

# SCHOOL COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

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**T**HIS ESSAY is not, except by very oblique implication, about community schools, nor does it attempt to recognize all the social currents at work in a school. Still less does it present a best buy in education. It attempts something simpler: to analyse and order the problems inherent in the imaginative administration of a largish school community.

May I introduce you to a monster: the perfect school? The marks of the beast are easily listed.

It is at once a satisfying object of parental choice, and the perfect instrument for creating the perfect society. It reconciles the often wayward and ignorant demands of families with the task of uniting people in a common and altruistic purpose. It respects the wishes, even the legitimate prejudices of parents, and serves a world deeply divided about the aims of and methods of education.

It has a high moral and religious tone. Goodness is honoured, worship is integral. Yet it would not seek to impose its ideals too formally. After all, a human being will naturally come to the idea of right, and the convinced christian will want to worship. It has found a way of making performance match ideals.

It is a place of learning. Knowledge is seen as the satisfaction of natural curiosity, the only possible outcome of man's search for truth. Interest will beget need, need search, and search accurate scholarship. It is at the same time a place in which the whole history of man's endeavour to come to terms with his world will be explained, and where a student may gain the qualifications necessary to fit him for a career. It develops each individual child's talents to the full, creating a rounded, fulfilled person, ready to assume that special place in the world reserved for each student by a benevolent Providence. At the same time it inculcates the notion of service, regarding self as secondary to the needs of others, teaching that a life placed at the hazard of providence is a life well spent.

It is an ordered society. It respects discipline, believes that human beings cannot live together without law, regards some regularity as the very stuff of good living. Discipline, must, however, proceed from the individual. The only true discipline is self-discipline. Punishment is failure.

This monster, I suggest, cannot exist.

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*Community ideals and school organization*

I suppose that all of us have some idea of the sense of community we would like in a school. The first need is to express it without too much precision. A working definition might be that of M. Oakshott (quoted by F. Bottomley in *The Month*, July 1973):

Finally, the ideal 'school' is that of a historic community of teachers and learners, neither large nor small, evoking loyalties, pieties and affections, with traditions of its own, devoted to initiating successive generations of newcomers to the human scene into the grandeurs and servitudes of being human: an *alma mater* who remembers with pride or indulgence and is remembered with gratitude.

It will serve, provided it is cut to the size of the workaday world in the light of Dr Johnson's comment: 'long confinement to the same company which perhaps similarity of taste hath brought together, quickly contracts the faculties, and makes a thousand things offensive which are in themselves indifferent'.

Is there any way in which such a community can be created? We must look first both at the notion 'community' and the notion 'organization'.

Community is a charged and loaded word. It expresses not only an idea but an ideal. It carries along with itself, like a good product, a seal of approval. It is natural to attach epithets: loving community, lasting community, living community. It is tempting to contrast other less respectable notions such as organizations, usually prefixed by 'mere'. This is a 'living community', not a 'mere organization'.

The distinction is at least a useful tool. It polarizes two sets of concepts which need to be distinguished, and I should like to dwell with some insistence on the contrast. Suppose, therefore, we take the family as the type of community, and the factory as the type of organization, and ask two simple questions: what is each for? How would success in each be measured?

Now it is relatively easy to answer these sorts of questions about a factory. A factory, we may say, is for making goods and profit. It is successful in so far as it does these things. The answer may not satisfy the sociologist, who would like his factory to fulfil other functions both with regard to workers and the environment, but in a sense it is enough. Consider, for instance, the likelihood of the following statement appearing in a company report: 'We turn out shoddy goods, and lose money regularly, but we are a happy community'.

What is your family for? How successful is it? The best answer to these questions is a blank stare. The proper answer must be in terms of

something much worse, high philosophy. Oddly enough, amusingly paradoxical statements are possible: 'We're a bad-tempered lot, and desperately poor, yet very happy'.

I conclude quite simply that the notion 'community' has no easy definition, and if one is to be found, a man must look to the meaning of life.

But I wanted to make the distinction for another reason: to point out that there are contrasting ways in which the notion 'community' and the notion 'organization' can be related. It is possible, for instance, to build up community in order to further the ends of an organization. We see this happening at a low level in football teams: 'a good team spirit scores goals'. The examples can be multiplied: 'a happy ship is an efficient ship'; 'commitment to the company means higher productivity'.

