

Gender Complexity in Schools

Some guidance for Principals, BOTs, Staff, Students and Whānau of Catholic Primary and Secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand.

(Endorsed by the NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference)



te pūtahi a motu mō ngā akoranga whakapono
national centre for religious studies

“The Church makes her own the attitude of the Lord Jesus, who offers his boundless love to each person without exception.”

(Amoris Laetitia 250)

Faith and theological context

- Each and every person, female and male, is created in the image and likeness of God and is to be accepted as a gift and blessing of God (*Donum Vitae, Part II, A,1*).
- This fundamental belief points to the unity of humanity and a shared spiritual dimension that shapes every person.
- As the image of God, men and women are created for love (cf. *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 8).
- Every person has an inviolable human dignity.
- Gifts, talents and personality differ from person to person, adding to the richness of humanity and the breadth of insights in faith.
- The shaping and nurturing of young people’s sense of identity is primarily the duty of parents who draw on the support of their faith community or parish and the Catholic schools into which they entrust their children.
- No person’s identity can be reduced to their gender or sexuality, just as they should not be labelled by any other single aspect of their personhood – for example, intelligence, sporting ability or ethnicity.
- The truly holistic view of the human persons is what the Church teaches: to be understood as authentically human is to be “whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 3).
- Recognizing that we are all created in the image of God and are united in Christ, we can then marvel at the diversity which marks the worldwide human family.

Social context

- We live in a country and time that excels in celebrating differences but struggles to articulate what unites the human family.
- We live in a society that claims to uphold human dignity but readily violates it when upholding human dignity might diminish or remove 'choice'.
- We live in a time when social media and the entertainment industry is all-powerful and largely unaccountable.
- We live in a nation where our young people are often eager to volunteer, deeply concerned for the planet, champions of social justice yet at the same time fall prey to alarming rates of suicide, anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses.
- And we live in a time when some young people are particularly vulnerable as they discover that their own gender and sexuality does not fit traditional binary categories. The number of children who report their gender does not match their biological sex is significant. Gender dysphoria is real.

School and cultural context

- Much of what shapes people's views today about the human person, and perhaps young people in particular, is influenced by the two strong currents of individualism and self-determination.

Exaggerated individualism distorts family and extended family life. Many providers of health resources to schools, for example, speak little of the family let alone the role and immeasurable worth of mothers and fathers.

Aiming for high standards and goals and developing abilities and talents to the full are an integral part of personal achievement. These intentions differ from the self-determination mantra that says to young people 'you can do anything and be anyone'. That 'vision' can be problematic mainly because what it proposes is for many people – young or not so young – not true. Unrealistic expectations arise that later can evolve into deep disappointment or even depression if hurdles and blocks to certain paths are encountered.

It must be noted, too, that our young people, including adolescents, are prey to interest groups and ideological positions that distort rather than enhance who we are as human beings. Indeed, it is not just young people who end up the pawns of ideology. Gynaecologists and obstetricians, for example, are affected by those who wish to take mothers out of new life, with maternity units up and down the country being renamed as 'birthing units'. (If this is an initiative to make fathers more involved, then this should be explained as such.) Ideological agenda are not insignificant.

- Psychosexual development is a unique and special journey for each person. Patterns of understanding can be readily identified though these may not fit everyone. Genuine questions about gender identity therefore may emerge as part of this journey for a small percentage of young people in primary or secondary schools. These genuine questions of individuals need to be kept distinct from other people's generalized perceptions or ideological groups promoting gender theory, which claims everyone can and should choose their gender. Programmes that seek to educate staff and students in gender theory as a means of addressing individually experiences of gender dysphoria should be avoided. Genuine questions when they arise should be responded to in a non-judgemental way showing care,

compassion and a willingness to listen. Alongside family and teachers, peers, leaders or tuākana of the student body, and friends of those questioning their gender identity may well have insights and certainly support to offer.

- Such questions are complex and need to be explored with great respect and professional support. The child, their family/whānau and wider school community, including teachers and other students, all require professional input and guidance from appropriate personnel who bring their faith and God's love to the discussion and learning. Great care should be taken that any individual student is not labelled by others in a way that diminishes the fullness of who they are. Any such tendency would be an objectification of the student. *NB. Teachers and counsellors should have at least completed the "Having Life to the Full" programme (formerly the Understanding Sexuality programme.)*
- Bullying, ostracising or personal teasing is always abhorrent and wrong. If it were to involve a student with gender dysphoria, a particular level of inappropriateness and harm is being perpetrated. Some people's answer to bullying is to build resilience in the one mistreated but this can never be an adequate response to such repugnant behaviour.
- It is to be expected that the child's family/whānau would be heavily involved in assisting the school how to best support and affirm their child. Family/whānau themselves may require additional support by the school together with well-chosen psychological and healthcare specialists.

