Sociology and Catholic education

The contribution of Grace

Meg Maguire

Introduction: Understanding the social

In 1984, Gerald Grace published a set of essays in a collection called *Education and the City: Theory, History and Contemporary Practice*. In the first chapter he set out a challenge to sociologists of urban schooling where he foregrounded a central dilemma that continues to bedevil the sociology of education more widely; that is, should the focus be with a ‘policy science’ approach and improving practices and provision through the generation of ‘constructive programmes’ or rather, should the emphasis be on ‘critical scholarship’?¹ Grace included an extract from C. Wright Mills to illuminate his response to this question – a perspective that he has refined over time and permeated into all of his writing and research. It is worth including this long extract right at the start of this chapter because it exemplifies the way in which Grace has always addressed innumerable educational matters through a social science and historical lens. It is the *leitmotif* in all he has done and in all he continues to do.

Certain types of critics, by the way, judge work in social science according to whether or not its conclusions are gloomy or sunshiny, negative or constructive. These sunshine moralists want a lyric upsurge, at least at the end: they are made happy by a sturdy little mood of earnest optimism, out of which we step forward fresh and shining. But the world we are trying to understand does not make all of us politically hopeful and morally complacent, which is to say, that social scientists sometimes find it difficult to play the cheerful idiot. Personally I happen to be a very optimistic type, but I must confess that I have never been able to make up my mind about whether something is so or not in terms of whether or not it leads to good cheer. First, one tries to get it straight, to make an adequate statement – if it is gloomy, too bad; if it leads to hope, fine. In the meantime, to cry for the ‘constructive programme’ and the ‘hopeful note’ is often a sign of incapacity to face facts as they are even when they are decidedly unpleasant – and it is irrelevant to truth or falsity and to judgements of *proper work in social science*.

(Mills, 1973, p. 89 cited in Grace, 1984, p. 43, my italics)

In *Faith, Mission and Challenge in Catholic Education: The Selected Works of Gerald Grace* (2016), a collection of Grace's highly influential writings in the area of Catholic Education Studies, a field which he has pioneered, this approach to 'proper social science' is powerfully evidenced. For example, influenced by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a theorist to whom he has returned many times, Grace identified and named the power and place of 'spiritual capital' in Catholic schools.² Through his interviews with sixty head teachers of Catholic schools, he illustrated the ways in which their vocational work was inspired by an 'animating form of spirituality' (Grace, 2010, p. 125). In this way, he took up and extended the theoretical frame of Bourdieu's notion of capitals, that is, various forms of assets, placing this approach firmly in the field of the Catholic school. While this feature of headship may seem *obvious* today and a core feature of positive leadership in any school, Grace combined sophisticated theoretical social science approaches with a grounded empirical exploration that recovered an ethical-moral pedagogical commitment in order to 'get things straighter' and clearer about Catholic headship. A feature of Grace's work has always been to relate theoretical ideas to empirical fieldwork in ways accessible to a wide range of readers.

Getting things straight

As I have already indicated, Gerald Grace has been writing and researching in the areas of educational policy, practice and provision for a considerable number of years. During this time, he has produced a substantial number of books, papers and reports. His contribution to the sociology of education has been wide ranging and inclusive but always with a central concern for the common good. His work has included some provocative challenges to educational thinking, particularly in some of his earlier work in urban sociology. His scholarship in the area of leadership in schools, while concentrating on the previously under-researched Catholic school system in England, has much to say to leaders of all schools everywhere concentrating as it does on matters of an ethics and morality that underpins headship. Those charged with leading other teachers and with the task of making wise choices and decisions have had their work celebrated as being centrally connected with a moral agenda (Grace, 2000). Grace has charted the complexities of headship and leadership with a specific focus on this work as one of 'mission integrity' in the Catholic school. However, he has always centred on the role these schools have to play in maintaining the common good and serving the needs of the poor – an interest reaching right back to his urban sociology of the 1970s onwards (Grace, 1978, p. 1984).

In preparing this chapter about aspects of the diverse and wide contributions made by Gerald Grace, as I have said, there are many different strands to his work that I could have selected for further discussion. However, what I want to do is concentrate on and explore his fascination both with Catholic education

and the social sciences and the insights that social science can lend to the study of Catholic education. For this reason, in what now follows I will centre on one piece of his work that combines these two facets; a chapter entitled ‘The Field of Catholic Education: Perspectives from Bourdieu and Bernstein’ (Grace, 2002). In drawing on one piece from his vast set of publications, my intention is to foreground Gerald Grace’s commitment to ‘judgements of proper work in social science’.