Is this attitude wholly respectable? Could there be a law: preoccupation with community spirit is in inverse proportion to the respectability of the enterprise? Certainly the desire of some reformers, socialist or christian, to have people think 'right thoughts' might suggest it.

It is possible, on the other hand to regard organization as the expression of community. We attend mass on sundays to demonstrate our communal sense of worship: we share family chores in order to serve one another. It is tempting to regard this attitude as more respectable, for here definable and simple objectives express but do not exhaust the meaning of life.

This fairly basic distinction can serve to underline the difficulties inherent in talking sense about schools. Consider two different sorts of school prospectuses. One might well turn out like this:

Catholic School is a living community of boys, staff and parents. Its object is to foster loyalty to Christ in his Church, to recommend self-discipline, and promote human values in the context of a living academic tradition, etc.

Another might read:

Catholic School was founded so that the catholic community might receive, in a christian context, an education equal to that given in state schools. A full range of courses is available to both O and A level, and the school has always laid great emphasis on academic excellence, etc.

One emphasizes community values, the other achievement. It is normal to say something about both, but rare to relate the two in any intelligible form, still rarer to give the reader any sense of what the place is like.

*Faith*

It seems to me that the key to understanding school community is faith, providing that the word is used in the sense of an abiding, overriding philosophy in terms of which the organization is created. I hold this for three reasons:

Education is concerned with the whole person, with the meaning of life, rather than with some specific, measurable objective such as the resultant position in society.

The ideal of education and the school must be capable of being realized in different ways in different people. Sartre's conclusion that man has no definition must always be a preoccupation of the educator.

The aim of education will be different in different schools.

Faith has three characteristics. It can be a restricted notion (like hating the boat in front in a bump race) or an all-embracing love of God and one's neighbour. It admits different degrees of commitment. It challenges without compelling. The student is invited to make a personal, individual response to community ideals, not asked to conform to a way of life. In a christian school this may well be the individual, personal response to the community challenge of Christ.

In what sense and to what extent can the practice of religion be a true community value of a school? Fr G. Earle, for instance, writing in *The Way* (vol 14, October 1974), on the 'Future of Catholic Schools', says:

The future of catholic schools must lie in this direction: towards a direct and exclusive relationship with God; otherwise the religion they transmit will be mere theory or social welfare. This path can be called a life of prayer. . . . What are our Governors going to do about it? . . . Prayer is above all things something we must do for ourselves. Only those who speak from personal experience can speak with any authority at all, and only they can avoid the double charge of hypocrisy: that lips and hearts are not at one and that we want to lay burdens on others which we are not willing to carry ourselves.

It may be argued, further, that some similar notion must be implicit in the concern to create catholic schools. If religion is not a true community value, why bother? The facts are not as simple as this.

Consider the way in which the school community is created. By any means it must be rough and ready. You could associate all the local baptized. You could if you wished apply, too, the test of practice, whatever that might mean, and presumably it might mean some kind of

judgment of the catholicity of a family by the parish priest. Whatever practice you adopt, you admit to some selectivity, and in admitting this selectivity you imply that religion can only be a school value under some circumstances.

But the matter is still more complex. The school deals not with mature adults (let it be noted that adults in modern times are not noted for the stability of their religious ideals) but with emergent youth. The girl you admit may not be the same in two years' time. She may have passed from simple family faith to adolescent agnosticism. The boy you admit may fluctuate from day to day as the mood takes him. And yet further, notice the implicit problem in Fr Earle's statement: 'prayer is above all things something we must do for ourselves'. A community value or an individual activity?

My only conclusion is that, in a catholic school, as in any other school, religion is not necessarily a true community value. It may have a better chance of becoming one, it may be easier to recommend, but it is not necessarily a value of the school as a school. The test is fairly simple: can you frame an organization to express it?

Many schools I know nowadays are tending to regard religion and its practice as more an extra-curricular activity, aimed at different levels for different levels of conviction. Even those who still feel compulsory worship to be possible, aim it at either younger and more immature pupils, or limit its extent.

What about religious studies? Developments here again underline the basic point. Catholicism is no longer assumed. One headmaster I know summed up the approach to religious studies in the following phrase: 'creating the human condition in terms of which the boy or girl might be open to the action of the Spirit of God'.

In this matter we are often missionaries trying to recommend one set of values in offering another. It is the question of finding the right key, of defining the relationship between a set of values that this particular section of society thinks it needs, and that set of values which it is reasonable to suppose it might be helped to revere.

