



Education for Wellbeing: A Missionary Reservation by Brendan Carmody

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Opinion

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Early Experiences in Ireland

I grew up in rural Ireland during the 1950s. After primary school, I attended boarding school. Obtaining a secondary education was, at that time, a luxury afforded to only a small number of children in Ireland.

This secondary schooling was traditionally Catholic with daily mass which was conducted in Latin and religion was taught as a core, but non-examinable subject. The focus was on assimilating information by rote rather than achieving deeper understanding, and for many of the pupils, 'our eyes were focused, but our minds were elsewhere'.

The Calling to a Life of Service

During my teenage years, I chose to live my life in service to others – a drive that was no doubt attributable at least in part to my religious upbringing. And so, at the age of 18, despite the challenges and personal sacrifices, I decided to become a Jesuit priest.

When it was time to make a major decision of where I wanted to work, study of economics fuelled an interest in the development of less prosperous regions. Further encouraged by my reading of social reformer and educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin 1996), I was drawn to missionary life. This was an opportunity to in church missionary work which included empowering people to achieve a better standard of life.

Becoming a Teacher

In 1972, I arrived in Zambia and became a teacher at Canisius College, Chisekesi – a school of around 700 boys and teachers from Ireland, England, the Philippines, India and Holland. Here, I recall being faced with the difficulty of

'making classroom learning come alive' in the context of an educational approach inherently based on capitalism. As a newly independent republic, Zambia was quickly embracing the belief that education and learning would be key to mobility and progression in life.

Alongside the development in educational practice, I observed that the school's focus moved over time to lean heavily on the natural sciences. The teaching of religion became primarily educational rather than catechetical, meaning that it was no longer a faith-based, spiritual formation.

While it makes sense to prepare upcoming generations for work, my concern pivoted upon the fact that such an education in itself would fail to prepare young minds to think independently. What was a challenge was how to move from a traditional worldview in a way that enriched rather than diminished people.

What is Education?

This spurred me to examine my beliefs on what education might be. Within the shift from spiritual development was the move to teach religion pluralistically, in which denominational approaches – such as Catholicism – were no longer the norm. Interdenominational, non-confessional, approaches had come to the fore.

Although this served a purpose, I wanted to achieve more than 'learning about' religion through the assimilation of facts and superficial evaluation, and move towards a 'learning from' mode of education. where teachers ought to be transformative intellectuals which is to say that they help to challenge social, economic and political inequalities.

Looking Back to Move Forward

The marginalization of religion, the absence of personal formation and too little concern with wellbeing have been and remain a question for me.

Now, many years later, armed with long-term experience as a missionary, I hope that this reflection will help shape education so that it can prepare individuals for life where care for the wellbeing of the learner is paramount.

