

There is doctrinal substance in this book but it is (thankfully) not over-emphasized, nor is it introduced in daunting detail. There are many factors which influence the teacher-learner relationship and how students engage with the material put before them. So much depends on the relationship between teacher and pupil and the assumptions, the outlook and attitudes brought to the classroom; also a great deal depends on what is experienced in the rest of the school, as well as outside it (in the home and in society). However, this stand-alone volume succeeds admirably in introducing pupils (and often their teachers) to central aspects of the experience of being a Christian.

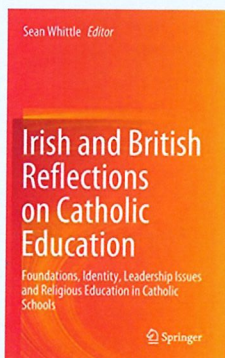
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Irish and British Reflections on Catholic Education

Publisher: Springer

Publication Date: Feb 2021 - £75.99



Twenty-two years ago, when Networking Catholic Education Today was at an advanced stage of gestation the search for content, guaranteed to speak to the living experience of teachers in

our schools, presented a formidable challenge. Ideally, we were looking for teachers and school leaders who were undertaking post graduate studies reflecting on their frontline experience, seeking answers to questions that resonated with colleagues across the board. Professor Gerald Grace, having recently established the Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education (CRCDE), was on a parallel track and with his customary kindness and encouragement was able to identify a select group of such people. Set against that background, this book would have been an answer to our prayers. What it now signifies is a growing confidence among Catholic

educationalist/academics in these islands in their collective ability to confront serious questions with a hard-won assurance that was beyond our imagining in 1999.

It is gratifying that a number of these contributors have written for Networking since that time, not least in this issue. Chapter 3 'Covid-19, Child Poverty, Catholic Schools and the Insights of Gustavo Gutiérrez' bears more than passing resemblance to Professor Stephen McKinney's article, in this issue, minus his sympathetic consideration on the role of the Liberation Theology in shaping our preferential option for the poor. Also familiar to our readers, Dr Margaret Buck and Dr Louise McGowan, drawing here from their respective experiences of the English education system examined extensively in their doctoral theses. Their papers offer, respectively, acutely perceptive insights into the effects of government driven systemic changes and the challenges these pose to the Church as a major player in educational provision, on one hand, and their effects at an individual level on those charged with the formidable task of implementation at local level. In his Preface, Professor Richard Pring recognises that:

'This volume, with its twenty-one contributors from a wide range of Universities and Schools in Britain and Ireland, reflects the quite remarkable resurgence, over a very brief period of research and critical thinking concerned with Catholic education.'

In his view, the importance of such research is significant for several reasons:

First, philosophically, there is a need to explain and to justify the distinctively religious nature of, or element within, primary and secondary schooling. Second, given that there are Faith Schools within the otherwise secular system then their distinctive contribution to the quality of State Education needs to be demonstrated. Third, the maintenance of such a distinctive and justified Catholic contribution needs consistently to be pursued in both Ireland and Britain. Fourth, there is a close collaboration in much of the research between the Universities and the classroom teachers in the Schools.

In his introduction, Dr Sean Whittle explains:

In light of the complex nature of scholarship and research about Catholic education, this volume is presenting the twenty-one chapters in four distinct parts, representing the four areas of overlapping scholarship and research in the field of Catholic Education Studies. Thus, the four parts of this volume are categorised into Foundations, Identity, Catholic school Leadership and issues in Religious Education in Catholic schools.

One of the fascinations of this collection is the opportunity to observe how the emphases in the chosen subject matter between the Irish and English contributions offers an insight into how the Church on each side of the Irish Sea is coping with a renewal of its self-understanding in a period of dramatic social attitudinal change, secularisation, and the fallout from the sexual abuse scandals, common to both jurisdictions.

