

Schools work resurrected

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In 2005 Youthwork published 'The Death of Schools Work', an article by Chris Curtis that asked whether Christian work in its current form could survive the fast-changing educational and cultural climate. Two years on, out of the experience of his work in Luton schools, Chris offers a vision for Christian schools work in the coming decade.

Silence.

Two hundred and thirty eight teenagers sitting in some kind of suspended animation in a large school hall. Teachers parade on the edges of this stillness, eyes bulging fiercely at anyone who so much as shuffles. Including me. That's me there, standing slightly uncomfortably at the front, looking out across the hall. At the sullen lad in the second row who's perfected disinterest through body language. And the two girls passing notes unnoticed behind him.

There's a nod from the burly PE teacher who's in charge of this lot, and I'm off. The next eight minutes of these teenagers' lives belong to me. For anyone who's stood where I am, comparisons with jumping out of a plane or feeding tigers, or being fed to them for that matter, seem entirely appropriate. This is schools work. And it's about the most invigorating, faith-stretching thing you can do on a Monday morning if you want to connect with the 96% of young people who never darken the doors of your church.

Actually assemblies are only one piece of the jigsaw that makes up Christian schools work, and there are plenty of others. You can probably add RE and PHSE lessons to the list, clubs at lunchtime and mentoring. But then there's a helping hand in sports or drama, therapeutic work in anger management, support for Christian pupils - and staff - not to mention 'creative hanging around', the phrase we coined for being out and about during breaks. Schools work across the country is as diverse and different as the schools themselves. What is cutting edge in inner city Sheffield might not cut the mustard in Norwich. Anyway, you probably already know that. A large percentage of church youth workers do some schools work and there are close to a thousand full time specialist schools workers too.

Schools work and youth work are like identical twins. People tend to assume they're alike, and that if you can do one you can do the other, but actually they're very different. Despite the skills needed to work in education, churches often expect youth workers to be able to operate seamlessly in both youth group and classroom. Amazingly, despite the plethora of professional qualifications for church youth workers, schools work doesn't feature in pretty much any of the courses (something that's slowly being put right now). Nobody trains you to take and assembly or teach a lesson. More importantly nobody gets you to think

about what schools work 'is'. Evangelism? That's been the unspoken presumption from a lot of churches, even though you might not want to mention that to the local Head. Just building links and relationships? Certainly, but hopefully more than that too. The missiology and theology of schools work has always been thin on the ground, giving rise to an opportunistic approach that has sometimes lacked a clear rationale.

Whatever the answer, changes in education have forced our hand - a good thing, perhaps - and we have to think about all of this more seriously. Assemblies aren't what they used to be. Back in my day they were daily, then weekly, and now, in some schools monthly. The smart money in education is on them disappearing altogether in the future. RE is still compulsory - except in private schools and the new academies - but it's changing too. The school day is becoming more flexible and in some places lunchtimes are 'rolling' with some students eating while others are still in lessons. And whereas school staff comprised teachers, front office secretaries and those weird lab technicians in white coats, now there are almost as many non-teaching staff on site as there are teachers.

Two trends dominate the changes. On one side, the personalisation of the curriculum. Students in the same year group will increasingly have tailored timetables and be studying different subjects. Some as young as 13 or 14 will be disappearing to other schools and colleges for whole days to use specialist facilities in construction, catering or engineering (That's why assemblies will become less practical). There'll be new diplomas alongside GCSE's and improved technology will make it easier to track pupils' progress in key indicators. Religious Education will remain, but will be continually squeezed for space. Some schools are already fulfilling their legal obligations by holding RE days at the end of term, freeing the weekly timetable for other subjects.

The second trend is towards connection with the community. Schools are increasingly being seen as the centre of the community in the way churches were a century ago. As a result they will be open earlier and closed later. Extra money (not much, but it's something) will be used to encourage schools to expand what they offer not just to pupils, but to their parents and other local people as well. The 'extended schools' programme will give opportunities for churches to connect with young people in some innovative new ways, if we're prepared take up the challenge.

