From Comfort and Conformity to Challenge and Collaboration.
The changing role of parents in the Catholic education of their children through the twentieth century in New South Wales.

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Abstract of a Thesis submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, University of NSW

The sociological investigation examined the changing role of parents in the education of their children in Catholic schools in New South Wales over the twentieth century. The argument was centred on the premise that Catholic Church documents over centuries (and secular documents in more recent times), have specifically stated that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children and have the primary responsibility for their children’s religious education. Catholic schools were established to inculcate faith, and assist the parents in their role. The thesis addressed the questions: to what extent has that role been realised? What recognition or assistance has been given to this principle at the school level?

It unravelled the processes that determined and defined the changing role of Catholic parents during the period. Additionally it identified significant shifts in institutional thinking and practices related to parents and resultant shifts in cultural and social perceptions. After half a century of conformity and comfort, a significant era followed as the Australian Church responded to challenges, including financial crisis for Catholic schools, reform in the Australian education system and the impact of the Second Vatican Council.

Cohorts from three generations of parents and religious teachers were selected, representing three distinct periods of the twentieth century, 1900–1950, 1950–1975, 1975–2000. Individual interviews and focus groups elicited memories and perceptions of the sixty participants, which were recorded and analysed, in terms of the integral questions; the role and involvement of parents in Catholic schools. Their perceptions of the parent role, were collected in two ways, i.e. as childhood memories and then, in their adult roles, as either parents or teachers. The analysis was theoretically informed by the work of Durkheim, Greeley, Coleman and Bourdieu. A review of Church documents, related to the education of children, showed the official Church position.

Despite numerous rhetorical statements issued by Catholic authorities, emphasising the role of parents as ‘primary educators’, the practical responses ranged from active encouragement to dismissal. Teachers in Catholic schools and related bureaucracies were, seemingly, reluctant to initiate a more inclusive partnership. Gradually, and in a piecemeal fashion, the Catholic Church and its schools have been responding to growing parental consciousness of their authority and responsibilities.

A significant shift was signalled by the New South Wales Bishops in establishing the Council of Catholic School Parents, to be supported by a full-time, salaried Executive Officer, in 2003. But any accommodation to new understandings of parent/teacher, or family/school relation is complex and not to be oversimplified as a simple sharing, or ceding of authority.

The research demonstrates that parents were effectively marginalised in the first fifty years and adopted a submissive role. However, due to factors of social change, both in society and the Catholic Church, parents now better-educated, are voicing their expectations of participation. This, however, does not apply to all parents who for various reasons are still on the periphery.
Three significant issues have emerged from the research: introduction of the principle of ‘parents as the primary educators’ at the pre-service level, i.e. the Batchelor of Education degree; secondly, recognition by teachers and parents that they are the ‘significant others’ in the socialisation and education of children and thirdly, the need for an approach regarding ‘the parents on the fringe of the school community’.

During the applicable years of undergraduate teacher training an integrated, sequential module in each year could be instituted and subsequently continued and expanded in Post-Graduate education. The modules would be based on the premise of ‘parents as the primary educators of their children’ – as stated in the Code of Canon Law, other official documents and Vision and Mission Statements issued from the Catholic Education Offices and Catholic schools. As a result, teachers coming into a school would have been given some exposure to the principle of parents and teachers sharing complementary roles in the education and socialisation of the child as the ‘significant others’. It is crucial that such a relationship is established as it incurs and implies a shared responsibility in equipping children in the life-long education process, of becoming self-sufficient, motivated members of society.

It is essential that knowledge and communication skills related to strategies aimed at the involvement/participation of all parents be part of pre-service and post-graduate teacher-education: the aim being to include, not only parents who are supportive, but also those who are difficult, indifferent or those who are merely surviving. Parents in special circumstance such as indigenous or others, who are experiencing language difficulties emanating from cultural differences, would require a sensitive focus. Thus additionally, a pastoral care approach would be incorporated within the school community and the role of parents would be given constructive recognition as decreed in the Catholic Church documents over centuries.

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Thesis Abstract: Monitoring and Modelling Threats to Koala Populations in Rapidly Urbanising Landscapes: Koala Coast, South East Queensland, Australia.

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Abstract of a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Queensland

The aim of this study was to develop tools for monitoring and modelling threats to wildlife and apply these approaches to koala populations in a rapidly urbanising landscape. The study addressed problems in establishing the conservation status of a population through the examination of the direct and indirect threats to species’ persistence at the landscape scale (10000s ha).

Wildlife populations are increasingly under pressure as human activities expand into natural ecosystems. In Australia, rapid population growth along the eastern seaboard is impacting heavily on regional biodiversity and threatening the persistence of many species, including the koala (Phascolarctos cinereus). Land clearing for residential developments and associated infrastructure such as roads, results in direct threats to habitat amount and species abundance; and introduces new threats associated with habitat fragmentation, vehicles, dogs and disease. Effective management of wildlife popu-

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