Researching spiritual capital in Catholic education

On the need for theoretical frameworks and more empirical work

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Introduction

It was an honour to be asked to contribute a chapter to this volume of work. Gerald Grace had been a significant influence on my work in empirical research in Christian education. Three interwoven strands underpin Gerald Grace's work in the field of Catholic education. It is based on the understanding that Catholic education's fundamental rationale is 'to keep alive and to renew the culture of the Christian sacred in a profane and secular world' (Grace, 2015, p. 1). Secondly, it is motivated by an awareness of an acute need for 'an articulated theoretical framework' developed from the insights of formal scholarship (Grace, 2002, p. 17). The third strand is the call for 'systematic research' into Catholic education at a national and international level, empirical research that can inform and shape evidence-based policy and practice for Catholic educators in schools, colleges, and universities. This chapter considers the value of one critical element of Grace's theoretical framework, his articulation of the concept of spiritual capital, embedded in the Catholic faith tradition, and supported by empirical research. This encompasses all three strands. The chapter's focus is primarily on Catholic education within England and Wales. However, many of the themes highlighted will be recognised as relevant to an international audience. The first part offers an analysis of Grace's development of the spiritual capital, from its roots in Bourdieu's theory.¹ The second part considers the significance and impact of empirical research of spiritual capital in Catholic education, which has the potential to illuminate the changing Catholicity of school and inform policy and practice. The chapter concludes with a look at some examples of empirical research, and highlights areas still in urgent need of research.

Spiritual capital

Gerald Grace defines spiritual capital as 'resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition'. It is a 'source of empowerment because it provides a transcendent impulse which can guide judgment and

action in the mundane world'; it empowers educators to act as professionals and witnesses (Grace, 2002, p. 236). In this definition, he builds Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and symbolic power and, in particular, his articulation of religious capital. Pierre Bourdieu's work on the concept of capital (economic, social, and cultural) has been a highly influential and invaluable tool in analysing education systems.

Economic capital, whose effects are mediated by social class inequalities in the lives of students; social capital, constituted in different access to supportive social networks; and cultural capital, viewed as resources of knowledge, language, and appropriate social relations differentially available to students in their homes.

(Grace, 2010, p. 118)

Religious capital for Bourdieu (1991, cited in Dillon, 2001) is an issue of power between religious specialists and laity. The former are 'exclusive holders of the specific competence necessary for the production and reproduction of a deliberately organized corpus of secret (and therefore rare) knowledge' (Dillon, 2001, p. 414), while the laity is dispossessed, recipients rather than generators of religious capital. Agency is limited to religious professionals, who struggle to control access to 'the goods of salvation' (Bourdieu, 1991 cited in Grace, 2010, p. 118). Religious capital is thus understood in organisational terms (Verter, 2003, p. 151); it is about knowledge and competence that sustains the distinction between priest and laity (Guest, 2007, p. 188). In the Catholic context, religious capital is generated and held in the hierarchical institution of the Church.

Gerald Grace's development of the concept of spiritual capital broadens and sharpens Bourdieu's religious capital. Grace (2002, 2010) defined spiritual capital with specific reference to the context of Catholic education. His initial definition (2002), as described above, was refined and clarified in 'Renewing spiritual capital: an urgent priority for the future of Catholic education internationally' (2010). For Grace (2002, 2010), spiritual capital is a source of empowerment; Grace argues 'that those who acquire spiritual capital act as professionals within Catholic education and as a personal witness to faith in practice, action and relationships' (2010, p. 120). Spiritual capital is 'resources of faith and values derived from vocational commitment to a religious tradition'. It is a 'source of vocational empowerment' as it provides a transcendental awareness that guides judgement and a form of spirituality where life is viewed in terms of relationship with God (2010, p. 125).

