

Education revelations

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In March, a coronavirus quarantine facility opened across the road from a Lutheran school campus. This made the national media when most people were in the beginning stages of learning what the word 'pandemic' really means, and there was a lot of fear and uncertainty everywhere. The principal set the tone when she stepped up to the podium and said it was important to 'pause and remember who we are'. Being a Christian school defines the way we respond, which is with compassion and empathy. This was just one early example of the caring, kind and respectful thoughts, words and actions shown again and again across Lutheran education.

Sometimes what seems new is actually the revelation of what was there all along. Let me explain what I mean by 'revelation' before proceeding.

- Revelation is the revealing of something previously unseen or unnoticed. It is the clarity of vision to look at what is before us, inescapably to see what is there. It is the unveiling of an obscured truth, hidden by covers of habit, accident, convenience or comfort.
- Revelation is discovery. Discovering new ways, knowledge, people and places. It is the unleashed potential and opportunity within the challenge. The awareness by self and others of capacity and skills they did not know they had.

What have been the revelations for Lutheran education from the impact of the pandemic so far?

Readers might be expecting a piece about online learning, but the terminology shifted fairly quickly to words like 'remote' or 'distance' learning in order to focus on the learning context, not the technology. This was partly because all sorts of issues arose with online access. Some homes had no computer or internet, and neither the money nor technical opportunity to get them. In rural areas, the town might have decent connection speeds, but the outlying farms do not. Even in seemingly more affluent urban families, there might be two computers and high speed internet at home but with mum and dad both working from home, plus three siblings studying from home, how do you ration two computers across five people so that they all get their work done?

Revelation 1: Issues of wealth and infrastructure inequity rapidly came to light.

There has been a lot of streaming and web conferencing by school staff and students. But there have also been bundles of paper sent home with activities. The telephone got a good workout. In some communities, mobile phones and apps became the standard platform. In the case of Yirara College, it broadcast lessons on television into remote communities via the ICTV network.

Revelation 2: Instead of making assumptions, schools listened to and understood their communities and met them where they were at. Awareness of access and equity has been at the heart of effective, creative problem solving.

You might have heard national and state leaders saying that schools needed to remain open for vulnerable children. A pandemic can increase the pressure on children, families and carers who were already experiencing vulnerability. This means that for some children, their school or and Early Childhood Service (ECS) is a safer or more supportive place than home.

Revelation 3: This has been a stark reminder of how many children nationally, and within Lutheran education, are at risk and are extremely dependent on their school/ECS for nurture.

How best to support students with a disability through the pandemic has been a steep learning curve, with remote learning benefiting some students while in other cases remote options are clearly inadequate. It depends on the individual child's needs, and this experience has reinforced the individuality of students and the need to tailor support appropriately.

Equity and equality are different concepts. To respond to the needs of students equitably, it is often necessary to treat them unequally. One size does not fit all in education.

Revelation 4: Personalised learning and individualised support is a feature of high quality and accessible education, and this lesson has been reinforced by the pandemic.

Lutheran education has a long and deep commitment to education for Indigenous children. The pandemic has impacted on many Indigenous boarding students in particular, partly due to guidelines about social distancing limiting the places in boarding houses, and partly due to the need for some students to return home to be with their families during community lockdowns. Keeping students engaged in their learning is key.

Revelation 5: Staff and students have shown dedication and commitment to keeping connected with each other and learning. This is yet another reminder that closing the gap on health and education is imperative.

Some readers might be surprised that issues of equity, access and vulnerability could happen in Lutheran schools. Depending on how much of Lutheran education you have had a chance to see, you might think that we are for solidly middle-class communities.

Revelation 6: In fact, most of our schools serve communities who would be statistically classified as below median on various scales of privilege.

There is also inclusion and diversity in our seemingly more affluent schools, and affluence does not guarantee protection from all of life's ills. Because we value humility in service, and are inclusive and respectful in our support, the challenges behind the scenes are unlikely to be visible on the surface.

