

# EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY

By DOREEN GRANT

SCHOOLS, whether catholic or not, sometimes see themselves as fortresses of civilization, standing against hordes of ideological vandals bent on destroying our cultural heritage. Those who respond fearfully or defensively to new pressures on our catholic schools have an added sense of alienation from society. Some may see the same scene the other way round, positively, constructively. For them the catholic school is like an oasis from which those who have been refreshed go out with renewed strength into the desert of materialism to offer leadership to a society that has lost its way.

I want to suggest a totally different picture, not just the same one from another angle. However much it was considered necessary for the school, particularly the secondary school, to stand apart from the community in the past, this attitude is counter-productive now. The days of academic seclusion are over. Something new is happening in our society today, co-operation begins to replace competition as an ideal, and all schools face some form of integration. Schools must be in tune with this change, able to contribute to an integrated society, or they will be merely absorbed, swallowed up, in reorganization. Our schools — catholic schools — in particular must respond to the change, not through pressure or fear of loss, but because the change is in the direction of christian principles, and so catholic education has much to offer to the fulfilment of society's goals.

Many of the advocates of change may not see its christian connection, but there is no excuse for catholics missing it. Teilhard de Chardin shows God's creative plan brought to fruition by the cumulative efforts of man. Helder Camara pleads for christians and atheists to work together for justice and peace. Individual missionaries like these illuminate in unique ways the teaching of the whole Church in council in Vatican II. The message is of a society reaching towards brotherhood, co-operation, the building up of world unity in Christ.

The world-wide nature of this movement is interestingly exemplified in politics. A feature of the modern political scene is the emergence of a new type of leader. Thirty years ago, Churchill or Roosevelt could

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represent a country, epitomize a national style. Today, while this sort of leadership from the top is still a necessity, society has created the need for another sort, which might be called leadership from the middle. Examples which come to mind are Whitelaw's recent role in the troubled situation in Ulster, and the activities of Kissinger for world peace. These men do not replace the heads of state, but have their own task: to listen, to help others to listen, and to integrate many points of view without losing what they themselves stand for.

As we move towards a more integrated world, such leadership is not limited to national or international politics it extends across the professional, intellectual and social spectrum. So, recently, an ordinary worker like Jimmy Reid could rise and lead a united Clydeside to save its shipyard industry in the face of pressure from both political parties.

This new leadership does not depend on the education of an élite. There was a time when forming a catholic intellectual élite was our first priority. We needed a voice which could be heard in the high places of the very stratified society of that day. We now have a large body of well-educated catholics who can both fulfil this function and see to its continuance, where necessary. Our needs have therefore changed, and as society's structures begin to alter, new priorities are emerging for us. One question we need to ask ourselves is whether catholics in general, and catholic schools in particular, are producing *leaders in co-operation*. Are we *in society* and open to community sufficiently, to be in a position to co-operate?

What is meant by the school being open to the community? Sometimes an ideal is given visual expression in the design and location of buildings. The school that is neither a fortress nor an oasis, but stands open and unafraid in the middle of the community, is exemplified by the ten-year-old Wyndham school in Egremont, Cumberland.

The school is there beside the clock tower, right in the centre. No gates, no high walls. Instead a broad path which draws you into the school or through it. It's a well-used right of way. It symbolizes better than any badge or motto what the school stands for — a school for the community, accessible and useful.<sup>1</sup>

To see school like this is to believe that the *community* is the educative force. The school is neither its shaper nor yet its servant; instead it is an important part of the co-operating team, powerful but not dominant,

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<sup>1</sup> Corbitt, A.: 'Community School', in *New Society* (27 Feb 1969), p 313.

contributing to the whole of life, aware of what the rest of society contributes to education. This view of education puts the heated arguments about selective versus comprehensive schools in perspective. That debate shows up as a mere preliminary the real controversy about the power and purpose of any type of school. But the smaller question of who should be in a school is contained in the larger one and has to be tackled with as little bias as possible. (Who could claim to be totally unbiased?)

Education is often used as a political tool. Statistics can be made to prove anything. But the mountain of information gathered in research by people of every political, social and religious persuasion *does* leave a few consistent findings which would be difficult to gainsay. Five major reports on education, spanning more than a decade, contain ample evidence of the educational effect of social class differences. From the 'Early Leaving' report, through Crowther, Newsom and Robbins to Plowden in 1967, research indicates there is significantly lower attainment by children from working-class homes than from middle-class homes. This is the case for children of identical I.Q. levels.

If we look at how I.Q. scores are reached, we again find a great number of studies all agreeing on the disturbing results they have to offer — this time about the inaccuracy of intelligence tests. Quite apart from the problem of what the tests actually measure — which few would now claim was intelligence as such — they reveal a very limited amount of information. For example they cannot show a child's 'ceiling' — what he *could* achieve.