Grace's definition of spiritual capital crucially diverges from Bourdieu's work concerning the laity's role in generating capital; he moves away from focusing on the power of a necessarily limited number of religious professionals within the Church to recognise the agency of the individual lay Catholic. Spiritual capital consists of a 'deregulated exchange and empowerment of individuals' (Guest, 2007, p. 190). Bourdieu's development of the concept of religious capital

is centred on the power of a select number of individuals. Within Grace's interpretation of spiritual capital, 'symbolic power is instantiated in individual school leaders' (2010, p. 119). It is individual spiritual capital – a source of personal 'power to maintain' rather than 'power over'. This idea to maintain or sustain is critical to Grace's spiritual understanding; its presence and generation sustains a sense of mission, purpose, and hope. He differentiates it from charisma as understood by Weber, insisting it is not found in the expression of exceptional leadership but is a sustaining resource for everyday leadership. Grace does not just transfer the power from religious professionals to school leaders; he develops the idea further to explain that spiritual capital is not held merely within the leadership but is with 'school governing bodies, in classroom teachers, in priests, in school chaplains, in parents and not least in the students themselves' (2002, p. 238). This is of crucial relevance when we later consider applying the concept in Grace's work and the potential for further empirical research in Catholic education.

Grace's focus on laity in his definition of spiritual capital is not unique. The concept of spiritual capital as distinct from religious capital has been developed independently by several scholars, for example, Verter (2003), Guest (2007), and Baker and Skinner (2006). In his article 'Theorising religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu', Verter (2003) argues for the adoption of the term spiritual capital, identifying it as ritual capital, a form of cultural capital, and that 'spiritual knowledge, competencies, and preferences may be understood as valuable assets in the economy of symbolic goods' (p. 152). Critically, Verter (2003, p. 164) moves away from the idea of religious capital held by professionals to that held by the laity; he argues that this threatens the autonomy of the religious field, for spiritual capital may be of value in other fields, and lay people may exercise spiritual power because of capital gained in another field. Spiritual capital with its focus on the individual and looser ties to institutional religion could be seen to reflect the more fluid nature of religion in the twenty-first century.

Grace (2010) also employs spiritual rather than religious, but in a different sense to that adopted by Verter. Spiritual is often seen as a vaguer, weaker term than religious as it is often employed in common parlance in 'I am spiritual but not religious'. Nevertheless, the concept of spirituality, of humans as spiritual, has deep roots within Christianity (Giordan, 2007) and Grace's definition of spiritual is not a weaker version of religion. It is a move from institutional to personal power, but within the context of the Catholic faith tradition.² There is an assumption that being spiritual within a Catholic school context refers to 'to the regular sacramental, prayer-life, moral and ecclesial dimensions and expressions of one's faith as a Catholic teacher or educator, both individually and communally' (D'Souza, 2012, p. 94). Grace (2010) does not limit spiritual capital to this, arguing that it cannot be reduced to theological literacy, as integral to it is a personal witness in practice, action, and relationships. As D'Souza (2012, p. 101) explains, Catholic education is focused on human

development, 'not just human development with a few churchy pieces tacked on, but, to use the language of St Paul, Christian development means progressively becoming a new creation in Christ' (2 Corinthians 5: 1). It is this understanding that better encapsulates the nature of spiritual capital.

Grace's interpretation of spiritual capital is distinct in that it retains strong links to the religious institutions. Other scholars' interpretation of the concept of spiritual capital such as Verter detailed above reflect much weaker links with the religious institution, a more fluid and free-flowing notion. For example, Davies and Guest (2007) define spiritual capital as a capital 'that is not possessed or defined by the hierarchy of the religious tradition but acknowledges the "believer" as an agent, not just a passive recipient' (2007, p. 129). Their interpretation resonates with Grace's focus on spiritual capital being a more fluid resource, an understanding of the believer as an agent, moving away from capital held by professionals within the institution. They differ in their understanding of the links to the tradition. Davies and Guest interpret spiritual capital as an 'eclectic appropriation of religious resources, chosen and adapted to meet the individual's subjective needs' (2007, p. 129). One major criticism of spiritual capital is that unlike religious capital, where there is a gold standard held by the institution (Verter, 2003), there is potentially no clear boundary to the concept. It is necessarily interpreted and adapted as it moves from one generation to the next. Davies and Guest (2007) identified a fluid process of transmission. They termed this 'transformed retention', which is a 'critically creative process of adaptive change by which beliefs pass from parents to children or mentors to those they influence' (2007, p. 170). In their research with children of Anglican Bishops, the spiritual capital they identified had in some cases tenuous links to that of the institution of the Anglican Church. Their interpretation strays too far from Grace's understanding of spiritual capital, which is rooted within the Catholic faith tradition, while avoiding a narrow focus on theological or scriptural literacy or ecclesial practices. Spiritual capital is a force that animates Catholic education and is sustained by personal witness to the faith tradition.