### *Scholarship*

If faith enters into the idea of school community in a real but enigmatic fashion, the position of learning is equally problematic. Mr Bottomley quotes M. Oakshott: 'the ideal "school" is in the first place a serious and orderly initiation into an intellectual, imaginative, moral and emotional inheritance'.

Quite apart from omission of reference to discovery, the definition has serious difficulties, not the least of which is concerned with the nature of the inheritance and how it is to be rendered serious and orderly. The fact is that knowledge is too vast for there to be a coherent inheritance. The task of considering the curriculum becomes an interesting parlour game. The latest player is the professor of comparative European Literature in the University of Geneva, George Steiner, who, in an article in *Conference* (February 1975), centres his choice round three foci:

English literature and the literature which it has bodied forth.

Mathematics.

The study of a foreign language and the immersion, so far as it can be achieved, of the student in the milieu of that language, at one or more points of his secondary education.

I make no comment.

The curriculum developer finds himself in an impossible position. He is either juggling with subjects or notions like study in depth, or trying to relate some vast philosophical theory to what is going on in the classroom. He will talk of personality, attitude, the emergent mind, social consciousness and the like. In the end he is forced back on the notion of humanity itself, and finally on to the notion of faith, in the sense in which we have already used it.

The cynic might be glad that the examination system has given us in practice a trivial solution to this problem. The serious educator finds himself thrown back into exactly the same position as he is forced to adopt about faith. He is a missionary trying to relate values which he himself has chosen to the values of the society in which he works. He uses his ideals as a key to what it is possible to recommend. Realistically he has to accept the limitations of his situation.

### *Personal Development*

If faith is the key and the academic merely an aspect of faith, it follows that the school community must find a challenging organization to express more than mere academic values. The great exponent of this kind of approach was Kurt Hahn (co-founder of Gordonstoun and the 'outward bound' schools). In a marvellous, if somewhat negative, passage — the source of which I have lost — he once wrote:

The young today are exposed to six declines: the decline in fitness, due to modern ways of moving about; the decline in skill and care, due to the weakened tradition of craftsmanship; the decline in self-discipline, due to the ever-present availability of tranquillizers and stimulants; the decline in initiative and enterprise, due to the widespread disease of spectatoritis; the decline in memory and imagination, due to the confused restlessness of our civilization, neither the love of God nor of man can take deep root except in aloneness; the worst decline, the decline in compassion, due to the unseemly haste with which modern life is conducted.

A school needs the courage to create its own version, and to state as Hahn did the practical solutions to the problems he had analysed.

There are many other ways in which the development of talent and its selfless use could be discussed, but I want to concentrate for a moment simply on the idea of competition. For some this is a basic ingredient of life, for others anathema, and it is easy for each to parody the other's position. It is, for instance, very simple to make wry remarks about non-competitive rugby football and mixed-ability cookery. It is equally simple to parody the whole competitive attitude as John Wain did in his novel *The Contenders*. Here the grammar school preoccupation with marks and success reaches its apotheosis. Adultery even becomes an away 'win'.

But the school which takes its community life seriously has seriously to face this problem. The quiet friendliness which can subtly destroy another man's life cannot be tolerated. Nor can a wishy-washy set of standards which challenge nobody.

The old jesuit concept of *aemulatio* is of use here. Competence is revered and praised, but not interpreted in terms of contention. Cleverness must be recognized in terms of service and duty: a matter then of admiration, not of pushing others into second place.

Schools can be hard, contentious, cruel, worshipping success in exams, careers and the rest.

### *Staff Leadership*

School discipline might be defined as the outward sign of staff leadership. It is the practical expression of the community spirit, in which the staff set out to issue a realistic missionary challenge to the pupils, one which is meant to engage a free response. A balance has, therefore, to be struck between two attitudes:

The kids have to be kept down. They are the drill squads and the staff, in fine churchillian phrase, mere bell-wethers or fuglemen.

The kids are equals; organization is destructive. Here there is no positive challenge. Pupil is not protected against pupil, or indeed staff against themselves.

Here the Vatican Council's notion of liberty and charity makes its contribution. The staff are challenging the pupils to spontaneity, individuality and diversity.

