

RE Teaching: Inquiry and Knowing Truth Church Schools and IB: Issues and Challenges

This paper addresses the relationship between the International Baccalaureate (IB) qualification and Religious or Christian Education in church schools. These observations are a fairly informal and tentative attempt to clarify both differences and areas of congruence between these approaches to education and values, in the hope they will assist both busy practitioners as well as school leaders and policy-makers. Although not an expert in either field, I have been a keen observer of the IB and RE/CE during the last 10-15 years or so, firstly in a professional capacity as a chaplain and RE head in a church school, but also as a parent and aunt of children and teenagers who have either had religious education or undertaken the IB during their secondary schooling. However, it is my most recent professional experience as Director of the Presbyterian Church Schools Office in NZ that has propelled action in response to a need for greater clarity and informed discussion of the educational and theological issues at stake. In this role it has been interesting to see a number of church schools (Presbyterian or otherwise) around New Zealand, many of whom offer a joint track for their senior students.

I will not be giving data on the IB schools – how many or what student numbers and successes are -, but concentrating mainly on the issues underpinning delivery of the system and the perceived tension with Christian or faith education.

Nor will I be focusing on the ‘how’ questions or the ‘what’ questions in terms of details of syllabus or curriculum, the nuts and bolts of what different systems offer and the coherence between different topics. Rather, I’ll be asking the more foundational or ... questions.

The first issue we need to deal with is the slippery term, Values. Values education seems to cover a multitude of worthy subjects and topics, but it is notoriously difficult to tie down or define. This has been well-documented and debated so I will not repeat the arguments here, but will begin with an affirmation/question:

What Values are Christian?

“Ethos is the ghost in the machine in education. Everyone recognises it when they see it; parents want it; politicians regard it with awe, but how do you produce it? Most would agree that it's

the result of a common set of values articulated by the head and shared by staff, governors, pupils and parents. Get that communal consensus motivated around high aspirations, mutual respect and self-discipline, and you have a successful, well-ordered school... Both the secular and sacred "languages" underpinning the values of self-discipline and responsibility have been badly eroded. Secular humanism has not found a popular ethical narrative to replace faith." (Madeleine Bunting in Guardian 8/9/08)

Another issue relates to education.

Theology has been late coming to education. 1980s text. Thinkers like Lesslie Newbigin and Parker Palmer's ground-breaking texts in the 70s and 80s raised questions about the kind of thought/ world view our educational practice reflects: What do we think it is important to teach?

Flowing from this is the practical pedagogical question: How do we teach and learn? How do we know what we know?

'The way we teach depends on the way we think people know; we cannot amend our pedagogy until our epistemology is transformed.'

Xvii *To Know as We are Known*, Parker Palmer

Defn: 'To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.' Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, p99

'In my own teaching I find that the autonomy of the subject's voice grows as I move beyond 'looking at' the subject into personal dialogue with it... In this 'otherness' of the subject we are drawn out of our isolated knowing into the community of truth; we are drawn out of merely knowing into being known.' Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, p99

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Refs

A Christian Paideia: the Habitual Vision of Greatness D. Bruce Lockerbie (Purposeful Design Publications 2005) LC 621

-integrated curriculum; epistemology, biblical system of knowing.

Where is Knowing Going? The Horizons of the Knowing Subject

John C Haughey, SJ. Georgetown University Press, 2009

-theol, traditional and integrated Catholic understanding of knowledge.

Definition of IB.

Definition or aim of RE/RS.

How they conflict or relate.

1. Faith schools in the IB community

Presentation by Sue Austin

The IB Mission Statement

.....(The IB) “programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right”

The Learner Profile

IB learners strive to be:

Inquirers

Knowledgeable Thinkers Communicators Principled

Open- minded Caring Risk- takers

Balanced Reflective

She lists possible areas of concern:

Restrictions on extent of enquiry permissible (science, TOK)

★ Insistence on one correct line of thought ★ Reluctance to accept uncertainty ★ Exclusiveness; attitudes to non- believers ★ Fear of

offending teachers or parents Divergence of mission from IBO's

She cites someone from a faith school: “ Our people are perfectly ready to accept that everyone has different views and has the right to practise their religion in peace but may have difficulty teaching the children that other views may be correct”

Idea of 'unity': where from?

