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Challenges of Catholic *educación popular* in Latin America and a case study of Ignatian *educación popular* in a deprived rural region of Ecuador

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This paper explores the current challenges of Catholic popular education in Latin America, with a focus on Ecuador. It identifies the current economic and political context – threats to democracy and economic crises – that affects the social fabric as well as challenging educational outcomes exacerbated by the pandemic. It focuses on *Fe y Alegría*, a Jesuit-affiliated network, to explore these issues as well as the transmission of faith, spirituality, and Christian leadership. It then presents a case study of contextualised Ignatian popular education in Ecuadorian indigenous communities. The challenges entailed in fostering individual integral development and community transformation through agency, citizenship and participation are discussed, as well as the difficulties of transmitting faith as underpinning for justice, with implications beyond Ecuador.

Keywords: popular education; Ignatian; transformation; Ecuador

Introduction

Educación popular (EP) or popular education is deeply embedded in the social and political history of Latin America. Stemming from ideals of freedom nurtured by the French revolution and the struggles for independence, it is linked to a quest for freedom and justice in the face of poverty and oppression of every kind. Its roots include Simón Rodríguez's championing of dialogical, practical education (FyA 2021a), José Martí's concept of political-pedagogical movements (Streck 2008) and José Mariáteguís rejection of colonial-style education (FyA 2021a), before it reaches its full expression with Paulo Freire's awareness-raising pedagogy for the oppressed. EP remains uncompromisingly rooted in a socio-political commitment to transform reality into a better world 'built daily by the social actors, considering their conditions, and analysing and transforming this reality together' (Jara 2020, 7).

The part played by Christian churches in this history is not always properly recognised. They educated the poor long before the Latin American bishops, influenced by Freire, proposed in 1968 a new type of education for the socio-political liberation of their continent's suffering masses. This paper focusses on Catholic EP and the challenges it currently faces, with particular attention to Ecuador. For this purpose, it explores the case of *Fe y Alegría* (FyA), a Jesuit-affiliated EP movement offering

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both formal and non-formal education to almost one million learners in Latin America and beyond. FyA's vision combines Ignatian pedagogy with a socio-political commitment to justice rooted in faith. It thus faces the same challenges as all EP organisations in the region but also that of transmitting its faith. After exploring current concerns and their impact in Ecuador, a case study of FyA's work in Ecuadorian indigenous communities will delve into the dilemmas of implementing its vision 'at the frontier'.

Twenty-first century challenges

Latin American background post-pandemic

According to FAO (2021) 59.7 million in the region, i.e. 9.1%, were undernourished in 2020, an increase of 13.8 million in just one year, with food insecurity affecting 41% of the population, a tragedy which also impacts on ability to learn.

In Ecuador alone, out of a population of 18 million moderate or severe food insecurity affected an estimated 6.5 million in 2019–2021 with 2.7 million undernourished (FAO 2022). In June 2022 income poverty levels stood at 25% nationally against 42.9% in rural areas, with extreme poverty at 10.7% and 22.7% respectively (INEC 2022, 4). Households with children are particularly affected (UNICEF 2022b, 1). These figures underline the discrepancy between urban and rural areas. Thus the central Andean province of Chimborazo, one of the poorest of the country, recorded in 2014 an income poverty level of 64.9% overall reaching 90.0% in two of its more rural cantons (SENPLADES 2014), including the canton of the study below.

In recent years political instability in the country has affected programme implementation and cuts in social spending and service delivery have seriously impacted on 'education, health, early childhood services and social protection' (UNICEF Ecuador 2020, 1). Ecuador still faces 'chronic human rights challenges, including weak institutions, poor prison conditions, laws that give authorities broad powers to limit judicial independence, violence against women, far-reaching restrictions on women's and girls' access to reproductive health care, and disregard for indigenous rights' (Human Rights Watch 2020, 1).

As regards education, UNICEF (2022a) paints a stark picture:

By November 2021, 71 million of the region's children and adolescents were still affected by school closures. [...] Too many children and adolescents are on the wrong side of the digital divide. [...]

Even before the pandemic, the region was facing a learning crisis. More than a third of students were not achieving minimum proficiency in reading while just over half of them were not meeting learning standards in mathematics. An estimated 10.4 million children were out of school, increasing their risks of violence, exploitation and abuse, as well as barriers to earning later in life.

