

EITN Issue 17 Book Reviews

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Faith Schools in the Twenty First Century: Policy and Practice in Education 23

McKinney, S. (ed.)

Edinburgh: Dunedin (2008), pp. 96, Pbk., £14.50, ISBN 9781903765814

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This book considers the views of four different academics on the current and often highly controversial subject of Faith Schools.

In the first chapter McKinney provides a coherent and informative history of faith schooling in England. This is brief, but does, without doubt, appropriately set the scene. He maps the debate by defining five overarching themes, which he argues illuminate the diversity and complexity of the faith school discussion.

McKinney's discussion of the first theme - state funding - provides a largely descriptive outline and lacks any real discussion of the often heated deliberations which surround allocation of state funding. His second theme is the selection process associated with faith schooling. He touches on possible selection issues without providing any evidence to contextualise the issues identified. The third theme acknowledges the accusation that faith schools and divisiveness are linked. In this section McKinney considers the basic equation that physical separation can have negative or harmful effects leading to division, while also arguing that a move to end faith schooling would in itself be divisive. Fourthly, considering social cohesion and faith schooling opens the door for McKinney to turn attention to the current demand for Muslim schools. While issues relating to 'self segregation' and 'suspicion' are identified little comparison is made between the pre-1944 aversion from the Christian Church to avoid secularisation and the current position of Muslim communities. In theme five, McKinney concludes that faith schools and children's rights are not mutually exclusive. Children are still presented with choice in faith schools while in some non-denominational schools McKinney argues that certain individuals drive home rigid agendas which often exclude rational autonomy. McKinney concludes his

outline of the faith schooling debate by stating that faith schools provide room for religious positions in an increasingly secular society, but falls short of discussing the extent to which this is the responsibility of a national education system in an increasingly diverse society.

In chapter two Brighouse compares the faith school debate in England and Wales to the complete separation of church and state in the USA. He highlights several unsatisfactory outcomes of this separation and encourages the reader to consider the 'net' contribution of a schooling system arguing that success for one school simply means failure for another. Brighouse concludes that it is not desirable to abolish faith schools but instead challenges the state to regulate both faith schools and non-faith schools carefully to ensure democratic competence and autonomy.

Ryan considers non-Catholics in Catholic schools in chapter three, pointing to the Vatican assertion of openness and inclusion. In addition, he argues that students without any faith or who have chosen not to profess the Catholic faith must be recognised in Catholic faith schools. The rising generation, according to Ryan, must continue to find ways for different religions and cultures to engage in mutually supportive ways and accordingly Catholic faith schools should be held as public institutions, not private.

In the next chapter McKinney explores the contentious accusation that Catholic Schools in some ways promote or cause Sectarianism. He considers the situation in Scotland where divided communities are commonplace. After asserting the reality of the public connection between Catholic Schools and Sectarianism McKinney investigates the views of a range of sixteen key academics, Catholic leaders and educationalists. While he dismisses the simplicity of the 'cause and effect' argument he offers little discussion of the sad realities of such division and the obvious link to ignorance through lack of association. McKinney and his interviewees conclude that Catholic schools are simply associated with Sectarianism not the cause of it.

In the final chapter, Davis considers the effect of New Labour's policies including Blair's previous assertion that faith schools are central to the education system and to the wider faith school debate. Davis contrasts leading academics' views with New

Labour's perspective that faith schools would simply diminish over time and ultimately wither completely. He concludes that in places such as Scotland faith schools are offering a cosmopolitan combination of modernisation and traditionalisation which is successfully retaining public appeal. However evidence for this success is not presented. In addition the reality of the demise of religious commitment throughout society should be considered in relation to the public appeal of faith schooling.

This book offers an interesting contribution to the faith school debate and indeed the wider consideration of an inclusive education system. However the extent to which it really tackles the many contentious issues which surround this subject is limited. Further investigation of the evidence of the proclaimed success of faith schooling and perhaps the inclusion of those who question the presumed partnership between schooling and a confessional religious approach would provide a more balanced account. A comparison between the divisive communities of some areas of Scotland and Northern Ireland and their relation, if any, to faith schooling, would also be an interesting piece of future research.