

INTERVIEW WITH HELENA MILLER, DIRECTOR OF DEGREES AT THE LONDON SCHOOL OF JEWISH STUDIES



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Gerald was, for many of our students, the first visiting professor who allowed them to think about and discuss Jewish Education in relation to Catholic education and Catholic schools.”
- “[At] the annual Research in Jewish Education Conference in London... Gerald took the conference by storm..., giving participants at that conference the opportunity for deep reflection and analysis of our Jewish education settings and contexts, through his examination of Catholic schools and education.”

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

I am the Director of Degrees and co-head of teacher training at the London School of Jewish Studies. I have no experience of working in Catholic Education, apart from when I was training to be a teacher. During my training, at Goldsmiths' College, quite coincidentally all three of my teaching practices took place in Catholic primary schools in London – St. Joseph's on Deptford High Street, Our Lady of Lourdes in Wanstead, and St. Anne's off Whitechapel Road.

They were all well out of the comfort zone of a young Jewish student from a North West London suburb. Those experiences, however, were the best training I could have had. The staff in these schools really showed me how a Catholic religious ethos and religious values could take centre place in a school environment. The dedication of those teachers ensured that their pupils were instilled with a love of their religion as well as the very best of progressive education of the late 1970s.

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 Helena Miller, Director of Degrees and co-head of Teacher Training programmes at the London School of Jewish Studies. The interview is part of a series in honor of Professor Gerald Grace's retirement from St Mary's University.

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

After many years of a career in schools, which I had loved, I found myself training Jewish teachers, and running a Master's Degree in Jewish Education in London. I was involved at the time with RESQUJE (Research and Quality in Jewish Education), headed by Jo Cairns, then senior lecturer in education at the Institute of Education. I was interested to have someone from the Institute come along to the College to talk to my students about teaching in a Christian faith school – a comparison with their own experiences in the Jewish faith sector. Jo introduced me to her colleague, Professor Gerald Grace, and a collegial relationship began which has been maintained over decades.

Gerald was, for many of our students, the first visiting professor who allowed them to think about and discuss Jewish Education in relation to Catholic education and Catholic schools. Gerald's insight and breadth of experience, as well as his very well-developed and singular sense of humor, made him a very popular guest speaker, and thereafter we asked him annually to teach our post graduate students. There is a generation of graduates of that MA in Jewish Education who will never forget the opportunities that Gerald gave them to understand the dilemmas that religious schools face through the lens of contemporary Catholic schools and education.

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

The International Handbook of Jewish Education adds to a growing list of substantial volumes that inform and debate issues within religious education traditions and frameworks. The starting point for the book was a conversation in 2007 with Gerald, who was then editing The International Handbook of Catholic Education. Gerald sat in my office and, in his usual serious and enthusiastic manner, convincing me that a sister publication for, and by the Jewish education community would be a valuable addition to this family of Springer publications, stimulating exchange of knowledge between two religious cultures and traditions. Before an hour had passed, he had also somehow managed to persuade me that, despite having a more than full time job, as well as family responsibilities, I would be the person to make this huge project happen. And, being Gerald, he was right.

Gerald came back to me in 2012, the year I thought I was going to have a rest from writing and publishing, and invited me to contribute an article to his journal. The original reason for this contact in 2012, was that I had invited Gerald to be the keynote speaker at the annual Research in Jewish Education Conference in London. Gerald took the conference by storm. He was able to give

the participants at that conference the opportunity for deep reflection and analysis of our Jewish education settings and contexts, through his examination of Catholic schools and education. And once again, after that conference, a short conversation in the hallway, as Gerald was getting ready to leave, had me agreeing to write an article for him on how Jewish Education and Catholic Education inform each other, through the lens of the respective books and journals we had edited.

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

During those years when I was busy working on the International Handbook in Jewish Education, Gerald's publishing career was taking him in the direction of Journal editing and from 2009, he has been the senior editor of Catholic Studies, a role he still holds. This role has significantly contributing to scholarship in Catholic education and educational research, giving space to voices and studies from all over the Catholic world. As senior editor, you have an enormous privilege, as well as a responsibility, to shape the discourse in your field, and Gerald has done just that. In addition, I know that the Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education was both inspired and led by Gerald, impacting on the work of Catholic schools and colleges, both in the UK and nationally. In short, Gerald has been a hugely significant force for change and development in Catholic education, both in the UK and overseas.

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

I can't answer this question from the perspective of Catholic education, but I can answer it from the perspective of Jewish education. All too often, research studies are written up and then sit on shelves gathering dust. Either the enthusiasm to pursue the project has waned, or the researcher is on to the next piece of research, or more often than not, there is just not the capacity or resource – human and financial, to make the bridge between research and practice.

In the Jewish community, we have done the following at various times: (1) Use educational research as a springboard for conversation at practitioner level; (2) Invest in practitioner research – if research begins in the classroom and is conducted by the teachers, we see real chances for change; (3) Use our annual teachers' conferences to discuss research studies in the context of the classroom. And in fact before all of the above, it is vital to conduct research studies that are of relevance to contemporary classrooms.

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

Again, I can only speak from my experience as a Jewish educator. I have just finished a six year role as Senior editor of the Journal of Jewish Education – the sister publication of the Journal of Catholic Education. The latest issue of the Journal of Jewish Education is focused on research studies that have been prompted by the Covid pandemic. I am also in the process of conducting a research project, called “Jewish Lives Interrupted”, where we are exploring the challenges (and some opportunities) for teenagers’ Jewish Lives in the past year and a half. We have collected data for almost 1000 teenagers in Jewish schools in the UK, and are just at the stage of beginning the analysis. We are hoping that our analysis will be helpful to schools going forwards. There is no doubt that the fallout from this pandemic will be with us in educational terms for at least a decade. Faith education

has had its’ own unique challenges during Covid – partly because faith (in Christianity and Judaism) is about community, worship, practice and experiences, and not only about cognitive learning. It affects the whole child. How will we make up for lost experiences? How will we make up for the disconnect from the religious community, as well as events and life cycle celebrations and commemorations? How will we support families’ religious lives?

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

Go for it! Find an area you are passionate about, identify a researchable question, ask yourself – is this going to be of value to Catholic schools - and follow through. You will be making your mark on the landscape of Catholic education.