Pathways to Innovation and Development in Education

A Collection Of Invited Essays

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Chapter 2

School Patronage, Educational Experience and Religious Teachings

Pádraig Hogan

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There's an important distinction to be made between how religious teachings are introduced in a church, mosque or synagogue, and how such teachings are to be introduced in schools. Where this difference is overlooked there is a danger that the need to distinguish between educational experience and faith formation will be similarly disregarded. Both generally involve systematic learning. And religious teachings can feature in both. But properly understood, educational experience is mainly exploratory in character while faith formation is, from the start, evangelising in purpose and in practice.

The distinction here is not simply one of 'learning about' religion on the one hand and being nurtured in the teachings of a particular faith on the other. Genuine educational experience is always more than 'learning about'. As well as a deepening of conceptual understanding or an advance in knowledge it involves some appreciation of the significance of what is learned for one's sense of personal identity: for one's efforts to find an enduring sense of orientation and belonging in a world shared with others.

Where Christianity is concerned a keen awareness of the distinction I'm highlighting can be discerned in the teaching activities of Jesus Christ, as documented in the synoptic Gospels. But the distinction seems subsequently to have become eclipsed in the history of institutionalised Christianity, from Imperial Rome to the Reformation and thereafter. The distinction is all but obliterated by the concept of 'school patronage' - a historical remnant which still burdens educational policy and practice in twenty-first century Ireland.

Jesus Christ used strikingly different approaches when dealing with 'disciples' on the one hand and 'multitudes' on the other. Here's how Matthew tells it: "All these things Jesus spoke in parables to the multitudes; *and without parables he did not speak to them*" (Matthew 13:34, emphasis added). Mark's account is similarly unequivocal: "And with many such parables he spoke to them (the multitudes) the word, according as they were able to hear. *And without parable he did not speak unto them*; but apart, he explained all things to his disciples" (Mark 4:33-34, emphasis added).

'Multitudes' were heterogeneous groupings - what today we might describe as groups containing a wide plurality of values and beliefs. The term 'disciples', then and now, refers to already well-disposed and eager believers. Viewed from a religion perspective, most Irish schools today, including faith schools, are populated more by multitudes than by disciples. That is probably as true of the teachers as of the students.

Speaking to multitudes only in parables seems to have been a decisive, even a categorical strategy on Christ's part. As a teaching approach, parables draw imaginatively on life's troubles and triumphs. They seek to illustrate important points in a memorable way; yet a way which makes no presumptions on the loyalties or convictions of the hearers.

Jesus Christ set up no schools. The teaching episodes described in the gospels are all informal, whether they are with disciples or with multitudes. Of course Christ's purposes were evangelising ones. But where multitudes were concerned his practices were invitational and exploratory. The contrast between the examples of teaching to be found in the New Testament and the continuing prominence of 'patronage' in Ireland's educational history could hardly be more pronounced. The concept of school patronage, and its preoccupation with control, is not only an alien one from an educational standpoint. Properly speaking, it is also a foreigner to Christian missionary endeavour.

Patron bodies are so familiar a feature of Irish education that it's hard to imagine what life for our schools would be like without them. What would happen if the churches, the Education and Training Boards, Educate Together, An Foras Pátrúnachta were no longer to feature in Irish schooling? Who would do the work these bodies are doing now? A short answer to a searching question is that the work would have to be re-conceived and carried out by public education authorities. This would also mean amending the Education Act (1998), which still retains the concept of 'patron' and makes no mention of public education authorities.

There are critical differences between a patron body and a public education authority. In Ireland, patron bodies took shape even before the establishment of the National School system in 1831. This system, established by the UK administration through the unspectacular device of the Stanley Letter (1831), sought "to unite in one system children of different creeds". It also laid down that "The most scrupulous care should be taken not to interfere with the peculiar tenets of any description of Christian pupils". The National School system was a historic policy endeavour which succeeded on many fronts, but which failed spectacularly in its declared ecumenical purpose.

Public education authorities in more than a few countries have periodically embraced strident political doctrines, sometimes acting as if they were secular variants of aggressive patron bodies. But their proper role in a democracy is to ensure that education is recognised, provided for, and protected, as a distinct practice in its own right. An impressive example of how public education authorities can build strong traditions of reciprocal trust with

communities in a pluralist democracy is provided by Finland over the last three to four decades (Sahlberg, 2011).

Of course Ireland is not Finland. Traditions of civic engagement - as distinct from community endeavour - are weaker in Ireland than in many other European countries. But the Republic's schools by and large, including faith schools, are non-sectarian. This is chiefly due to the commitment of teachers to practices that are defensible on educational grounds, whatever the nature of the patron body. It is also due to a widespread pragmatism – mainly caring, sometimes more calculating - among school managements.

But problems now begin to loom larger. School managements and teachers have to make increasingly demanding accommodations, and increasingly untenable ones. Misgivings about the denominational nature of so much of Irish schooling are on the rise among parents. The government's response, rather than encouraging a greater plurality within all schools, seems to be the promotion of a greater plurality of schools, while leaving the notion of school patronage itself intact. This holds in place an architecture with key features that are inhospitable to the requirements of educational practice as a public good in a pluralist democracy. It sustains a system of power and influence which took on its key features during the 19th century sectarian struggles for control of education in Ireland, not only between church and state, but also between the main religious denominations. It is in one way scarcely credible, but in another unsurprising, that the government policy-makers view the only practicable path at present as that of promoting a greater plurality of schools. But this doesn't mean that the idea of plurality in the full sense - plurality within schools - should be abandoned, or even put in cold storage, where Irish educational policy is concerned. Its day might arrive unannounced. John Kenneth Galbraith (1958), who coined the phrase 'the conventional wisdom', has insightfully remarked that the march of human events characteristically confounds the conventional wisdom of the present, even making 'non-starters' suddenly timely. Let me conclude with a recent telling example.

Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt, when asked about the prospects of a reunited Germany, replied that he could envisage it only as the final step in a united Europe. Germany has been one country now for almost a quarter century. The EU, meanwhile, remains divided on many fronts. Percipient policy-making appreciates that the crooked paths of history are replete with surprises.

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