RELIGIOUS SCHOOLING AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE POOR

JEFF ASTLEY
North of England Institute for Christian Education

Abstract
Some brief comments are first offered on the research methodologies employed in William Jeynes’ paper. In the context of his identification of the advantages of church schools to students of low socioeconomic status, the contrast between the ideals of religious schooling and the realities of their context is then explored, with particular reference to the imperative of a preferential option for the poor and the concept of social capital. A broader argument in support of the ministry of such schools is rehearsed.

Key Words: religious schools, low socioeconomic student, school ministry

In response to Bill Jeynes’ paper on the impact of religious schools on the academic achievement of students of low socioeconomic status, I wish first to raise a few questions of methodology, before attempting some wider reflections on the context and implications of his interesting study.

1. Methodological Questions

(1) The author notes that his meta-analysis covered thirteen studies, and that some of these controlled for variables such as parental involvement whereas others did not. It is arguable that this disparity might have skewed the results somewhat.

(2) Both of the studies reported cover a range of religious schools. These might be expected to differ quite widely not only in educational ethos and policies, but also in such significant features as their criteria for admission.

(3) The data reported in the studies include those generated by various academic achievement measures, which are used to compare low-SES students in religious schools with those in public schools. It would, of course, be much more difficult to obtain information about the increase in achievement of these students during their school career over a fixed period of time, but this ‘value-added’ measure would be even more significant. (It would also help to address the doubt that part of the
reported effect could be an artefact of different modes of selection from the population of low socioeconomic status students at admission.)

2. WIDER IMPLICATIONS

In this study, Jeynes is following in the honourable tradition of James Coleman, Andrew Greeley and others, who discovered that religious schools – particularly Catholic schools – were remarkably effective academically for low income children from groups subject to discrimination. Such schools have been described by Joseph O’Keefe, however, as ‘academically successful but financially insolvent’ (O’Keefe 2003, p. 96). This claim reveals a significant tension that underlies the debate over the ‘success’ of religious schooling, between a successful realization of the schools’ ideals, on the one hand, and the economic (and economic-related) realities that such schools face, on the other.

Ideals

The ideals of religious schooling are much wider than academic success, and these wider considerations provide the context within which their academic success must be considered. For Christian schools, these ideals are contained in forms of ‘inspirational ideology’ (Bryk, Lee & Holland 1993, p. 301) that serve as expressions of gospel values. These include what have been described as the ‘gospel imperatives’ of service, justice and love, and (more specifically) as ‘a preferential option for the poor’. ‘Those who have the greatest need’, it has been said, have ‘the greatest claim on our resources’ (O’Keefe 2003, p. 97).

Such ideals have been articulated in some of the most powerful language that may be found in the whole literature of religious schooling. In Britain it was heard most clearly at the time of the explosion of new schools in the first part of the nineteenth century, when both Anglican and Free Churches spoke in terms of a provision of education ‘for the children of the poor and manufacturing classes’. Soon after the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England, the Catholic bishops added their voice, insisting on ‘the first necessity’ of ‘a sufficient provision of education, adequate to the wants of our poor’ (Arthur 1995, p. 15).

In our own day it has mainly been Catholics that have taken the lead in expressing this theme. Thus, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education described the Church as offering its educational service ‘first and foremost’