Catholic education and the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein

In this chapter, Grace argues that the sociological study of Catholic schools and education provision has been ‘relatively undeveloped and marginalised’ (2002, p. 25). More specifically, he claims that at the time of writing (2002), very little work exploring the ‘particular aspects of social theory to a deeper understanding of the field of Catholic education’ had been undertaken, other than some keynote work in the US.³ His argument is that ignoring the contribution that can be made through drawing on social theory may serve to position Catholicity in an ahistorical manner and reduce the capacity to produce a more powerful and reflexive account of the role and practices of Catholic education.

In the chapter, Grace draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein. I will start, as Grace does, by detailing the insights that he has taken from the work of Bourdieu and that he has applied to Catholic education. Bourdieu is perhaps most celebrated for his concepts or method of analysis; namely, his interwoven concepts of field, habitus and capital. Starting with ‘field’, Grace explains this concept as denoting ‘a social and cultural space characterised by a particular activity’ (2002, p. 26). So, for example, a school or a church can be a ‘field’. Drawing on Bourdieu, Grace makes the case that any field constitutes a setting where power relations are struggled over and where symbolic power is exercised. As Grace points out, the history of the Catholic Church is replete with instances of power struggles and contestations between different factions, different popes and different anti-popes. He also claims that over time, despite any contradictory evidence, the overt discourse of the Catholic Church has stressed ‘vocationalism, idealism, consensus, service and unity’ (2002, p. 26). In this way, the Catholic Church has marginalised and erased any internal debates and contestations or any other ‘difficulties’ in case they ‘disturbed’ the faithful. The point and value of using the concept of field is that it ‘compels’ (2002, p. 27) Catholic educationalists to face up to these struggles and contestations as part of the real, agentic and sometimes messy social worlds of all institutions, organisations and fields. Reading this argument in 2020, with the knowledge of the abhorrent abuse of power underpinning international and institutionalised child sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church now well established, even if not always dealt with fully and openly, demonstrates the need for honesty, dialogue and an admission of the dangers of power and an uncritical stance to ecclesiastical hierarchy. Situating the Church as a *field* where power relations and struggles over status and control characterise the

struggle that takes place in order to appropriate various forms of capital (such as the power to define and shape the social order) provides an account that allows for a richer and more robust account of contestations and a way in which to understand the social world in a more analytical rather than a 'received' and static manner.

Power, control and Bourdieu

Grace selects a number of key areas for consideration that come out of his application of a Bourdieusian perspective to Catholic education. He writes of 'legitimation struggles' and of 'symbolic power' and 'control struggles'. Starting with his argument around legitimation, he writes about how some critics challenged the validity of the separate Catholic education mission in the UK, especially after the radical proposals of Vatican II. Essentially the point was made that if Catholic schools and Catholic education were to become more inclusive, then these schools would have to be abolished. Catholic schools should change to become 'a "leaven" in the secular world' (Grace, 2002, p. 28). This argument was confined in the main to a small group of intellectual Catholics at the time but, importantly, as Grace points out, 'neither the hierarchy nor the Catholic community in general were ready for such a debate' (2002, p. 29). The habitus of the Catholic Church, those social patterns that endure over time but that shift to accommodate to specific contexts, become set in place to support various dispositions to think and act in certain ways. *Habitus* is a set of dispositions shaped by past events and different structures that influence how the social world is produced and imagined (Bourdieu, 1984). Positioning the Catholic Church as a habitus works to reveal its way of being and ways of controlling. So, in the example of calls that challenged the legitimacy of the Catholic school to exist, there was a monumental challenge to the well-established habitus of this particular field. In the face of this powerful critique to the legitimacy of Catholic schools to exist, the hierarchy was able to sideline and disregard this debate. As Grace points out, it was easy to ignore these debates in a period where what was valued (the habitus) was consensus, order and obedience towards the leadership of the clergy. To paraphrase Grace, Bourdieu had pointed out that a habitus defends itself from challenges to its hegemony by applying sets of avoidance strategies. This is what occurred in response to the arguments being made for the closure of Catholic schools post Vatican II. In a recent paper, Grace has returned to Bourdieu's work and its resonances for understanding and illuminating the power of religion in society. Bourdieu recognised that in the field of religions 'a constant struggle was always in progress between the institutional "priests" and the radical and heretical "prophets"' (Grace, 2020, p. 865).⁴