In Ecuador, with many schools still to re-open in December 2021, the World Bank (2022, 1) reported that 65% do not achieve minimum proficiency level in reading at the end of primary school. Lockdown has exposed a digital gap with 90% of students in the lowest socio-economic groups attending classes through a cellular phone, against 70% through a computer in higher socio-economic groups (UNICEF 2022b, 1). This is a significant issue for the disadvantaged populations served by EP.

Latin American EP

Because their *raison d'être* is to respond to the needs of vulnerable populations at given times and places, EP movements constantly reassess their role and methodology according to the evolving contexts in which they operate. In the 1970s EP was seen as revolutionary, often non-formal adult education, increasingly involving such marginalised groups as indigenous populations and women. The crisis of Soviet socialism in the 1990s was then followed by a 'pink tide' of left-wing governments which brought improved living conditions and liberal democracy. For social movements promoting EP this meant a fundamental reassessment of approach. Attention turned to formation to citizenship and participation in local democracy, and to formal education. The greater involvement of marginalised groups also led to a new accent on intercultural dialogue (Torres 2020, 22–23).

More recently, disillusion with neo-liberal government policies and economic crises in much of the continent has coincided with a resurgence of social movements. Against this background, Jara (2020, 4) identifies five challenges for EP: the erosion of liberal democracy; an economy governed by neoliberal policies and the rule of the market; sustained efforts to restore a conservative agenda; increased inequality and exclusion, together with socio-political polarisation (markets and individualism vs solidarity and democracy); and a 'hegemonic mindset' imposing 'an individualistic, consumerist, conformist [...] subjectivity'. This situation, concludes Jara, makes it crucial 'to build and strengthen democratizing capacities, and enable the utopia of equity, justice, respect for diversity and care for life' (8).

Fe y Alegría

Educating for liberation and 'the faith that does justice'

The unexpected offer of small private premises in a Caracas *barrio* enabled the Jesuit José María Vélaz in 1954 to open FyA (Faith and Joy), a school to educate destitute children out of poverty. It offered traditional education consisting of literacy, numeracy, health and catechism.

At their 1968 meeting in Medellín CELAM, the Bishops' Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean, envisioned under the influence of Paulo Freire a 'liberating education' for the integral human development of their continent. Beyond literacy and numeracy, critical reflection on social and political reality was to be encouraged so that learners – initially mainly adults in non-formal settings – could become the subjects of their own and their communities' development. Freire's model of education for social transformation was particularly suited to the base ecclesial communities which multiplied in the wake of Medellín. Socio-political commitment and liberationist spirituality coalesced into *mística*,¹ giving the Church a voice against oppression and for democratisation and heralding a 'new way of being school' which spread to all types of education (Streck and Segala 2007, 174–175).

Four years later the Society of Jesus, at its 32nd General Congregation, firmly committed itself to 'the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement' (1972, Decree 4.2). Social justice was thus to be integrated into all Jesuit ministries, including the education apostolate.

In the first colleges opened by the Society soon after its foundation, education was rooted in instruction in Catholic doctrine together with spiritual development and interiority based on the *Spiritual Exercises*. Alongside this, a thorough formation

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both intellectual and moral was imperative: the students were expected to become religious and civic leaders entrusted with ‘persuading and teaching others how to be Christians in the fullest sense, with a special awareness of social responsibility’ (O’Malley 2000, 61). St Ignatius saw the schools of the Order as ‘a contribution to what he called the “common good” of society at large’ (64).

The Society’s educational vision has endured. Developing intellectual ability to the full remains essential, but ‘the ultimate aim [...] is, rather, that full growth of the person which leads to action – action, especially, that is suffused with the spirit and presence of Jesus Christ’ (Kolvenbach, as quoted in Society of Jesus 1993, # 12). Its object is ‘to prepare men and women of competence and conscience capable of making significant contributions to the future of the human family’ (# 79). This is achieved by imparting the skills of reflection and analysis necessary ‘to lovingly understand and critique all aspects of life’ in order to prepare students to become responsible citizens, participate in cultural growth and work for the common good (# 79-80). At practical level, Ignatian pedagogy rests on the constant interplay between experience, reflection and action, a pedagogical paradigm that reflects the dynamic of the *Spiritual Exercises* and its ‘continual call to reflect upon the entirety of life’s experience in prayer in order to discern where the Spirit of God is leading’. (# 22–23).

