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Peter Hemming (2015) *Religion in the Primary School: Ethos, Diversity, Citizenship*. London, Routledge

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Hemming's book addresses some weighty issues – the place of religion in public life, and in particular in education, and how as a society we negotiate the increasingly multi-faith nature of our population, as well as notions of citizenship belonging and diversity. It is to Hemming's considerable credit that that book engages with these issues in a highly accessible way.

Through case studies of two schools, a community primary (here called Rainbow Hill) and a Catholic primary school (Holy Cross), Hemming considers both the schools' engagement with religion and attempts to transmit particular values to their pupils, in order to ensure the children's personal and social development, and to establish a sense of a collective identity. This is not a book on the position and validity of faith schools per se, although the arguments are briefly rehearsed. Hemming discusses the concept of post-secularism in depth, arguing that 'the binary distinction between the "religious" and the "secular"' (p.57) is too simplistic and fails to account for 'the way in which Western "secular" societies remain saturated with religious concepts such as Christian charity...or particular Christian manifestations of ethical and human morality' (ibid). A further discussion of citizenship and diversity follows. Hemming argues that citizenship is 'viewed as a complex process rather than a fixed given, encompassing both rights and belonging, and constituted through subjective and often quite contradictory practices and discourses' (p.25). In order to understand these processes we must consider the way in which 'the state permeates the ordinary and unexceptional experiences of everyday life' (ibid); Hemming notes that in response to a state retreat from multiculturalism towards integration, increasingly minority communities are required to demonstrate an adherence to majority norms, morals and values (such as the 'British' values which schools are now required to promote).

Both schools had a multi-faith and multi-ethnic population (Hemming does not comment on the social class profile) and were located in an urban area in the north of England. Hemming acted as a teaching assistant with one particular class group in each school, in order to conduct participant observation, and he also interviewed teachers, parents and children (the latter in pairs). The children were also asked to act out and then discuss particular vignettes that focused on moments of religious/cultural tension.

As expected there were some differences between the two schools with Rainbow Hill, the community school, emphasising liberal values such as diversity, inclusion and respect for individual difference. Holy Cross however, was more focused on a citizenship ethic that stressed the belief that God loved all equally regardless of differences (p.116). Rainbow Hill had little overt engagement with religion and operated within a liberal, humanist secular framework of values and priorities, whilst Holy Cross was formally working within a Catholic framework. The crux of Hemming's analysis is that there were in fact many commonalities between the two schools. Values at Rainbow Hill were explicitly taught through PSHCE (Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education) rather than RE, as well as through assemblies, policy documents, and less explicit modes such as staff role modelling. At Holy Cross values teaching derived from Christian Catholic belief systems. However, there was a common focus on caring in terms of both care and concern for the children from the adults, and on the children displaying caring behaviour. Hemming suggests that the focus on caring positions the children as passive, dependent and vulnerable, a perspective which resulted in a marginalization of pupil voice. Although both schools had school (pupil) councils, Hemming argues that they were not strong outlets for pupil voice, an assertion which could have been further illustrated. Hemming also notes that parents interviewed from both schools had similar views about the importance of the school in developing the children as individuals through the accrual of emotional capital (p.67). Both schools are invested in what Hemming, after Arlie Hochschild, calls 'emotion work'. Through such sessions as circle time children can discuss how they could/should interact with each other. Additionally both schools emphasised respect for others and kindness, thereby explicitly positioning bullying or racism as a major infraction of the schools' rules and ethos. The justification for these values was presented differently; at Holy Cross the rationale was compliance with messages from the Bible and Jesus' teaching, whilst approved values and behaviours at Rainbow Hill were understood simply as good, moral ways of being. In the vignettes activity, Hemming states that the children were often quick to present socially acceptable views in their discussions, although he continues by suggesting that there were signs that some children had not fully adopted the schools' messages (which of course may conflict with messages from home, especially regarding different cultural practices), and were involved in (citing Hochschild again) 'surface', rather than 'deep' acting. As values education seems to be increasing in popularity in primary schools, Hemming makes the important point that there are 'limitations of teaching socially cohesive values when children can merely repeat rhetoric or demonstrate 'surface' acting without necessarily understanding their importance and then undermine these discourses with their everyday practices' (p.80).

