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Learning in a Lutheran school

From north to south, and east to west, Lutheran schools dot the landscape of Australia. Small schools, large schools, rural schools and urban schools serve the needs of diverse communities.

A huge amount of learning takes place as these schools seek to educate the young people in their care. They structure literacy and numeracy programs, provide learning support for students with special needs, offer a broad curriculum from the disciplines, and engage in teaching methodologies that flow out of their articulated beliefs and understandings about the way young people learn and the ways that learning can be supported. In many cases there are additional programs offered. These can focus on areas such as social skill development, physical coordination and emotional well-being.

And because these schools by their very nature are places of people, relationships abound. The interplay of relationships is significant. Everyone in the school environment is in relationship with others. The extent of each relationship is determined by the level and quality of interaction over time. Ultimately, relationships impact on learning and determine the kind of learning community that the school will be. With particular respect to teacher/student relationships, Dozier [2000] says, 'it's about the critical element of the teacher and what transpires between a teacher and a child.'

The descriptions in the preceding paragraphs are a snapshot of the core work and nature of schools. Any school in any location in Australia could be matched with the description. So what is it, then, that makes learning in a Lutheran school distinctly different? If, indeed, it is!

A good starting point is the LCA policy statement [1999, edited 2001], *The Lutheran Church of Australia and its Schools*. Here we find that:

The Lutheran school is one of the arms of the church's ministry and mission [1.1] providing a formal education in which the gospel of Jesus Christ informs all learning and teaching, all human relationships, and all activities in the school [1.2]

The Lutheran school is not only for members of the Church but for all the community. Christian witness through the school, therefore, is deliberate and intentional. In the same policy statement we find reference to a Christian world view:

The Lutheran school operates from an underlying holistic world view. All learning and teaching is integrated into this world view, which recognises the role of education of both God's revelation and human reason [2.3]

and to worship:

The Lutheran Church confesses that worship of God is central to the life of the people of God in mission to the world of the school [3.1].

From these statements we can see that Lutheran schools have a very specific context from which, and purpose for which, they exist and operate. Our core values, or ultimate truths, derived from the revealed word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, underpin every aspect of school life including the learning that takes place through them. Our beliefs about God and his plan of salvation for humankind, about what it means to be fully human, about the created world and about Christian purpose impact on every thought, word and act. To this end, the working document adopted by the BLS [March 1998] *Values in Christian Studies* provides us with insights into values in the Lutheran school, ie,

- *the word of God informs all learning and life*
- *the overall aim is for students to know, express and live in God's values through faith in Jesus Christ*
- *policies and practices reflect God's values*
- *staff are committed to a life that reflects God's values*
- *parents are aware of the God-given values of the school*
- *a prophetic stance is taken towards the pluralist values of the world*

It is what we value that drives the culture and the learning environment of the Lutheran school. Our values and beliefs directly contribute to the construction and formulation of school mission and vision statements. Mission statements encapsulate our purpose, our reason for being, and usually include words such as Christian education, school community, Christian environment, development, growth of the whole person, and gifts and talents. Vision statements, on the other hand, seek to articulate where we are headed and what we want for our students. Vision statements usually include words such as life roles, investment for the future, continuous learning, lifelong learning, learning how to learn, goal-setting and commitment to a supportive environment for learning.

Mission and vision statements, driven by our underlying beliefs and values, live and breathe in the daily life and work of Lutheran schools as they set about their core business of learning and teaching. From the writing of curriculum and policy to the analysis of the suitability of resources, from the conducting of meetings to one-to-one interactions, from the carefully constructed learning program to the specific needs of individual learners, from words of encouragement to responsibility for action and behaviour, from pastoral care programs to disciplinary action, from moments of celebration to moments of sadness, from the provision of buildings and structures to the setting of budgets, from daily rituals to symbolic actions, the values and beliefs of a Lutheran school will be evident.

Because of the specific nature of Lutheran schools, our values and beliefs inform the appointment of teachers who:

*as well as being qualified and competent educators, will be committed to the Christian faith as confessed by the Lutheran Church, are willing to identify with, uphold and promote the Lutheran ethos of the school and who will exemplify and model the Christian lifestyle in and beyond the school [1993 BLS policy *The Teacher in the Lutheran School*]*

and principals whose:

*highest priority..... will be to ensure that both the formal and informal programs and activities of the school and all relationships are informed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. [BLS Model Statement *The Principal – Responsibilities and Relationships*].*

And so the resultant culture of the Lutheran school is always at work, influencing, embracing and permeating the thoughts, feelings and actions of all learners. Wagner [2000] describes school culture simply as 'shared experiences...a sense of community, of family and team.' In Lutheran schools the shared experiences are underpinned by our core beliefs and values.

Given that over a considerable period of time in their formative years our students have experienced the culture of Lutheran schools, what is it, then, that these young people will take with them when they leave? What will our legacy be? What will be the specific life roles and qualities of character that will have been developed and nurtured throughout their years at school? What will endure? On what will they scaffold future complex life roles? What do we want for our students? What will the students ultimately demonstrate?

These questions have been the focus for an LEA collaborative undertaking, *The Lifelong Attributes Project*, which has been taking form since November 2001 and is currently nearing completion. The Project documentation provides a rationale and overarching framework, a core statement encapsulating a hoped-for goal for all students, core values, a set of six lifelong role performances and qualitative attributes, explanations of the roles and attributes, and snapshots of the development of the attribute descriptors from school entry through Years 3, 6 and 9 to Year 12. In addition, the *Lifelong Attributes* have been aligned with productive pedagogies, a culmination of international, national and state research aimed at discerning the pedagogies that best facilitate lifelong learning, and The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century [1999 MCEETYA].

Schools will be able to use the Lifelong Attributes material in a host of ways from annual reports on the operation of the school to assessing learning, as a framework for curriculum mapping, for program assessment, to evaluate pedagogical practices, as a marketing tool, for class, faculty and whole-school planning, and even for student reporting by clustering Key Learning Area outcomes around them. The possibilities are endless. So while the Lifelong Attributes are a cohesive framework, the flexibility and scope can be as varied as the creative hands in which they are used.

As a resource the *Lifelong Attributes* will enable Lutheran schools to reflect on their own practice as they seek to 'empower every learner, open to the influence of the Holy Spirit, to shape and enrich our changing world' [2002, LEA *Lifelong Attributes documentation*].

Louise Mason
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