Educational intervention in the homes of very young children with unstimulating backgrounds can show dramatic effects on I.Q. scores. A four year old can be moved from a below normal score to one within the 'academic' bracket in a matter of months. Even average results for a whole group are quite spectacular. A research report selected at random says:

I.Q. gains of 17 points were found in the experimental groups after an average of thirty-two visits over a seven month period, during which a total of twenty-eight books and toys were left in the home.<sup>2</sup>

This may point to the unreliability of early testing, but it also shows the influence of a stimulating environment in the early years. All this was news five or more years ago. It is an accepted fact now and is the

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<sup>2</sup> Schaefer, E. S.: paper read at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Washington, Dec 1969).

sort of finding which has led to our national development of pre-school education.

It has also helped to bring about a growing realization that selection by examination could be so inaccurate as to be unethical, especially when the uneven distribution of grammar school places for boys and for girls is contrasted and the very different number of places for either in various parts of the country is added. Professor Halsey, Director of Social and Administrative Studies of Oxford University, has an apt expression for this cumulative effect. He says that the best predictor of a child's educational attainment turns out to be that child's name and address.

Once this situation has been uncovered, it is unrealistic as well as unchristian to expect it to continue. But those who think reorganization on comprehensive lines will redress the balance by itself are also unrealistic to the point of naïveté. S. J. Eggleston, Professor of Education at Keele University, points out:

The disadvantaged working-class child of the elementary schools of the 'thirties has become not only the disadvantaged child of the secondary modern school of the 'fifties. He is the still disadvantaged child in the unstreamed, progressive comprehensive school of the 'seventies! I am not suggesting that by changing our schools we have achieved nothing; but changing the type of school is not sufficient in itself. . . . Changing the school may not make all that difference. Major changes in opportunity may only be brought about, if at all, by changing the society, and this in turn depends on our own perception of and involvement in society.<sup>3</sup>

This involvement in society is the heart of the matter. Schaefer's research on I.Q. rating, quoted earlier, goes on to say that 'intellectual functioning is influenced by environmental stimulation during the school years, adolescence and maturity'. British research has looked at this a little differently. Pupil, parent, teacher relationships are increasingly shown to be influential. As Professor Wiseman has pointed out, 'the interaction of these attitudes of child, parent and teacher, may be the greatest simple force affecting the end-result of education for a particular child'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Eggleston S.J.: 'The great equal opportunity debate', in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* (London, 30 Nov 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Wiseman, S.: 'Education and environment', in *Linking School and Home*, ed Craft *et al.* (London, 1973), p 101.

The catholic school is in a particularly good situation for furthering these links. We are already a community of faith, no matter how weak the practice of some members may be. If children are sent to a catholic school, the priest and the religious are likely to find the doors of the home wide open. Their interest in the children's welfare is accepted without question — if it is offered by us. But before we embark on home visiting it would be well to consider carefully the purpose of our proposed visits.

It would be possible simply to engage in a wider version of the victorian 'lady bountiful' visiting: to up-date the 'charitable institution' mentality. The victorians ameliorated by voluntary aid an unjust system which they supported by statutory means. The present community service — good though it is — and the proposed school/home contacts — much as we need them — will be less than helpful if they paper over the cracks in our economic, cultural and political affairs. Positive discrimination in favour of these who suffer 'multiple poverty' was demanded by the Plowden report. Following its recommendation, five areas in Britain had special programmes of aid. The Halsey report, commenting on three years of action-research in these areas, noted:

... We must conclude that the 'poverties' to which urban industrial populations are prone must be understood to have their origins in both the situational and cultural characteristics of those minorities which suffer disadvantage and discrimination, and to have their cures in both economic and cultural reform, not only at the local or community level, but also in the total structure of society.<sup>5</sup>

The total structure of society can be influenced by all its members whether they are leaders or not, through economic and political channels. But at the local or community level we might share, with senior pupils and with interested parents, findings which would inform that action. This I see as important interaction between school and the community.

An example would be the recent National Children's Bureau publication *Born to Fail?* The findings are based on a longitudinal study of all children in Britain born, within a certain period, in March 1958. This latest piece of information distilled from the data shows that 6% — an equivalent of two pupils per classroom — compares badly with 'ordinary' children in every way, physically, intellectually and socially. These results show up across the whole country, yet the only

<sup>5</sup> Halsey, A. H.: *Educational Priority*, Vol I (H.M.S.O., London, 1972), p 17.

characteristic the children have in common are poverty and bad housing together with less than good family relationships. A few examples of the plight of this 6% are: one out of eleven has contact with probationary service compared with one in 300 among ordinary children. One in fourteen needs special education compared with one in eighty among the others. On average they are three and a half years behind ordinary pupils in reading.<sup>6</sup>

