Justifiable or not? Developing and preserving a Christian school ethos

Bruce Youlden
Principal, Macquarie College, Wallsend, NSW

Introduction

Are independent or private schools justifiable or not? Do they have a role beyond providing quality educational outcomes as defined by States' Board of Studies? Why would parents choose a particular school over another, be it public or one from within the diverse range of independent schools? Is it just a simple matter of 'choice' as espoused by the previous Howard Government and now supported by the new Rudd Government, or do the reasons and justification run deeper?

Clearly, with an increasing percentage of parents choosing independent schooling at considerable personal cost to family budgets, it would seem there are very significant reasons for the choice of schooling in Australia. The most recent census data reveal approximately two thirds of parents choose public schooling and one third (up from 29% in 1997) of parents choose Catholic or other independent schooling for their children—such as Christian Community schools, Seventh-day Adventist, Lutheran, Jewish, Muslim and Steiner schools.

I would like to suggest that the best thermometer of what influences parental choice of schooling is the ethos or special character of a school. School ethos evolves within a school environment in response to the school's philosophy of education and mission. The challenge for school authorities is to understand, develop and preserve it.

> ***"The best thermometer of what influences parental choice of schooling is the ethos or special character of a school"***

School ethos

School effectiveness literature claims:

> Schools have their own tone, their own vibrations and soul that set them apart. This tone or culture or ethos or climate, as it has been variously called, is a result of the way in which the individuals in the school interact, how they behave towards each other and their expectations of one another.[1]

As noted above, the terms *school ethos*, *culture* and *climate* have been used interchangeably and, more specifically, refer to: *norms* that inform what is acceptable behaviour; the dominant *values* cherished by the school; basic *assumptions and beliefs* shared by the school community; '*rules* of the game' for participation and membership; and the *philosophy* that guides the school in dealing with its educational tasks, its employees (teachers, staff) and clients (students, and parents).[2]

Christian schools and public schools, as educational institutions have a shared ethos in many pedagogical and administrative areas. Among others, these may include:

- co-operation, purposefulness, order and pleasure in learning.
- joint planning by teachers for in-service programs.
- efficient co-ordinated planning and scheduling of learning activities.[3]
- staff consensus on "values for Australian schooling".[4]

However, in discussing the notion of 'ethos' in relation to Christian schools, I do not plan to focus on the cultural commonalities with public schools or independent schools in general. Instead, I will focus on *significant differences* that often undergird parental choice in favour of Christian schooling.

Subsequent sections of the article indicate the *scope of distinctiveness* and the inter-relatedness of key ethos elements and their practical outworking, with particular reference to the Adventist Christian school.

Raison d'etre

The respective governing bodies of the group of schools mentioned previously would argue that the purpose or mission of their schools is to create an educational environment and develop a school ethos that reflects the beliefs and values of the particular constituencies they serve. In many instances, this would simply amount to articulating the key elements of the educational experience that gives their school a competitive edge, such as its academic standing, performing arts program, or its sporting prowess. In order to position themselves successfully in an increasingly competitive market, many schools seek to identify and highlight the niche market they have recognised and developed as their own. This then

serves to provide the basis for the culture and ethos that is developed within the school.
I would like to underscore, however, that it is the school's educational philosophy that provides the foundation and therefore gives shape to educational practice, culture and the overall ethos of the school. Conversely, the degree to which the *school ethos* reflects the mission and philosophy of the school will determine the extent to which the school fulfils its mission and can justify its existence. A school's strength should be measured by the degree to which there is harmony and resonance between its underlying philosophy of education and its operational practice.

To that end, the challenge for a Christian school is to articulate its educational philosophy and mission and to preserve its distinctive character and ethos amid the growing compliance demands of State authorities and the changing nature of education in the 21st century.

This matter is viewed very seriously by most school authorities. For example, this is particularly true of the Catholic education sector. The Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, announced in May 2007 that school leaders and religious education coordinators in schools in the Catholic Archdioceses of Sydney will have to swear an "oath of fidelity" as an expression of their dedication to Catholic teaching within their schools. Cardinal Pell expressed concerns that the preservation of the Catholic faith and its distinctive character were being diminished and that it needed to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Likewise, it is a matter of equal concern among Adventist school authorities and educators. In the context of this journal, the question needs to be put to Seventh-day Adventist schools in Australia: *Is the distinctive nature of Adventist education being compromised to the extent that the investment in these schools can no longer be seriously justified?*

In order to address the question, it is important, firstly, to understand Adventist Christian educational philosophy that gives shape to its educational practice, culture and ethos; and then, secondly, to identify the key elements and strategies considered important in preserving it.

Philosophy of Christian education

Adventist Christian educational philosophy has three major pillars, all of which are God-centric and serve as the key elements of its educational endeavour: The *Creator God* is the ultimate source of *reality*; the ultimate source of what is *true*; and the ultimate source of what is of *real value*. It is *His being* that brings meaning to the reality and magnitude of the universe and the world in which we live, to its origins and destiny. Further, it is *His revelation* through Jesus Christ, the natural world, and the Bible that provides a framework for knowledge and understanding of what is ultimately true; and it is *His character* which serves as a basis for the values to be transmitted. While these philosophical underpinnings and assumptions serve as a foundation for Christian education in Adventist schools, it is the spiritual imperative that provides its distinctive character.

More specifically, the mission and purpose of an Adventist school is to provide a Christian learning environment which promotes the holistic development of young people; optimises the learning potential of all students; while building a community of faith and hope which seeks to know, experience and share Jesus Christ and His values.