Equity in education is topical in public debate. It may be a complicated space for Lutheran education to navigate as we are independent providers who need to cover the costs of

staff and infrastructure. However, there is support from the government through needs-based funding. This includes additional funding for students with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, socio-educational disadvantage and low English-language proficiency. There are also school-based loadings for size and remoteness.

Revelation 7: In summary, the business side of independent schools may not necessarily be a barrier to providing equitable access to Lutheran education.

One of the potential criticisms of focusing on equity is the perception that it might lower educational quality. In fact, the highest ranked school systems in the world are associated with high levels of equity¹. Our Lutheran lens statements in *Growing deep* fuse Lutheran theology with educational principles to ensure both educational quality and an education in which the gospel of Jesus Christ informs all learning and teaching, all human relationships, and all activities. For example, ‘Lutheran schools and early childhood services are communities that value learning as God’s gift to people for their wonder, growth, and to inspire them to respond to the needs of the world.’ Notions of equity are infused throughout these statements.

Revelation 8: Our Lutheran lens objectives are self-reinforcing of each other, ensuring both equity and high-quality education.

One of the founding principles and practices of the Reformation was access to the bible in the vernacular, and that all men and women should be able to read, and in particular to learn and teach the catechism. Lutheran reformers expanded on this and were instrumental in the establishment of the first public school systems. This is an important part of our heritage to be aware of and cling to, given that Lutherans are a small minority in Australia.

Lutheran education in Australia is rooted in a religious and ethnic tradition of access to education which is different to the dominant British-Australian tradition. Given the breadth of staff and students in our learning communities, we need to continue to educate our communities about these underlying values and beliefs in order to avoid the risk of sliding into unconscious models of class and privilege that may exist in other sections of independent schooling in Australia.

Revelation 9: Educational equity is a foundational principle of Lutheran education.

Justice is one of the core values of Lutheran education. ‘Through genuine concern, and the development of a conscience for the rights and wellbeing of everyone in the human family, justice focuses as much on understanding and responding to the reasons for suffering and injustices as it does on responding to unjust conditions. It requires integrity between beliefs, words, and actions. It may necessitate taking a stand and acting with courage. Isaiah 26:7–8, Romans 12, Matthew 5:7, Ephesians 2:1–5, Jeremiah 23:5–6, Job 8:3–7.’²

¹ Kaius Sinnemäki et al, eds., *On the Legacy of Lutheranism in Finland: Societal Perspectives*, Studia Fennica Historica 25 (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2019), Section II ‘Education and Culture’, <https://doi.org/10.21435/sfh.25>. Free download available at <https://oa.finlit.fi/site/books/10.21435/sfh.25/>.

² Lutheran Education Australia, ‘A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools,’ 2016, accessed 8 July 2020, <http://www.lutheran.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/a-vision-for-learners-and-learning/>.

Revelation 10: Given the revelations, is it time for courageous conversations about the way ahead?

The pandemic has revealed the inequities in society that were there all along. We knew they were there; we have just had to face the consequences of these inequities in new ways. One day we will come out the other side of this, but I hope these equity issues do not recede into vague invisibility. Instead, they need to stay at the front of our minds and bring about a fresh conversation within Lutheran education about why, who, how and where we are called to serve.

Overarching revelation: If the experience so far could be summed up in one word core to Lutheran identity, it would be 'vocation'.

It has certainly been more than a job for all staff involved, and more than just study for the students. We know that we do not choose our vocation but that God places our vocation before us in the moment. Staff and students across Lutheran education have asked, 'who is my neighbour?', and found the answer to be local, national and global. They have listened to the needs of their neighbour and this has shaped their service. Creativity has been unleashed to find solutions, firm in hope, nurtured by the promises of God's Word, love and forgiveness which empower staff and students to embrace the future with confidence. An inclusive future where issues of access and equity in education are hopefully addressed.

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