



Education in Northern Ireland: under review

Under review

Anyone visiting the new NIACT (Northern Ireland Association of Christian Teachers) website will notice the greatest number of articles comes under the category of education reviews. Currently, virtually every area of education in Northern Ireland is, or has recently been, under review. In fact, it is probable that every area of teaching and training has at least got a passing comment in one or other of these documents.

The more things change...

I sometimes wonder if some of the best teaching in Northern Ireland has been the result of teachers who never quite got fully committed to the latest bright idea! Review is good, bright ideas are good, a little change never hurt, but too often the new automatically means the end of the old. Often the next review returns many of the previously abandoned methods anyway.

If there is an ideal teacher using an ideal approach, how come Jesus contrasted so much with John the Baptist? We cannot be all things to all people: God made us unique, each with a unique style. He made our pupils unique, responding to different styles.

Even though everything from Primary (and Nursery) to Further Education (and beyond) is being reviewed, nothing as radical as discipleship has been suggested – we are still hopelessly devoted to the industrial, mass production model.

Most controversial of the reviews are the *Burns Report* and its follow-up the *Costello Report* which recommend the ending of selection at eleven and propose interesting and creative if rather optimistic suggestions on how to achieve it. For some, the ending of selection cannot come soon enough, for

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A Christian response

Where do Christian teachers stand on all this rethinking? Christian teachers have as many different views as the rest of their teaching colleagues. This makes it challenging for NIACT as it attempts to accurately represent their views. What we have done in formulating responses is read the consultation documents closely, address issues which have a clear Christian response and provide guidelines or principles where our members are likely to differ in their specific responses.

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Everyone agrees it is not appropriate to brand children failures at eleven, and over the years various attempts have been made to change that perception, with little success. Whether the new proposals are more likely to be successful is open to question.

A slow process

Now the real work begins. I suspect there are many people at the moment scratching their heads and wondering where they go next. Grammar schools are already beginning to think through the implications for them. Whatever 'informed choices' parents make it is inevitable that the ability range in grammar schools will broaden.

The final date for selection is 2008, if not before. For many parents that probably seems like a long time to wait. For educators to achieve the required change in post-primary institutions it is bound to be quite a challenge, even in that time scale. In defiance of all previous efforts and now, I suspect, Burns' and Costello's optimism, it is going to be a

long time before all schools in Northern Ireland are regarded as equally desirable.

Burns and Costello

Costello says (one suspects with fingers crossed behind collective backs and a sharp intake of breath):

‘Choice of post-primary schools will be between local schools with distinctive characteristics but which will be of equal high quality, equally valued, and which provide access to the breadth, choice and flexibility offered by the entitlement.’

I reckon that’s that problem solved then! (I am in danger of expressing some unchristian, but stereotypically teacherly, cynicism... so I’ll move on swiftly.)

Burns’ principles, that each young person should be valued equally and that all young people should be enabled to develop their talents to the full, also guide Costello who adds ‘measurable outcome’ such as:

‘Each young person is:

- aware of personal strengths and unique dignity
- responsible for self and eager to make a positive contribution to society
- motivated to learn and to embrace life-long learning
- given opportunities and support to maximise potential
- valued and demonstrates respect for others
- recognised for individual abilities and achievements
- equipped with a wide range of knowledge, values and skills for life and work.’

Doubtless it is good to be aware of personal strengths but surely the first step in taking responsibility for your own learning is usually a realistic assessment of weaknesses? These are desirable outcomes (I especially like the word ‘responsible’!) but I would question how measurable they really are, despite Costello’s suggestions.

Values

I reckon one outcome defies understanding (never mind measurement) – ‘Society, the economy and the environment benefit from a high quality and flexible work force with a wide range of skills, values and knowledge.’

Where do ‘values’ fit in? I get the feeling someone said, ‘Values are important, let’s get them in there

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somewhere.’ But is the work force to have a wide range of values? Do such values need to be coherent? And who is to say what good values are anyway?

RE

RE has also come up for review. In Northern Ireland RE is the responsibility of the four main Christian denominations (ie Church of Ireland, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Roman Catholic Church). As the review approached it was noticeable that newspapers began carrying letters from those arguing that religion should not be taught in schools. Contrary to all propaganda that insists that division in Northern Ireland is caused by religion, the RE curriculum is Bible-based and agreed across the ‘religious divide’ by church leaders and educationalists who work well together! It is a delight to report that NIACT’s response to the consultation document was designed to support the work that had been done.

Discipleship (again)

A final question: if everything was really up for review how might we reintroduce discipleship in practice? Answers, please, to the NIACT web site: www.niact.org.uk and click on forum.

■ Ian Kennedy, NIACT web master

