

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Contemporary Issues Series | Monograph #1 Fall 2017 | Published by Institute for Catholic Education

Understanding Well-Being from a Catholic Perspective

by Richard Olson

“I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43.1)

In April 2014 the Ministry of Education issued *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. It outlines four goals: achieving excellence, ensuring equity, supporting and promoting well-being, enhancing confidence in publicly funded education.

More recently (2016), a discussion document entitled *Ontario’s Well-Being Strategy for Education* was published. It outlines the Ministry of Education’s understanding of well-being as it relates to our children’s success in school. In sum, it concludes that there is an important relationship between a child’s sense of well-being and his or her capacity to learn. The discussion paper also recognizes that the stewards of publicly funded education must work together to determine what “well-being looks like, establishing what conditions and supports are required to create positive learning environments.

The Ministry continues to focus attention and encourage initiative as schools and school systems are asked to play active roles in addressing concerns for well-being and mental health for students and staff alike as part of Ontario’s Well-Being Strategy for Education.

Ontario’s Well-Being Strategy for Education acknowledges that there are four publicly funded school systems in the province. While the document recognizes the public and Francophone school

districts explicitly, along with references to Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, it makes no specific reference to the unique mission and vision of the Catholic school system.

Reference is made to “spirit” as part of well-being but is not identified in the *Four Domains of Well-Being*. The concept of spirituality is one of the important concepts of well-being for people of faith. This is true not only in the Catholic community, but also for those who view their life through a spiritual lens, guided by their religious beliefs, many of whom are in Catholic schools but many of whom also are in the other publicly funded systems of education in Ontario.

“ [T]he disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’ (Matthew 18.1-3)

The intention of this monograph is to expand upon the important conversation about well-being currently underway within our communities, and to ensure

that discussion and response is premised on a full Catholic/Christian understanding of the human person.

The Catholic church community has a long tradition of addressing human well-being, and the salvation history of the Catholic/Christian Church demonstrates a profound focus on the question of human growth and fulfillment. For Catholic schools, this has always found expression in the care for every child. For Catholic educators, teaching is a vocation of love and service to children and their families. Jesus taught that whoever welcomes a child, welcomes him.

Catholics share a distinctly Christian view of the human person; that is, the human person is not a construct but a creation, the impetus for his or her birth being love, not accident. For Christians, God is creator and sustainer of all that is — from the majesty of the Milky Way galaxy to the Syrian newcomer child entering junior kindergarten. As St. Paul reminds us, “[I]t is in God where we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17.28) In the Judeo-Christian worldview each person is created *imago dei*, in the very image and likeness of God (Genesis 1.26). And because God creates all things good, the human person is endowed with a fundamental, inviolate dignity. It is not economic privilege, nor intellectual prowess, nor athletic ability that dictates a child’s worth. Our common humanity, wholly created from God’s bountiful goodness, gifts each human person with essential dignity and worth.

Therefore, for the Catholic community the well-being of our children is a gospel mandate, a moral imperative, a long-understood precursor to the healthy development of the human person. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me...for it is to such as these the kingdom of heaven belongs.” (Matthew 19.14). Perhaps it is for this very reason that Catholic education, not just provincially but globally, has enjoyed a pride of place in terms of academic and personal excellence for its students.¹

In the Catholic/Christian view of the human person as creature, we see personhood at the center of the emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual and physical domains of human experience. None of these manifestations of the human experience

exist in isolation from the others. They are not silos. There is continual tension and interplay among them. For example, human emotions impact physical experience; spiritual, emotional and cognitive expressions are interwoven with our social experience.



Jesus says, “I come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.” (John 10.10)

Liturgical prayer for Catholics is both spiritual and social, for example, while leading us to a deeper (cognitive and emotional) understanding of creedal statements. In essence, the human person does not create himself or herself in the Catholic/Christian experience. We discover who God has intended us to be. Catholic education addresses this desire of the person to understand human life as an integration of body, mind, and spirit. Rooted in this vision, Catholic schools foster the search for meaning as a lifelong spiritual and academic quest. The expectations guiding the journey of learning for all students in Catholic schools, therefore, are described not only in terms of knowledge and skills, but necessarily in terms of values, attitudes and actions informed by reason and faith (*Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations*). In the discovery of our gifts, we discern who we have been called to be. God is always the initiator and the agent of change. In the recognition that God has loved us and called us first, we respond in the manner that is appropriate from one who has received a gift: with gratitude.



