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CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: MISSION, MARKETS, AND MORALITY

GERALD GRACE
FALMER PRESS, 2002
\$41.95, 240 pages

Reviewed by Patrick Duignan

This is an excellent book that addresses directly many of the challenges facing Catholic educators and leaders of Catholic educational systems and schools in a number of countries. Grace provides the reader with a framework for understanding many of the contemporary dilemmas of Catholic schooling in the 21st century. Catholic schools are challenged to remain relevant and “on the front foot” in an increasingly demanding secular and market-driven global society. Grace offers Catholic educators and leaders valuable insights from the literature and from his own research on how to meet the challenges and contribute to the common good and “to renew the culture of the sacred in a profane and secular world” (2002, p. 5). Grace is urging Catholic educators and leaders to engage, rather than retreat from, the secular and profane so that they can decide “what aspects of the spirit of the world they can legitimately accommodate to and what aspects they must be clearly against” (p. 22).

Grace’s framing of Catholic education and schooling as field and habitus are particularly insightful and help place some of the current tensions in Catholic education in a historical context. A major challenge faced by Catholic schools in a number of countries is to demonstrate that they remain distinctive in terms of the cultural messages they carry. Grace poses a core question that is at the heart of this tension:

Have the 1980s and 1990s state-imposed curriculum and assessment requirements dealt a fatal blow to concepts of a Catholic curriculum and pedagogy or has it been possible for Catholic schools to find ways of rendering to Caesar that which is Caesar’s while rendering to God that which is God’s? (2002, p. 48)

While he is referring directly to England and Wales, this point applies equal-

ly to the U.S., New Zealand, Australia, and other Western countries.

The discussion of the distinction between visible and invisible pedagogy helped this reader clarify and come to terms with the complexity of this question. Grace points out that “in contemporary market-driven schooling, a pupil’s measurable performance in prescribed competencies and skills becomes the objective of a visible pedagogy,” while pedagogy is invisible insofar as “its procedures and its outcomes are more diffuse and intangible” (2002, p. 49). Grace highlights that “at its most general level, invisible pedagogy is designed to be person forming whereas visible pedagogy is designed to be product forming” (p. 49).

A major challenge for Catholic schools is to continue to produce the academic goods as they have always done, but to clearly demonstrate “new signs of their spiritual, moral and social achievements” (Grace, 2002, p. 51) – their invisible pedagogy. Using the findings from Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993), Grace explores the concept of Catholic school effect and singles out an inspirational ideology – fundamental beliefs and values – as the “animating force which gives shape and purpose to the Catholic educational mission” (2002, p. 93). It is this inspirational ideology that highlights the fact that the Catholic school has “transcendent as well as mundane purposes” (Grace, 2002, p. 94). The contemporary trap for Catholic schools is, therefore, to ensure that in their attempts to continue the academic excellence to which they have always been committed, they do not sacrifice “their historical and primary mission, i.e., educational service to the poor and religious service to the church” (Grace, 2002, p. 95).

While there are numerous historical, contextual, and international perspectives on Catholic education presented which most readers will find informative and thought provoking, the author should be commended for the originality of research and the depth and insightfulness of analysis and interpretations. Chapters 6-10 come to contemporary life through the use of real examples from Catholic schools and pertinent quotations from Catholic educators and leaders. These chapters, in particular, constitute a valuable and substantive contribution to our theoretical understanding of the challenges facing contemporary Catholic schools. They also offer much practical insight to those who have to face these challenges.

The final chapter, entitled “The Renewal of Spiritual Capital and the Critique of the Secular World” is a gem. The view that spiritual capital – defined as “resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition” – “can be a source of empowerment because it provides a transcendent impulse which can guide judgement and action in a mundane world” (Grace, 2002, p. 236) is central to the Catholicity of Catholic schools. In a new century where young people are faced with a veritable feast of choices, Catholic schools must empower their students to choose ethically,

morally, and wisely. They must also nurture their “spirituality against external pressure for secularism, hedonism and materialism” (p. 237).

Perhaps the best insight this book has for leaders of Catholic schools is that in

using their understanding of the fundamental principles of the Catholic faith and of its associated moral and value positions, the Catholic head teachers of this study have, in the main, attempted to maintain the mission integrity of Catholic schooling in the face of many external pressures which could compromise that integrity. (Grace, 2002, p. 237)

A major challenge in an increasingly secular and market-driven society is the constant renewal of this spiritual capital in support of the distinctive mission of the Catholic school.

This book is essential reading for all who are engaged in Catholic education and schooling at any level.

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