Must recognize cultural and ideological basis of IB theory of knowledge and
Quote from the Aga Khan

“I would (also) like to quote an infinitely more powerful statement about the unity of mankind, because it comes directly from the Holy Quran, and which I

would ask you to think about. The Holy Quran addresses itself not only to Muslims, but to the entirety of the human race, when it says:

“O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from one single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women.”
(Peterson lecture 2008)

Austin: the IB and Muslim Schools –

– Setup as deliberately non- religious, a- political organisation, in Western humanist tradition

- ★ Yet aim of intercultural understanding
- ★ Recognition that 2/3 of world’s population take their values from their religion

A 21st century version of faith schools in the UK

- ★ Academies: some sponsored by wealthy individuals with a strong faith background , claiming to reintroduce moral values to school life. But one sponsor, Oasis, claims to offer: “membership of a global movement, working to transform communities, based on a vision which is person-centred, inclusive, servant- minded...we believe that every person matters” (Steve Chalke, chairman of Oasis). Cited Austin but see Oasis website.

Challenges to the IB community

- ★ Welcoming students whose faith shapes their world
- ★ Acknowledging divergence of opinion, while retaining respect for freedom of expression and human rights
- ★ Encouraging dialogue
- ★ Fostering a spirit of enquiry and open- mindedness

WHAT IF FAITH SHAPES YOUR WORLD?

WHAT VALUES/PHILOSOPHY/FAITH SHAPE A CHURCH SCHOOL?

The idea of Unity and Church School IB students:

Penelope Maxwell, an IB graduate from SKC: “The Diploma is highly-regarded around the world because to attain it, young people must not only perform academically across a broad range of subjects, **they must also embrace a shared global philosophy**”. P 37 Piper 2012.

St Kentigern attempt to reconcile or deal with the divide between Christian Education and IB, in Piper p 36 John Andrews.

-Yr 13 CE and intensive for IB students: is ‘an intensive Xn Education course **which complements their ongoing TOK course. Both courses are primarily discussion based and have a similar aim**

in that they seek to prepare and equip young people to interface with the world after they leave the constraints and special nature (? What is this referring to?) of the College community'

-Yr 12: enc students to **explore foundational principles of Xn life**; Yr 12 TOK is 'an epistemology course of interdisc study that allows students to **build upon their own exp** and enables them to **explore** the values of curiosity, thoughtful enquiry and critical thought.' The course is designed to develop a **coherent approach to learning that transcends cultural perspectives...** The TOK course enc students to **reflec on the huge cultural shifts worldwide ... whose implications for knowledge are profound**'.

TOK: looks at diverse ways of knowing and diff areas of knowledge. 'In this process, students' thinking and their understanding of knowledge as a human construction are sharpened, enriched and deepened'. Chall students to think critically about knowledge itself. -refl on their role as a knower; question how they know. What is the value of knowledge? How grow? Its limits? Who owns it? Etc.

Conclusion: 'In reality, perhaps there is no gap between Christian Education and TOK'

Examine the IB and this claim. This goes against considerable evidence and there seems little warrant to be advocating no such coherence/compatibility.

How do we teach and learn? How do we know what we know?

To Know as We are Known, Parker Palmer

Defn: 'To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.'

P40 What we learn from the desert communities:

-our education must stand apart from the modern alliance of knowledge and power;
-founders of Western tradition of contemplative prayer. From their solitary quest came monastic communities and ultimately the universities BUT they were devoted to the kind of knowing

humankind lost in the Fall, a knowing grounded in the love with which we are known. To overcome the arrogance of the mind that would be God, we could learn from the desert experience.

- used/learnt from silence, learn to humble language and break down the illusion we can create reality with words. Words are a gift of grace.
- re-learn obedience. Comes from Latin *audire*, to listen. Takes discernment, a listening that allows the hearer to respond to that reality.
- re-learn conception of truth as *troth* which connotes/involves a relationship of trust. Truth is evoked from the teacher by the obedience of those who listen and learn.

Education: from *educare*, to 'draw out'. P 43 To evoke truth. But pragmatic teaching and learning (for grades) is mercenary. It does not evoke/draw out truth. 'mercenary students will draw mercenary teaching upon themselves'.

IB does this encourage learning? Evoking of truth?

- re-learn link between truth/learning and practice.

Inquiry learning:

- Heidegger: questioning is the piety of thinking.

If a classroom is to enable practice of the 'rule of truth' has two challenges:

- reducing truth to private perceptions interpretations and feelings;
- reducing truth to a body of information that is transmitted.

If teaching /learning truth, it must have some equivalence to rules of scientific enquiry; must embrace the rules of logic and evidence.

Saves the best of objectivity and the best of subjectivity.

Palmer proposes the rule of truth in teaching which 'can order our inquiries and bring us all, knowers and knowns, into mutually obedient relationships of troth.' P 89

Leslie Derart: truth is related to obedience: BUT it is a fidelity rather than a conformity.