Grace (2010) argues that within Catholic education, spiritual capital was previously held and acquired through Religious Orders. Within the Catholic tradition, spirituality has often flourished within religious communities (Giordan, 2007). It was the contribution of the Religious Orders, 'the transmission of distinctive religious charisms' (Lydon, 2009, p. 51), that was the driving force of sustaining the Catholic Church's educational mission. The 'transmission of charism reflected an openness to the reception; to receiving from those who have encountered, or are encountering, it' (Lydon, 2009 p. 52). Religious Orders' role in the transmission of spiritual capital took place within the context of the Orders' foundation in the Catholic faith tradition. Grace argues that spiritual capital declined within Catholic education as Religious Orders have disappeared from most Catholic schools in the UK. The transmission of spiritual capital generated within Religious Orders maintained the close link to the

institutional Church. In his empirical research with head teachers in England, Grace (2002) found that many head teachers' vocation had been shaped or influenced by Religious Orders in their Catholic school days. He argued that these head teachers were in the first stage of the transmission of spiritual capital (2010, p. 123). They transmitted their spiritual capital to staff who had no contact with the resource present within Religious Orders. It does raise an urgent question: as spiritual capital is reconstituted, what is happening to this spiritual capital in subsequent transmission processes? (Grace, 2010, p. 123).

An integral element of Grace's interpretation of spiritual capital is that 'those within education whose own formation has involved acquisition of spiritual capital do not act simply as professionals, but as professionals and witnesses' (Grace, 2002, p. 236). The key term here is witnesses; there is a clear implication that those working within Catholic education have the potential to become 'witnesses' to the faith, to maintain the educational mission, and animate and inspire others to do so.³ In *Lay Catholics in Schools Witnesses to Faith*, the Congregation for Catholic Education (1982) recognised that with a decline in the number of Religious Orders in school there was an increased role for lay Catholics within education.

The Catholic educator must be a source of spiritual inspiration... A lay Catholic educator is a person who exercises a specific mission within the Church by living the faith... with an apostolic intention... for the integral formation of the human person.

(Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, p. 14)

The Catholic educator is thus a personal witness in words and action; they are witness to the Catholic faith as lived religion. Michael Buchanan (2020) in Australia has explored the teacher's role as a witness to faith, arguing that a Christian educator who is a witness to faith offers students a real and tangible example of Christian attitudes and behaviours. However, he has drawn attention to the challenges of this in practice. In Australia, Christian educators are reluctant to witness their faith publicly; it is not within Australian culture. Similar issues have been highlighted in the UK; the reluctance to share personal faith in the classroom for fear of indoctrination and the lack of confidence many educators have in expressing their faith. Nevertheless, personal witness to the faith, vocational empowerment, is integral to Grace's interpretation of spiritual capital and this raises the question of what is needed to empower Catholic educators to fulfil this role. For Grace, the interpretation of spiritual capital, even as it moves from Religious Orders to lay Catholic educators, is rooted in the Catholic faith tradition.

Grace draws attention to the urgent need to renew this source of spiritual capital; it is essential that school leaders can acquire spiritual capital, and sustain the educational mission.

