

## INTERVIEW WITH ANNE BAKER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION, SOUTH AFRICA



*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon*

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### EXCERPTS:

- “On innovation is the Building Peaceful Schools programme [which] develops a climate of justice and peace in schools. It promotes an understanding of Restorative Justice in discipline and promotes communication, conflict management and restorative practices.”
- “Another innovation in a local Marist school that provides education for refugee children. Called “3 to 6” it has enabled many children who cannot get into South African schools to still get a primary school education. A normal school opens its classrooms from 3 o’clock to 6 o’clock for these children.”

#### **You manage the Catholic school network in South Africa. Could you tell us what your work entails?**

I am the Deputy Director so share the task of serving Catholic schools in South Africa with the Director. My responsibilities include strategic planning with the Director and team, managing regional offices, liaising with other members of the Catholic schools network as well as the independent schools sector in South Africa.

Together with my colleague the Policy, Advocacy and Government Relations Manager, I liaise with government, comment on policy, and advocate for our schools. Networking not only with other education organizations but also with owners of Catholic schools, forms another part of my responsibilities. Reporting to the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference on behalf of the Catholic Board of Education, our governance structure, is also a vital part of our responsibilities

#### **Box 1: Interview Series**

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Why a series of interviews?** Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

**What is the focus of this interview?** In this interview, Anne Baker, Deputy Director of the Catholic Institute for Education in South Africa, talks about the challenges and opportunities faced by Catholic schools in the country and her hopes for the Global Compact on Education.

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**What do you believe are the current strengths of Catholic education in South Africa?**

Catholic schools in South Africa serve a broad section of society, but primarily disadvantaged children. Only 8% of South Africans are Catholic which enables us to provide values-based Christian education, making our schools inclusive. There is a high level of care in most of our schools and the academic standards of our high schools are above the national average.

**In which areas could Catholic education in the country be improved and how?**

The Catholic school network continues to mirror the divide established by apartheid. This divide also largely takes place in our independent sector. That is, wealthy schools focus on competing in the education market in South Africa which is becoming increasingly competitive especially with the fast development of for profit chain schools. This is in contrast with other independent schools that are serving middle and lower income or indeed poor children. COVID-19 has also impacted on schools as parents struggle to pay school fees.

In our public Catholic schools our challenge is insufficient say in the appointment of teachers, which makes the development of an understanding of the mission of Catholic schools a real challenge. A further challenge in these schools is having teachers who are able to offer quality Religious Education. The extreme emphasis on our grade 12 school leaving examination is also a serious hindrance to innovation in education and the narrow curriculum also hinders creative teaching and learning.

**Have you observed recently interesting innovative initiatives in Catholic education in South Africa? If so, what are they and why are those initiatives innovative?**

There are a few innovative initiatives. One is the Building Peaceful Schools programme developed by the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) to develop a climate of justice and peace in schools. It started after the implementation of a Catholic Child Safeguarding policy in schools and the discovery that corporal punishment was still prevalent in spite of being outlawed in 1996. This programme promotes an understanding of Restorative Justice in discipline and promotes communication, conflict management and restorative practices. Thus it aims to enable the Catholic ethos of deep respect, care and a safe environment to grow.

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school opens its classrooms from 3 o'clock to 6 o'clock for these children.

Still another innovation has been a pilot health screening programme in rural schools. The CIE also collaborated with the Department of Education to distribute deworming medicine to our low fee independent schools.

**How do you understand the call from Pope Francis for a new Global Compact on Catholic education? How do you think you could contribute to the Pope's vision?**

I see it as a more communal, collaborative approach to education across both the Catholic school networks and other education endeavors. Pope Francis' call for peace is very close to the heart of our Building Peaceful Schools programme and our close relationship with associations serving other faiths such as the Muslim, Jewish and other Christian groups which builds the compact.

**What events, projects, or activities could be suggested to strengthen a common identity for Catholic education at a regional or global level? What are your ideas?**

In September 2019 we held a National Congress after regional conferences to discuss issues affecting Catholic schools as well as to elect delegates. People from all sectors of the system attended: leadership, Religious Education teachers, governors, owners and even some parents. From this a vision and five directions were developed to assist the network to strengthen our common identity. From this a plan has been developed with responsibilities for each sector.

A further way to develop identity is in leadership support and development – we have in some regions Principals' Forums which enable peer support and development. I believe we need to do this in Africa as a whole and Augusta Muthigani from Kenya and I are currently trying to organize a virtual gathering next month for Anglophone Africa as a start.

**What are some of the priorities in terms of training and capacity building for school principals, teachers, alumni, parents, or other groups to strengthen Catholic education in South Africa?**

As mentioned above, the Principals' Forums are a vehicle for this. The CIE has run comprehensive leadership courses and is planning another one in the near future. Our Regional Managers are providing personal support to school leaders as well.



Photo: Catholic school students and teachers.

Some smaller programmes attempt to support Foundation Phase (Grade 1-3) teachers in their ability to deliver quality literacy instruction. However, funding for such programmes has to be raised. Support for school owners is also very important. Finally, we do not deal directly with parents but encourage schools to do more in that area.

**Could you please share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?**

I taught in a Catholic school for a number of years and when my husband was transferred to another province I approached the CIE (with whom I had developed relationships when they offered support for our school's development) to see if there was a vacancy. I worked first in the division which supported any type of school (Catholic or other) in school development and was later asked to become Deputy Director focusing on the Catholic network, policy and advocacy, and managing regional offices.

**Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?**

I am passionate about my large family of five siblings, my own family of four children and ten grandchildren and of course spouses of siblings and children. My Irish/Italian background and South African birth has enabled me to feel strong connections to two continents – Africa and Europe. Leadership and ethical leadership is a further passion. I love working with school leaders and learning and sharing with them. Finally, Building Peace in schools and changing the school from punitive ways to restorative ways to become places of justice and peace has become a huge passion for me. This comes from my passion for justice and human dignity.