'Conformity is a relation to another by reason of the other's nature; fidelity is a relation towards another which one owes to

oneself by reason of one's own nature. Conformity obligates from the outside. Fidelity... obligates from within.' Cited p 90

In Xn teaching: we must always be aware of the other's nature, but that is not the final arbiter of our response. We must respond to the other not in conformity to what he/she wants or says, but in fidelity or obedience to the truth within us.

As RE teacher: we must allow the other to speak back to us in fidelity to their truth, not conformity to what we want to hear.

'The truth we are seeking, the truth that seeks us, lies ultimately in the community of being where we not only know but are known.' 90

-ie, it is not focused on the independent individual.

This means checking and criticizing and clarifying our communal relationships. It is a quest for truth; this is opened up in the process of the dialogue between us.

'As the dialogue goes on, a larger truth is revealed, a truth that is not only within us but *between* us'. P90

Education/learning: our created, inner nature calls us into obedient relationship with each other and all that we know. This produces genuine community. **It can only grow as our inward response finds outward manifestation in relationships of dialogue and truth.** P91

Me: several Responses/applications/Developments

1. suggest Bakhtin's idea of 'author-ity' is appropriate here. Dialogic communication between others. Possibility of God as Author. Genuine dialogue is polyphonic.
2. Jesus' methods with parables; invites others in and to respond, genuine dialogue.
3. MacDonald on education
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Telling the Truth'.

But there are ambiguities, explored by Bonhoeffer in the example of the child asked if his father comes home drunk. BUT what answer is more in accordance with reality?

I have observed questions like this in RE classes.

The questions we ask students '**must take into account the larger community of truth in which they live their lives... the relationships of truth ...present in the classroom**'. These must be sensed and respected.

What kind of classroom are we creating? Is it one in which students are ever trapped into agreeing with something or forced into taking something which doesn't belong there?

But, the learning process cannot be fully separated from the students' lives. Watch a schizophrenic track in which knowing runs on one track and living on another.

We need to understand that 'obedience is not a mechanical kind of truth-telling but a sensitive process of feeling for the truth that exists between students and teacher, our subject and our world.'

Some pedagogies serve this purpose better than others.

1. Learning by Consensus (eg: work together to rank items to take to the moon).

By consensual inquiry people learn together and come up with a more effective response/solution to the problem if they listen to each other and apply the knowledge they have to the problem. This reflects the communal nature of reality itself.

Has allowance for creative conflict; no room for either objective authoritarianism or subjective relativism but reflects the complexities of community of truth. Works better with people comfortable with each other and a hospitable learning space. Otherwise, the conflict threatens the group's already flimsy interpersonal structure.

'Consensus is not a democracy of opinion .. it is a process of inquiry in which the truth that emerges through listening and responding to each other and the subject at hand is more likely to transcend collective opinion than fall prey to it.' 97
Individual truth is both affirmed and corrected by the communal process. But need to have rules for consensus seeking p 97

2. The Voice of the Subject p98

There are three parties: the teacher, the student/s, the subject itself. How do we listen to the subject? How do we allow it to have a voice of its own, to speak its own truth and resist our tendency to reduce it to our own terms?

This partly happens as we listen to others – opens the subject up to us. Attentive listening to others.

How listen to what the subject is saying beyond our interpretations?

Listening to the divine Subject: in RE?

P 99 'In my own teaching I find that the autonomy of the subject's voice grows as I move beyond 'looking at' the subject into personal dialogue with it... In this 'otherness' of the subject we are drawn out of our isolated knowing into the community of truth; we are drawn out of merely knowing into being known.'

- interacting with and learning about the subject allows the objectivity and otherness of (that)reality to check and correct our private perceptions of the subject.

Eg: the knowledge of God; beliefs in the existence of God. Approaches to this in RE too readily assume God is not a subject. They begin with human questions, and in a sense end there. I have not seen a text or lesson that really allows the divine subject to speak but almost bases on the fact of human questions and knowing. In this case, the subject cannot speak for itself. If there is no real community with the subject, the students arguably, cannot learn from it/God.

Can we allow God to speak?

Similarly with a poem/novel/ the Bible:

'A verbal creation is not meant merely to be viewed. It has a voice, not only the voice of its creator but the voice of the creation itself, a voice that can be interviewed. So let us bring students into conversation with these voices.' P 100

BUT I would advocate the conversation sometimes is diverted along the lines set by the teacher who intervenes in dialogue with the Bible.

-Take for example the creation story and the 'questions' the children came up with cited in *RE Today*. I would be surprised if that were, in fact, the genuine dialogue between children and the text.

-On the other hand, an approach in which the questions are set by the teacher and the children fill in the blanks forecloses any real engagement with the text as well, perhaps in an opposite direction.

Similarly the pretense at inquiry learning in senior RE at not open enquiry at all.

