

Developing qualifications for schoolworkers (Part 1)

Some thoughts and ideas

If you're looking for conclusions and answers, you may be a little disappointed with what follows. That it to say, this is meant to be a contribution to the debate and discussion about how we better equip Christians to visit and work in schools and not a finished thesis!

Starting points

There are a lot of Christians visiting schools and offering some kind of service. Of the nine thousand or so church youth workers, most have some contact with a school, whether it's taking an assembly or lesson, providing pastoral or mentoring services or one or the many other kinds of input. And there are another thousand or so full time schools specialists mostly working for schools trusts and organisations like YFC. And that's not including the many ministers and others who also may be doing occasional input in a local school.

So a good question to ask is 'what qualifications do we have for this work?'

Some have an educational background. In a survey conducted in 2007, 22% of full time schoolworkers had previously worked as a teacher (and 24% of church youth workers... interesting how high that is, by the way). That means those workers will have formally qualified as teachers and therefore have considerable training as well as a deeper understanding of the education system.

If they're a church youth worker, it's increasingly likely they've completed an undergraduate degree in youthwork and are JNC qualified. Although most church youth worker courses don't include specific material for working in schools, obviously some of the pastoral and other skills taught are transferable to the school context.

There are also a few courses out there for schoolworkers: not many admittedly, but most significantly 'Schools for Schoolworkers', the five day course run by Scripture Union. And of course there are plenty of other courses and training that may be applicable to working in a school: for example, a training course on preaching might add to your public presentation skills and help you when taking a school assembly.

Many others, including me, will have picked up skills as we go, attending the odd course, but mostly learning how to take a lesson or assembly through the experience of doing so regularly, with all the highs and lows that entails.

Having said all that, I think we could safely say that there is a need for more training for schoolworkers, especially in the skills you need for working in education.

Why the discussion

So what's the debate and discussion here? Well, on two fronts.

First, I want to suggest it would be useful to go through the process of developing what might be called a list of key skills for schoolworkers. In other words, instead of starting with what training is available, let's start with what training we might need. If you could boil down the skills of a schoolworker into some kind of list, what would they be? In the world of academic qualifications, these would be called **competencies**.

I think it would be incredibly useful to try and draw together a comprehensive list of competencies. Not only would it help us see where the holes are in the training we need to provide ('we' being the schoolwork community), but it would also to help us as individuals think about where we need to grow and develop personally.

The second reason for needing to explore qualifications and training is the growing expectation of schools for those working in them to have recognisable accreditation. By that I mean those moments when a Head or teacher might ask 'what are your qualifications for doing this?' Now for me, up until now, that question has been rare, but there is some evidence that this will increase in the coming years and that schoolworkers who are regularly visiting a school might need to show they are competent to be doing so.

The key issue here is, if that is to be the case, finding accreditation that's recognised in schools. In other words, it's no good my telling a school I have the Sunbury Schools Trust certificate in schoolwork (I made that up, in case you were wondering) if it means nothing to the school. Heads are likely to want qualifications that they recognise and trust.

So those are the questions, now for some answers, or at least a discussion of how they might be found.

Developing competencies

What does it take to be a schoolworker? The truth is, it's an incredibly wide-ranging and demanding role. Could it be one of the most challenging jobs in ministry? Well, I would say that wouldn't I.

But stop and think about it for a minute. If you're a schoolworker you almost certainly have to take school assemblies on a regular basis. That means you have to have your skills as a public speaker finely honed. There's no harsher audience than 250 Year 10's. And first thing in the morning isn't exactly the easiest time to pull off a funny, insightful and interesting talk.

Minutes later you could find yourself in the Head's office. Not to be told off, unless your assembly was particularly bad, but to talk about your work in the school. You'll need to be able to hold your own in this context, including understanding educational language and presenting yourself effectively. You'll need to know your PANDA report from your core curriculum requirements? Then it's off to a classroom for an RE lesson. Here you'll need to have mastered behaviour management strategies that will keep the most truculent 13 year old in check, teach effectively, organise group work and, of course, have the creativity to have thought up the lesson material in the first place.

Exhausted? Fortunately it's break time. But here you'll need a different set of skills again. Walking around the playing field chatting to students, this is where your detached youth work skills, friendliness and knack for remembering names will need to spring into action. You may need to have the courage to walk straight up to a group of teenagers and start talking to them. Knowing something about youth culture will help.

