

The death of schools work

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Christian schools work is in crisis. Many schools workers are having to work out what their role is in a rapidly changing educational environment, where proclamation of the Christian faith is explicitly outlawed and the days of praying in assembly are long gone, where there are often too few Christian young people to make a CU practical, and where working with socially excluded young people is what schools really want, even if the church is pushing for more open evangelism.

This isn't just an issue for the schools and youth workers involved, it's something for the church as whole to consider. It's time for a radical rethink of what it means for the church to engage with the educational system in our country, which might end up with us embarking upon a risky and unknown road, but one that I passionately believe we must take. If we don't, we risk losing the ground gained in the past decades, finding our strategies outdated and ineffective, and being overtaken by government reform. In short, the death of schoolswork.

Those are strong words, but they first and foremost reflect my own experience as a schools worker. This job has been my calling, passion and full time occupation for the past twenty years. I've spent most of my working life taking school assemblies, standing in front of RE classes and eating more school dinners than any man should have to face in a lifetime. So this is a personal reflection, but one that seems to be held in common with the many other schools workers with whom I have shared conversations. We have some tough and difficult thinking to do, but my hope is that we will be the better for facing these questions, more effective in the school environment and, ultimately, more able to declare and make present the kingdom of God.

Schools work has been part of the UK landscape ever since education became the primary responsibility of the State rather than the church in the 1940's. Once the church was moved from centre stage, it had to decide what to do about it. One answer was to create Christian schools (an approach taken by both the Catholic and Anglican traditions, though with rather different rationales, and more recently by sections of the independent evangelical church). But that still left the question of how to relate to the majority of schools, for all ages, run by the State. Of course, there were, and are, many Christian staff and pupils in these schools, who are seeking to work out their faith in this context. But gradually the church began to engage in other ways. Vicars visited and took assemblies. Full time youth workers, as they became more commonplace, did even more. National organisations sprang up to support Christian young people and the running of Christian groups, often during lunchtime. Others toured the country visiting schools with bands and theatre companies. Gradually smaller more local projects began to be created. They appointed staff specifically to work in the nearby school, and the concept of a schools worker was born. By the early 1980's there were

projects appearing all over the UK. Today there are hundreds of these workers up and down the UK.

One of the problems of trying to understand schoolswork is that it is actually a blanket term for lots of different kinds of activities. Two schools workers, standing side by side, will almost certainly be doing two different jobs. For one, their work may be educational: their time spent in the classroom teaching RE and presenting the Christian faith. For another, it could be pastoral: they may offer life skills or mentoring within the school. Still another may focus on informal detached work, run a Christian group, organise events and weekends away or simply offer Christian assemblies. Some schools workers and projects are focused on evangelism, others would shudder at the thought of doing evangelism in a school and focus instead on caring for pupils or supporting the curriculum. Schools work is a loose term describing all of these approaches and motives, and more.

Let's not forget either, that a school is more than just a place where you get your education. Schools are communities in themselves, striving to develop common values and facing the same social and practical issues that any community faces. They are also a key, perhaps the most key, social environment for young people. Your approach to schoolswork will be shaped by how you recognise and prioritise these different facets. No wonder there is such a rich variety of approaches by Christians. At our best, we have become the trusted friends of the school, seen as a positive influence, and welcomed into school life. At our worst we have engendered anger and upset, using school assemblies as evangelistic rallies and an opportunity to cast out a few demons. (There are some apocryphal stories of just that, though I've never been able to pin them down!).

Two years ago we reached our own crisis in the project in Luton where I work. It was a gradual realisation that, as education and youth culture changed around us, our work was becoming less and less effective. A slow slide, rather than an overnight emergency, but nevertheless, something we couldn't ignore any longer. In the midst of a hectic growing work, where every day was a blur of energy spent speaking, teaching and walking the corridors of local schools, we began to face up to some tough issues. They went like this:

1. Those who can, teach?

We'd never ever got to grips with the relationship between education and evangelism. It's the dark shadow in the closet of schoolswork. To the churches we talked evangelism. To the Head Teachers we talked education. We prayed the two would never meet. While books on assembly ideas are two a penny, there's barely a word written by schools workers on why we are doing schoolswork. Doesn't that say it all. One schools worker who wrote to me, put it like this: "I worked in the mid 90's in a schoolswork project. The struggle between evangelism and education has always hassled me as an ex-teacher. Somehow I always had this strange feeling that something was not right in the land of Christian schoolswork."

I suspect that churches have often seen schoolswork and evangelism as one and the same thing. They want the schools worker to be the bridge that brings young people into the church youthwork. With this rationale, taking RE lessons, helping mentor pupils or whatever you do, is simply a means to an end: building relationships with young people so you can convert them. I wonder if that's what a Head Teacher would like to hear? It's no wonder we tend to skew how we describe ourselves to fit the context. That's not to say such duplicity is a planned strategy, more the automatic way we adopt to open a door, without thinking too much about why.

2. Activity overload.

In my own work, a failure to resolve these motives for schoolswork, meant that it was easy to take on all kinds of activities without really knowing if it was a good idea or not. Can you help coach the football team? Sure. We need some help supporting a pupil in maths. No problem. Can you do a lesson on bullying. Absolutely! Being busy has never been a problem in schoolswork, but achieving what? As a team we began to realise we weren't nearly clear enough about that. We were exhausted running so many projects and activities. Once they trusted us, schools couldn't get enough of us. Was this all relationship building in order

to share our faith? Or should we consider serving the schools needs a valuable end in itself?