[Spiritual capital is] in urgent need of renewal in the contemporary world of Catholic education faced with growing secularisation, ideologies of secularism, global marketisation and materialism, and the decline of Religious Congregations in the field of education

(Grace, 2010, p. 125)

The need for renewal that Grace described in 2010 still exists acute as ever at the time of writing this chapter in 2020. The external and internal pressures on Catholic schooling have only increased, challenges such as in England of academisation (Buck, 2018) and the declining engagement of young people in the life of the local Church (Bullivant, 2016). Grace (2010) is concerned that the field of Catholic education is responding only slowly to this call for a renewal of spiritual capital. He proposes a two-pronged approach, a practical response focused on developing formation programmes for school leaders and teachers and in-depth empirical research on the extent to which spiritual capital is in decline or evidence of its renewal.

Grace's concept of spiritual capital is more inclusive and fluid than Bourdieu's religious capital with its recognition of the agency of the individual. It is an invaluable tool in illuminating the nature of Catholicity and faith transmission in the sphere of Catholic education, illuminating the individual's role as an animator of spiritual capital. It stands in contrast to other scholars' interpretation (Verter, 2003; Guest, 2007) with its stress on the connection to the orthodoxy of the Catholic faith tradition and characterisation as a tool to re-energise the mission of Catholic education. Grace's purpose in developing spiritual capital was not solely intended for an academic audience; it was aimed at Catholic educators working in the Catholic education sector. The development of this concept is motivated by concern for the mission integrity of Catholic education. Grace's elaboration of the concept when applied in research studies has the potential to illuminate the changing nature of Catholic schools within the UK and provide evidence to initiate and sustain the renewal of spiritual capital in Catholic education.

Researching spiritual capital in Catholic education

The second part of this chapter focuses on the value and relevance of researching spiritual capital in Catholic education research. Accessible systematic research, which improves Catholic education's integrity and effectiveness, is invaluable; it is essential to know more about the mission integrity of Catholic education and effectiveness in these challenging circumstances (Grace, 2009). Research within Catholic education is critically important in a time when society is fragmenting and faced with uncertainty. Understanding and exploring how Catholic schools can facilitate and support encounters with faith is essential not only for the future of Catholic schools but also for the future of the Catholic Church. Grace's writing is motivated by a concern for Catholic education in practice; he sees the work

of Catholic education as crucial to the renewal of faith and of the Church itself. Scholarly rigorous research rooted in a well-worked-out theoretical framework can ‘provide a necessary intellectual and cultural defence against the challenges of secularisation in contemporary societies’ (Grace, 2009, p. 8). Challenges need to be addressed with arguments, policies, and practices supported by evidence drawn from empirical research on the ground.

Through all his works, Grace emphasises the distinctive nature of Catholic education, rooted in the Catholic faith and defined as a mission activity. He has been much influenced by *The Catholic School* document (1977), for example:

Education is not given to gain power but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of and communion with man, events, and things. Knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others.

(CCE, 1977, par. 56)

Within England and Wales, ‘Catholic schools are provided first and foremost for the Catholic community and to facilitate the right of Catholic parents to choose a Catholic education for their children’ (Stock, 2012, p. 9). In 2019, there were 2117 Catholic schools in England; that is to say, 825,032 pupils are educated in Catholic schools, of which 65% of pupils and 49% of teachers are Catholic (CES, 2019). It is this steadily declining number of Catholic pupils and Catholic staff that potentially impact on the mission integrity of Catholic schools. Mission integrity describes the connection or lack of between the Catholic mission and the practice; it is fidelity in practice and not just in public rhetoric to Catholic education’s distinctive and authentic principles (Grace, 2010). Grace envisages that the renewal of spiritual capital is needed to sustain mission integrity; it must necessarily be rooted ‘into the distinctive and authentic principles of Catholic education’ (2010, p. 194). Researching spiritual capital in schools illuminates this connection between Catholic mission and practice. Detailed empirical research in school could provide evidence of where and how spiritual capital is changing, declining, or renewed.

