

Ryan Catholic College Kirwan, QLD

“What’s in a Name?”



Ryan Catholic College is a huge, multi-campus catholic school, which offers pre-school to Year 12 Catholic education in Thuringowa, part of the greater metropolitan area of Townsville. Its overall enrolment is well over 2000 students.

When I visited the school in August 2004, my expectation was that, like most large schools, it would be a well-oiled administrative machine. No doubt it is exceptionally well-run. But what did surprise me was the warmth that existed within this community from the much-loved Parish Priest, Fr Dave, through to the leadership team of the school, the staff and the students.

Paula Duffy is the Primary APRE at Ryan, and from my perspective, a very talented and organised one at that. While setting up on my first morning there I noticed that the children called Paula by her first name. And I noticed during my early sessions that it seemed the children all called their teachers by their first names. I also noted a genuine warmth between staff and students on both campuses and perhaps this has something to do with that.

I had the opportunity at one point in my teaching career to be part of a beginning school. I arrived in its second year but during its first the staff had a discussion about how the children would address the teachers: would it be first names, or Ms Smith and Mr Jones? Most of the teachers opted for the first name option but the parish priest suggested that this was a little “familiar” and perhaps a compromise would be Miss Barbara. The staff accepted the compromise and this form of address was adopted.

Because of this, when I arrived in its second year I was known to my Kindergarten class as Mr Andrew, which I never really warmed to and made me feel like a relative to a certain talking horse. And, surprisingly, my principal didn’t warm to the idea of *my* compromise at all, “Sir Andrew”.

So where does respect come from? Does it come from our formal titles? Is it attached to our qualifications or our years of experience? Above all respect comes from integrity. Children are very adept at sensing integrity in adults. They know the teachers and leaders who are genuine about the care and teaching and learning that happen in a school every day.

I’ve heard stories of principals who have insisted on staff calling them by their post-doctorate title, while others have been known as Eric or Paula. And I’m fairly certain that there was more respect in the latter situation than in the former, and in both directions.