3. The age gap.

We noticed we were doing less and less work with older pupils, especially those over 16. We'd ended up concentrating on younger and younger year groups because it was easier. Funny stories, simplistic explanations: these things go better with 12 years old than philosophical 17 year olds. Our work was like a funnel, but not in the way we normally use that illustration. 100 Year 7's became 10 Year 11's. We began to ask ourselves why our style of work wasn't connecting with older teenagers.

Perhaps it's time to ask if lunchtime Christian evangelistic clubs, have had their day? The teenagers I know don't tend to like formal groups like that. If I do run them, I'm conscious I have to make them highly entertaining in order to keep everyone coming back and only the lower years are really interested. For me, this is typical of the problem we face: the strategies we're using are 30 years old and what worked in the 1970's may not be appropriate.

4. Social inclusion rules?

We were unsure of how far to take on mentoring and social inclusion work in schools. During the mid-1990's a significant amount of money became available in schools for the development of this type of work, and many Christian projects like ours got involved and benefited. We found it hard though, to balance the huge opportunity and need with the other kinds of input like RE lessons and assemblies. It got us back to the question of why were we there in school in the first place. If we were evangelists, maybe it would be a diversion, if we were something else, maybe it would be a chance to care for some of the teenagers most in need.

5. Schools vs. church?

Churches have adopted the idea of full time youth leaders in a big way in the last 15 years. Youth leaders look after young people in their church, but during the day they are all at school. Youth leaders started doing schools work - why not? What else are you going to do between the hours of 9.00 and 3.30? Existing schools workers were threatened by this. If youth leaders did more schools work, what would we do? One answer was to take up the opportunities in social inclusion and let youth workers concentrate on the more traditional input of assemblies, clubs and lessons.

6. Reaching out?

Assuming that we wanted to share our faith in school, we realised we had to think much harder about the methodology we adopted. We had at least three in operation! One was cerebral. Using RE lessons and assemblies, we presented evidence for the Christian faith and challenge young people to respond through lunchtime groups and events. The second was attractional. We set out to appeal to young people, and hope their interest in us will translate into an interest in the gospel. Of course, at the centre of it all, was a relational model, wanting to befriend young people. Not that school is necessarily an easy place to build relationships. Most of the day is spent in lessons, breaks are short, and there's little time to chat. As a result, most schools workers rely on extra-curricula activities to get to know pupils.

All these questions are difficult ones to face, but they point, I believe, to some serious issues schools work, as a whole, needs to confront. And as it happens, events may overtake us anyway. This month we hear the results of the Tomlinson Report, a major government policy rethink of education for 14 to 19's. It's wider implications may see schools look more and more like colleges with flexible timetables, rolling lunch breaks, no collective worship and multi-site education. What will your schools work look like if you can't take assemblies, run a lunchtime group or even guarantee pupils will even be in the same school every day? It may be that we have to rethink our strategies whether we like it or not.

But these are the problems, and I don't want to dwell on them any more than I have to. The real challenge, the one I am now pursuing, is to develop a model of schools work for the future: one that will bring the

vibrancy of the Christian faith into contact with the world of education and make a real and lasting impact on both schools and individuals.

I think our starting point must be to explore in much deeper terms, the relationship between the church and education. The Christian community has much to offer, if given in the right spirit, but we must think more clearly about the value of education in itself, and not see everything and everyone as merely evangelistic targets. We have to rediscover the mission of God which includes but which is broader than evangelism, and become willing to integrate ourselves and serve within the school community. There are books written about this relationship, and Christian schools workers need to start reading and discussing them.

Not that we must lose our passion to see young people discover the faith. But we must begin to accept what is and isn't possible in the context of a school. Like Vincent Donovan, a Spiritan priest working among the Masai in Tanzania in the 1960's (see the excellent book 'Christianity Rediscovered'), we must cast aside old theories and strategies and seek what is appropriate and effective in the mission context in which we find ourselves. We have to accept that some forms of evangelism are never going to be appropriate. Instead, we have find those that are.

Churches too need to value education more deeply, and recognise that schoolwork is far more than evangelism. There are churches up and down the UK who are doing just that, engaging with their local school communities and making a real difference. We need to encourage many others to follow their example.

Schools workers need to become much clearer about why they are in school in the first place. If it is evangelism, they need to be honest about that, and work out what, within the limits of the law, is possible in a pluralistic society. But there are also schools workers whose focus will be serving and loving young people in need; others who long to see the RE curriculum set alight with interest and energy (now there's a prayer!). All of these are valid aspects of schools work and all need to be valued by the church.

We also need to experiment with new ways of achieving these aims. Some of the 'golden-oldies' of schools work need a critical rethink. Some of our lessons and assemblies need to be ditched. According to the government, schools should be focused on developing young people spiritually: we need to think hard about how we can contribute to that aim and develop input that is challenging and credible. Schools workers need to talk more with each other, visit other projects and take some risks!

So back to my own work and the challenges we faced. We decided to take two years to explore them and see if we could work out where we should be going. Specifically, we decided to:

- 1. Increase the theological and intellectual discussion about educational, evangelism and spirituality, reading more widely and devoting time to 'thinking out loud' with each other.**
- 2. Talk to schools more honestly about our rationale for work and hear what they really wanted from us, and why.**
- 3. Produce the same publicity describing our work for both churches and schools, forcing us to think carefully about what we wanted to say to both.**
- 4. Take two years to experiment with new ways of working in schools, taking some risks and being prepared to undergo tough self-evaluation.**
- 5. Draw up much clearer aims and objectives, and work out better ways of monitoring and evaluating our work.**

It's a journey we've been on for 16 months. And one that I invite other schools workers to join us in. Schoolwork as we knew it may be dead, but maybe something much more exciting and effective is going to take its place. I hope so.

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 schoolwork.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.