So now what we have done as 'schools work' for years seems like it's in danger of disappearing, becoming increasingly inappropriate and impractical. But schools work isn't dead, it's being reborn and reimaged in this new educational world. And, as it happens, it may be the best thing to happen to us in years.

Luton is a good place to be when you're trying to figure all this out. Twelve secondary schools, a sixth form and an FE college and huge cultural and religious diversity. If it works here, it'll work almost anywhere. There are fifteen full time staff and eight part time volunteers at LCET, a Trust created by a partnership of local churches, working in most of these schools. We're passionate about young people discovering and being transformed by the Christian faith, but what place does that agenda have in a modern secular educational environment?

The answer is not easy to work out. Our relationship with schools is layered and complex, not easily given to simple pronouncements about intent. Even the terminology is revealing: is it school 'ministry' or schools 'work'? And what's the aim? Conversion to the Christian faith? Surely it would be deeply dishonest not to admit that this is part of what we want, even if sometimes we've been inappropriate in the methods we've used.

Perhaps the issues we face simply mirror those of the wider church in understanding how to reach out to our community, where a challenge to personal conversion without reference to the wider needs of the community sounds increasingly empty. Schools workers also need to find a wider concept of mission, living with and serving a school community in a way that demonstrates the Kingdom of God with its personal call to faith but also its wider call to justice and love. It demands humility and respect, allows young people

to take the journey at their own pace, or not at all. It recognises that we're guests in schools and need to behave in the way we would expect guests to behave in our own homes and churches: with respect to the rules and practices of that community.

For me then, proclamational evangelism doesn't have a place in schools work: the days of lunchtime concerts and appeals should be well and truly over. And while we're at it, inventing a 'schools week' just as an advertising platform for a mission in your local church is a cheap shot too. Part of the reason for moving on from this approach isn't just about what's legal in schools, it's about how we've imagined evangelism in the past. Education is a participative activity, focused not just on what the teacher is teaching, but on the creative, interactive, explorative process of learning. Some evangelism hasn't always been so open-handed towards those on the receiving end.

The truth is that whilst schools aren't interested in being convenient contexts for indoctrination, they are interested in spirituality. Part of the remit of all schools is the spiritual development of the young people in their care, along with their moral, social and cultural growth. These aren't separate lessons, they're meant to be a thread through all that the school does: part of its ethos. Spirituality in this context is broadly defined to include a person's inner life through which they "acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth" (OFSTED's words, not mine). And perhaps not surprisingly, it's something that schools struggle to implement or even imagine what it should look like.

As a Christian I may have a view of spirituality focused on God, but to me that occupies a space within this broader definition and certainly isn't in opposition to it. And I find it hard to be anything but enthusiastic about young people beginning to explore spirituality even in its more general and abstract form. Whatever you think, the fact is that this is the context that Christian schools work has to take place in, so we have to figure out a response or we might as well pack our bags and head home.

As it happens, I think that a school's responsibility for spiritual development offers a perfect context for Christians to work in education. Notice, by the way, that this doesn't necessarily negate what you already do in schools, it simply provides the overarching reason for your being there. But it does mean that Christian schools workers need to genuinely applaud this aim and be prepared to contribute to it without dominating it or excluding other faiths or beliefs. Getting this balance between serving a wider agenda of spiritual development and keeping the Christian distinctive is going to be one of the real challenges we'll face (and I'm sure get wrong from time to time too).

By the way, this doesn't mean that we're not interested in young people finding a genuine Christian faith over a period of time or at one significant moment in their lives. Nor does it exclude the many other kinds of work being done in schools, like offering support for individual pupils or helping out with a sports team. These are essential to a balanced and Biblical approach to serving the local community, including schools. In fact these kinds of opportunities are going to grow rather than diminish with the advent of the extended schools programme. The danger is that the allure of government funding and school's demand for these services - like running an after school club - could diminish the time and enthusiasm we have for the much more difficult challenge of overt spiritual input in a school. If we end up just providing support services to schools I think we'll have missed something important. If there's a genuine and appropriate opportunity to engage with students about faith, we should grab it with both hands.