I shall not list the qualities of the men and women required for this work: the rounded personalities, the dedication, the patience and sheer physical energy, the ability to make large-minded choices, to create a teaching community, the charity. Oddly enough, staff-rooms are full of them. They merely need the opportunity to act in concert: to plan with imagination and sympathy.

Their enemies are simple: pop culture, political activity and the tendency of universities and employers to reduce schools to indicators of future potential.

#### *Notes on existing organizations*

School communities are commonly made or perpetuated in two ways:

A cross-section of the school population is directed to a particular plant, and the staff told to get on with it. Sometimes this method is subject to some refinements; for instance by organizing a greater social or academic mix. A section of the adolescent population is hived off from its peer group in the name of some principle; for instance sex and/or religion and/or academic potential.

Now neither of these methods is going, by itself, to create a satisfactory community. Good neighbourhood schools produce bad neighbourhood schools; the 'bussed' school is a divided school. Selection by sex, religion or ability does not necessarily involve the community values it promises. We may, however, hazard two assertions:

*Assertion I:* Schools that associate children of widely differing background and achievement usually do this in terms of a social philosophy emphasizing civic virtues. It follows that such virtues are likely to become an important community value.

This is not a nonsensical attitude. A man may hold fast to the principle of subsidiarity, and hold none the less that good government, both national and local, must have a major say in the education of the good citizen. To neglect the needs of the community at large, and not to recognize the requirements of industry would be absurd. Yet the dangers are obvious. Firstly, good citizenship can be too easily identified with



qualities suggested by one particular philosophy of power. Secondly, the state's intervention may turn out to be at once alarmingly total, and totally trivial. Illych (*The Celebration of Awareness*) may serve to overstate the case:

Comprehensive schooling today involves year-round, obligatory, and universal classroom attendance in small groups for several hours each day. It is imposed on all citizens for a period of ten to eighteen years. School divides life into two segments, which are increasingly of comparable length. As much as anything else, school implies custodial care for persons who are declared undesirable elsewhere by the simple fact that a school has been built to serve them. The school is supposed to take the excess population from the street, the family, or the labour force. . . .

Schooling also involves a process of accepted ritual certification for all members of schooled society. Schools select those who are bound to succeed and send them on their way with a badge marking them fit.

Thirdly, there is some danger that the schools themselves might become a microcosm of the political battle. The major danger in all this, that of triviality, is a condition of the existence of us all, and is not confined to one sort of school. Comprehensive education does not rule out community; it merely changes the emphasis.

*Assertion II:* Schools which adopt some principle of selection do not necessarily elevate their principle into a community value. If they do, its content is often negative.

Here I content myself with a few simple questions: There is, we know, a historical reason for the existence of girls' schools, but what would be the reason for founding one today? Would its foundation imply that there were some specifically feminine virtues that could only be pursued in isolation from men? Or would it imply that men might be a distraction in their pursuit of aims which were specifically womanly? My point is simply that the feminine might arguably be pursued alongside men, indeed even with their active connivance. It might be important to keep men out merely to stop them taking over.

Does the existence of catholic schools imply any particular set of religious standards? There is a case for saying rather that they imply merely the exclusion of other beliefs and practices considered as lax. The evidence comes, partly from the rather limited spiritual aims we set ourselves, the hunch that parents might be content with some such formulation as: 'well at least I know he isn't going to be led astray or given queer ideas'.

Does academic selection imply concern for high academic standards? Neither the formality of much grammar school education, nor the vitality of some staff, suggests this. Sometimes one senses that the attitude can be boiled down to: 'I cannot be bothered to teach anyone but the bright, and that only in highly structured conditions'. As one head once put it: 'Too many children with an IQ below 130 makes for a very stodgy school'. My conclusion is that the selective school needs to know more about itself than is contained in its apparent values.

My final conclusion is that the type of school is not the key to the real quality of school community. It must be sought elsewhere, and indeed, in order to find it, you have to look well beyond the school itself.

### *Summary*

- 1 There is no ideal school.
- 2 School staffs are missionary communities in partly hostile territory. They have to use partly misguided wants and often unsatisfactory situations as a means of ensuring their presence. They have ideals and values which they hope will challenge, but which they can rarely express fully.
- 3 Schools have to frame an organization which expresses this state of affairs realistically. The organization has to create the conditions in which a challenge can be issued, one which is neither too weak to be properly demanding, nor too strong to be met.
- 4 It is unlikely that any system of school organization will, of itself, solve the problem.