A second strand where Grace illuminates the power of Bourdieusian theory to interrogate Catholic education relates to the concept of 'symbolic power' – which is itself part of the process of legitimation. Bourdieu claimed that symbolic power was constructed out of 'culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status

and authority and it functions in practice as a powerful means of communication and potential domination' (Grace, 2002, p. 30). In the chapter under consideration, Grace argued that the Catholic Church holds considerable symbolic power, which has traditionally been wielded by the bishops who have controlled education provision. As Grace says, even so, there have been struggles and challenges to this panoply of symbolic power over time. There have been differences of opinion as to what Catholic schools and Catholic education should look like. He cites some of the early struggles between Rome and certain Religious Orders (and makes the point that the Jesuits have always been able to steer their own ship to a large degree). His point is that even in periods where symbolic power has dominated, there have always been struggles over points of definition and provision. However, he does say that the Church has taken the position that 'it has been unedifying to draw attention to them' (p. 30) but that the existence of challenges and political struggles demonstrate the reality that there is no 'simple' account of consensus or unity. Things in reality have always been a little more vexatious and contentious. He picks out for further examination clergy-laity relations in Catholic educational settings as well as the tensions that exist in the policy landscape.

One of the fundamental features of the Catholic Church in the UK is that it has been patterned by strong and clearly delineated hierarchical relationships between the clergy and laity. As Grace says, this relationship has been mediated by social class hierarchies since the beginning of urbanisation in the UK. Many of the large number of migrants coming into the newly emerging cities were working-class families of Irish Catholic heritage. While religion provided a buttress against the vicissitudes of urban life, it was a very top-down arena where priests and their bishops' authority was rarely if ever challenged. Grace believes that this power-hierarchy continued well into the twentieth century. However, by the 1970s in the UK, there was a move to engage more directly with parents in a new education policy settlement where older partnerships between state and churches were dissolving to some degree, where parents were moving into the driving seat, in theory at least, through tactics such as choice of schools. It was a time where the Catholic Church had 'to conform its educational arrangements to policies devised by governments strongly influenced by New Right ideologies of market forces, competition, individualism and consumer choice in schooling' (Grace, 2020, p. 32).

'Parent power' was and is a 'complex phenomenon which can be appropriated to serve various social and political ends' (Grace, 2002, p. 34). For example, parents could decide to change their school's status to become 'grant-maintained',⁵ which would effectively remove the traditional voice of the bishopric in these schools. Parents could even choose to change the character of the school in new ways that 'could oppose diocesan reorganisation plans' (p. 32). For example, if a small Catholic school were being threatened with closure, parents could organise to 'save' their school by opting out of diocesan control through becoming grant maintained. Grace details some of the *cause-celebres* of the period, most notably

the struggle round Cardinal Vaughan School in London and others ‘who defied episcopal authority by voting for grant maintained status’ and, in the case of Cardinal Vaughan, threatened to take Cardinal Hume to court to assert their legal rights to control and manage the school and to take decisions that may well have been in their own interests but were seen as not in the interests of the wider Catholic community. It is worth citing Grace at some length here:

The socio-cultural struggle within the Catholic community was large. Not only had a group of Catholic headteachers, school governors and parents defied the advice of their Cardinal and their bishops on a key issue of educational policy but some of them had been prepared to ‘take the Cardinal to court’ on the issue. Such events were unprecedented within the English Catholic community and they made visible the limitations of clerical symbolic power when faced by the alliance of ‘strong state’ and ‘strong parentocracy’.

(2002, p. 37)

While this is a significant moment in the history of Catholic schools in England, here this example is cited to illustrate a challenge to the older habitus and symbolic power of the Catholic Church and its educational provision. Being able to ‘read’ these events through a stronger theory-driven lens using the concepts of habitus and symbolic power affords a more critical and analytical understanding of Catholic education over time and in its current formation too (see Byrne and Devine, 2017; Grace 2020).

Pedagogy, knowledge and Bernstein

According to Gerald Grace, a second major social theorist whose work can provide a powerful and critical ‘intellectual resource’ (Grace, 2002, p. 25) for understanding Catholic education at a deeper level is Basil Bernstein. Grace claims that, as with Bourdieu’s analysis, the application of Bernstein’s work to Catholic education theory and practice has also remained underdeveloped. He concentrates on two core strands of Bernstein’s work around pedagogy as well as knowledge and the curriculum. Starting with pedagogy, Grace claims that Bernstein’s work on what he termed ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ pedagogy ‘have proved fruitful in empirical research in various educational settings’ (2002, p. 49).

Bernstein saw visible pedagogy as being a concentration on the ‘performance’ of the learner; ‘where the pedagogy is visible, it is likely to be standardised and so schools are directly comparable as to their successes and failures’ (1975, p. 31). For instance, visible pedagogy is reflected in concerns with outcomes and attainment, with league tables and scholarly achievements; with aspects of the neoliberal market form. In contrast, invisible pedagogy refers to those processes involved in socialisation and the construction of desired dispositions and behaviours. As Grace

says, 'at the most general level, invisible pedagogy is designed to be person forming whereas visible pedagogy is designed to be product forming' (2002, p. 49).

