

0212

Theorising religion and education in faith-based academies

Elizabeth Green

Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, United Kingdom

Background

1. Overview

Faith-based education is a front line issue in the United Kingdom. This paper argues that empirical research carried out in faith-based Academies requires an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of the impact of a theological worldview upon educational culture in these settings. Such a framework needs to avoid the current polarisations of the faith school debate first, by treating as authentic expressions of religious faith and culture found in faith-based educational settings and second, by critically examining theological assumptions particularly as they interact with institutional structures and student culture.

Research Questions

2. The contribution of a theoretical framework

This paper proposes an emergent theoretical framework informed by perspectives from Bourdieu and developed from the first ethnographic study of a City Technology College (CTC) and two Academies sponsored by a non-denominational Christian foundation. The main research questions investigated were: how does the Bible-based ethos show itself in the social and academic experiences of the pupils and staff and what are the aims of the College and how do staff and pupils experience them in practice? The study found that a faith-based ethos may not have much impact upon student culture. This suggests that institutional structures and practices mediate against the intended theological aims of faith-based sponsors. This is significant because faith-schools justify their mission in these terms and government policy is committed to their expansion. A theoretical framework for further analysis would benefit empirical research in faith-based academies and create opportunities for such organisations to engage with competing understandings of religious knowledge and culture in order to explore how students and the wider society interact with their theological assumptions.

Methods

3. Research methods and literature

This research was submitted for a doctorate at Oxford University (awarded September 2009). Data for the study was collected between January and June 2007 via ethnographic observation of formal and informal settings and a series of in-depth interviews. Typically the researcher was on site five days a week for the entire school day and also attended after school events and meetings during evenings and weekends.

The lack of empirical research into faith-based education together with the lack of clarity surrounding theoretical approaches has been well documented (Green, 2009a). Empirical research in Academies is in its infancy due in part to issues of access and to the fact that many have only come on stream in the last two to three years. According to Curtis (2009) 51 of the 133 Academies open in the academic year 2008/9 were sponsored either solely or in part by Christian faith-based organisations. Woods et al (2009) propose a typology of entrepreneurialism drawn on their empirical work in a non-faith-based Academy, but this author is not aware of any other published work proposing a theoretical framework for studying faith-based Academies drawn from empirical research.

Frameworks for studying cultural reproduction using Bourdieu's theoretical tools have been widely applied to the study of gender and to class in educational settings (Reay, 2004). Outside of the context of education, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital and symbolic power have also been successfully applied to the study of religion and culture (Rey, 2004). These concepts are not without their critics who argue that Bourdieu's perspectives are reductionist and tend towards the economic and conflictual. A key outcome of the doctoral study, therefore, was the development of a theoretical framework utilising Bourdieu's concepts to reach a more nuanced analysis of the impact of a particular theological worldview in its own setting.

Frame

4. Findings and theoretical framework

The framework employed in the doctoral research and set out in this paper is based upon a dual reading of the cultural arbitrary in Bourdieu's work proposed by Moore (2004) and utilised by Beck (2007). Moore's (2004) argument will be summarised in this paper. Beck (2007) contends that Moore's reading provides a basis for educational research which does not assume by default that 'all cultural variations and priorities are always little more than camouflage for positional struggles' (p.50). The research found that key theological beliefs stemming from a reformed Protestant Christian worldview functioned as a habitus for the sponsors and senior staff of the CTC and Academies (Green, 2009b). It is a key assumption of this framework that the religious habitus together with its attendant hierarchies and valued practices must be analysed and understood in terms of their relationship to the lived and local experiences of the research participants. Another key assumption of the framework is that the relationship between ethnographic methodology, research questions, theory and analysis should be iterative. This relationship will be explored in the paper as the theoretical framework and its application are outlined in relation to findings of the empirical research. This paper will, therefore, set out how Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital and symbolic power were used as theoretical tools to illuminate and critically analyse the assumptions of the religious faith of the CTC/Academy sponsors together with their appropriation or re-appropriation within the student culture. The paper will provide examples of how these tools were used to examine the relationship of the religious habitus to institutional structures and the practices and identities of students and staff.