

‘Religious affiliation and educational achievement: a note on the “Brethren” in Western Scotland’

I.G.D. Ford

in *Scottish Educational Studies*, 3 (May 1971).

‘Evangelical beliefs, attitudes towards schooling and educational outcomes’

Alex McEwen and Earl Robinson

in *Research in Education*, No. 52 (November 1994).

The aim of Ian Ford’s study was to determine whether a group of people whose way of life included certain factors associated with educational success might (for this reason?) perform differently from what might have been predicted on the basis of their socio-economic status alone. The survey involved 150 children from 90 families from 33 assemblies in Western Scotland. In each family the father’s occupation was classified as Class III manual or below in the Registrar General’s Classification (1966). The child’s performance was established at four points: selection for a five-year secondary course, staying beyond the statutory leaving age, completing a five-year course and entry to higher education. In each case the Brethren children not only scored much higher than Scottish children with skilled manual worker parents but also significantly higher than ‘middle-class’ Scottish children.

The only exception was in entry to higher education, where the figures were: skilled manual 4 per cent of the population cohort; middle class 19 per cent of the cohort population; Brethren 20 per cent of the sample. The researcher suggests that this may have been connected with the difference between the parental job aspirations of the two groups.

There was a significant difference between boys and girls, which increased with age so that while 28 per cent of the boys entered higher education only 11 per cent of the girls did so. The differential was far greater than in the population as a whole, prompting the hypothesis that it was related to the differing roles of men and women in the assembly.

In view of other research suggesting that the higher than anticipated educational attainment of Jewish children might be associated with the quality of language in the home the researchers sought to test the parents but results were inconclusive because too few were willing to participate. There was however some evidence that children selected for a five-year course had parents with a higher level of verbal participation in public worship—and thus a likely higher verbal score.

The study by Alex McEwen and Earl Robinson probed the paradox that a ‘world-renouncing’ ethic, such as is commonly associated with Evangelicalism, is frequently perceived as leading to success in business and the professions. A series of 30 bi-polar statements, scored from 1 to 5, was devised, on the basis of interviews with leaders and members of Evangelical and main-line churches. The polarities related to e.g. certitude of salvation, patterns of television viewing and Sunday observance. They formed the basis of a questionnaire administered to 350 Northern Ireland students from school and university groups, having both main-line church and Evangelical backgrounds. Interestingly, ‘the sampling procedures had to be altered because of the less than anticipated separatist values of Baptists, Pentecostals and Brethren and the insistence of Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic students that their Evangelical credentials were as solid as those of people from a general Baptist background’.

The academic results showed Evangelical students performing better in linguistic skills at GCSE; but at A level there was no significant difference in grades, although Evangelical students on average took more subjects. They were more ready to say that their purpose was to ‘glorify God’ but were less likely than the main-line group to agree that ‘worldly success is not particularly important’. Their stated reason for wanting to succeed in life was more often

‘in order to please God’, whereas the main-line students were more likely to measure success in terms of benefiting ‘myself and my family’.

The article is too long to be adequately summarised here. McEwen and Robinson suggest that it confirms the validity of Weber’s basic thesis about the connection between an individualist religious ethic and economic entrepreneurialism. Although modern Evangelical young people are less austere and world-renouncing than is often thought, they are distinguishable by the primacy of religious beliefs and doctrine in forming the social and moral aspects of their lives and in embracing and explaining their motivation to academic achievement and success in future career.

These conclusions are as fascinating as they are far-reaching. It will be interesting to see how far they may be confirmed by other studies.

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