Therefore, Adventist Christian faith, values and spiritual life are critical to the operation of Adventist schools. They should serve as the basis for its distinctive character and the ethos of the school which evolves as a result. However, it can only be fostered and preserved by an intentional and ongoing commitment to integrate it through the entire operation of the school. It will not occur automatically. Rather, success is dependent upon thoughtful effort and careful planning.

What then are the key elements and aspects of an Adventist school that are critical to fulfilling its mission and preserving its distinctive character?

Preservation of special character and ethos

Personnel appointments

The appointments of the principal, leadership team and teaching staff are critical in the first instance to developing and preserving the special character of an Adventist school. Their roles are ministerial and pastoral in the sense that they are 'called' to provide spiritual leadership to the entire school community. More specifically, they are 'called' first to demonstrate the reality and relevance of Christ in their own lives and then to inspire students and the parent community with a similar need for themselves. Of necessity they should be active members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church community who understand and accept Adventist faith and culture. Employment processes are therefore critical to this outcome.

> ***"The ministerial and pastoral roles of the principal, leadership team and teaching staff are critical in the special character of the school"***

Curriculum and instruction

The underlying Adventist Christian philosophy and practice of education, where faith is fully integrated throughout the learning process, is important to preserving a school's distinctive character. Integration should not be a forced process but that which occurs naturally in the flow of teaching.

> *Faith is fully integrated in the learning process, largely as a function of the freshness and vigour of the teacher's spiritual life*

Again, this will be largely a function of the spiritual freshness and vigour of the life of the teacher.

Bible classes and teacher

Bible classes and the Bible teacher are critical to spiritual nurture and to preserving an Adventist faith environment. Bible instruction needs to be both creative and developmentally appropriate without compromising the distinctiveness of Adventism. However, the lasting impact of the class is more likely to be a function of the spiritual life and priorities of the Bible teacher. Experience also suggests that where there is a mix of faiths, there is greater respect, tolerance and a healthier level of discussion in the Bible classes. Adventist students defend their faith rather than taking it for granted, treating it with skepticism, or even with derision.

'Week of spiritual emphasis' programs

The distinctive character of an Adventist school is greatly enhanced through 'week of spiritual emphasis' programs. If guest speakers are particularly in tune with young people and there is widespread student involvement, the programs will contribute significantly to the spiritual climate of a school campus. Schools should not hesitate to invest in the best youth speakers available. The dividends repay outlays many times over.

School worships

School and class worships also can be a powerful medium for developing the spiritual climate and ethos of an Adventist school. School spirituality is greatly enhanced when the relationship with Christ is central, the worship period is perceived to be relevant and stimulating, student and school concerns are frequently considered in prayer and when students are actively involved.

School chaplains

Clearly, the appointment of full-time chaplains is a key element in fostering the distinctive character of Adventist faith and culture. It is also an important way of exploring many of the opportunities of ministry found within the school family. The duties entail the spiritual and social nurture of the student body including home visitation. Many families without a support network respond very positively to such care.

Peer influence

Adventist young people are capable of being a very powerful medium of ministry and spiritual nurture among their peers. These young people might be shown and encouraged to take greater responsibility in befriending and reaching out to their friends who are not active members of a faith community.

Youth volunteer program

This program can play a very significant role in fostering the spiritual life of the school. These volunteer youth workers are able to develop a special rapport with students, in a unique way. Participation in Bible study groups and baptismal classes often becomes an 'in thing'.

A 'surrogate church'

Adventist faith and culture will be enhanced when a school views itself as a 'surrogate church' in which the social and spiritual dimensions of campus life are integrated. By sponsoring and organising a fortnightly Saturday night social program, by incorporating the regional youth calendar, summer youth camps, Pathfinder clubs, Sabbath school and Friday night programs as an extension of the school program, Adventist faith and culture will likewise be preserved.

Enrolment process

An Adventist school environment is greatly influenced by the type of students enrolled. It is essential that all applicants share the Christian philosophy, goals and values of the school. The admissions process needs to be thorough. To admit largely on economic grounds without due regard to the above will invariably be counterproductive.

Student management

Expectations should be clearly defined and consistently applied. They are essential to preserving the special character and ethos of an Adventist school. In addition, they lay the groundwork in creating a suitable climate in which the distinctive Adventist values and ethos can be maintained and fostered. Specifically, in instances where disciplinary action is required, the school is provided with a unique opportunity to model the values of justice, mercy and forgiveness.

School council membership

The preservation of Adventist ethos is also a function of school council leadership and its appointees. It is essential that members ('church shareholders') take their responsibilities seriously and that Adventist Church membership continues to be a necessary prerequisite for council membership. The voice of all parents and especially the non-Adventist 'client' may be heard through the medium of the parent and teacher association or through a parent advisory board. Such mechanisms provide the needed forum for parent voice, while protecting the interests of the church as proprietor.

Conclusion

To sum up, the special character of the Adventist school system will be preserved and its mission better served, as schools focus on developing specific strategies that will ensure greater consistency between educational philosophy and practice, particularly in settings where the spiritual climate of schools is fostered. By so doing, Adventist schools will continue to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, justifying their existence and their contribution to the broader goals of Christian education in Australia. TEACH

Endnotes

[1] Reid, K. et. al. (1990). *Towards the effective school*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p.3.

[2] A paraphrase of Owens, R. (1994). *Organizational behavior in education*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, p.28.

[3] See Reid, K. et. al., ibid.

[4] See Nine values for Australian schooling. Retrieved February 28, 2008, from http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce.default.asp?id=9500