it ‘teaching is an emotional labour. It is not just cognitive work ... students are not just machines to be topped up with knowledge.’ When we treat students purely as machines or a face in a group we rob them of their individuality and dignity.

Developing strong and confident relationships with students is one of the greatest supports in teaching. In fact many teaching specialists would argue that because learning is a social event both teachers and students will pay the price if teachers neglect to form emotionally warm, supportive relationships with and among their students. Research has shown that positive relationships between teachers and students...

1. increase the levels of students’ interest in and enjoyment of the class
2. increase the levels of students’ academic achievement
3. decrease the occurrence of classroom disruptions

These positive relationships have the spinoff of more productive and positive environments while also reinforcing that the student is valued.

Once positive relationships are established there is also a shift in teacher thinking. When you know someone you are able to recognise their dignity and separate the person from the behaviour. Mucci’s work includes the idea that in the light of dignity there are no bad kids, just bad behaviour. Being able to actively separate behaviour from a student gives the young persona a sense of hope, that they are not bad or hopeless, they just have to make a change.
Case in point: Chelsea

As a dean I came back to a pastoral message from the Head of Social Sciences in regards to an issue of plagiarism.

*Chelsea has admitted that she is struggling with school. She said there is a lot 'she doesn't get' and doesn't like to share her work with her teachers because of that. She just cheated on an internal in GEO and failed to submit a completed internal for HIST. What are our next steps?*

In reading this message the focus for the HoD was punitive, what should be done to this girl for misdemeanour. Our school’s Restorative Practice model indicates that all things should be done with a student and not to them. This mentality can take some time to adjust to.

In this situation there are multiple factors that required consideration and unfortunately, this HoD had not taken the time to learn about them. They were these.

1. This student has spent the past two years in another country, which meant the curriculum did not neatly line up. She has never been part of NCEA.
2. The shift back to New Zealand had been extremely difficult on her and she was deeply unhappy.
3. Chelsea has extremely low self-esteem and serious anxiety issues.

Part of respecting the dignity of a student requires knowing about them on an emotional level. In Chelsea's case any action done to her, and not with her, would result in a huge academic blow. What needed to happen in this situation was for the parties involved to have a Restorative meeting and work through the issue, not just punish her and send a letter home. The latter was likely to make her feel worse, increase her anxiety and likely end up with her truanting school.
Another area in which a teacher can uphold the dignity of a student is to have high expectations of them, both academic as well as personal growth. Storz & Nestor outline that often when we think of raising expectations we link it to academic success, leaving it there simply ignores having expectations such as intellectual curiosity, intrinsic motivation, divergent thinking, a love of learning, risk taking and the ability to work with others.  

For many students, especially in low social economic areas, expectations are lowered with teachers making excuses for why we should not expect them to do better. Excuses such as "Well, it’s not their native language so we can't expect that they can read that level" or "things at home aren't so great so we need to just let them be." Excuses can be made so often that students get a sense that they don't need to reach higher than is expected. Compassion to situations is incredibly important but it is no excuse to expect less from a young person.

When we set our eyes to high expectation we recognise the best in each of our students. There is a wealth of educational literature that supports the need for teachers to hold high expectations. In L. C. Clarkes work from 2002 it became apparent that if students are firmly and continually encouraged to engage in a high standard of learning their self-esteem improves and begin to see themselves as a strong learner who can engage in a learning environment. In any situation an increase in self-esteem reinforces the dignity of the student. When we look at the work of John Hattie we can see that high expectations not only impacts on a student’s psyche, making them feel valued and important eliminating the feeling of ‘being nothing’, it also plays a role in increasing achievement. Having clear, communicated and high expectations has been proven to be a tool to have student achieve. Teachers who communicate these expectations to students are more likely to have their expectations met and a 0.43 effect is to be expected, using Hattie’s zone of positive effect.

Outside of the education sphere high standards were also set by Christ. So often in the Gospel’s Christ challenged those to be better and set higher standards. Often in teaching He would outline the teaching of old and then add a next level so not to leave it at the lowest common denominator.

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9 Storz M. & Nestor K. They Call US to Justice (2007)
11 Hattie, J. Visible Learning (2009)
When working with students in a disciplinary context I often remember the story of the woman caught in adultery. We know the story, the woman is caught breaking the law and dragged to Jesus. After discussion the accusers leave with their heads bowed and Christ says “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11). Christ does not leave the woman to continue on her sinful path, instead he gives her the directive that she should do better.

