

Inaugural Conference at the Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College, London; 12 March 2020:

How do Catholic schools serve the goal of social justice?

By Carolyn Malsher and Louise McGowan

'Following Pope Francis's lead, how should Catholic education serve the poor, regardless of whether or not they are Catholic Christians?'

This was the question we posed to speakers and delegates at our one-day conference in March, just before COVID-19 and lockdown posed a whole new set of challenges around education and equity.

We were thrilled to have an esteemed line-up of keynote speakers in Professors Gerald Grace, Stephen McKinney and Richard Pring. In combination these academics represented a good century of research in Catholic education.

Professor Grace took us back to the seminal work *The Catholic School* issued by The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in 1977. He reminded us that the ethos of Catholic education has always been the 'preferential option for the poor' and, as Pope John Paul II had clarified, this was "not limited to material poverty but encompasses cultural and spiritual poverty as well."

Following on from Professor Grace's historical overview we focused in on more recent developments with Professor McKinney's studies into the role of Catholic schools in addressing specific injustices such as food insecurity and life chances for those living in areas of deprivation. He touched on the connected issue of sectarianism extant in his home town of Glasgow and how that had been and was being addressed; a subject which drew an interesting discussion from the floor on parallels with delegates' experiences.

After a thought-provoking morning of keynotes, delegates were able to choose from a range of short papers in parallel

sessions based on their specific areas of interest.

Dr Margaret Buck offered definitions of poverty originating both outside and inside schools, working from her research conducted in state-funded English diocesan schools. She identified material poverty, emotional poverty, and poverty in the faith as being areas of deprivation which may need to be addressed within a Catholic educational setting.

Focusing on primary education, Dr Ann Casson spoke of strengthening the 'Nexus' of connections between the home, school and church in order to develop the spiritual capital of pupils, their families and the whole school community. Her presentation was based on empirical research carried out by the National Institute of Christian Education Research (NICER) at Canterbury Christ Church University, which identified some effective approaches such as pastoral care for the whole family, opportunities for parents to share worship and provision of time and space for prayer.

We were pleased to welcome Edward Conway, headteacher at St Michael's Catholic High School in Watford, one of our partner schools within the Diocese of Westminster Academy Trust. His session focused on the current deficit of social services and the consequences this has had on the de facto position of Catholic schools as an additional support service for vulnerable families. He described what this looks like in practice and how it impacts on schools who are themselves under budgetary constraints. He also gave some helpful pointers towards accessing support from Catholic charities.

Martin Earley looked at the contribution to debate around Catholic social teaching made by two orders of religious fathers; the Dominicans and the Jesuits. He examined the output of their teaching via their academic journals: *New Blackfriars*



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Carolyn Malsher is the Administrator to the Research School and Librarian at the Convent of Jesus and Mary Language College in north west London.

and the Heythrop Journal, respectively. He identified many points of overlap and similar concerns, but noted differences in approach and emphasis, with the Dominicans being more radical and quicker to address 'difficult' subjects e.g. Marxist-Christian relations, liberation theology and sexual ethics while the Jesuits were more measured and discreet in their criticism of church policy.

The challenging question of whether a selective faith-based entrance policy for Catholic schools is compatible with a social justice ethos was presented by John Harris. The fundamental principle described in the 1977 document is that "In the certainty that the Spirit is at work in every person, the Catholic School offers itself to all, non-Christians included ... " However, school admission policies are often such that the inclusivity this statement implies may be sacrificed, certainly for oversubscribed schools with high uptake from within the Catholic community. The fear of a loss of Catholicity or a dilution of Catholic ethos in schools with a higher proportion of non-Catholic students is, arguably, problematic

and should be addressed with great care and sensitivity.

For full details of John's research see p8.

Dr John Patterson, Principal of St Vincent's, a specialist school for students with sensory impairment, described his work in forming connections between schools, universities and businesses with the aim of improving the social capital and employment opportunities for visually impaired students. He explained his school's 'Common Good' curriculum and its focus on learning through service while simultaneously promoting opportunities for spiritual discernment.

As a Catholic research school we are lucky to have several practitioner-researchers on our staff, and two of our colleagues presented papers to the Conference. Claudia Paisley, Assistant Headteacher, is contributing to a wider study being undertaken throughout the London Borough of Brent on the underachievement of Black Caribbean students. In her talk on the study she is undertaking within our own cohort of students she examined some of the factors that are emerging to suggest that we as educators could be unconsciously complicit to this issue, which has implications for our stated aims to promote social justice and core Catholic

values. She spoke of how we influence the beginning of a black child's awareness of themselves and can unconsciously contribute to a crystallising self-view that they are less able, less valued and have less right to a voice.

Our Head of History, Sharon Aninakwa, described the school's work on a history curriculum that engages with 'difficult' histories, and gives our students the language and critical consciousness to understand the impact these histories have on our identities. The school teaches on the basis that history can (and should) be a tool for 'scholar activism' where students can confidently seek justice by studying the roots and legacies of injustice. Sharon invited some of her sixth form students to speak to the delegates about what this mode of teaching actually looks and feels like in practise and their voices presented a compelling and much appreciated addition to this paper, amply demonstrating why the Convent was awarded the Historical Association Quality Mark for History Gold Award in 2019.

Outside of the formal sessions we were pleased to offer a 'poster conference' during tea and lunch breaks, where our student researchers presented projects they



Louise McGowan and Professor Grace

had been working on during the year. These students were also able and enthusiastic ambassadors for the school, helping with hospitality and conducting guided tours for the delegates of the Convent's buildings and grounds as well as making visits to lessons. We were incredibly proud of them.

As this was the first ever Research Conference we had hosted as a new Research School, we were grateful to



Research Students

be working in conjunction with Dr Sean Whittle and the wider Network for Research in Catholic Education (NRCE) community and the support in sponsorship from Willie Slavin and the Networking Catholic Education Trust. Their support, experience and knowledge of the field proved an enormous help in terms of marketing, outreach to interested bodies and the format and organisation of the day.

Finally, we would like to thank our delegates; academics, Headteachers and representatives from Catholic organisations and charitable bodies, for attending and contributing to the many thoughtful and fruitful discussions. Our Conference was luckily timed just prior to the wholesale closure of our schools to the majority of students. As we return to our new, post-lockdown education system, the issues and concerns that we all brought to this day will have been exacerbated and the push for an understanding of and a practical application of social justice in Catholic schools must be prioritised.



Sharon Aninakwa



Louise McGowan and Professor McKinney



Louise McGowan and Professor Pring



Louise McGowan with speakers and Chair of Governors

View of the Conference