Next Hemming turns to the way in which the schools developed a cohesive, collective identity, using shared rituals and practices. Hemming emphasises the embodied nature of these, using assemblies as an example – the children discuss being bored and fidgety, as well as enjoying group singing and the giving out of awards and prizes. As a Catholic school, Holy Cross had a particular and distinctive set of religious rituals with which the children were familiar and which Hemming feels resulted in Holy Cross engendering a much stronger

feeling of community and togetherness than at Rainbow Hill' (p.88), a sense that he later refers to as bonding social capital. However he goes on to consider the effect on the Muslim children attending the school of not taking part in many of the frequent religious events. Rainbow Hill, despite or because of its somewhat looser sense of community, was found to be effective at bridging social capital through its involvement in the local geographical community surrounding the school.

In the final analysis chapter, Hemming considers religious citizenship. There has been a long history of critique of multicultural practices in primary schools for focusing on the surface and the exotic, an approach often referred to as the 3 'S's' - saris, samosas and steel drums (Troyna 1993). Hemming identifies in Rainbow Hill a phenomenon common in multi-ethnic schools; that despite marking other festivals, Christmas (and sometimes other Christian festivals such as Easter or Harvest festival) retains a dominance unmatched by the art activities or stories to celebrate Diwali and Eid. Likewise whilst accommodations were made in both schools for other faiths (days off for religious festivals, arrangements to support children who are fasting) these only went so far and did not alter the fundamental organisation of the school or its practices. 'School life was still loosely based on a Christian cultural model' (p.113). Hemming notes that Muslim children at both schools devised their own techniques for negotiating prayers and assemblies for example 'revealing that they often changed the words of the Christian prayers so that they were appropriate for Islam or prayed to Allah in their heads' (p.109). He makes a brief reference to those adults - parents and teachers - who felt that the schools existing practices went too far to accommodate other religions.

In the conclusion, Hemming emphasises the degree of compatibility between the two schools despite their different underlying philosophies. 'Both schools were aiming to develop an appreciation of nature, awe, wonder and human relationships and an understanding of the moral values of right and wrong, tolerance, respect, caring and honesty in their pupils, even though they had different reasons for doing so' (p.117). This compatibility between a faith and a secular school is, Hemming argues, an example of post secularism 'where religion can be "located" within apparently "secular" places' (p.119). In Rainbow Hill we can see the subtle, unspoken and taken for granted influence of Christianity on the school culture in mundane and everyday ways. Hemming reiterates the shared focus of the two schools on values of caring and respect, and argues that, in relation to the two schools, citizenship and a sense of belonging is influenced and shaped by 'embodied practices and emotions' which point to the 'non-rational and non discursive aspects of citizenship'. A little more detail here would have been helpful. I take Hemming to mean that citizenship could be taught - but is not - more explicitly, as having a political form involving rights, as well as responsibilities, but instead citizenship is understood as membership of the school community - provided that the child can display the correct form of emotions and practices. But I may be over-stating and/or mis-representing his argument. Hemming concludes by noting that maintained faith schools should consider how they can serve and include pupils from different or no faiths, and in doing so, go beyond simply exempting them from specific

religious events. In my view, this is an argument unlikely to be accepted by the faith school sector who would see such a move as diluting the religiousity of their schools. In terms of values education, the role of schools in teaching values is, I think, more established now, given, for example, the growing interest in 'character education', than when Hemming was conducting his fieldwork (2007-8). As he notes the requirement that all schools must promote the British values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths, is in some respects evidence of the state prioritising schools as a site for values transmission. On the issue of the continued existence of faith schools, Hemming does not take an explicit position. Instead he concludes that given that high levels of congruence between secular and religious perspectives can exist, this shared ground is the terrain for further debate. Of course, the faith school in this study is Catholic (the 2000 Catholic maintained schools in England & Wales educate roughly 10% of the population). As the embedded influence of Christianity in a supposedly secular society looms large in Hemming's analysis, it would be interesting to consider if the findings may have been different if the faith school was one of the 48 maintained Jewish schools or 21 maintained Muslim schools (Schools Week 13/6/16), although I suspect a significant degree of commonality with regard to values transmission would still have been found.

There were points when reading this book when I missed a fuller and deeper discussion, but Hemming covers a lot of ground in a relatively slim and accessible volume. Overall, I found his empirical analysis of post-secularism in education to be a fascinating and insightful study.

Carol Vincent, UCL Institute of Education

References

Troyna, B. (1993) *Racism and education*. Buckingham: Open University Press