In this way, an Ignatian education prepares students to participate in the service of faith and the promotion of justice, a mission

... rooted in the belief that a new world community of justice, love and peace needs educated persons of competence, conscience and compassion, men and women who are ready to embrace and promote all that is fully human, who are committed to working for the freedom and dignity of all peoples, and who are willing to do so in cooperation with others equally dedicated to the reform of society and its structures. [...] It calls for persons [...] who have a powerful and ever growing sense of how they can be effective advocates, agents and models of God’s justice, love and peace. (# 17).

FyA’s vision, first defined in its 1985 *Ideario* (ethos statement) and still extant, reflects clearly its debt both to Ignatian pedagogy and to the influence of Freire and CELAM’s liberating education. As an EP movement, it aims to form ‘new men and women, conscious of their capabilities and their reality, open to transcendence, agents of change and protagonists of their own development’, thus contributing to a new, just society based on Christian faith (FyA 2008, 11–12). This ‘integral education’ was to be achieved through a liberating pedagogy ‘according to Medellín’ and evangelisation would give to all ‘a personal experience of God’ (16–17). We shall return to the latter in the case study. FyA also uses lobbying and advocacy to influence public policies for a more just and equitable society.

International FyA Federation (FIFYA)

Each national FyA organisation operates as an autonomous legal entity and adapts the movement’s vision and principles to its own context. But all work as a network through the International Federation which brings them together yearly to review developments and challenges and organise activities across borders. Sadly, Jara’s diagnosis above is not one with which FIFYA would disagree, nor is it a stranger to the practical significance of present statistics: pandemic aside, it knows that the current context is its greatest challenge. But it expresses this not in terms of

secularisation but rather of the concrete socio-political structures at the root of individualism, consumerism and market forces, putting the blame firmly on failing democracy and the neo-liberal globalisation agendas. Citing De Sousa Santos (2018), it contends that combined, these factors have led to unstable labour conditions hence worsening social injustice and inequality, be it economic (access to resources), cultural (neo-colonialism) or patriarchal (FyA 2021a, 22–23). Not surprisingly, exclusion, violence and extreme poverty remain at the top of FIFYA's list of challenges, which also includes emotional and spiritual education. But the digital divide exposed by lockdown is deemed the most urgent of all (FyA 2021b, 16).

Issues considered as deserving a concerted effort are made the subject of a 'federative initiative': projects involving FyA national networks working collaboratively to address a problem. Current initiatives include human mobility (migration, intercultural and bilingual education), gender (equity and equal opportunities), citizenship, the environment (Amazon region), quality of education, early childhood and spirituality. Also of concern are rural education, influencing public policies and reviewing pedagogical practices (2021b, 16–17).

Fe y Alegría Ecuador (FyA-Ec)

A system akin to the UK voluntary-aided system operates in Ecuador under the name of *fiscomisional*, reflecting its reliance on taxpayer funding for teachers' salaries as well as its 'missionary' identity.

Ecuador's 2008 Constitution offered an alternative form of development based on the rights of the Pachamama – Mother Nature – and the ancestral principle of Buen Vivir (leading a good life) rooted in inter-connectedness and reciprocity. Rafael Correa's Citizens' Revolution promoted support for life in all its forms, equality for all, respect for diversity, solidarity, participatory democracy and harmony with nature. Correa also upheld the right of every child to free, secular education and made schooling compulsory for all. Infrastructure was developed and basic needs, education, equality and health indicators improved until the pandemic, although sliding oil prices and political instability had long brought many reforms to a standstill.

FyA-Ec's *fiscomisional* status means that it needs to maintain a strategic partnership with the government to continue its work. Relations are not tension-free, on three counts. Firstly, the ideal of free, secular education does not sit well with the *fiscomisional* system: not only are FyA's schools not secular, they are not even free. Parents are expected to contribute towards school supplies, uniforms and transport unless receiving a grant on financial grounds.² Secondly, the prevalent educational culture in the secular state sector is problematic in that it produces people with 'a very competitive profile' who 'do not appear to be people with a sense of solidarity' (Túpac-Yupanqui 2015, 124): the emphasis is on exam results, technological skills and competitiveness. Finally, state funding also means adherence to the state curriculum, hence FyA-Ec's determination to have a say on curriculum design. However, its resolve to provide quality education means that it is currently entrusted to deliver in-person and distance adult education and training for the government.