The Catholic/Christian initiation into the life of the church community begins with a profound affirmation: “You are my beloved. With you I am well-pleased.” These are the words Jesus hears at his baptism (Mark 1.11), and they are the words embedded in the welcome experience of every Christian person at their baptism. As Jesus emerges from the waters, he is claimed by God. It is this experience that launches his public ministry of teaching and healing that both proclaims and inaugurates the reign of God.

In the Catholic school, educators *continue* or *extend* the baptismal experience of children and youth with gestures of welcome and words of encouragement. This positive affirmation is foundational for a learner’s well-being and creates an environment that is optimal for learning. Catholic educators mindful of the social, spiritual, emotional, cognitive and physical needs of their students, build classrooms and schools where children and youth can grow into their giftedness. This contributes to the building of the kingdom or reign of God that was Jesus’ vision for the world.

Maya Angelou, the great American poet and storyteller, once reminded an international conference of teachers that they were the rainbow in the storm-tossed sky of every learner they encountered. In the same way that God’s “bow in the sky” (Genesis 9.13) became a sign of the covenant between God and God’s people, the teacher in our contemporary Ontario Catholic context becomes an arc of colour in the child’s school day. The arc of colour is the promise that says, “I believe in you. You can learn and thrive given time and my support.”

The Ministry of Education understands the dynamic interrelationship operative among the goals of achieving excellence, ensuring equity, supporting and promoting well-being, and enhancing confidence in publicly funded education. We have looked carefully at the Catholic/Christian tradition that has always understood that the well-being of the learner is a gospel mandate and a moral imperative. Similarly, the goal of ensuring equity is embedded in the prophetic tradition that flows from the Judeo/Christian perspective. Equity contributes to the well-being of

the child. Our biblical and contemporary prophets have called us to account for how we treat each other, especially the most vulnerable among us. From the voice of the prophets over centuries, the church has developed its social teaching, often simply referred to as *social justice*.

The principles of social justice can be characterized in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this discussion about equity and its relationship to well-being, we will highlight four of them.

Human Dignity: Each human person has fundamental dignity because they have been created in the image and likeness of God. There is no discrimination based on age, gender, race, ancestry, place of origin, sexual orientation, family status or disability.



Human Dignity “There can be no peace unless we have the conviction that every person is important, that every person matters, that every person flows from and to the heart of God.” – Jean Vanier

Preferential Option for the Poor: Those of us who have been blessed with economic, social and cultural privilege have a duty of care and responsibility for those in our communities, local and global, who do not. Any one person’s right to products or resources changes when a neighbour is in need. The well-being of students is supported with school breakfast programs, for example.

Promotion of Peace and Solidarity: When Jesus was faced with violence, he did not return it in kind. He absorbed it, transformed it, and gave it back as forgiveness, reconciliation, loving kindness. Educators called to the vocation of service in Catholic schools are called to do the same. Children who may have been traumatized by violence or act aggressively are welcomed, embraced and accepted. Educators accompany students as a supportive stance to aid in the development of their self-regulation.

Stewardship of the Environment: In Catholic social teaching, care for the earth is a prime concern.² In an educational context, this extends to the learning environment. When classrooms are inclusively designed for learners so that they may see themselves reflected and included, their sense of belonging and ownership for their learning increases. Catholic educators do not decorate classrooms or bulletin boards; they intentionally design the learning environment so that the social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical needs of children are addressed positively.³

Thus, the academic and personal excellence that we envision for our children cannot be separated from their experience of equity and inclusion. Jean Vanier reminds us that the need to belong precedes our human ability to give and receive love. The well-being of children flows from their sense of belonging and acceptance. Safe, welcomed and loved, they learn and grow. The degree of confidence that parents have in bringing their children to our schools is informed by the quality of care the children receive.

The Catholic community in the province of Ontario has provided consistent witness to the revealed truth that we have been claimed by God who loved us into being, and then walked among us teaching, healing and giving himself over completely to our reclamation, our redemption. The natural response to this gift

has been an attitude of gratitude and an appetite for loving service. This vision is captured in our Catholic Graduate Expectations:

1. A Discerning Believer
2. An Effective Communicator
3. A Reflective, Creative and Holistic Thinker
4. A Self-Directed, Responsible, Lifelong Learner
5. A Collaborative Contributor
6. A Caring Family Member
7. A Responsible Citizen



You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

– Saint Augustine

Our Catholic graduates are consecrated for service to their families, their larger communities, and the global village. It all begins with the warm welcome and embrace children receive as beloved sons and daughters as they enter our schools.

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Published by:



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ISBN # 123-4567-89-00
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