

BOOK REVIEWS

New perspectives on Anglican education: Reconsidering purpose and plotting new directions

Cairney, T., Cowling, B. and Jensen, M. (2011).
Sydney: Anglican Education Commission

Phil Fitzsimmons

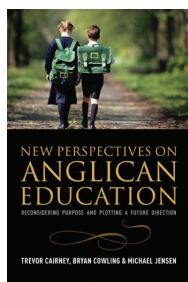
Associate Professor, Faculty of Education and Science, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW

Arising out of Archbishop Peter Jensen's challenge to a group of Anglican educators collectively called the Anglican Education Fellowship (hereafter termed AEF) to produce a book that begins to answer the question, 'What is Anglican Education?' this ninety-nine-page paperback could easily have been entitled 'What is Christian Education?', or 'What is Australian Education?' While relatively short in length, it packs a significant educational punch in that it forces the reader to confront the most basic of praxes linkages, that of conjoining personal ideology, knowledge and practice through deep reflection. However, it also seeks to make these connections at the systemic level. In a time of systemic flux within the Australian educational context as a whole, and the specific discussions concurrently being undertaken by academics, school administrators and teachers in regard to values, identity and connectedness Cairney, Cowling and Jensen's (2011) book is both refreshingly timely, honest and educationally poignant.

While obviously focussing on Anglican education, as indicated each of the five chapters opens critically reflective doors for focussed discussion for both Christian educators and those engaged in government systems. It should be noted that the primary aim of the text is to only encapsulate the driving questions and forces that commenced the AEF discussions, and does not seek to provide full and explicit answers. However, this book is one of those rare compendiums of thought that compresses

the initial processes necessary for a particular organisation to redefine itself through a balanced sense of meaning-making, while simultaneously engendering a platform that 'telescopically' offers positive potential directions for an entire array of educational systems at local and national levels. While having a prime focus on how this book relates to Christian education, this review will also touch briefly on where this text intersects with secular education. In line with the underpinning ideology of the text and the process which brought it to 'print life', these comments will be in the same modality of reflective questioning that are strategically placed in each chapter of this book. It should be noted that these points are the ones that personally challenged me, and that there are so many pivotal needs and issues pointed out in each chapter that it is impossible to cover each in the brief of a book review.

Cairney and Dowling's initial chapter is an important springboard for the ensuing chapters. As they focus on 'understanding the what, why and how of education' they not only summarise the central questions of who is education for and what schools should be about but also commence the discussion on a raft of key points including the contested area of 'values'. Through brief links other critically related issues are also dealt with, such as what motivates individuals, the facets that are privileged in education, the possible role of faith in teaching and the links between these issues and a Bible based curriculum. Interesting, but albeit far too short references are also made to notions of connecting interdisciplinary facets of excellence to education, humanities innate desire to learn and the role of the Christian teacher. As they briefly bounce amongst these points, these authors are also refreshingly honest in that they note that the Bible offers "little direct reference to education." Indeed, they are also candid when they comment that there is "difficulty in finding Biblical guidance for many of the questions" that guided the AEF group. This point alone makes this text a stand-out document in a theological publishing world containing Christian texts purporting to be the crystallisation of Biblical truth and definitive direction. This facet alone could, or perhaps



should be the reflective capstone element for all Christian educators and their students. In responding to this challenge in the final pages of this chapter there are numerous components that could form discrete book chapters themselves. However, to summarise several key pages, I found their contention that Christian education should be restorative, transformative and based on dialogical relationships is applicable to all classrooms and education systems. In a time of universal application of the axiom “if you can’t measure it its not valuable” this book as a whole challenges this reductionist and economic rationalist position, and asks educators at all levels and in all systems to extend the restorative-transformative connection by asking the rudimentary questions, “What is spirituality?” and “Where does it fit in education?”

Bryan Cowling’s second chapter circles back to the notion of foundational elements by clearly grounding the inception of the New South Wales education system within an Anglican organisational framework. Again, following the threads of critical appraisal developed in the previous chapter, Cowling notes that this system was deeply rooted in diversity, which is couched as a positive force. Through a carefully crafted set of ‘frames’, the concept of diversity as a whole is then discussed in regard to how it has worked its way within Australian society in regard to employment, ethnicity, multiple realities and as an anti-religious worldview. While Cowling comments that diversity as a national meta-narrative could lead to the possible fragmentation and dissipation of Anglican education, this chapter contends that confronting this concept is vital as a component of identity formation. On a wider scale the actual place of religious education within the Australasian socio-cultural framework needs to be dealt with through honest and robust discussion. He ends with the reoccurring theme that to exist in a society underpinned by diversity, and still be relevant in today’s society, education systems need to be personally and collectively transformative. I was left wondering how this could occur. Cowling’s comment that “questions big and small are the stuff of education” left me wondering if our schools have tended towards becoming factories where administrators, staff and students

have become ‘replicators’ of a fictional past or a false present, instead of taking on board new research related to learning so as to generate a relevant future?

In many ways chapters three to five continue to focus on the challenges of the first two, taking up the more practical but still deeper issues of the nature of the fallen human condition and how this nature as learner relates to the Creator-Redeemer. The possible centrality of a soteriological, Christological and genuinely Bible-centred approach to teaching, form the core elements of these last chapters. Embedded within are numerous reflective caveats not the least of which are the imperatives that such a learning system should be one in which values are not ‘watered down’, the concept of learning as community is a fundamental given, and an integral component of all aspects of the system is transformation. An interesting and cutting-edge line of thought in these sections, is the concept that the process of narrative as a fundamental human and Biblically based approach is the optimal platform for learning that could meld these together. This concept of narrative as an ideal approach is in my opinion a critical aspect worthy of much more focussed consideration by all educators. The critical question remains as to what could this look like as a meta-narrative and in all aspects of the education spheres?

This text is designed to challenge the status quo of one organisation. System priorities might preclude every key facet being included. As I see it, several key elements have been somewhat glossed over. These include the concept of socio-emotional learning, the nature of spirituality and the notion of what constitutes a genuine learning community. Notwithstanding these personal reactions, this text is ahead of the educational thought and practices of Christian education systems and is a ‘must read’ for all those involved in these organisations. As I have clearly indicated this text is also a critical reflective read for non-Christian systems, and in particular Jensen’s final words in chapter three in which he notes the “tendency of institutions to become morally complacent.” Is this a key problem for Australia and all of its educational institutions? [TEACH](#)