While helping to bring informed action to bear on national problems like these, we are faced with the local problem of providing for such children in our present school and society. What do we do? Herd them together so that we can get on with teaching those who want to learn — or who at least do not actively resist the process? If so, who is to look after the 'unteachables' while the priest and the levite pass by on the other side? Judging by staffing conditions in areas where such pupils and their less extreme companions predominate at present, there are not too many applicants for the samaritan's job. Does education in such difficult conditions seem reasonable work for the religious? Don't rush to point out a lack of qualification for such work. A very small number of teachers are trained to teach the maladjusted. *No one* is qualified to cope with these ordinary casualties of our society. They are members of our community. They live in a self-perpetuating cycle of deprivation. Who is going to link up school and home for these pupils and so break this circle of failure, if not the religious who is already at least marginally acceptable in these homes — more often warmly welcomed? Think what a team of dedicated people could do in co-operation with such pupils and their parents, if the religious would only make that first link. Research shows that the situation can be changed. Such pupils can become whole people and educated adults. The challenge is to the catholic schools, and particularly to the teaching religious, to bring about that change. Catholic education could be a force for good that society could not afford to do without.

Some of us do not need to go further than our present classrooms to meet pupils who, if not born to fail, seem either to acquire failure or else have failure thrust upon them. Denis Marsden, discussing his book, *Education and the Working Class*, says, 'Crowther [the Government report, 1960] demonstrated that many of the most gifted working-class pupils did not get through grammar school at all'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Wedge, Peter and Prosser, Hilary: *Born to Fail?* National Children's Bureau: (London, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Marsden, D.: 'Education and the Working Class', in *Linking School and Home* (London, 1973), p 49.

Since a great many of the present middle-class, particularly the teachers, come from working-class via the schools, there is always an outcry when this is said. But the success of those in a position to protest does not alter the fact that a greater number were defeated by the system. One of the defeating processes, the researchers tell us, has nothing to do with education as such. It is a matter of social class preferences. Schools are middle-class in culture. What we prefer, we think is better in some way. That is why we prefer it. Because our social standards and our christian beliefs are integrated in our way of living, we rarely stop to separate them. But it might help some of our pupils if we could differentiate. We are all aware of the problem created accidentally by the missionaries of colonial times who took christianity and western culture to Africa in one 'package'. As Africa shook off colonialism, much of its interest in christianity went too. So also, with those pupils who see not only our christian witness expressed in middle-class terms, but are left with the impression that the two are inextricable. If these young people feel alienated and unaccepted in our schools, because they have different social class preferences, they not only fail academically, as the sociologists tell us, they are alienated from religion also. If you are convinced that the poor crowd our churches today, try counting the number of successful and unsuccessful pupils who participate in the mass. If you discuss social preferences with those who do not participate, you will surely meet the middle-class self-styled 'intellectual atheist'. But he is likely to be in a minority in the non-practising group.

It is not a matter of giving up our social preferences but of seeing that they are not equivalent to christianity.

To attribute a superior quality to middle-class morality does not correspond to the facts. The Sunday Supplements may be glossier than the *News of the World*, but their standard is no higher. The *Daily Telegraph* may be written in more sophisticated english than the *Daily Mirror*, but the standard of sexual morality it proclaims is no higher. A recent enquiry showed that those who dishonestly claimed social security amounted to one seventh of the number of people indicted for income tax evasion.

It is important to be able to distinguish between *The Times* and the gospel; between our political and social differences and our unity in humanity and in Christ.

The school that has good parent/teacher relations has gone a long way towards making the community whole, and by making education flow back and forth between home and school. But there is another

direction in which unity must be sought. This is in interaction with ideals that are different from our own. There are two extremes to be avoided. Those who would put high walls — even metaphysical ones — round our catholic children to ‘keep them safe from harm’, mix up ignorance and innocence — besides attempting the impossible in these days of mass media. Others, in their zeal for equality, would have everyone reduced to a grey sameness — or a tangle of opposing tensions — by exposing pupils to every kind of belief and disbelief without help. They muddle uniformity and unity. If the catholic school is a place where those gifted by a particular relationship with Christ grow in their realization of that relationship and are supported by the witness of others committed to Christ, then the witness we give must be clear and unashamed. It must be able to stand up against the counter-witness of those who sincerely see life quite differently. It is in seeing his teachers unwavering in their faith, while appreciating the goodness of those of different beliefs, whether christian or not, that the pupil learns to witness to *his* faith in the wider community. It is no help to leave him to meet his first challenge when he has stepped out of the supportive setting of school.

Helder Camara, whose appeal to believers and atheists to work together for justice and peace is very much to this point, has a few lines of poetry which may sum up the relationship between what we are trying to do in catholic education and what society could move towards if only we would participate.

*Join together*

Stone brick and tile  
 together all compose the house.  
 Unbuilt the pile of single elements  
 are the hope of a house.  
 But more important is to plan  
 and put it up.  
 The building done is greater  
 than the unassembled material.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Helder Camara, Archbishop: *The Desert is fertile* (London, 1974), p 47.