However, researching spiritual capital is very problematic as it is not easily measurable or quantifiable.⁴ Religious capital is more easily measurable in evidence of practice, such as how closely connected individuals are through the numbers attending Sunday Mass. Spiritual capital is open to a variety of interpretations, and short-term measures are of limited use. Individuals have different interpretations of what it is to be Catholic and personal witness to the faith tradition may take many forms. Within Catholic education there exists ‘an internal culture divided on the conception of a “satisfactory realisation of Catholicity in a school”’ (Grace, 2010, p. 20). Grace (2002) quotes Greeley’s (1998) observation that perhaps the outcome is only fully apparent in mature adult lives and behaviour. However, the qualitative case study method may be particularly appropriate in researching spiritual outcome; it is close to practice, and aims ‘to understand

human behaviour at ever increasing depth and to communicate this deepening understanding to others' (Nesbitt, 2004, p. 5). Research in Catholic education working in partnership with school leaders, listening to their stories and those of other members of Catholic school community, is invaluable in understanding how individuals are acquiring spiritual capital, and the processes of generation and transmission. Accepting that there are many challenges researching spiritual capital, there are some fruitful published examples, but there are also some areas in urgent need of research. To consider first examples of fruitful research with school leaders, the changes from the generation of spiritual capital by Religious Orders to lay Catholic leaders has proved a fruitful vein for research. Catholic school leaders face many challenges in today's complex, ever-changing field of education; they are involved in constant negotiations between secular and sacred interests. Grace (2010) makes it clear that Catholic school leaders have a particular responsibility to be faith leaders as well as professional leaders and guardians of the mission integrity of Catholic schools and colleges internationally. Research with school leaders offers a fruitful method of exploring how the resource of spiritual capital is changing within Catholic schools. In Grace's own research with head teachers as detailed in *Mission, Markets and Morality* (2002), he identified the change in spiritual capital as the lay head teachers drew on personal spiritual capital acquired from their education by Religious Orders. Research into the spiritual capital in school leadership undertaken by leading practising head teachers (Friel, 2018; Wilkin, 2018) has highlighted the need for renewal of spiritual capital in Catholic education. Wilkin's (2018) empirical research detailed the challenges faced by Catholic head teachers in the English education sector: the changing political priorities, market competition compounded by parental choice, and the accountability to Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills). Wilkin examined how head teachers draw on their resource of spiritual capital 'to ensure that the Church maintains its links with young people' (2018, p. 164). He identified a significant role for Catholic head teachers as 'interpreters of the Church's mission for young people, and of young people for the Church, offers an opportunity for the future' (p. 174). This idea of interpretation is key; it raises concerns, highlighted earlier, that spiritual capital is more fluid and open to interpretation than religious capital. It highlights that renewing the spiritual capital of Catholic lay educators, and ensuring it is clearly rooted in the Catholic tradition, is an urgent priority.

Friel (2018) sought to evaluate how two national initiatives in England and Wales, (the National Retreat for Catholic Head teachers and the National School of Formation) impacted on the spiritual capital of head teachers. He concluded that head teachers in his study were drawing on personal resources of spiritual capital, but there was a clear need to renew these resources, as these resources are maintaining rather than developing or deepening their spiritual lives. Friel's research found evidence that Catholic head teachers' spiritual capital was inspired by a new type of formation programme. Those who had participated saw themselves as ministers of the Gospel providing an education

for young people which encourages them to be ‘agents of change’ and to use the qualities and skills they develop in a rich curriculum in Catholic schools for the transformational service of the world, especially of the marginalised and poor (Friel, 2018, p. 92). Such research offers a promise of evidence-based ways for the renewal of spiritual capital within school leadership. It also highlights the need for more research into other members of the Catholic school community.

Grace’s concept of spiritual capital has the potential to illuminate where spiritual capital is held by other members of the school community such as ‘school governing bodies, in classroom teachers, in priests, in school chaplains, in parents and not least in the students themselves’ (Grace, 2002, p. 238). While there has been limited research in this area, Catholic schools ideally work with home and parish to transmit the faith tradition to the next generation; both these areas are potential contributors to the renewal of spiritual capital in schools. Research is required into a variety of key contributors to the Catholic mission of the school; the parish priest, chaplain, or lay workers in retreat centres, foundation governors, and the family. For example, foundation governors, often parents, or grandparents and members of the local parish could have a critical role in renewing spiritual capital. In English and Welsh Catholic schools, foundation governors are appointed by the Bishop, or Religious Order, to represent their interests and those of the Catholic community. They are expected to implement the Bishop’s policies on education and promote the distinctive nature of Catholic education (CES, 2020). There is a paucity of research on the role of Foundation Governors in English Catholic schools. Storr (2009) undertook a study of 100 foundation governors, which highlighted their perception that spiritual capital is declining in Catholic schools. Storr’s finding that the governors made little or no reference to teachings of the Catholic Church from the Congregation for Catholic Education or the Bishops’ Conference (p. 225), in their work of promoting the distinctive nature of Catholic education, suggests there is potential here for research into ways of renewing spiritual capital of school governors.⁵

