

Forum for Change: Education Cluster

Brief Introduction to the Sector

Education shapes the life of a nation. Through our education, we acquire the skills and knowledge that equip us for employment; but, far more importantly, we also acquire the values, attitudes and beliefs that shape the persons we become.

Homes and churches are foundational educational places, but the majority of formal education happens in institutions such as school, college and university. Children and young people spend a significant proportion of their day in these institutions. The curriculum and ethos are set by the government, governors and teaching staff. The challenge is for Christians to contribute to transforming what happens in these institutions so that everyone flourishes through experiencing a gospel-shaped education.

More Extended Introduction

“Teaching has not taken place until someone has learnt something.” This apparently obvious observation is actually incredibly profound but easily forgotten.

- In schools, promotion for teachers used to be linked to becoming a manager and often meant less contact with pupils and more administration. Today being promoted means taking responsibility for improving pupils’ learning in particular subjects; and you have to demonstrate how that is happening.
- Universities used to be the place to work if your passion in life was research. Teaching, or lecturing as most called it, was a necessary evil. Today, lecturers are required to know about how students learn and to teach accordingly (although research is also still very important).

The job of teachers and lecturers is to create a place where learning can flourish. Two examples of recent initiatives which reflect this emphasis are:

Assessment for Learning: an approach to assessing students that isn’t content to ask simply “what has the student scored?”, but also asks, “how has the student learnt through this process of being assessed?”

Every Child Matters: a government initiative in England that focuses on the whole well-being of the child in recognition that learning only happens if children are flourishing. Schools are now inspected against the criteria developed through this initiative. See www.everychildmatters.gov.uk.

To be a disciple is to be a learner. Jesus gathered disciples around him with the sole aim of helping them to learn what it means to be Kingdom of God people. An important goal for Christians involved in education is to ask “how can we carry out our duties in such a way that the pupils and students we work with experience a Kingdom education?” To seek this is to seek transformation by the Gospel.

Big Questions

The big underlying question that should concern all Christians is the relationship between faith and learning. Modern Britain is a plural society, meaning that questions of religious faith are often controversial. There are significant numbers of people committed to the so-called minority religions; a larger, although still small, percentage of active Christians; and many others who don't much care for religion and who, between them, think that it is the root of all evil. Many believe that a generalised spirituality is the way forward or even that the only thing that really matters is the pursuit of self-interest.

In this climate, some of the issues in education that Christians should care about are:

1. Is faith significant in learning? Or is the point of education to produce humans who are good citizens irrespective of their own personal (and private) faith commitment?
2. What is the distinctive contribution that Christians can make to promoting human flourishing through education?
3. How is learning to be organised if Christian faith is to be taken seriously. Are faith schools a good idea or is it better to educate people from different faith communities together?
4. Can meaningful acts of Christian worship be run in schools?
5. What contribution can education make to combating the toxic features of modern childhood? How can Christians contribute to the *Every Child Matters* agenda?
6. How should Christians respond to the teaching of controversial issues in education such as creationism, multiculturalism and gay lifestyles?

Working in the Sector

Teaching is a rewarding and worthwhile career. It is an opportunity to transform lives. In a survey of a number of professions, teaching emerged as the least boring career, with every day being varied. It is an opportunity to work with exciting and interesting people.

“My friend and I were both exploring what God was calling us to now that our children had reached the age of some independence. We prayed, talked and studied together. God spoke to us both. I applied to train as a teacher and she applied to study theology with a view to church-based ministry. Our courses both began on the same day. The Sunday before, one of us was prayed for and commissioned by the church during the morning service. It wasn't me”

In many churches' eyes the most important form of Christian ministry is so-called “full-time work for the Church”.

There are three main challenges facing Christians working in education.

- The **first challenge** for Christian teachers is when your vocation to teach is not recognised by their church.