The study

The statistics quoted above highlighted the stark conditions of rural areas, in particular in an Andean province such as Chimborazo. FyA's proud claims that it starts

where the tarmac stops means it is prepared to go to ‘the frontier’ and the setting of the study was one of the most deprived canton of Chimborazo. The province has the highest rate of child labour in the country for children aged 5–14: 26% for indigenous children, and 39% for indigenous 15–17-year-olds against 20% nationally (UNICEF 2018). There is historical evidence of child trafficking in the region, largely affecting girls in their teens (CARE Ecuador/FLACSO 2009). Pandemic and economic crises have affected the rights of children to protection services, disrupting their education and leading to an increase in reported domestic violence (UNICEF Ecuador 2020, 1). Any post-pandemic increase in multidimensional poverty would be catastrophic, with women and children particularly vulnerable.

In the canton of the study, over 90% of the population is indigenous, hence all primary schools provide intercultural, bilingual Spanish/Kichwa education (EIB).³ Outside the city, social organisation revolves around the community and its values. An indigenous community (also known as *ayllu* in parts of the Andes) is an autonomous grouping composed of loosely related families who own their land and organise their work and resources in common. Consequently the Buen Vivir values of reciprocity, solidarity and conviviality – living in harmony with others and nature – are all-important.

The case study, carried out over a twenty-month period in 2016–2017, focussed on three small, bilingual FyA schools catering for indigenous children in isolated mountain communities. Its aim was to evaluate the role and effectiveness of Ignatian EP in achieving both individual integral development and community transformation, as perceived by the beneficiaries. Whilst outcomes such as basic necessities and bodily integrity/safety from violence will have changed since the pandemic, other aspects have not been so impacted and results remain valid.

Methodology

The methodology was derived from studies collected by Biggeri, Ballet, and Comim (2011). These used Capability Approach principles to evaluate the impact of organisations in addressing the multiple dimensions of poverty on child development, as perceived by the beneficiaries. Aspects explored covered basic needs, emotional well-being, education, participation, formation to citizenship, leisure/play and psychological development. Methods included field observation, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, photographs and drawing. Studies of this sort, however, typically focus neither on collective dimensions nor on spiritual development. These aspects are not measurable as such, but there seems to be no reason why similar methods should not be used to measure an organisation’s impact on facilitating their development, as perceived by the beneficiaries.

The approach used here included both questionnaires and group work, reflecting the differentiation in Amartya Sen’s capability approach between ‘functionings’ or dimensions already achieved (Sen 1999, 7) and ‘capabilities’ or potentialities to be achieved through choice (18).⁴ The questionnaires were adapted from Biggeri and Libanora (2011) to reflect both the local context (buen vivir, reciprocity, solidarity, respect for nature) and the religious/spiritual element (practice, spirituality, values, Christian leadership). Participants (including parents) were asked to consider two aspects: to what extent given dimensions were perceived as already achieved by youngsters, and to what extent the school was perceived as facilitating this.⁵ By contrast, in (gender-specific) group work youngsters were asked to discuss those aspects

most important for themselves as individuals and for their communities to develop (capabilities). The methodology thus included, as recommended by Alkire (2013):

- Existing sources: official statistics, FyA documentation and the school context analyses carried out yearly by each community to ensure contextualisation
- Participation of beneficiaries in both questionnaires and group work.
- List of dimensions important to individuals and the group as obtained from group work.
- Participant observation (the researcher had light teaching duties in the schools involved).
- Analysis of empirical results (reported below).

Participating schools

The study focussed on a sample of three small rural FyA schools. Two of these served their community, catering for children aged 5–12; the third was an all-through school (5–17+) serving five far-flung communities. The two primaries had an entirely Catholic intake, the all-through a mixed Catholic and evangelical intake. For comparison purposes, data was also gathered across the same age range in two different settings: two state-run secular institutions (one primary, one secondary) in the same rural area; and a FyA school with a mixed ethnic and religious intake in a medium-sized town (5–14+), there being no secular urban school available for the study.

