Reflecting on Faith Schools

Edited by
Helen Johnson

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Profound changes in society, government policy and the political landscape, together with such cataclysmic events as 9/11 and 7/7, have greatly altered perceptions of faith schools in England. Their publicly funded existence at the beginning of the twenty first century causes considerable public debate.

Taking a reflective practice approach, this study – by people working within faith schools and colleges – explores the new and highly controversial issues surrounding these schools in a sophisticated and thoughtful way. Looking at the supposed secularisation of the west (or at least, some parts of it), the nature of the multi-cultural and multi-faith society, the role of women, the spiritual development of children, and most of all, the form that the tolerance of religious diversity should take in liberal societies, this book encourages readers to re-examine their assumptions and to consider faith schools as a positive part of the future of the English schooling system, within a multi-cultural society. Such schools can also be seen as a means by which the emotional resilience of both staff and pupils can be enhanced.

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Reflecting on faith schools: an exercise in the sociological imagination

> The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of individuals. (Wright Mills, 1970, p. 11)

Part A: an argument and some evidence

Less than ten years ago, it was possible to remark on the *lack* of opposition to faith schools (or, as they tended to be called then, church schools). Today, faith schools attract an immense amount of attention from within and outside the field of education and in many national contexts. In England, some of this opposition is both very vocal and intense, some is well argued and some makes no attempt at objectivity. What has happened in this intervening period?

Declared government education policy supporting a faith presence in education, parental perception and choice, seemingly contradictory social trends including secularisation, and cataclysmic events, such as September 11 and 7 July, have contributed to a much-changed context in which these schools operate. As noted elsewhere, faith schools are a phenomenon of our times (Johnson, 2000). It is despite and perhaps because of these factors (and others) that such schools are not merely surviving on the margins but are oversubscribed.

Structural issues

First, it is useful to note faith schools as a *structural* phenomenon. As touched upon in various ways in several chapters, the Anglican church school predates the mass schooling system that has developed in England since Forster's Education Act in 1870 opened up elementary education to working-class children. Both the Anglican National Society and the non-conformist churches had provided elementary schools from the early nineteenth century, offering basic literacy and numeracy skills as a *voluntary* activity. The state, which, at this time, had resisted a direct role for itself in

education, from the early nineteenth century until the Forster Act, used the voluntary bodies to channel government grants to assist such schooling. In this book about faith schools in England, Marilyn Holness' chapter, 'New wine in old bottles', offers, for those new to the area, a short overview of some of the more significant historical pivotal moments and explores more fully the importance of voluntarism and difference in the structure of the English dual system of schooling. It offers a historical perspective (touching on secularist, political, social and educational arguments). Perhaps more importantly, and hence its position in the final section (Part C) of this book, the chapter goes on to explore the role of faith schools as part of a wider governmental move to emphasise difference and voluntarism in *current* education policy. Such open governmental approval is far from Churchill's express demand of Butler that church schools were a particular can of worms not to be reopened in the epoch-making Education Act of 1944. The settlement of the Education Act of 1902 was to be left undisturbed, but, most of all, *unmentioned*.

But the excitement in the study of the area of faith schools is that it allows some very large contemporary issues to be explored. Some immediately come to mind: the supposed secularisation of the West (especially Europe); the nature of the multicultural and multifaith society; the role of women; and most of all, the form that tolerance of this diversity should take in liberal societies. In the first chapter in Part A, Mike Castelli and Abdullah Trevathan explore some of these questions, using a contemporary English Muslim context. Determined not to shy away from controversial issues, the second chapter is a full-throated attack on faith schools. Roger Marples, in 'Against faith schools', takes a less than accommodating view, arguing passionately for the rights of the individual child for an open future. For this to happen, he argues, students should not be subjected to what he regards as the indoctrination of the faith school experience. He sets out a philosophical argument, in a confidently modernist perspective.

The other chapters in this book ask and explore their own questions: What is this open future? In the development of our spirituality, can we ever ignore our own starting-point? How many skins do we have to shuck off before we *really* are what we are when we interact with others? This exploration is also predicated on the need for an agreement about the nature and perspectives of liberalism, in which liberals are committed to an emphasis on the individual and his/her rights. Interestingly, the philosopher Anthony Appiah (2005) has recently argued for a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' in which attachments to our families, friends, communities and religions are deep enough to matter but unrestricting enough to allow us to 'move on' and grow in our own self-actualising way, in our own chosen context.