Now when it comes to applying these concepts to an analysis of the field of Catholic education, Grace makes the point that the schooling of young people has always involved *both* of these approaches. And it is important to underline his argument (made in 2002) that many headteachers of the period when he wrote this chapter attended schools that had foregrounded visible pedagogies and 'were themselves socialised within ... the visible pedagogies of traditional schools'. Thus it could be predicted that they would reproduce 'aspects of this academic culture within contemporary schooling' (p. 50). However, Grace argues that this approach simultaneously still valued the sacred and 'concepts of service to community and the public good' (p. 50). What Grace was concerned about was the stronger emphasis on visible pedagogy that was an intrinsic part of the insertions of market forces into all forms of education. Again, it is worth citing Grace in full in order to convey his concerns and also to illustrate the power of his contention; that drawing on social science theory really can help researchers move to a deeper understanding of educational change, the deep structure and not only the surface structure.

The danger of this new dominant form is that it dislocates knowledge from a relation to the sacred or to the community and replaces it with a utilitarian, commodified and individualistic relation. While Catholic schools may be 'successful' and 'effective' within this new visible pedagogy, such success will not articulate well with the principles enshrined in their mission statements.

(Grace, 2002, p. 50)

While Grace warned about schools valorising visible pedagogical outcomes at the expense of their spiritual mission, a stress in policy that came from central governments, he was far more concerned about the threats inherent in aspects of the invisible pedagogy and its focus on the formation of the person. Invisible pedagogies have, he claims, always been central to the mission of the Catholic school. To paraphrase his words, while these schools have had a visible pedagogy of direct religious teaching, alongside this there has been a central commitment to support and develop the 'good Catholic'; a less tangible and less visible outcome altogether. Grace warns of what he sees as the inherent danger of Catholic schools taking on the need to do well in the market place and assert themselves as bastions of academic excellence rather than a more traditional concern with what he sees as the primary purpose of the Catholic school: the production and nurture of good people.⁶ The trick perhaps is to be able to hold on to both visible and invisible pedagogies in the pursuit of Catholic education: a concern that has been a significant endeavour over time on the part of Gerald Grace.

Drawing on some of the substantive debates about knowledge that are central to Bernstein's work, Grace believes that the main threat is a dehumanisation of

knowledge. He cites Bernstein (1996, p. 87) in order to highlight the dangers implicit in moves towards a marketised form of knowledge.

Knowledge should flow like money to wherever it can create advantage and profit. Indeed knowledge is not like money, it is money... Once knowledge is separated from inwardness, from commitments, from personal dedication, from the deep structure of the self, then people may be moved about, substituted for each other and excluded from the market.

(Bernstein, 1996, p. 87, cited in Grace, 2002, p. 46)

Bernstein also generated two key concepts, *classification* and *framing*, that helped to unpack some of the complexities of curriculum studies. By classification, Bernstein was referring to the boundaries that support and maintain subjects and practices. He argued that where boundaries were strong and there was insulation between subjects, this generated distinctive aspects of the curriculum, for example mathematics or biology. Where the boundaries were less well insulated, 'subjects' became more diffuse and less distinctive, for example environmental education perhaps. Grace takes this set of ideas and argues that historically Catholic education has been strongly classified and bounded and 'insulated from the secular world' (2002, p. 47). Since Vatican II, these boundaries have been weakened, he believes, by contextual shifts in ideology, politics and other social changes. Grace adds that this weakening has been forced upon Catholic schools because of other factors such as the reduction in priests and Religious Orders in schools and a major shift in the 'distinctive habitus which they represented in schools' (2002, p. 47). Also there have been systemic policy reforms that have eroded the autonomy of Church schools to a large degree, certainly since the 1980s onwards in the English setting.

Bernstein's second major curriculum concept is that of 'framing'. This refers to the power relations that shape what is to count as knowledge, the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – the message systems of the curriculum. Historically, the curriculum of the Catholic school was determined by the diocese or the teaching order that provided schools even before the state took up this responsibility. When the state took over the responsibility for education provision, initially as Grace notes (2002, p. 48), 'the degree of relative autonomy for a distinctively Catholic framing of priorities was large'. From the 1980s onwards, however, in the light of a massive shift in England where the 'secret garden' of the curriculum was opened to the control of the educational state, what ensued was a 'strong framing regime on all schools regardless of religious character' (2002, p. 48). This incursion has continued and currently in England is driven by a (traditional) knowledge-based approach that stresses the need for tightly classified (traditional) subjects as well as a discourse of the need to meet global market demands and be wealth producing. In these contexts, and drawing on issues of curriculum framing, Grace (2002, p. 48) believes that this approach can drive research questions such as 'what remains distinctive in the cultural messages carried by Catholic schools'?

