

EDLE 654

LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT: Educational Narratives and Literacies for Learning Communities



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Introduction:

Purpose of the task:

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the contemporary discourses on data usage and evidence in the light of Catholic social teaching.

Data Through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching:

Catholic Social Teaching (CST), grounded in a longstanding tradition of nurturing young minds, assesses the data utilized in educational settings from a moral perspective (Ballano, 2019, para. Introduction). CST views education as the comprehensive development of an individual's intellect, will, and character, aligned with divine truth and faith (Abolade, 2024, para. Introduction). In this framework, data serves to foster the holistic growth of each learner, respecting their inherent dignity and supporting their spiritual, intellectual, and social development. As education systems increasingly adopt data-driven strategies to improve performance and ensure accountability, ethical concerns surrounding the use of data—especially regarding the dignity of the learner, the educator's role, and the broader mission of education—are emerging (Zeide, 2017, sec. Abstract).

The study is guided by three key assumptions. First, data itself is neither inherently just nor unjust; its ethical implications are determined by the methods employed in identifying, collecting, analyzing, and applying it. Second, both CST and contemporary educational research agree that education should benefit students mentally and spiritually, not merely focus on numerical outputs or standardized test results. Current research highlights that excessive reliance on standardized data can lead to "robotic" learning (Selwyn, 2021, sec. Abstract), where creativity, emotional well-being, critical thinking, and cognitive abilities are stifled. Third, a balanced

integration of Catholic values with evidence-based educational practices is necessary. Catholic schools face the challenge of harmonizing traditional orthodox structures with the adoption of skill-based, data-driven educational trends.

Two Policies in the Educational Context:

This essay examines two key educational policies, one international and one Australian, to discuss their role and purpose. The UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action, a global initiative, emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable education while advocating for the use of data to eliminate disparities and monitor learning progress (Öztemur, 2024, p. 169). However, in Australia, although 89% of schools collect equity-related data, such as socioeconomic status and disability, only 34% link this data to corresponding wellbeing or developmental programs tailored to the individual (UNICEF Australia, 2024, p. 21). Domestically, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) prioritizes equity and excellence and encourages student participation in decision-making, recognizing the role of data in improving educational practices (Stacey & Mockler, 2024, p. 5). However, its implementation is inconsistent across schools. A recent UNICEF report found that most students had little to no say in how their data was used (Herbst, M., 2024, p. 21). Both policies share a common objective: to cultivate critical thinkers, empathetic citizens, and lifelong learners. Despite the challenges in data usage and implementation, the potential for aligning these policies with practical educational outcomes remains a motivating factor for achieving better results.

Structure of the Essay and Named Propositions:

The essay is structured around three propositions that advocate for the integration of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in educational data practices:

1. The ethical use of data serves the common good when guided by Catholic Social Teaching.
2. Over-reliance on data undermines integrated learning and human dignity, contrary to CST and contemporary research.
3. When combined with evidence-based best practices, Catholic Social Teaching offers a balanced, human-centered approach to utilizing educational data.

These propositions call for an ethical, spiritually grounded, and evidence-informed use of data that promotes the development of every learner while supporting the common good.

Proposition 1: The Ethical Use of Data Contributes to the Common Good When Used in Alignment with Catholic Social Teaching

In today's educational landscape, data is becoming increasingly central to shaping policies, restructuring education systems, and measuring success (Zeide, 2017b, sec. Introduction). When used ethically and in alignment with Catholic Social Teaching (CST), data can be a powerful tool for promoting the common good, ensuring fairness, and protecting human dignity. This proposition asserts that ethical, values-driven data usage, grounded in principles of justice, participation, and the preferential option for the poor, can significantly enhance the educational experience, particularly for marginalized communities, thus offering hope for a more equitable educational future.

Data for Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

Catholic Social Teaching places a strong emphasis on serving individuals at all levels of society, promoting a culture of the common good that supports the well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable (Jones, 2019, p. 81). Educational data, when used correctly, can highlight systemic disparities—such as inequalities in achievement linked to socioeconomic status, disability, or language background—and can direct resources where they are most needed to address these issues. For example, collecting and analyzing data based on demographic categories at the school level can reveal achievement gaps and inform targeted interventions to close these gaps (Marsh, 2012, sec. Conclusion).

Data can also play a pivotal role in enhancing accessibility. The UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action advocates for "inclusive and equitable quality education," which necessitates tracking progress across diverse groups of learners (Öztemur, 2024, p. 169). In this context, data becomes a moral tool that ensures equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their social status or position within society. It is important to note that data-driven initiatives must not create new barriers; rather, they should actively promote equal participation for all students.