Which brings me back to standing in that assembly, looking out at row after row of teenagers. Talking in those kind of contexts you quickly realise that many of the words you use to describe spirituality won't work here. Schools need 'grace' and struggle with 'sin' like the rest of us, but language like that is clunky and difficult in education. Increasingly we're going to need to find better ways to explain our faith in terms that are more appropriate not only to the young people listening but the educational setting too. How you do that and remain true to your experiences and beliefs is going to be interesting.

The language issue is bigger than what might or might not work in education. Even though we recognise that young people are often more 'spiritual' than we have sometimes given them credit for, they often don't have the words to express themselves in those terms. We tried asking a group of Year 10's in one school the simple question 'Are you spiritual' and most thought we were talking about whether they had ever seen a ghost! In truth, they were spiritual, they just didn't have the vocabulary to talk about it. How can a fifteen year old understand anything I say about spirituality if that's the case? It's like explaining particle physics to a five year old without first teaching them what the words 'particle' and 'physics' mean.

In Luton these questions led us to develop and pilot a 'spiritual literacy' programme with a group of year 7 pupils. Interestingly it was the English Department who worked with us rather than RE. Not where I imagined it would be used. I suspect we'll find ourselves in unexpected places within the curriculum more and more in the coming years.

Is this evangelism? Not in most senses of the word. Is it educational? Absolutely. Is it a useful activity for youth workers visiting schools? I think so.

Spiritual literacy lessons are only one way of helping young people learn to express their spiritual questions, beliefs and experiences - and the critical thinking skills they'll need to evaluate them. We've been working hard to find other ways of doing that, some which tap into the Christian faith much more clearly and overtly. Here's a few we've tried:

- ✦ 'Stations of the Cross' in school corridors. Eight stations set up for the last week of the Spring term, following the Easter story and picking out relevant themes and questions. They start with 'choices' and Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane about the fate that awaits him. Young people from all backgrounds then create art on that theme and the finished station includes their stories about deep and difficult choices they have had to make. Over the course of the week, students are invited to 'walk' the stations and reflect on each one in turn.

By the way, note that this activity is fairly upfront in terms of the Christian faith, but that it's voluntary - no one has to stop and read them - and participative - the stations ask questions of the reader and encourage them to reflect.

- ✦ Spiritual events marking important moments. We held a service soon after the 2004 Tsunami for young people to respond spiritually to what had happened. We developed a fairly formal liturgical service with Christian themes and held it after school for half an hour.

- ✦ Assemblies that are less like funny church youth group talks and more like spaces to help young people reflect and explore spiritual life. Again, with a strong Christian theme, but more open and less proclamational than previously. For example, 'Do you have a spiritual side' uses a Russian 'Matryoshka' Nesting Doll to delve deeper into who we are on the inside. (Still plenty of humour in case you were wondering).

- ✦ Spiritual art groups, meeting during or after school and using art to explore our spiritual side. Linked with competitions and exhibitions of the resulting work.

- ✦ Breathe. A new resource which takes some of the idea from the Labyrinth and makes them more suitable for the classroom and a one hour lesson. Students listen to meditations on 12 Christian themes exploring how the Christian faith sees God, the planet, people and themselves. Each theme involves participation and reflection and there is space for students to think about how they see the same issues.

You'll notice the absence of Christian Unions and clubs in this list. In the past they've probably been the mainstay of what schools workers have done. I'm not sure they'll be anything like as relevant in the future.

Clubs are going to be harder to organise in the future: lunchtimes are shorter and increasingly they're at different times for different years anyway. I'm not sure that 'clubs' will work after school either: it's going to be tough to persuade large numbers of pupils to hang around instead of heading home to chill out in their technology-laden bedrooms. Maybe it's time to think of some new ways to create community among a group of young people in a school setting.