Particular points to consider

- Consideration of gender identity in the school setting should be focussed on developing positive self-esteem and truly authentic friendships with others.
- Friendships are what unite a school community. Befriending a wide range of people is part of Christian discipleship and has always been part of the Church's spiritual tradition. The lives of the Saints frequently draw attention to his or her gift of friendship.
- Other terms like boyfriend and girlfriend are exclusive. Similarly LGBTQI+ is a term that tends more to separate off members of a community rather than point to what unites them. Talk of relationships too is fraught with difficulty as the term is used in so many ways today, some of which are inappropriate for a school community. It would be helpful to learn from the leadership of some college principals who are already discouraging the use of unhelpful 'identifier terms'. As some co-ed kura leaders have put it: "in our School we do not use the term girl or boy friend. We are all friends."
- While it is true that, in schools, age group or ethnicity can at times be grounds for a degree of separation, the evolution of vertical house groupings and kapa haka groups – for example – show that young people themselves are always looking to unite and include, and in fact resist being ring-fenced by the labels or categories of some adults.
- The Catholic Nigerian novelist and doctor, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it this way: "be wary of the single story narrative, be wary of those who tell one part only of your story and make it the definitive story of you." She goes on to say, "The consequence of the single story [or label – black, LGBTQI+, etc.] is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."
- It is nevertheless also the case that the fear of 'being different' – body shape, academic or sporting capability, autism, sexuality, gender dysphoria etc. - can be distressing for young people who feel

they don't fit the norm. Yet what such young people usually desire is inclusion and acceptance. Support groups in fact run the risk of accentuating differences and may be counter-productive to their presumed aims. To use Adichie's term, they can become another single story forum. Indeed, if support groups were simply havens free of bullying and put downs etc., then, regrettably, they could unintentionally perpetuate an unaddressed matter of the entire school's code of acceptable behaviour and language in all places and spaces.

- The Catholic school community has a responsibility to ensure that all young-people:
 - › Are safe from all bullying behaviour and words.
 - › Know that they are loved, respected and accepted in their personhood.
 - › Have changing, toilet and showering areas which are adequately private.
 - › Are supported in their growing self-identity in a kind and sensitive manner, which is nurtured by faith, spirituality and the sacraments.

Some specific suggestions for kindness and support in practice

- Unisex or single toilets and changing rooms should be designated on school sites. This can be a health and safety issue. It is not a response to bullying because bullying needs to be eliminated not 'managed'.
 - › This might simply involve making unisex, or disability, or other single toilets more available.
 - › If new building is taking place this should be a consideration.
 - › Effort should be made to make these as unobtrusive and easily accessible as possible for young people.
- Sleeping arrangements on school retreats or camps for a transgender or gender dysphoric student.
 - › Careful discernment needs to take place prior to a retreat or camp, as appropriate for all concerned.
 - › This is likely to involve discussion with the student, parents, other significant adults (such as counsellor/teacher) and possibly the group of friends or classmates potentially in the same sleeping space. It requires constructive, mature dialogue with concerned parties on a case-by-case basis. Parents of the non-transgender or gender dysphoric student should be advised if it is proposed that a student of the opposite sex will be bunking with their child.
 - › Being made to sleep alone or in the same room as teachers is not appropriate.
 - › The final decision needs to be agreed to by the individual in question, other students and all parents.
- Changing gender on the school roll
 - › Much research and professional advice cautions strongly against changing gender while still in adolescent years. It is hard to imagine anyone in a school setting who could give advice in this regard other than to echo strong caution. Many nations prohibit surgical intervention in favour of gender change under certain ages.
 - › Official gender is designated formally in public records such as passport and birth certificate etc. This can only be changed through formal channels.

- › If this were to occur then a school would use the new name and gender for school communication (such as school roll, reporting etc.).
- › It is the case that after careful discernment over time by a young person, their family/whanau, and appropriate support persons, a secondary student may deem it appropriate to use a different name and gender (though not seek to change their biological sex).
- › If this were to happen at a single-sex school it raises particular complexity which should be managed with sensitivity. A desire to change school may or may not occur.
- Seeking expert advice and professional development for staff.
 - › ‘Expert’ groups or individuals, need to have an understanding of, and be supportive of, the Catholic context of our schools. Otherwise, they can bring a sense of dualism between Church teaching and a perceived secular ‘reality’. The rich Catholic understanding of human wholeness, of each person being made in the image of God, far from being at odds with support of diversity and difference, explains it and offers a way forward in Christian friendship.
 - Having said this, productive dialogue between experts outside of the Catholic context and Catholic leader/s within the school community (Principal, DRS, School Counsellor etc) can lead to the school offering its own PD which will support care of young-people within the rich Catholic context.
 - Diocesan offices will be able to offer advice and/or suggestions in this regard.

Concluding comment

Catholic schools are committed to providing a kind, nurturing, faith-filled environment that respects everyone’s dignity and personhood. Great care and reflective discernment is needed when principals, boards of trustees, or any person in a professional capacity, are discerning pastoral care for students in regard to matters as sensitive as gender identity.

Every situation is unique and demands caring, prudent and wise accompaniment. The example of Jesus in responding to so many different people with diverse needs and concerns in the Gospels, consistently shows us that love and truth needs be at the heart of our response – and in a particular way when supporting and accompanying children and young people who may be vulnerable in our schools.

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*
(Jn 13:35)