The Preferential Option for Marginalized Communities

CST's "preferential option for the poor" prioritizes the needs of disadvantaged individuals, and in the context of education, this means using data to identify and support students at risk of falling behind. Data helps not only to identify these students but also to design targeted strategies to assist them. For instance, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) allows schools to monitor developmental vulnerabilities in early childhood and implement early interventions (Evans-Whip et al., n.d.). However, it is crucial that data is not used to reinforce

existing inequalities or stereotypes. For example, low expectations based solely on test scores can perpetuate inequality rather than address it. CST reminds us that every child is made in the image of God and should be seen as a whole human being, not merely a set of numbers.

Personalized Learning as a Pathway to Human Dignity

At the heart of CST, the principle of human dignity mandates that every individual be treated as unique and irreplaceable. In schools, information can personalise learning by appreciating students' diverse talents, interests, and needs. Teachers practice a highly respectful methodology when acting on formative data to tailor instruction. Personalised learning models, combined with the responsible use of data, foster a customisable study framework for students. The study by Johnson (2020, sec.. Abstract) identifies that when data drives differentiated instruction, student engagement and achievement increase, particularly among underperforming students. The data demonstrates the CST perspective on education, and contemporary studies support the use of data to personalise the learning experience for students.

Perils of Misuse of Data: Steering Clear of Labelling and Ranking

The increasing reliance on digital tools in education brings with it a growing risk of data misappropriation, theft, and abuse. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) warns against utilitarian practices that reduce individuals to mere numbers (Fawns et al., 2020). The use of data to rank students, schools, or teachers without considering the broader context can commodify education and undermine its true purpose. A notable example of this is Australia's National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In an effort to enhance transparency and accountability, NAPLAN results

are used for school-to-school comparisons on the My School website. This practice has raised concerns about curriculum narrowing, teacher testing, and increased stress for students (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, para. Introduction). From a CST perspective, such practices compromise the dignity of individuals and hinder the holistic development of learners. However, when NAPLAN results are used internally as a guide for improvement rather than as a monitoring tool, they can produce fairer outcomes. Catholic Social Teaching advocates for ethical practices in data interpretation, urging that data should inform decisions rather than impose them on the educational process.

The growing role of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) in education introduces new ethical challenges that require careful consideration. Issues such as algorithmic bias, a lack of transparency in decision-making, and the potential for dehumanization represent significant hurdles for a CST-informed approach to data usage. It is crucial to ensure accountability and human oversight in the deployment of algorithms, protecting human dignity and promoting justice. Moreover, the ethical concerns surrounding data privacy and security must be central to all data-driven educational initiatives.

Proposition 2: Data Over-Reliance Can Dehumanize Learning and Undermine Holistic Development, Contrary to Catholic Social Teaching and Research

Australia's education system has increasingly embraced data-driven decision-making (DDDM) to improve outcomes, with initiatives such as NAPLAN and digital learning analytics platforms. While these tools aim to promote equity and improvement, their unintended consequences are becoming evident. For example, NAPLAN results, when used to target literacy support, uphold the dignity of students.

However, the use of biometric surveillance tools to track student engagement risks reducing learners to mere data points, thereby commodifying their experiences.

Dehumanized Learning

In an education system dominated by data, the curriculum often becomes confined to testable metrics, leading to a teaching approach where educators "teach to the test." This process conditions students to memorize, recall, and recite (Robinson & Dervin, 2019, para. Introduction), discouraging critical thinking, analysis, or creative exploration. Creativity, moral inquiry, spirituality, and emotional intelligence are marginalized because they resist quantification.

Data-driven systems pressure children to conform to standardized norms, causing them to define themselves by their test scores and class rankings rather than by their unique strengths or character. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) firmly rejects this reductionist view, emphasizing that each child is created in the image of God and holds inherent dignity, independent of their intellectual abilities or numerical success (Héjj, 2019, p. 74).

Biesta's Theory of 'Learnification' and Loss of Purpose

Gert Biesta (2010) warns against the "verification" of education, a trend that promotes the quantification of learning at the expense of its normative and ethical dimensions. Biesta's theory suggests that the rich, relational, and transformative aspects of education have been overshadowed by an emphasis on statistical efficiency. Catholic education resists this trend, viewing teaching as a moral calling and learning as a process of becoming, rather than simply acquiring knowledge. Pope Francis insists that education should lead to the holistic development of

individuals, not merely prepare them for the workforce. Biesta's critique aligns with CST by arguing that education must be grounded in purpose, personhood, and responsibility, rather than solely performance metrics (A. Thompson, 2024, p. 12).

Data Distortion of Pedagogy and Undermining Teacher Integrity

With the dominance of high-stakes testing, teachers often feel compelled to abandon pedagogical creativity and moral judgment. Many educators report that data collection and analysis consume most of their time, and teaching has increasingly become about data rather than actual instruction. A study in New South Wales found that over 36% of teachers cited data saturation and policy pressure as major obstacles to effective teaching (Mills et al., 2021, p. 4). Without proper consultation or support, the layering of data programs has led to frustration and alienation among educators.