But, Palmer does advocate letting the students put words into the poem's mouth, as it were: let them put their dialogue to it, *allow them to make it say what is not there*.

Is this what Jesus did in allowing his listeners to interpret the parables or the meaning of his actions or other events?

Yes, but then '*ask them to listen for a counter response*' from the text itself.

'Our ultimate aim in practicing obedience to truth is to allow the (text) to speak of its own integrity, its own personhood'. P 101

Carol Bly's words on Mozart are apt:

'Remember we are not now talking about you or yourself. We are talking about someone *other*... and he is making a demand on us, and we are going to meet that demand'.

Paradoxically, as we listen obediently to the voice of the other, our own speech becomes clearer and more honest; through the other we learn much about ourselves. [How so if we are listening to the Other who made us and gave our 'self', our life and very being, and who calls us to become fully alive and fully human and flourishing?]

We can help students enter into relationship with the 'third party', the subject, not only in lecturing and discussion but also in their private and silent study.

Is Christianity a subject? Yes and no.

Xty is not centred around moral teaching (nor rational knowledge?), but around a person... The Scripture is the normal way of introducing us gradually to the knowledge and love of this person.'

This is similar approach to Hasidic Jewish reading of Talmud of Abraham Joshua Heschel: 'Torah study is a way of coming into the presence of God'.

This approach adds personality dimension to the study of Talmud, considering sages cited by name and seeking communion with them.

'Thus it was maintained that, while learning 'Abbaye said' or 'Rava said' one should see Abbaye and Rava (as well as understand their utterance). One had to live with them, to enter their minds and souls, not just to grasp their thoughts'. Cited p 102

Also quote Muslim way of knowing.

Could dialogue on paper, students put thoughts down.
Take dialogue outside ourselves.

There is a place for memorization. *Re-member* = to bring separated parts of community back together.

'When we forget truth we dismember the relationship between us and the rest of reality, between us and the knowledge we need to take our part in the community of truth... We can call upon memory to introduce third parties and... to invoke voices too distant in time or space to speak easily for themselves. By teaching students to re-member, and by inviting those memories into the classroom conversation, we recover the presence of the third party'.

P103

Learning and Hospitality:

This is the hospitality of the teacher with a faithful friendship with the subject and who wants students to benefit from that friendship.

But, introduce it as a friend and be open to the friendship between the subject and the student: students may transform the teacher's relationship with the subject as well as be transformed themselves.

The teacher who loves a subject must not force that love on the students: stretch and test it, invite negation as well as affirmation, argument as well as assent.

This is not possession: do we love our subject so much we protect it? **Do we require our students to accept the subject on our terms? Are they, even in subtle ways, discouraged, even forbidden from assessing the subject and finding their own relation to it?** P105 If so, the teacher's enthusiasm is not an invitation but a *demand*; the teacher's relationship to the subject is what dominates the dialogue and sets the terms of engagement with it.

'Here, truth is mistakenly thought to reside in the teacher's personal relation to the subject, and not in the widening network of relationships the community of truth requires'.
P 105

(note: this might apply to a liberal reading as much as an evangelical reading of scripture or theology)

The problem arises, of course, when we are fearful and insecure about our love, about our relationship with the other. We do not want that bond challenged or threatened. If we are possessive of our subject the students are denied the chance to relate to it on their own terms. They are denied the opportunity to practice obedience to truth, to forge a personal bond of truth with the subject and its world. The problem is in the teacher... grounded in their insecurities and fears. The solution is for them to pay attention to their own spiritual formation.

To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced'. In order to do that, we must open a space for truth within ourselves.

Summary issues arising:

- Western humanist basis of what is 'unity', knowledge, truth;
Wright article: how do we 'reconcile' mutually exclusive accounts of the ultimate order-of-things?
- vs Eastern values. Cite Walker;
- How we know; what is knowledge. Faith as a way of knowing. Statistics that 2.3 world centre their lives on religious knowing.
- Individual vs community. 'truth' related to 'troth'. Inquiry and discovery within that not opposed to it.
- God as other; Subject who relates to us.

What the church can/should bring to this conversation.

Theology and/of Education.

John M. Hull 'What is theology of education?' paper in 1980s, published in *Christian Perspectives for Education: a reader in the theology of education*. Edited by Leslie Francis and Adrian Thatcher (Fowler Wright Books, UK: 1990)

Bloxham Project Paper 41 extract (summary of 2008 conference):

'What this section ... made very clear was the range of education-related (rather than simply school-related) thinking going on at Church House, an indication of a real, developmental shift from a preoccupation with the Church's institutional stake in education to a concern with what the Church should be doing in the schools within its sphere of governance.' – John Caperon