Dr Patricia Keiran, having provided an informative history of education in Ireland, concludes:

'Catholic education continues to undergo a period of soul searching and repositioning. It is beginning to relinquish institutional roles and is moving away from a theological narcissism into a new terrain. This more self-aware, modest Catholic educational sector, is attempting to re-focus on the mission of Christ. It is beginning to develop a new sense of identity as it dialogues with stakeholder groups. Perhaps this more vibrant, pared-down Catholic system of education ... will become more self-conscious of its prophetic mission. Only then can it nurture real strength by refocusing on its evangelical mission to provide high-quality education based on Christ's gospel of justice and love, in service of all, especially the marginal and the poor, while addressing the needs of a more secular and multi-belief society.'

Focusing on the last ten years of educational change in England and, living with the inherent disability of the Catholic education to speak coherently because of the autonomy enjoyed by each diocese, Dr Margaret Buck offers a less assured

view of a Church sufficiently at ease with itself to engage with anything like the fruitful conversation implied by Dr Kieran's conclusion. This assertion paints a less assured picture:

'For nine unsettled years, dioceses have navigated national education policy with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance, confidence or concern, like participants in an unpredictable game of snakes and ladders. In 2019, English Catholic education is underpinned by a permissive national ecclesial policy that defers to canonical authority, resulting in considerable variation in local diocesan policy and practice. The prevailing professional context of educational provision in the twenty-first century requires that the church re-imagines the future of Catholic education as dependent on a three-way partnership between church, school and state.'

In her carefully argued paper, she proposes a national solution that incorporates the best of Catholic educational, theological and social thinking which is already finding traction in a wider debate within Catholic educationalists in England. What does emerge is that the English Church is showing no sign of the soul searching that seems to be underpinning the seeds of revival evident in the Irish situation. The Church in Ireland, in grasping the nettle has uncovered substantial support for its schools among parents. While English school leaders could substantiate the same claim to legitimise the Church's right to provide schools, the Bishop's

Conference, does not yet appear to be able to speak with such confidence.

Interestingly, of the seven papers presented around the debate on Religious Education, only one is from an English perspective. Even allowing for this being a Dublin based conference, the centrality of Religious Education to the faith schools debate, is surely indicative of a more mature and healthier climate of enquiry among our Irish colleagues. That said, John Moffatt SJ's paper 'Religious Education as a Discipline in the Knowledge-Rich Curriculum' caught this eye for its intelligent engagement with a government led debate about Religious Education. His whole open-minded, mutually respectful approach to engagement stands in marked contrast to the overly defensive front normally presented by the Church and its agencies in these situations. His Note:

'My reading of the OFSTED document is that it is actually much more subtle and thoughtful' speaks volumes for an approach that opens doors. (Who ever imagined OFSTED, subtle and thoughtful in the same sentence?)

His preferred outcome of religious education sits well alongside Patricia Kieran's refocussed mission:

'Ideally, we want to help young people find their way of making an ever more mature, credible sense of their faith as something that already matters to them. But if this is not possible, at the very least we want to leave people with an understanding of and respect for the integrity of Catholic Christianity and of

alternative world views that will help them to interpret and act in the world with responsibility and compassion.'

What John Moffatt, in the company of so many of the contributors to this publication, has demonstrated is that, as a Church in these countries, there is an appetite for, and a growing body of scholarship that is not only capable of entering the debate about faith in the public realm but equally assured at moving unapologetically on to the front foot.

This book, and the conference that lies behind it, is testimony to the work of the Network for Researchers in Catholic Education (NfRCE) that has become increasingly influential since its inception in 2016. We at Networking Catholic Education Today acknowledge our indebtedness to our colleagues in NfRCE for providing access to this fruitful source of material and making it available to Catholic teachers and school leaders. In conclusion, I can do no better than leave the last word to Professor Richard Pring:

'I hope that this book will be read by all the various tiers of responsibility for Catholic Education both in Britain and Ireland. This volume also deserves a wide circulation amongst those who work in Catholic Schools, not least as a way of encouraging them to engage with research about Catholic education. Hopefully, it will prompt many more to participate in research and educational thinking about Catholic education.'

Author of the Review: Willie Slavin