The primary age groups participating were grades 5 and 6 (ages 9–11). At secondary age, the groups included Grade 10 (age 14+) and Baccalaureate 3 (age 16+). All students on roll in the year groups concerned took part in the study (24 in the FyA all-through school, 12 in the urban FyA school and 48 in the rural secular school.) The numbers of male and female students was roughly equal in all schools.⁶

Constraints

The main constraint was the size of the sample. Because of the low numbers on roll in the sample primaries, results had to be aggregated into one ‘primary sample’ category (30 children). However, the numbers participating represent the totality of the relevant age groups in the schools concerned. Triangulated with the qualitative data, the survey thus gives a reliable picture of the situation at the time of the study. It is appreciated, however, that the low numbers involved make generalisation more difficult.

Other constraints included participant interpretation, especially in the case of children where individual, cognitive and emotional development as well as culture would come into play. Fear of being disloyal to the organisation may also have affected responses. The author was well known in the school communities before undertaking the survey, which helped minimise reactivity.

Analysis of the results

The results of questionnaires indicate respectively the level of functionings which the youngsters and/or their parents considered as achieved, and the school’s effectiveness in promoting these. Group work results reflect the prioritisation of valued dimensions.

- Basic needs

Basic needs received high scores as a dimension both achieved and supported by the school, with health the highest scorer for parents and youngsters alike. This finding, surprising considering the high level of unsatisfied basic needs in the region, may have been due to the questionnaires bearing on availability rather than quality, or it may indicate a substantial level of adaptive preferences.⁷ However, the situation has changed markedly since the pandemic and would need reassessing.

- Affective dimensions

These scored very highly in the questionnaires, especially in primary schools, with children adding affective agency dimensions (giving love/friendship/ respect) from a young age. This was a sad finding in view of the level of domestic violence in the region (see next section).

- Bodily integrity/safety from violence

This received poor scores even from primary-age children: in one sample school 80% of boys and 70% of girls reported enjoying little or no safety from violence, a result confirmed by the school context analysis. In all schools, the girls' sense of physical safety decreased with age. In the all-through school, 100% of females felt completely safe at primary school age, against 83% in the 14+ group and only 33% by age 16 +. By contrast, males in that school claimed to enjoy total safety across the age range. In the secondary urban school questionnaires, only 50% of youngsters of either gender reported feeling safe from violence.

On average, violence affected one child in five in the survey. The reported exacerbation of domestic violence during lockdown (UNICEF 2020, 1) is, therefore, a major concern.

- Education

Both parents and children gave education very high scores (between 62% and 88%) as a dimension already achieved across the board. This is at odds with the World Bank statistics above and seems to indicate a failure to distinguish between compulsory attendance and quality education. Also, a gender gap appeared and widened with age in both questionnaires and group work. In group work, 14-year-old females gave education a score 25 percentage points lower than their male counterparts, both in the FyA all-through school and in the FyA urban comparison school. The lowest figures of all were in the rural secondary comparison school: there, only one female in four saw education as something of importance for her future, as opposed to one in two for the males.

These results highlight the challenge facing both the state and an EP organisation such as FyA in their efforts to provide truly inclusive, equitable quality education.

- Agency for transformation

As a reflection of the Ignatian pedagogical aims outlined above – developing the ability to ‘lovingly critique’ all things, promoting responsible citizenship rooted in participation, preparing for an active contribution to the common good – the building blocks of agency for transformation are defined here as critical thinking,

citizenship education and participation. In addition, they also include freedom of opinion. Whilst most parents were confident of their school’s support in this respect, responses to the questionnaires at secondary age highlighted a gender difference in both achievement and school impact: males were more likely to perceive the building blocks of agency as both achieved and supported by the school, suggesting that females’ socio-political agency was not being fully developed.

In group work, however, these dimensions were considered of little or no importance by either gender, showing a poor understanding of their importance for personal or social transformation. The FyA urban comparison school showed a higher awareness of their value than its rural counterparts, the rural comparison school almost none (Figure 1).

- Collective dimensions

Collective dimensions were included for two reasons: they an intrinsic part of the local culture and they also correspond to the collective action necessary ‘in order to reach the capability that the members of that group find valuable’ (Robeyns 2017, 116). In the questionnaires, they were presented both as a Buen vivir concept and as individual components: solidarity, reciprocity, conviviality. In the sample, these drew high scores across the board as dimensions both achieved and supported by the school, but with a definite gender difference. In two of the three FyA rural schools, males across the age range gave higher scores than females to enjoying these aspects: in one case, the female score trailed behind by as much as 53 percentage points, coinciding with poor scores relating to safety. This disparity indicates that ideals of harmonious living and reciprocity are experienced very differently according to gender.