Part B: using reflection to find oneself and the big picture

It is a statement of the obvious that what happens in schools—whatever their type— has a significant impact on the development of young people. After all, young people in our schools learn most powerful and perhaps lasting lessons from watching the behaviour of the adults in their schools. Sizer and Sizer put it vividly:

> *They watch us all the time.* The students, that is. They listen to us, sometimes. They learn from all that watching and listening. Be quiet. Don't cheat. Don't lie. Be nice. Don't fight. They attend to us, more than we usually realize. (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p. xviii; original italics)

Fullan (2002) has identified as part of the head teacher's role, not only building a shared organisational culture but a professional learning community in which knowledge and attitudes are shared and developed. This leads directly to the question: what are the values that schools *should* and *do* promote? Sizer and Sizer (1999, p. 11) sum up the issues for schools and those within them: 'What do we stand for in this place? How is that stance reflected in our routines, activities and rituals? How do we *model*— as institutions and as the people who work within them—that which we most value?' (their italics).

Without being too glib, it can be seen that faith schools have certain 'givens' that give them as institutions and organisations, sometimes a steer, sometimes a directive, in the way they should behave and perform. They know what is expected of them. But what of individual members of staff, whose own religious and moral perspective may not entirely match the position of their school—and their church or faith body? Following Sizer and Sizer, it is clearly important that school staff are aware of the impression that *all* their behaviour makes, from the formal behaviour played out 'rhetorically' in ceremonies in the school hall to the most casual (and perhaps unthinking) comments made in the rush of the school corridor. After all: 'The kids count on our consistency. Few qualities in adults annoy adolescents more than hypocrisy' (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p. 11).

So whatever the setting, adults within an educational institution have power, sometimes expressed explicitly; sometimes expressing their authority, and even their domination, in more implicit ways. Thus, it is clearly necessary for them to become aware of their own values and construction of identity, for the supposedly 'powerful' individual to go beyond the self in isolation to find the self in reflection and consequent awareness. In this, for example, it is necessary to:

- examine the marginalisation of the Other;
- investigate the 'taken-for-granted';
- and find one's social, moral and spiritual location in the discourses that he/she uses.

Arguing for autobiographical reflection and data

The task and duty to reflect is therefore clearly one in which all adults within the environs of the educational institution must engage. How should this reflection be facilitated, tracked and recorded? Within education research, there is a strong strain of positivist research and so much use of statistics, performance indicators and other components of performativity. It would seem especially relevant in the audit of educational institutions and systems. Once some form of formal educational process is entered, students and staff become participants in a system that has inputs, processes and outputs. This approach with its objective measurement of specified

activity can indicate whether or not a system is functioning effectively in accordance with declared criteria. The debate around the particular advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative approaches is an old one in education research (and elsewhere in the social sciences). More recent arguments have focused on governmental insistence (both in the UK and the USA) for evidence-based policy and practice. Patti Lather (2004, p. 757) sees such an expectation as 'oversimplif[ying] complex problems' and 'as being used to warrant governmental incursion into legislating scientific method'. In particular, she argues that one reading of such a move to evidence-based approaches is to see it as an expression of a 'regressive modernism' that is 'disciplining', 'normalizing' and 'standard[izing]' educational research (Lather, p. 766). The danger in such an approach is that the 'spaces for doing other sorts of research' into the changes in the crumbling, old hegemonies are limited. She goes on to conclude that: 'This backlash attempt to transfer a medical model to educational research might be read as an "assault, direct and indirect, on multiculturalism" (Hall, 1996, p. 468)'.

But what if the task *is* to find out how people feel about what has happened to them, what has been the lasting impact of events and exposure to particular cultures and religious faiths? After all, education, if regarded as a process of personal development, can take place wherever the spirit moves. Thus, as the above discussion has shown, perhaps an approach that seeks richer and thicker data is required to do more than skate across the surface of received and perhaps out-moded realities. An approach that fully embraces qualitative research can offer such a means. Such an interpretative perspective offers 'a process of exploration', in which, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 12): 'the researcher comes face-to-face with social situations that reveal … constructs and the taken-for-granted components of such worlds'.

These elements can be understood through a holistic understanding or 'mind-map' (Argyris & Schon, 1974), based on interactions between the subject matter and its external context and vice versa. In this task of understanding, we can call up Weber's distinction between the direct observation of the meaning of manifested subject matter (which includes verbalisations or 'verbal utterances'). (This allows a more deep understanding of why the teacher or individual did what she did). Recalling Weber (1978, p. 8), 'This … consists in placing the act in an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning'. These two types of understanding, *Erklaren* (explanation) and *Verstehen* (understanding) clearly require different methodologies (Habermas, 1990, p. 10).

While there may be social constructions of reality that are governed by identifiable rules and regulations, no objective patterns of reality exist. Individuals have the capacity to make their own reality and so exercise a choice in deciding to act out this rather than that: 'the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning' (Weber, 1978, p. 24) to his or her own behaviour 'be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence'. So, in practical terms, whereas quantitative research seeks to measure behaviour, qualitative research attempts to go beneath the surface to explore a deeper understanding of the meanings of a particular situation, as offered by the situational actors themselves.