Thinking of those ideas is going to be challenging, and time-consuming. If we're going to get this right, and develop a schools work that is relevant to schools and faith, then we're going to need some clear ideas about what values underpin our work. Here are the four we've developed:

1. Passionate about faith.

Christian schools work can't be reduced to support services for schools. Pastoral support and developing input into the extended schools programme are immensely valuable but the challenge of engaging young people in a spiritual journey is something we can and should be helping schools achieve. With the right aims and the right approach we can still be passionate about our faith in a way that is entirely appropriate to education. Developing a clear rationale for what we're doing is vital and it needs to be communicated not just to schools but to churches aswell.

2. Integrity in education

The days when we told churches we were doing evangelism and then the local head something completely different need to be well and truly over. We have to be far more open with schools about where we're coming from and, unless, we accept that proclamational evangelism isn't appropriate, we're not going to get past the front door.

3. Professional standards

Schools are increasingly expecting those working within them - including regular visitors like church youth workers - to be suitably qualified for the task. Taking a lesson or assembly involves a wide range of competencies: not just the ability to stand up in front of a crowd, but being able to comprehend the curriculum requirements, enable learning to take place and be measured, and managing behaviour in the classroom. We need to train schools workers better than we have been doing, both in the context of full time courses and in ongoing professional development. At the same time, we may need to explore how we can be accredited for this kind of work, perhaps by educational authorities or as part of the new Integrated Qualifications Framework.

4. Adapting to change

Education has already changed more in the last five years than the last fifty, and it's set to continue to evolve in the coming decade. We have to be far more innovative and adaptable in the kind of work we doing. We have to try new forms of working with students beyond assemblies, lessons and lunchtime clubs and be prepared to think 'outside the box' when it comes to engaging students spiritually.

Those eight minutes or so in a school assembly are an amazing privilege. They may not be open to us for much longer, but whilst they are, it's a great feeling to be able to stand there and talk to teenagers about life and faith in ways that make sense to them. Where else could you do that? The Christian faith and education go back a long way - and a lot has changed over the years - but I think the best days are still ahead. We'll need training and more creative resources, we'll need to work together and share ideas, and above all we'll need the grace and presence of God to be salt and light where it's really needed. If you're a schools worker, are you ready to take on this challenge? And if you're a church youth worker, are you prepared to give some time and energy to doing something like this in your local school? Schoolwork isn't dead, it's being reborn

into something we should all be part of.

▶ **The schools work sandwich**

Here's one of the ways we think about schools work. Imagine a sandwich represents the different possibilities for working in a school. In the middle is the meat. This is the curriculum, the main business of a school to provide education in a range of subjects hopefully leading to exam success and qualifications. But either side are two pieces of bread which are just as essential to making this a sandwich. Each slice represents another dimension of school life.

The bottom slice is emotional and behavioural well-being. In order to function at school, young people have to be able to sit and listen, interact with others and, above all, want to learn. In previous decades this was assumed, and schools played no real part. Now things are different and they have a range of counselling and support services to help get young people to a place where they can access the curriculum. Anger management courses and learning mentors are examples of this kind of work.

The top slice is spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. Quite a mouthful, but it refers to the broader aims of education: not just churning out exam results but forming citizens with healthy values and a wider concern for the world beyond themselves. This is where assemblies and things like visiting theatre companies come in.

Christian schools work can offer something to all three parts of the sandwich. If you're involved in schools work, which best describes what you do?

▶ **What is schools work?**

LCET's aims in schools revolve around three key challenges:

Words from within:

Helping students express their spiritual questions and experiences, and encouraging them to develop critical thinking skills about spiritual life.

Living out loud:

Demonstrating Christian spirituality and values to students, and encouraging the school community to nurture spiritual life.

Creating curiosity:

Calling young people to look within themselves, at their human relationships, and at the wider world to find ultimate meaning and purpose, and sharing a Christian understanding of this search.

Chris Curtis

Chris works in Luton for LCET, a local schools charity, where he splits his time between managing the team and working in some of the local high schools. He's now also part of the team running schoolswork.co.uk and is passionate about developing more creative and effective input into schools. He writes regularly for Youthwork magazine and in his spare time he's a complete mac geek and a member of the Magic Circle.