- Moral and spiritual values

This aspect of the questionnaires mirrored the vocabulary and concepts of FyA-Ec’s pastoral programmes: primary-age children become ‘Christian leaders’ by modelling good behaviour, whilst adolescents can join an optional ‘Young Leaders Movement’ promoting spirituality and explicitly Gospel-based leadership for transformation. The extent to which impact is effective and perceived to be effective, should thus be an essential marker of FyA’s success in this area.

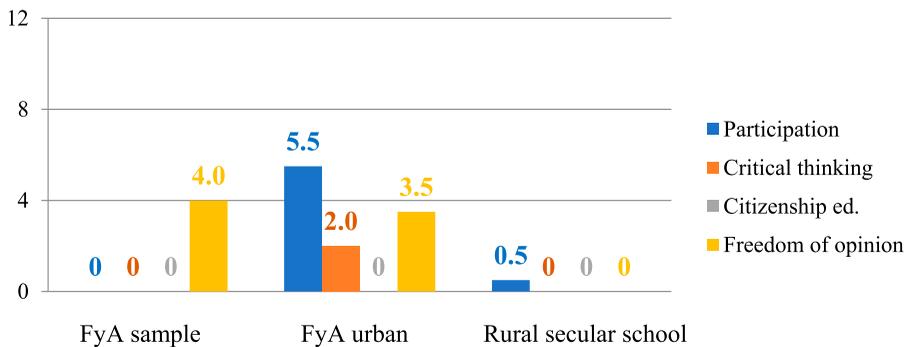


Figure 1. Importance of the building blocks of socio-political agency as identified in secondary pupils’ group work. Maximum score: 12.

In the questionnaires, learning and practising moral values (FyA-Ec refused explicit reference being made to Gospel values) were indeed highlighted as important achieved doings. Primary-age children, females in particular, also gave great importance to religious practice – including in the secular comparison schools – although this declined with age. But results regarding Christian leadership and spirituality were disappointing. The former did occasionally appear, usually with males. The latter was never identified either as achieved or even valued. In the sample secondary, roughly one in five reported feeling unsupported in either dimension with less than half satisfied with the school’s input. This applied to the males in particular: 55% considered they received little or no support with spirituality and nearly 75% with Christian leadership. In questionnaires, FyA secondary schools scored no higher in this respect than the secular comparison school, a dissatisfaction replicated in parents’ responses. This disappointing result may be due to several factors: the optional teenage programme leaving most youngsters unsupported after the age of 12, variable quality of implementation and, in the secondary sample, strict evangelical families not comfortable with the school’s more liberal practices – raising the issue of what ‘Christian leadership’ may mean to different denominational groups.

In group work in FyA-Ec schools, only very few youngsters (mostly male) chose Christian leadership as a valued dimension to be developed; and spirituality was absent from the priorities of every single group across the board. However, in the comparison schools neither appeared *at all* (Figures 2 and 3), which indicates some measure of success for FyA.

Whilst interpreting the results of primary-age children needs some caution – they may not have the cognitive or emotional ability to relate fully their life experience to the vocabulary of the pastoral programme or questionnaire – the case of secondary-age children is different. The few that choose to follow the optional pastoral programme promoting spirituality and Christian leadership are already committed, but neither dimension was valued outside this group.

Reflecting on the results: challenges of Ignatian education at the frontier

The limits of contextualisation

A region’s socio-historical features places limitations on what Ignatian contextualised education can achieve. The main issues here are agency/participation and gender

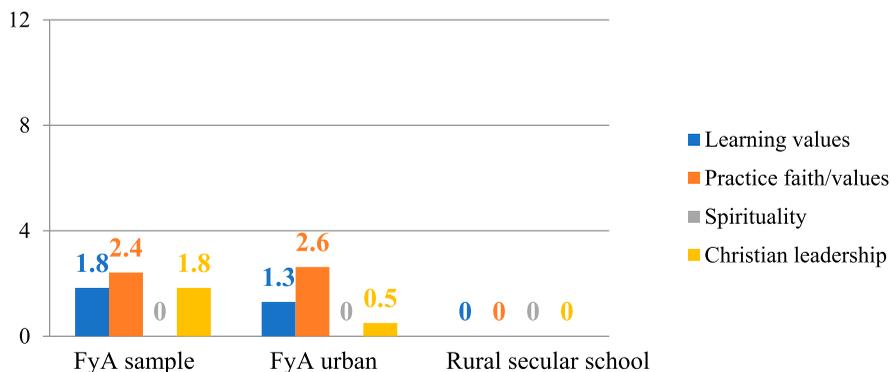


Figure 2. Importance of moral and spiritual values in primary-age group work (all FyA schools except the rural secular school). Maximum score: 12.