The narrowing of the curriculum under these pressures diminishes the relational and transformative potential of education. It also limits students' opportunities to explore the moral, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of learning, which are crucial to their overall flourishing.

Proposition 3: Catholic Social Teaching and Recent Research Combined Provide a Balanced Approach to Ethical, Human-Focused Data Use

In an increasingly data-driven and technological world, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and contemporary research offer essential ethical guidance for creating humane educational policies. In today's society, a framework that safeguards human dignity while leveraging evidence-based practices is crucial. CST asserts that data must serve the people, not the other way around. When integrated with modern

research on learning, CST provides a compelling vision for using data in ways that enhance human potential, build community, and foster meaningful learning experiences.

CST Principles: Human Dignity, Solidarity, and the Common Good

Three core CST principles—human dignity, solidarity, and the common good—serve as the foundation for ethical educational practices. The principle of human dignity emphasizes that each student is not just a data point but a unique individual, created in the image of God (Lustig, 2017, p. 318). Solidarity encourages teachers to view students not as competitors but as fellow members of a common human family, flourishing interdependently (Lustig, 2017, p. 318). The common good places the well-being of society above individual performance and institutional rankings.

In practice, data must be utilized to promote equity and inclusion. However, research by Lin and Chen (2024) reveals that AI-driven data tools tend to reduce students to predictive profiles, diminishing their empathy and creativity. In contrast, Catholic institutions like the Parramatta Diocese prioritize relational mentorship over algorithmic tracking, thereby reaffirming the inherent dignity of every child. A human-centered approach to data, grounded in CST, resists the reductive nature of high-stakes testing and promotes inclusive practices that nurture the holistic development of children.

Aligning Policy and Practice: Moral Purpose of Education

Educational policies must align with a moral vision of education that goes beyond economic utility. This is evident in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019), which emphasizes the importance of students becoming "confident and creative

individuals" and "active and informed members of the community," rather than merely productive workers. The Declaration highlights wellbeing, diversity, and the holistic development of children, which closely aligns with the values emphasized in Catholic Social Teaching (CST).

This approach also shapes the ethical use of data to identify systemic inequities and establish frameworks that support each child's dignity and potential. In this context, data is presented as a moral tool that supports the true goal of education.

Integrating Science and Spirituality: A Non-Orthodox Vision

The discussion challenges the false dichotomy between data-driven modernity and spiritual-ethical traditions. Catholic education should not reject science but rather embrace it as part of a richer vision of the human person. This non-traditional perspective encourages an imaginative integration of information and ethical judgment, with technology serving as a tool rather than a determinant. Lin and Chen (2024) also advocate for human-centered innovation, emphasizing creativity and co-creation in assessing a child's educational progress.

Catholic Social Teaching offers a framework for integrating these practices into schools. Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) exemplifies this approach with its "Catholic CoPilot" chatbot. The AI tool helps teachers with lesson planning and administrative tasks, using only BCE's curriculum and authorized doctrinal materials. This ensures that technological advancements align with Catholic education's theological and pedagogical values, allowing schools to adopt digital tools without compromising core beliefs (The Australian, 2024).

Further studies emphasize the effectiveness of incorporating CST principles within curricular subjects (Gleeson, 2019, sec. Conclusion). Queensland's "Identity and Curriculum in Catholic Education" initiative, for instance, has demonstrated how human dignity and the preferential option for the poor can be integrated into mainstream subjects, leading to greater student engagement and ethical awareness (Slattery, 2022). These initiatives show that Catholic values can be woven into various parts of the Australian Curriculum without sacrificing academic integrity.

Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) offers another model for blending scientific inquiry and spiritual formation in its approach to "Liberating Education" and "Gospel Spirituality." Students in this model are encouraged to critically examine scientific knowledge while reflecting on its moral implications, fostering both cognitive growth and ethical reasoning (Australian Catholic University, n.d.). This model reflects broader educational trends that support human-centered innovation. By integrating CST within modern technological and scientific frameworks, Australian Catholic schools promote an integrated approach to education that remains faithful to theological traditions while engaging with the complexities of the contemporary world.

Conclusion:

This assignment aimed to critically assess contemporary discourses on data usage and evidence in light of Catholic Social Teaching. The ethical implications of data practices in education, particularly their interaction with CST principles of human dignity, equality, and the common good, were explored. The research highlights the need for a value-based approach to educational data usage.

By combining CST with evidence-based practices, a balanced, human-centered framework for the ethical use of data in education is achieved. Catholic schools in Australia, such as those utilizing the Catholic CoPilot chatbot and the "Curriculum in Catholic Education" initiative, demonstrate how current data tools can be aligned with ethical and human-centered practices. These examples show how educational data, when guided by Catholic Social Teaching, can foster personal and social growth while maintaining respect for human dignity and integrity.