New thinking, new scholarship and new research in Catholic education

At the end of the chapter that I have concentrated on here, Grace finishes with a return to the central question of ‘social theory and the study of Catholic education’. He makes his case cogently:

Aspects of social theory applied to Catholic education have the potential to illuminate the field, to provide greater in-depth analysis of issues and to generate fruitful theoretical frameworks for future research and enquiry.
(2002, p. 51)

Through using some of the key concepts in Bourdieu’s writing (field, habitus, capital and symbolic power) as well as Bernstein’s key concepts of visible and invisible pedagogy and the classification and framing of knowledge, Grace demonstrated that this sort of ‘*proper work in social science*’ could be extremely valuable in extending the study of Catholic education through critical scholarship. While this chapter was written some time ago, the relevance of its argumentation to a collection entitled *New Thinking, New Scholarship and New Research in Catholic Education* is still significant. In the examples that Grace has provided of the application of these key concepts from Bernstein and Bourdieu, it is possible to identify and articulate some key analytical questions that are central to this academic endeavour. Questions about the relevance of faithed schooling in a secularising society. Questions about what should count as knowledge in these complex and ever-changing times. Questions about power, hierarchy and influence – still central issues in unpacking educational policy and provision. In arguing for proper work in social science, Grace believes that the study of Catholic education can benefit from this approach. As he details in a more recent piece, ‘contemporary sociologists of education should “take religion seriously” and go beyond their own personal paradigms in future research’ (Grace, 2020, p. 867). Finally, I wonder if Gerald Grace would still select Bourdieu and Bernstein’s writings as being his choice of social scientists whose work demonstrates the contribution that sociology can make to understanding and theorising Catholic education. I rather suspect that he might!

Notes

- 1 At the time, Grace also used the term ‘policy scholarship’ because he believed that policy needed an interdisciplinary approach, using history, sociology, economics and politics to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of policy.
- 2 He first defined ‘spiritual capital’ (2002, p. 236) as ‘resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition’. This was not limited only to Catholic religious tradition but applied to all religious traditions.
- 3 Grace argues that he became ‘converted’ to the serious study of Catholic education following his reading of Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee and Peter Holland’s (1993) brilliant research *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* from the USA.

- 4 This raises the question, was Jesus Christ perceived as a radical or heretical prophet by the 'institutional Church' of his time.
- 5 'Grant-maintained schools' were an educational innovation in England, introduced by a Conservative government to encourage schools to 'opt out' of the relationship with the Local Education Authority (LEA) and make a direct financial arrangement with central government in the 1980s.
- 6 Catholic schools before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) had a primary aim of forming 'Good Catholics'. In more recent years, in a more pluralist social context, contemporary Catholic schools have a primary aim of forming 'Good People' who may be Catholic but who may not be, i.e. a more inclusive and open access principle now characterises many Catholic schools in England.

References

- Bernstein, B. (1975). Class and pedagogies: Visible and invisible, *Educational Studies*, 1:1, pp. 23–41.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London, Routledge.
- Bryk, A., Lee, V. and Holland, P. (1993). *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Byrne, R., and Devine, D. (2017). Theorising Catholic Education through the lens of Bernstein and Bourdieu. *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 9:1, pp. 29–44.
- Grace, G. (1978). *Teachers, Ideology and Control: A Study in Urban Education*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Grace, G. (1984). *Education and the City: Theory, History and Contemporary Practice*, London/Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Grace, G. (1993). On the study of school leadership: Beyond education management, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 41:4, pp. 353–365.
- Grace, G. (2000). Research and the challenges of contemporary school leadership: The contribution of critical scholarship, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 48:3, pp. 231–247.
- Grace, G. (2002). *The Field of Catholic Education. Perspectives from Bourdieu and Bernstein*, in *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality*, London/New York: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 24–52.
- Grace, G. R. (2010). Renewing Spiritual Capital: An Urgent Priority for the Future of Catholic Education Internationally, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2:2, 117–128.
- Grace, G. (2016). *Faith, Mission and Challenge in Catholic Education: Selected Writings of Gerald Grace*. London: Routledge, World Library of Educationalists.
- Grace, G. (2020). Taking religions seriously in the sociology of education: Going beyond the secular paradigm, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41:6, pp. 859–869.