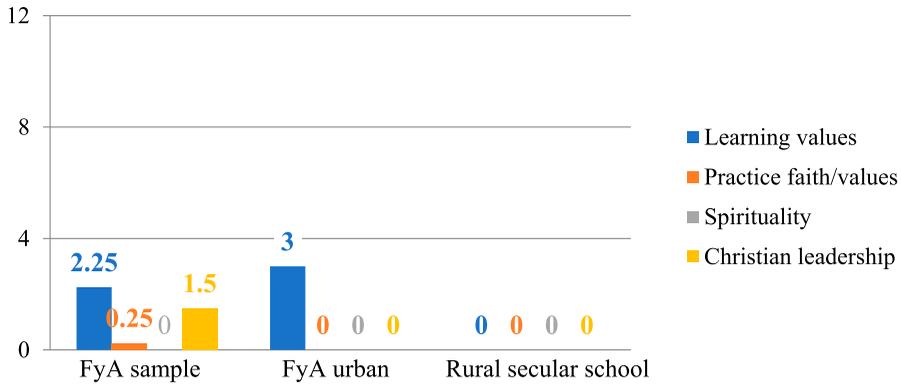


Figure 3. Importance of moral and spiritual values in secondary-age group work (all FyA schools except the rural secular school). Population: in FyA rural school, Catholic with a significant number of evangelical pupils; in the comparison schools, mixed. Maximum score: 12.

equality. Firstly, there seems to be a disconnect between the activism of national indigenous movements and attitudes to transformation in mountain communities. The former explicitly interweaves decolonisation, culture, ancestral spirituality and transformation (Walsh 2017). Yet for Chimborazo sociologist Luis Tuaza (2014) progress is still perceived as coming, as in the old days, from external agencies: in this case the government and the myriad of NGOs working in the region. Development projects are still often obtained through favours or political support. Consequently, Tuaza contends, the notion of basic democratic rights is not properly recognised and the sense of agency for transformation is truly fostered neither by the existing social structure nor by NGOs. Responses to the questionnaires and informal conversations did show that FyA-Ec was perceived as a powerful external entity able to provide for needs such as health, food and clothing. The challenge here is to continue the support whilst reinforcing agency and democratic participation as crucially important for both personal transformation and the common good.

It is also to communicate that this message applies to all. Pervasive gender inequality affects all areas of girls' development. The low group work scores given by all secondary-age females to education suggest that their academic aspirations remain limited, especially in rural areas. A combination of factors affect their attendance and wellbeing at school, from cultural expectations to the hidden curriculum to material considerations such as security travelling to school, sexual harassment at school and lack of running water. This culture critically affects females' perception of their own potential agency for change. At the time of the study, FyA literature supported gender equality in theory but discrimination was largely ignored in practice. However, this issue is now recognised as a major challenge and the subject of a 'federative initiative' to review both the curriculum and practices in school.

Spirituality for social transformation and mystagogy

Whilst FyA still defines itself as a popular education movement born of and underpinned by Christian faith (2016, 23), it has long accepted that state-funded schools can never have as strong a religious character as their independent counterparts (2011, 29). In Ecuador, an increasingly diverse pupil intake in a lay environment

means a reluctance to mention Jesus Christ explicitly for fear of being seen as discriminatory. Is FyA-Ec's 'transforming spirituality', promoted explicitly outside any religious context, a betrayal of its Ignatian roots?

