

INTERVIEW WITH MARIE GRIFFIN, CHAIRPERSON OF THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP IN IRELAND

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Prof. Grace encourages people to do research in Catholic education and to write it up. This might seem like an easy job but it’s not! Many practitioners are engaging in interesting innovative practice and research but often lack the time, experience, confidence, and motivation to write up their work.”
- “When I went to meet him first in London, he was welcoming and so easy to talk to... Prof. Grace lives the mission of kindness, humility and servant leadership. This is good!”

Could you briefly introduce yourself and explain what your work on Catholic education entails?

My name is Marie Griffin and I am the Chairperson of the Catholic Education Partnership (CEP) in Ireland. The CEP is an oversight body for Catholic education at the primary, second-level and third-level in Ireland and has a remit to be an authoritative voice for Catholic education. Catholic schools make up approximately 89 percent of schools at the primary level and nearly 50 percent at the second-level in Ireland. At the third level, the number of Catholic colleges has been reduced significantly, particularly in the area of teacher training. Part of CEP’s role in the future will be to bring cohesion to Catholic education across the sectors while acknowledging that the primary sector has to become more diverse and that Catholic primary schools will have to be divested to the State.

How and when did you first meet with Prof. Grace and how did you interact with him over the years?

I met Prof. Grace when I was CEO of CEIST (Catholic Education an Irish Schools’ Trust), which is a patron of 107 second-level Catholic schools across Ireland. Prof. Grace gave a keynote address to the CEIST annual conference in 2015 and we have kept in touch since then.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? This interview is with Marie Griffin, Chairperson of the Catholic Education Partnership (CEP) in Ireland. The interview is part of a series in honor of Professor Gerald Grace’s retirement from St Mary’s University.

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In his keynote address, Prof Grace presented a model for evaluating the mission of Catholic schools to match the performative evaluative model used by the State inspectorate. While such a mission evaluation has not yet been formalized in Ireland, it will be a necessary future step for Catholic schools.

How do you see Prof. Grace's main contributions to practice or research in Catholic education?

Prof. Grace encourages people to do research in Catholic education and to write it up. This might seem like an easy job but it's not! Many practitioners are engaging in interesting innovative practice and research but often lack the time, experience, confidence, and motivation to write up their work. Having Prof. Grace as a gentle persuader, supporter, and scaffolder is very enabling. He is also a very good source of scholarship about what is going on in Catholic education across the world.

In what way did Prof. Grace influence your own practice or research in Catholic education?

Prof. Grace encouraged me to do an article for *International Studies in Catholic Education* and I would never have done so otherwise. The article charted the first decade of CEIST, an Irish education trust company. I looked at the origins of CEIST, the reasons for its establishment and how it engaged with a number of stakeholders in its early years and subsequent progress. The article proved very useful for the Trust company itself, hopefully for other such companies, and as a chronicle of the first such education trust company in Ireland.

How can Catholic education scholars make sure that their research is useful to practitioners?

By staying close to practitioners, co-writing with them, getting feedback and engaging in practice in schools themselves where possible. Useful research almost presents itself to researchers from the agenda that is taking place in schools. CEIST always has a workshop at its annual conference for presentations by teachers in the schools that are currently engaging in research. It is always very well received and attended, and it gives other teachers and leaders ideas for practice.

What are for you the most critical areas of future research in Catholic education, and why is that?

Listening to the voices of parents because if they don't send their children to Catholic schools, there is no future. In Ireland, many parents are vocal about the lack of choice of school type, particularly at the primary level. The

Church acknowledges that more diversity is needed and is very willing to divest schools to the State. However, there are many parents who actively choose Catholic schools for their children and would want to retain that choice as well. It will be important to know why those parents choose Catholic schools, what they want for their children, and how the Catholic sector can respond. It will also be important to have Catholic parents more involved in the faith lives of their children and not leave all faith formation to schools.

What is your advice for graduate students who may be interested in conducting research in Catholic education?

Get some practice as a teacher in a Catholic school first so that they can truly understand their area of research. If researchers don't understand how schools work, they can make basic errors in research design (e.g. asking too much of busy schools at particularly busy times of the school year) and/or in recommendations. Having school experience also gives researchers credibility with their colleagues at the coalface. In doing my own doctoral research, for example, being able to engage with Principals, as a former Principal myself, made it more worthwhile for the work and hopefully for the participants.

Is there a personal anecdote of your interactions with Prof. Grace that you would like to share?

When I went to meet him first in London (I was visiting there), he was welcoming and so easy to talk to. By the time he came to the CEIST conference, he was like an old friend. Prof. Grace lives the mission of kindness, humility and servant leadership. This is good!



Photo: CEIST team with keynote speaker Prof. Gerald Grace at the 2015 CEIST Conference.