That has been little research into the renewal of spiritual capital in young people, perhaps because of the difficulty of ‘measurement’, but also because it is often unclear how to approach this research area. This neglect needs to be addressed. It is vital to understand the effect of renewal of spiritual capital within Catholic school leadership on the student population, but also to investigate how young people acquire and generate spiritual capital rooted in the Catholic faith tradition. Young people are active agents, potential generators of spiritual capital.

One study that did seek evidence of spiritual capital within the Catholic student community analysed students’ experience of Mass in English Catholic secondary schools through the lens of religious and spiritual capital. Casson (2013) differentiated between religious and spiritual capital, with the former seen as a means of ensuring attachment to the Catholic faith tradition, while the latter focused on students’ expression of personal rather than ‘institutional

spirituality'(Rossiter, 2010, p. 130). Reconsidering the findings from this research, it could be argued that they suggest evidence of Grace's interpretation of spiritual capital and that students' experience of Mass within the secondary school can be a source of spiritual capital. However, further research is needed into the extent to which this spiritual capital animates and empowers young people to be witnesses to the Catholic faith tradition. There is potential to explore how spiritual capital as vocational empowerment to witness and animate Catholic education is received by Catholic students, how they acquire and generate spiritual capital, and how does spiritual capital within the student body function to sustain the Catholic mission. There is a need to undertake research in programmes directed at the formation of young people, or investigate the areas that young people identify as potential sources of their spiritual capital.

Without doubt, the work of Gerald Grace has had an impact on Catholic education research in the UK. The articulation of a theoretical framework for research in Catholic education offers Catholic education the opportunity to present the necessary intellectual and cultural defence. In this context, the concept of spiritual capital, rooted in theory, but with a focus on relevance and application in practice has been invaluable. This reflects a key focus of Grace's work, that of Catholic education in practice; in what ways does an understanding of theories and concepts such as spiritual capital illuminate how Catholic schooling functions in changing and challenging circumstances, and make visible the Catholic mission of Catholic education in practice in Catholic schools, colleges, and universities?

Grace has also actively encouraged empirical research within Catholic schools, actively supporting researchers in the field, for example practising school leaders. Research in Catholic school leadership is providing vital insights into the changes that are taking place within Catholic schools. However, there is an urgent need for further research into to what extent spiritual capital is transforming or is in decline and how successful programmes of renewal within Catholic education are. Spiritual capital research needs to widen in scope; investigation of other sections of Catholic school communities could provide a rich source of data on the nature of spiritual capital in Catholic education. The legacy of Gerald Grace's work on spiritual capital is invaluable, sparking continuing empirical research in the field of Catholic education.

Notes

- 1 See Bourdieu (1986) and (1991).
- 2 Grace makes an important qualification that states 'Spiritual Capital in this definition is a resource of faith and values possessed by *all* faith-based schools and not only by Catholic ones' (see Grace (2002) p. 262, Note 1).
- 3 This does not imply 'indoctrination' of students, it rather refers to a Christian 'way of being' in the classroom, e.g. social relations and care of students.

- 4 Sustained efforts are needed in the future from interdisciplinary teams including education researchers, theologians, religious studies specialists and in-service teachers of religious education (and school chaplains) to find sensitive ways of evaluating 'spiritual growth' in our secondary schools.
- 5 This is a crucial area for development. School governors (with headteachers) are the ultimate source guarding the mission integrity of Catholic schools. The spiritual capital resource of governors needs more attention from the Church.

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