In a letter purportedly written by Ignatius to a modern Jesuit, Karl Rahner (1979) speaks of the need for all to have the immediate experience of God: 'It is possible for man to know God. And your cure of souls must keep this goal in mind, always, at every step, unwaveringly' (14). For Rahner's Ignatius, the activities of a modern Jesuit should focus on offering 'mystagogical help for others' so that all can experience clearly and accept the immediacy of God (16). If the communication of God's presence, the mystagogy, is the all-important task at the root of spirituality beyond dogma and even religious faith, then FyA's approach in promoting this spirituality independently of any faith background, does remain the expression of an Ignatian tradition.

Yet according to the findings of the survey, there is a question mark as to FyA's success in this respect. In a private conversation in July 2016, one Jesuit educator worried that the Society in Ecuador was not fully succeeding in transmitting the Ignatian dimension of its educational vision either in the private schools or in EP, with serious repercussions in terms of the transformational impact of education both for individuals and for society.

How then to maintain the link between faith and justice? The difficulty of promoting Gospel values in a lay environment has led to somewhat mixed messages in FyA's more recent literature. Sometimes it speaks of its ambition to form people 'centred on Jesus of Nazareth' (2016, 65). At other times, its approach is more universalist: 'Although the inspiration of [our] movement is a Christian one [...] we must progress to recognising one common God who invites us to join forces with different forms of expressions of faith as we work towards a broad community that promotes a more human and just world' (2016, 71).

FyA-Ec is walking a fine line between a universalist message and its adherence to a trinitarian faith which it no longer feels free to express openly. It has managed so far to follow both, at the cost sometimes of absolute clarity. But if the trinitarian element of the faith that does justice were to go unheeded, then there is a danger that 'transforming spirituality' could ultimately become little more than a general moral outlook with an Ignatian flavour, with justice as an expression of love of God and neighbour only touching a minority.

Conclusion

Turning to the future, FyA-Ec's 2021 strategic plan identifies challenges which sadly reflect the 2021 UNICEF report above and FIFYA's own concerns (2021b). Socio-economic issues include widespread child malnutrition, endemic violence in schools/colleges (sex/gender abuse, racism, xenophobia), lack of services in rural areas and intercultural education, and a significant socio-economic gap in learning and skill outcomes between rural and urban settings and according to ethnic background. FyA-Ec is only too aware that children struggle to attain the basic knowledge necessary to participate fully in society, especially in rural areas. The digital gap, the lack of virtual learning-trained teachers, the limited opportunities for technical education leading to work opportunities, are all major challenges to providing quality education. This diagnosis, not unique to Ecuador, highlights both the continuing need for EP and the major task shared by popular educators.

In the study, youngsters and their communities were not fully aware of their own agency, their own ability to transform. Half a century after Freire, raising socio-political awareness is still very necessary in order to decrease dependency and improve life chances. Where this is an element of *mística* the difficulty, as shown by the survey, lies in transmitting the spiritual element; and more still in reconciling, in a pluralist environment, spirituality and social transformation as part of an explicitly trinitarian vision. This is a challenge for all Christian education, not least state-funded education.

This notwithstanding, FyA has successfully brought together popular education and contextualised Ignatian education to work for the integral human development of indigenous children in rural areas and the social transformation of their deprived communities. It accompanies people in the creation of a just society for a hope-filled future. FyA ‘has become an educational network on the frontiers that gives a new face to the apostolate of education of the Society of Jesus’ (Sosa 2018), demonstrating the ongoing integration of the Society’s social and education apostolates – not an end point, but a permanent journey.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Rooted in Brazilian landless movements, *mística* refers to ‘the representation through words, art, symbolism, and music of the struggles and reality of a social movement. [...] *Mística* is also used to refer to the more abstract, emotional element, strengthened in collectivity, that serves as a mobilizing force’ (Issa 2007, 126).
2. Poorer families receive an unconditional Human Development Grant (*Bono de desarrollo humano*), payable to mothers. No family in the case study sample schools paid any fees.
3. For the socio-political and linguistic complexities of EIB in Ecuador see Haboud (2019).
4. In consultation with FyA-Ec, functionings were described simply as ‘dimensions’. For capabilities, *potencialidad* (potential) was used because the Spanish *capabilidad*, which could describe either capability or capacity, was deemed too ambiguous and therefore not appropriate.
5. Space was provided for participants to add any dimensions they deemed important.
6. There were no disabled students in any of the groups concerned at the time of the study.
7. ‘The fact that our expectations tend to adjust to circumstances, particularly to make life bearable in adverse situations’ (Sen 2008, 18).

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