It's not over yet. For many schoolworkers you'll also need to be able to mentor, and perhaps even counsel, young people with difficulties. Helping students through bereavement, bullying or the kind of behaviour that got them thrown out a classroom is par for the course. You'll need to be able to turn your hand to almost any subject that might trouble a young person, often on the spur of the moment.

Lunchtime might seem like a welcome break in the day, but you'd better hurry and get that classroom set up for the Christian group. It's probably not unlike a church youth group, but with the added excitement of groups of pupils bursting noisily in throughout, and others leaving if they feel bored. Just as well you have a good selection of games up your sleeve and are able to tell a good story.

That's actually a fairly range of activities for a schoolworker. And that's before you think about the hundreds of other types of input schoolworkers get involved in. Our work depends on being able to adapt to all these roles in an instant.

So the challenge is how you boil these down to a set of competencies. That's not something I'm going to do here, but I think it would be a worthwhile exercise. It would need to recognise that not every schoolworker needs every competency: some don't take any assemblies or lessons, for example. But it might provide a guide for all of us to look at training needs both internally as churches and organisations, and as a whole 'schoolwork' community. Last year we produced a draft set of competencies at LCET (Luton Churches Education Trust) but I'd like to have another go at it before opening it to public scrutiny.

Developing qualifications

The possibility that qualifications and accreditation might be increasingly demanded by schools in the future is something that's been talked about for years by schoolworkers though, in terms informal feedback, I've never heard it being much of an issue. But now, it seems, there may be some truth to it.

I suspect there are two important points that back up this claim. The first is the dramatic increase in non-teaching roles within schools. Where twenty years ago teachers and admin staff might have made up almost all the school staff, now there are teaching assistants, mentors, pastoral workers, non-teaching year heads and many others. All these new roles have - or are in the process of having - qualifications and accreditation developed nationally by the government. That means that there are now possibilities for accreditation that didn't exist before. For example, if a Head had asked me twenty years ago what qualifications I had for the work I was doing, what could I have answered? There weren't any to talk about, with the exception of perhaps being an ex-teacher. Now there are **Teaching Assistants**, **Higher Level Teaching Assistants** and **Learning Mentors**. These three roles all have skills and standards laid down by the government and recognised qualifications. There are also **counselling** and **mentoring** qualifications from other sources that have validity and status within a school. For example, training and qualifications through Connexions.

This means that, in just these last few years, new formal roles and qualifications have sprung up that may have some application to a schoolworker. Some are still in the process of being brought into being so the 'field' is very much in flux at the moment. But there's no doubt that, over these next few years, we'll see these becoming more established and well known. I think the existence of these qualifications and roles will put pressure on schoolworkers to 'prove' they are qualified for their work too. By that I don't mean the occasional visitor, but where someone is working in depth and long term in a school, offering mentoring, counselling and curriculum input.

Secondly, there has been a significant trend towards professionalism within education over the last decade. Teachers are more scrutinised and professional development is much more important. For students, the curriculum is much more defined and they have to work towards identified levels of ability. Those laid-back days when an RE teacher might have

said 'come and do whatever you like' have long gone (and they did exist, believe me). Instead there are very clear demands placed on teachers including getting good results when it comes to exams. That, in turn, places higher expectations of schoolworkers delivering input, and with those higher expectations comes the question of accreditation and qualifications.

So what if we find a recognised qualification that suits the role of a schoolworker? Whilst we could all disappear off and take these qualifications, I doubt that many would be able to do so. Practical constraints - not least time and money - will make that difficult. Any courses would need to be incredibly flexible and include distance learning and educational level.

I think an alternative option might be to develop our own course which is linked to these qualifications but which is more specific to our particular role and ministry. Rather like many of the Christian youth work courses at present that include JNC accreditation. If we could develop a programme that was tailored for schoolworkers and also meant we, say, became qualified teaching assistants, I think that could have some real impact.

Whatever we do, there are a hundred practical considerations linked with the level of study, access, finance and a whole host of other questions. Some of them may prove insurmountable, but I'm convinced it's worth exploring.

schoolwork.co.uk will be taking some steps in this direction in the coming months. here's what we have in mind:

1. Developing a list of basic competencies for schoolwork to help us identify training needs and to act as a basis for any future training courses.
2. Identifying any possible educational qualifications that might be applicable to schoolworkers.
3. Liaising with Christian training providers to talk about what could be done to provide training for both new and existing schoolworkers.

That's as far as it goes right now. But I hope they'll be a chance for plenty of debate and discussion, and prayer. Let's see where we're led and let's make sure it results in better, and more spiritual and passionate, schoolwork.

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