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Reading Religious Ethos: The Responses of Fourteen-Year-Olds to School Culture Sponsored by the Emmanuel Schools Foundation

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Background

In this paper I suggest that we need to become better 'readers' of religious ethos and culture in schools because this can be influential upon both individual students' beliefs and values. Previous work on reading, citizenship and ethics is synthesized and a new approach to evaluating school culture, which draws upon hermeneutics and literary theory, is proposed. This is applied in an evaluation of a particular UK schooling context although it will have implications for other types of schooling elsewhere.

Research Questions

How can we research and interpret religious ethos in schools? Far-reaching claims are made on behalf of 'ethos' as it is often thought that children learn how to live (rather than simply acquiring knowledge and skills) through its influence. In the UK, where a third of the school-going population attends church schools and where a third of the new academies are sponsored by Christian organizations it is especially important to consider the claims made for a 'Christian' ethos. One of the problems in assessing such claims is that 'Christian ethos' can vary quite dramatically. Some school leaders or school policies may seek to make the connection between their values or aims and the Christian ethos while in others this linkage is much more tenuous. If readings of Christian-ethos schools tend to be polarized, interpretations of Christian-ethos Academies in England are often even more starkly so.

Methods

Although people often comment on the 'atmosphere' or 'feel' of a school and even the 'spirit of the school' (Stern, 2009) but we need to know how this relates to the religious beliefs and values of students and school leaders. Solvason (2005) eschews the term 'ethos' and prefers school 'culture', Donnelly (2000) doubts whether ethos exists, in an intentional sense, and Murray (2000) points out that ethos is not to be confused with school mission statements or aims. The research drawn upon in this article is strongly influenced by McLaughlin's (2005) view that we can distinguish between 'intended ethos' and 'experienced ethos'. Analysis of findings from observations, transcripts of focus groups with students, and anonymous surveys of all 543 14-year-olds (Year 9) and all 311 staff, in the first three schools sponsored by the Emmanuel Schools Foundation, are reported here. Drawing upon this data, an assessment is made of the relation between the authorial intentions of the sponsor and school leaders, and of readers' responses, the ethos experienced by students.

Frame

Put simply, the suggestion is made here that evaluating school ethos can be compared to evaluating a literary work. A school has central characters, the main protagonists, and also dominant or recurring themes. Much is implicit, hidden in the sub-text and inferred rather than explicitly and clearly stated. Most importantly, perhaps, just as one cannot adequately evaluate the tone or tenor of a literary work without attending to the mood it evokes in an audience, for works are often judged by the quality and intensity of the effect they have upon readers. Applied reader response theory, the broad range of perspectives that privileges 'readers' rather than 'authors', in educational contexts, is therefore drawn upon here as it offers the conceptual tools needed to augment our understanding of the relationship between those who 'author' the 'authorized texts' (aims, core values, honour codes, ethos statements etc) of school life and the young people who 'read' and respond to those 'texts' (Pike, 2009). As 'the

convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence' (Iser, 1980, p. 50) I want to suggest that the transaction between aims and responses constitute the ethos of the school, which can be 'read' by researchers.

Research findings

The evidence indicates that there is a high degree of congruence between the ethos as intended by the Emmanuel Schools Foundation and the ethos as experienced by young people attending its schools. It should not be inferred, however, that the values of any sponsor should be adopted in schools any more than the values of any private individual should be. The values of the Emmanuel Schools Foundation do, however, support the development of good character as well as academic success and are subscribed to and endorsed by secular and religious students and teachers who describe different sources for the same values. Yet the ESF has evoked polarized readings and reader response theory helps us to appreciate that the beliefs, values and attitudes of the reader, his or her social location and ideology, as well as past experience, can influence response to ethos as a 'text'. Those who oppose the private sponsorship of schools may be ideologically disposed to disapprove of the ESF, others who believe private sector involvement in state-maintained schooling can be beneficial. Those who believe state-maintained schooling should be exclusively secular, are unlikely to approve of schools with a Christian ethos or religious character of any sort while others who believe a Christian ethos can underpin whole school values (such as humility, compassion and integrity), which are widely subscribed to and endorsed by all citizens in a politically liberal society, may be more favourably disposed to schools with a Christian ethos. It is important for those living in what appears to be becoming an increasingly religiously illiterate society, to 'read' any religious ethos with sufficient discrimination.

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