

Multifaith student teachers learn about teaching in Catholic schools

Student teachers from Catholic and multifaith backgrounds are learning about the distinct identity of Catholic schools, including the values, ethics, and moral reasoning, thanks to an expanding Australian Catholic University (ACU) program.

The ACU/Brisbane Catholic Education Spiritual and Pedagogical Accompaniment (SPA) Program is currently Brisbane-based with plans to expand throughout Queensland.

Australia has 1,755 Catholic schools serving more than 777,000 students. One in five school students are enrolled in the Catholic education system, which employs over 100,000 teachers and staff. There are 146 Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Brisbane.

ACU education expert Dr Amanda Gutierrez partnered with Brisbane Catholic Education to develop the program, which sees student teachers volunteer one day each week in their placement school, throughout their six or 12-month experience, while shadowing a teacher. This allows them to make connections to their school, their students, and the staff prior to their block placements completed in the same partner school.

Dr Gutierrez said, “The SPA Program is working to educate student teachers about the ‘distinct’ Catholic school culture. The program is inclusive, and we welcome student teachers from all faiths or no faith who are willing to undertake a journey of spiritual accompaniment to deepen their own spirituality and beliefs informed by a contemporary Catholic worldview.”

“It’s a wholistic mentoring program that provides support across the areas of spiritual exploration, teaching practice, curriculum, and understanding of school culture/community.

The program offers graduating students a valuable point of difference because it educates them in the church’s mission, values and spiritual beliefs.”

Brisbane Catholic Education Office Head of Catholic Identity Alain Pitot said, “This partnership between ACU, the schools and Brisbane Catholic Education aims to better prepare student teachers in what it means to work and belong to a Catholic school community. By immersing themselves more frequently in a school, student teachers will be able to feel the culture of the school and become part of a faith-filled community, while being supported in a more comprehensive way in answering the questions they may have about their own spiritual journey.”

Dr Gutierrez added, “When undertaking the SPA Program, student teachers are encouraged to develop a spiritual connection with themselves to better understand the Catholic mission and pass this onto the children they teach. What some people don’t realise is that spirituality is not just for religious people. It’s intrinsic to all human beings.”

There are three main benefits for student teachers entering the program:

1. Explore their own spirituality within the context of the Catholic school in which they are placed.
2. Learn what it means to teach in a Catholic setting.

3. Embed Catholic perspectives into their teaching, including Catholic social teachings, ethics and morality.

Another SPA Program benefit is the ‘companion model’, which sees every student teacher provided with a companion to support their learning.

ACU’s Dr Leigh Stower is a program Companion who provides one-on-one support to student teachers.

Dr Stower said, “In recent years, the global Church has focused on listening to and discerning the voice of young people. Young people are seeking companions on their spiritual journey: ‘witnesses’ who humbly, enthusiastically and compassionately walk with them, and who help them develop deep knowledge.

“This is the role of the Spiritual and Pedagogical Companions as we journey with our student teachers.”

Hannah Scott, an ACU Masters’ of Teaching (Secondary) student, is currently volunteering in the SPA Program. The aspiring secondary French language teacher said that having Leigh Stower as her Companion meant she never felt alone, and always felt supported.

“I have found working in a Catholic school incredibly insightful and personally meaningful and I have sought to better understand Catholic identity and integrate this into my teaching practice,” Ms Scott said.

“I no longer have preconceived ideas about what a Catholic school ‘promotes’ and I made the decision to send my four children to Catholic schools for the positive values, principles and strong sense of social justice, embedded within the school culture.”

Ms Scott added she would highly recommend the program to all student teachers, regardless of their faith.

“For me, the opportunity to experience student progression, from my teaching, to assessment, to marking, to moderation and finally to reporting is invaluable. This gives a great sense of satisfaction, as well as ensuring readiness for my first teaching job,” she said. “From joining the teaching staff at the start of the year in their pre-term professional development days, to my involvement in the Inclusion and Social Justice groups and initiatives throughout my time in school, I quickly became ‘part of the furniture’ and developed a sense of belonging. If an opportunity arose to work in a Catholic school, I would jump at the chance!”

Program developer Amanda Gutierrez concluded, “The program gives student teachers a sense of belonging in the profession and any anxiety that might be experienced is much lower than is normal during a practical teaching placement.”

ACU/BCE’s SPA program is available to all education students due to complete their final placement in a primary or secondary school through the McAuley Campus in Brisbane. The program has a six month or 12-month option depending on degree completion date. In 2022 a pilot program will be running for undergraduate third year primary and secondary education students and those in the first six months of their Masters’ of Teaching degree.

Students interested to learn more can email Dr Amanda Gutierrez at: amanda.gutierrez@acu.edu.au

PHOTOGRAPHS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST.

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