The collection of data about the individual's history and experiences

It is in this complexity of contextualisation and personal realities, that the experiences of adults within educational institutions as actors making things happen can be reported in various ways. Returning to C. Wright Mills' remark about the link between 'the larger historical scene' and 'the inner life and career of a variety of individuals', Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 10) take this point and apply it to the field of educational studies:

> Working with teachers … who are, again, arguably marginal in terms of their social power, life history has been seen as particularly useful and appropriate because, as Bullough (1998, pp. 20–21) points out 'public and private cannot … be separated … The person comes through'.

It is *this person* and the construction of identity with which we are concerned. But how unstructured should the autobiography or life history be? Clearly the life history and experience review is being entered into with the expectation that some incidents may be more relevant or meaningful than others.

Trying out the reflective method

The set of life history and experience reviews presented in Part B are concerned with revealing participants' involvement with a particular aspect of faith schools and institutions. Adapting Goodson and Sikes' (2001, p. 30) comments about the use of time-lines to focus reflection, our snowball sample of reviewers has discussed some of the following:

- Place and date of birth
- Family background and birthplace
- Religious background
- Education, preschool experiences, school experience: courses taken, subjects favoured, credentials achieved; general character of school experiences; peer relations; teachers; 'good' and 'bad' experiences
- Education, college/university attended
- Occupation, general work history, changes of job, types of school, types of position.

What is offered in the way of personal reflection, in the manner of life history? A range of methods and reportages is used in Part B's symposium of reflection but all revolve the use of constant *questioning*: the second part of this editorial explores the method more fully. Catherine Hill discusses the impact of trauma on children's well-being in a variety of contexts; Robert Jones discusses the forming of a religious perspective that though Christian is not hegemonic and its impact on his own role as a chaplain in a higher education college with a faith basis; Howard Worsley discusses being an actor in the setting up of a faith school. Lynne Scholefield writes about her travels in two cultures so that one identity can evolve. In pursuit of one individual truth about the impact of being a student at a faith school, an interview with a former faith school student asks some very direct questions and gets some

equally direct answers. As ever, there are more questions than answers, and the third part of the editorial attempts some conclusions about the symposium.

Part C: lessons from the international scene and guesses about the future

Many of the issues that arise in the English context are found in other contexts too. Denis McLaughlin, writing from Brisbane, Australia, is concerned with the popularity of fee-paying Catholic schools in a supposedly secularising—and egalitarian— Australia. He offers a historical overview of the development of Catholic schools, linked as it is to the Irish Catholic experience in Australia, and its subordinate position to hegemonic Protestantism. He goes on to report on some robustly positivist research that surveyed the attitudes of students whilst attending Catholic schools. He offers a picture, one feels, that has echoes in the English experience: that Catholic schools have many purposes, both educational and religious; and while those working within them or supporting them may have as their primary concern 'the nurturing of the human community', parents may be more attracted to the 'quality education' provided within them. The issues of social divisiveness and elitism do not go away; but does such separateness automatically mean segregation? What do the students themselves really want in terms of spirituality? Marion Maddox (2005, p. 162) has said of her Australian university students: 'As in other secular, western countries, a personalised, free-form and eclectic spirituality seems to be replacing commitments for and against religion. My students, who dread to be seen as "religious" … are proud to be called to be "spiritual"'.

However these young people define 'spirituality', it may not conform to the expectations of mainstream adult society; and it is clear that 'new forms' of spirituality are emerging. We do not have space here to investigate how free of influences from established religious traditions this new spirituality really is; and, of course, this spirituality can continue to express itself through belief in and living through the more traditional forms of the established religions. Marion Maddox's students can point to 'the wrongs religions have perpetrated', and the case against organised religions is not trivial. However, as Maddox goes on to note:

> Religious traditions carry the collective memory of generations of committed thinkers, trained and lay, devoting themselves to pressing human problems. The trial and error nature of individual, internalised spirituality has attractions, but it leaves every seeker reinventing their own wheel (2005, p. 162).

None, new and old

This argument around the 'old' religious traditions is not going to be settled here; but it is enough to note that the case has not been proven one way or the other and is unlikely to be. It is a matter of belief, emotional need and of choice. All we can do, in fairness, is to examine our *automatic* positions and how they might impact on how we regard ourselves and others. One important assumption that has direct significance to this discussion is the acceptance that our society is increasingly becoming secularised.

That may or may not be the general case; however, it is clear that many students within education come from families and communities that live within active religious traditions. It is likely that the latter will influence, to a greater or lesser degree, how they express their life perspective and needs—as much as secularism or disbelief or 'new' 'unattached' spiritualities will influence their fellow students. So we arrive at a mixture. It is this—these families and communities and, most importantly, others of different faiths and none—that is served by faith schools.

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