- This leaves you on your own when facing the **second challenge**; the pressure to leave your faith at home. Religious faith may be seen as irrational at best, or sectarian at worst by those around you. They will remind you of what happened in Northern Ireland when schools and religion were mixed. There is pressure for schools and universities to be neutral (i.e. unbiased) and inclusive (i.e. open to people of all faiths and none). Many people think that you achieve this by keeping religion out of education. Teachers with a known religious commitment can therefore be suspect. Being a loyal follower of Christ in such circumstances is demanding.
- The **third challenge** Christian teachers experience is the pressure of the daily stresses experienced by every teacher. These include:
 - The physical and emotional demands of being in charge of large groups of children and young people for several hours a day.
 - The relentless pace of change.
 - The poor behaviour of a minority of pupils that is very wearing.
 - It is hard to switch off. There is always another lesson to prepare.
 - The paperwork

Churches can make a significant contribution to transforming education by adopting a policy of targeted support for Christian teachers. This could include:

- Setting up prayer support networks
- Arranging mentors
- Providing opportunities for teachers and others to discuss how they can live out their faith in their profession.

For further ideas see www.transforminglives.org.uk.

Issues Facing Consumers

The main “consumers” of education are parents (paying the bills) and students (using the product). In addition to all the usual questions that a consumer would want to ask about the “product” of education, Christians will want to make judgments on some or all of the following:

Schools

1. Are pupils from Christian backgrounds made to feel welcome in the way the school deals with religion?
2. Are there Christians on the staff who will nurture the faith of Christian pupils?
3. Is RE a high status subject?
4. Is there a voluntary Christian club?
5. Are controversial issues, e.g. health and relationships education, taught in a way that would mean that pupils expressing a Christian view would feel affirmed?

6. Is there a programme of meaningful assemblies?
7. Does the school emphasise the importance of spiritual and moral values and the importance of the development of the pupil? Or is it over-concerned with its exam results and performance in league tables?
8. Does the school recognise the important place of religion in today's world?

Universities and Colleges

1. Will the course leaders deal sympathetically with a Christian who wants to approach their studies from the perspective of a Christian worldview?
2. Is there a strong Christian community into which a student can integrate e.g. a Christian Union, a chaplaincy, active student churches etc?
3. Is there a healthy culture of debate and discussion of spiritual and moral issues?
4. Is there a sense in which the university or college cares about the personal welfare of its students? Or is there a very impersonal atmosphere?

Resources

ACTNow is a termly magazine published by the Association of Christian Teachers. Further information from www.christian-teachers.org.

The Journal of Education and Christian Belief is an academic, peer-reviewed journal devoted to exploring the interaction between Christianity and education. See www.jecb.org.

The Bible and the Task of Teaching by David Smith and John Shortt is a consideration of how the Bible operates as an authority for teachers. It examines different ways in which the Bible can shape a teacher's work. Available from www.stapleford-centre.org.

There are numerous resources of ideas for the classroom and assembly available from **The Stapleford Centre** [www.stapleford-centre.org]. See particularly the **REThinking series**, which gives a rigorous but easily digestible overview of important topics for anyone wanting to understand contemporary Religious Education.

SMSC Online [<http://www.smsc.org.uk/>] is an invaluable source of information for resources on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Transforming Lives [www.transforminglives.org.uk] is a comprehensive website for Christians interested in teaching. Visit this for more information on resources.

Links

Association of Christian Teachers [www.christian-teachers.org] is the professional membership organisation for Christian teachers which publishes the magazine ACTNOW and pamphlets and leaflets.

The National Society [www.natsoc.org.uk] is the education branch of the Church of England and is the first stop for information on Anglican schools.

The Stapleford Centre [www.stapleford-centre.org] offers professional training for Christian teachers through one-day courses, conferences and university-validated degrees. It also publishes and distributes a wide range of classroom resources for RE and other subjects as well as general literature on education.

The Independent Schools Christian Alliance [link to www.tisca.info] is a support network for Christians working in independent schools.

Transforming Lives [www.transforminglives.org.uk] is a comprehensive website for Christians interested in teaching. Visit this for more information on training to teach, being a Christian teacher or supporting teachers.

Short Introduction to Cluster Host

Trevor Cooling is Director of the *Transforming Lives* Project (www.transforminglives.org.uk), a Jerusalem Trust initiative based at the Stapleford Centre that promotes teaching as a Christian vocation. Trevor has worked in education for over thirty years as a secondary school teacher of science and RE, the Director of The Stapleford Centre, a Principal Lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire and the Secondary Adviser for the Diocese of Gloucester. He has written many books and articles on Christian education and has a PhD in Religious Education from the University of Birmingham. He is married to Margaret who has written many books for school RE. They have two sons, a foster-daughter and five grandchildren.