

EDUCATIONAL VISION: A MARIST PERSPECTIVE

JOHN RICHARD MCMAHON

B.Sc.(Hons.)(Monash) M.Ed.(Monash)

B.Theol.(M.C.D.)

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to understand the current educational vision of the Marist Brothers' Teaching Congregation, a Catholic religious order founded by Marcellin Champagnat in rural France in 1817 which currently has 5,000 Brothers educating young people in 76 countries. The Congregation is conceptualised as a charismatic social movement. Using case study methodology, it is investigated as a single bounded system comprising many sub-systems, namely its individual school communities, which can be studied both as interesting in themselves and as leading to a significant measure of understanding of the overall system. The work of Marist Brothers in three schools in three continents is studied in detail: Marcellin College, Melbourne, St. Mungo's Academy, Glasgow and Archbishop Molloy High School, New York.

Interviews, document analyses and observations are carried out over a two year period, from 1990 to 1992. Theory contributes to the research, first, through an appropriation and adaptation of Max Weber's sociology of charismatic authority, second, through a study of the self understanding of religious congregations as reflected in and influenced by the current theology of religious life, and third, through brief analyses of some educational social movements with a claim to be charismatic, in particular the United World Colleges and the Society of Jesus. With the data from the three case study schools collected and analysed, initial research findings were sent to Marist educators in eight further schools in seven different countries. These educators affirmed those findings which coincided with their experience of Marist educational vision and added other findings based on their current work.

Some theoretical conclusions are drawn about the fruitfulness of bringing the theological and sociological literatures on charisma into relationship with each other. A series of more practical conclusions relates to the nature of Marist educational vision, the possibility of pursuing this vision with different levels of contribution in terms of numbers

and roles of Brothers in a school, the relationship of Brothers to lay staff in Marist schools, and the process of school self-definition of educational vision.

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INTRODUCTION

*Write the vision; make it
plain on tablets.*

Habakkuk¹

Marcellin College, Melbourne, a Catholic secondary school for boys, is owned and administered by the Marist Brothers, a Religious Order belonging to the Catholic Church. Soon after I began my term as principal of the school, my colleagues and I decided to research, articulate and implement what we hoped would be an appropriate educational vision for the school for the 1980s. We sensed two options for this well respected, middle class, catholic secondary school - to go with the grain of its evolution towards a grammar school vision of education or to encourage a more comprehensive vision with a deliberate and explicit basis in Christian and Catholic sources and teachings. In moving the school towards the second option, I became aware of the issue of the specific educational vision of the Marist Brothers. I was familiar with the recent work from a range of sources on the goals of catholic education and had a more or less worked-out position on those goals, but found I lacked an understanding of any specifically Marist perspective, whether actual or potential, on them. As a member of the Marist Brothers' Congregation, I felt a responsibility and a keen desire to research the questions 'What is, and what might be, the educational vision of the Marist Brothers' Congregation today?'

Fullan observes that the role of vision appears in every book on educational excellence (1992, p.44). At Marcellin College, we found seeking a vision implied answers to the question Why? 'Why are we here? Why are we committed to our cause? Why do we believe it is important? Why should we have a programme of action at all?' (Avis, 1992, p.113). During those years from 1982 to 1989, our school community began to get involved in justice issues, for example. An annual 'Peace Week', initiated by the Marist Brother Chaplains on the staff, highlighted issues such as those surrounding the Cold

¹ Ch.2 Vs.2.

War. Some in the school community felt we should be participating in public demonstrations opposing nuclear proliferation. Others felt we should maintain our efforts on more academic pursuits, and especially on examination results. Such questions continue to emerge in Marist schools as our world experiences revolutionary change. Now that the Berlin wall has crumbled, apartheid been outvoted, war fought in the Persian Gulf, claims made for national status by countries in the Soviet bloc and the former Yugoslavia and women priests welcomed to the Anglican Communion, questions which emerge include (1) What kind of education should students receive for such a relatively unknown future? (2) Will today's skills be beneficial in years to come? (3) How many young people will get jobs when they complete their schooling? (4) Will there be peace? (5) Will the next generation be living in an irretrievably damaged environment? (6) What will be the state of the world economy? (7) What can a religious congregation, such as the Marist Brothers, contribute to this world of the future? (8) What should be the educational vision of such a Congregation?

Vision has been described as 'the product of exercising many skills in a holistic way to create a mental picture of what the future could and should look like' (Patterson, Purkey and Parker, 1986, p.88 quoted in Fullan, 1992, p.45). Flood sees such a vision helping to 'both get the best out of people and align them with the goals of the organisation' (Flood, 1992, p.33). Charismatic people are seized by a vision. Martin Luther King articulated his vision when he proclaimed: 'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] are created equal' (King, quoted in Malone, 1991, p.34). For Christians, Jesus Christ proclaims the vision of the Reign of God (AEC, 1992, p.6). Charismatic people who found religious congregations, like Marcellin Champagnat, see a particular way of co-operating in God's plan. They seek to help people experience the Reign of God and, in many cases, abandon the status quo and look to the future (Congar, 1986, p.70). Members of religious teaching congregations have traditionally seen a close link between facilitating this Reign of God and the work of education.

Starting the research and seeking out a theoretical framework, I considered two broad strategic options: the theoretically eclectic and the theoretically coherent. The matter was resolved only when, on following a recommendation to acquaint myself with the work of Max Weber, I found in his central concept of charismatic authority an idea of great illuminative power in relation to my subject. The concept of the charismatic social movement became central to my work - as understood first by Weber and then by contemporary members of religious congregations and by educators working in organisations with both secular and religious aims.

1992 heralds the 175th year of the Marist Brothers' Congregation. In seeking to understand the Congregation's educational vision, I adopt Lawton's belief that educational theory is 'essentially generated out of successful practice' (1992, p.141). I adopt case study methodology to study Marist schools, one in each of Australia, Scotland and the United States. I then invite responses to the findings from schools in other countries.

The following research questions prove helpful in entering the research:

- (1) What is the nature of the contribution being made by the Marist Brothers' Congregation in Catholic secondary schools today?
- (2) Where does the educational vision of the founder of the Marist Brothers, Marcellin Champagnat, fit into this contribution?
- (3) What part does the Marist Congregation's history play in its educational vision today?
- (4) How do Marist educators resolve the tension between the need to be historically authentic to the educational vision of Marcellin Champagnat, while still being relevant, and even 'prophetic', for today's educational needs?

As the findings emerged and my thinking developed, these questions increasingly fed back into the original and basic question: What is the Marist Vision of Education?

1st Sunday of Advent, 1992.