This story has many parallels to working in pastoral care. So often the offender is dragged to me, with sins poured out by the teacher and a ‘stoning’ expected. After all the discussion is done and all the consequences worked through, it would be wrong of me to allow the student to simply go back to do the same thing over and over again. There needs to be an expectation set that the student can do better. A question of how comes into play here. How can we set these high expectations or look for change in our students without it being something that is once again done to them and not with them? We can encourage students to do better, tell them that we believe that they can be Excellence level students or that we believe that they can be punctual but at the end of the day the expectations is something that must be actively taken up by the student themselves in order to be affective. The answer to this I believe lies in the skill of motivational interviewing.
One of the greatest barriers as a teacher is motivating a student to change. Many of the students who sit in front of us have engrained behaviours and struggles that impact on themselves and on our classrooms. It is difficult often to look past these behaviours to the student.

Often as adults we try to give a solution or ‘force’ a change. I have more than once sat in a conversation with a student that was only one-sided, where I have spoken at a student and then given them expectations. Most students want to please us, or just want the conversation to end, and with due to well-developed avoidance skills most students know exactly what to say to make that conversation end. Most of the time they will do or say anything to get their teacher to stop talking, including agreeing to everything we say or suggest, even our well-meaning "I think the best way forward for you would be for you always bring your pen to class" suggestions for change. However, we know from our own experience that if we want to make a change in our own lives it has to be done from an internal motivation not driven by an outside force. I have had many failed behaviour change attempts based on what others have thought would be good for me.

What makes the situation harder is that often the student is part of this conversation involuntarily, they have been referred to the conversation either by ourselves “we need to talk about …”, another teacher “you need to talk to …”, a parent or even an outside provider. In these conversations you cannot guarantee, in fact I would almost bet there is no buy in. How is it that we can motivate a student to change in this situation?

The underlying principle of Motivational Interviewing is to guide a student through the process of change. It is a person centred conversation that is approached collaboratively to elicit and strengthen the desire to change. As the teacher, dean or general adult in the situation it is your job not to take responsibility for the change but to support the young person to get there themselves. In the Catholic setting, MI is a great tool that continues to respect the dignity of the student in front of you; it is designed to be a non-judgemental approach and to put the student first.
The basic steps for Motivational Interviewing

1. Understanding the story
2. Establishing the pros and cons
3. Providing information
4. Establishing a desire to change
5. Offering help with change

(Atkinson & Woods, 2003)

Firstly, allow the student to share about the issue, whether it is talking in class, constant disruption, truancy or even higher level behaviour. Start by hearing them speak. Often, we as teachers, are happy to fill in the gaps or tell a student what has happened. What this does is immediately put the student on the defensive and often leads to a feeling of being ‘guilty without trial’. The key to starting the conversation is to let the young person tell you what has happened.

While sitting in silence can be intimidating for us; it is also for the student. Don’t give in to the desire to fill the void of silence. Offer leading questions where needed such as “Can you outline what just happened?” or “Tell me about the situation?” The difficult part here, once the student opens up, is to frame the conversation to stick to the point and not to let it run off down the rabbit hole into territory that is not productive.

Once the student has shared their story the next step is to move on to investigate the pros and cons of the event. The most important part here is have the student themselves identify what might be positives and negatives of the situation and to get to a place where the negatives outweigh the positives and the student establishes a desire to change themselves.

Lastly, we offer our support to the student to help with the change. This may be with practical suggestions, offers of external support but most importantly a concrete time when you can meet again to check in to make sure the student is still on the right path.

The skill of motivational interviewing is that it takes the ‘power’ away from the teacher and places it squarely with the student and allows the two to set a high standard or expectation and it is not something that is forced and is something that can be supported by the teacher.
At all times we must remember that the student we are dealing with is an image of God and must be worked with accordingly.

It is crucial for teachers to learn positive strategies for working through issues with students — restorative approaches.

At all times we are working with a student, not doing something to them.

Students must be part of the change cycle and believe that it is their idea — motivational interviewing.
Always pray for your students

Use motivational interviewing

When things don’t go to plan include the student in the solution, work with them

Use restorative practices

Always set high standards for your students

In all situations remember to treat student with dignity

To treat a student with dignity you must know them and have a relationship with them

REMEmber
Every student is made in the image of God

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