

Brenda Watson

Education & Belief

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Preface

This book should be of interest to all who are concerned about the state of education today, and especially to those involved in curriculum planning and development. It argues forcefully for the value of education at a time when many are challenging it.

The first part of the book seriously considers the mismatch between education and what so often happens in schools. It suggests some fundamental reasons for this, and puts forward a strong case for a different set of priorities applicable right across the curriculum.

Education cannot avoid questions to do with belief. Value judgments underline the organisation and ethos of schools and what is taught; these value judgments are based on beliefs, whether acknowledged or not, chosen or imbibed. Schools need to explore ways in which they can help people to reflect on the content and validity of beliefs within a framework of mutual respect. This book argues for a mode of education which sets out to initiate young children and older students into responsible self-education. This involves sharing with them the purpose of education, alerting them to the dangers of indoctrination and conditioning from whatever source, and introducing them to those skills and attitudes which can enable them to develop their full potential.

Having discussed education and belief in general terms, the book goes on to look in some detail at one particularly contentious area of the curriculum which is centred on beliefs – Religious Education. The only subject legally required in our schools, Religious Education has gone through a tortuous series of chameleon-like transformations in recent years to make it fit modern thinking and become acceptable in a predominantly secular society. The book discusses what kind of Religious Education is needed for it to make its distinctive and significant contribution to education.

What this involves in practical terms is set out in the third section which seeks to dispel possible criticism that the approach advocated is unworkable. Chapters 15 and 16 are concerned only with primary education but contain much material which middle and secondary school teachers may adapt for older age-groups. Similarly, the two corresponding chapters (17 and 18) on secondary education may furnish primary school teachers with a greater appreciation of how vital their role is in Religious Education.

Brenda Watson
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A ON EDUCATION

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1 Schools and Values

Education in the West is at a critical point. Many seem to have lost faith in it altogether. Despite vast expenditure, education does not seem to be delivering the goods. Complaints range from low standards in the '3 Rs' to absence of vision and the lack of a sense of responsibility. Universities as well as schools are criticised for failing to expose students to values and turning out 'knowledgeable barbarians', who have no real understanding of their society.

In Britain the point of education is being questioned even within the teaching profession itself, at present in considerable and serious disarray. Low morale among teachers is coupled with the anxious search for new courses, new methods, new approaches to assessment, more relevance, more awareness of the needs of society and increased efficiency. At the same time industry, central government, pressure groups, governors, parents and children continue to protest, in one way or another, about the quality of education.

Is education failing, or has it indeed been tried? Perhaps what commonly passes for education is really something else. What indeed is education?

Values in education

The Chief Education Officer for Oxfordshire, Tim Brighouse, when addressing a recent conference at Westminster College commented: 'The first ingredient of an excellent school, in which relationships are good and learning happens, is a shared value-system.'¹

He went on to say that such a system enables young people to be comfortable in handling ideas and teasing out prejudices; without this ability people succumb to a mental form of slavery.

A shared value-system gives a sense of direction without which no school can operate efficiently. Shared values encourage vision. In underlining the importance of what the school is about, they help to develop – in all concerned – a proper self-respect.

Yet any consensus as to what such values are, or should be, is increasingly difficult to sustain in a world remarkable for its intermingling of convictions and life-styles. There is no longer any 'gold standard'. Values are widely

regarded as purely subjective; the possibility is rejected of there being any absolutes to which people should seek to relate their views and their behaviour. In this situation values logically become an arbitrary matter of agreement between people who happen to be thrown together. Yet the divergence of opinions to be accommodated makes this 'holding-the-ring' exercise ever more problematic.

Awareness of how important and how difficult such questions are seems to be becoming more widespread. Roy Wake (recently Senior HM Staff Inspector for Secondary Education in England and Wales), considers that there is 'a take-off all over the country in the study of values and attitudes in education, and in those held by teachers in responsible positions'.² This is very encouraging.

Difficulties in reaching agreement on values

The search for shared values, however, is no light undertaking. In addition to the diversity of views already mentioned there are a number of other considerations.

First, society does not wait for consensus before transmitting values, and neither do schools. They convey values every day, knowingly or unknowingly, both at the more explicit level of what is taught, and at the less openly-acknowledged level of how the school is administered. The latter constitutes a largely hidden agenda which determines, in no small measure, the content of the schooling experience.

Second, schools often convey conflicting sets of values. Figure 1 refers to a school, typical of many, where contradictory signals are given, and neither staff nor students know where they are.

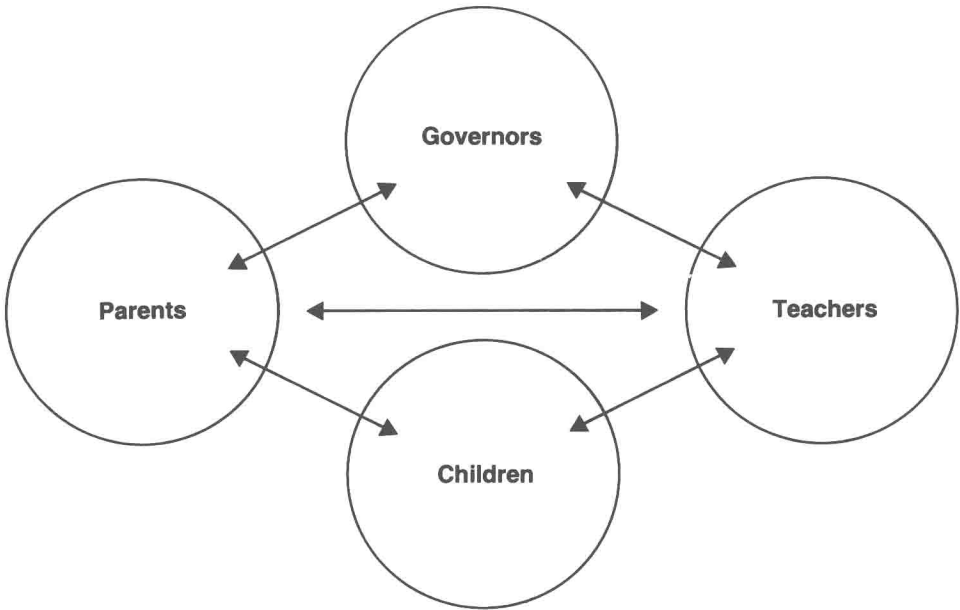
Third, it is often not easy to ascertain what values are being transmitted because of the distinction between what people *say* and what they actually *do*. Paying no more than lip-service to some ideal can be due to laziness, hypocrisy, or lack of understanding, as well as to other factors outside a person's or a school's control. Such lip-service is therefore not infrequent.

Fourth, there is of necessity something of universal significance about the term 'value', even if a subjective view of values is held. We cannot choose values as we choose a coat, or plants for the garden. They are not a matter of mere preference, nor even of what is personally important (in the way that music can mean a lot to some people and football to others). A statement such as 'I value honesty and integrity' implies some kind of obligation laid not only on the speaker but on everyone – irrespective of whether they choose to acknowledge that responsibility or not.

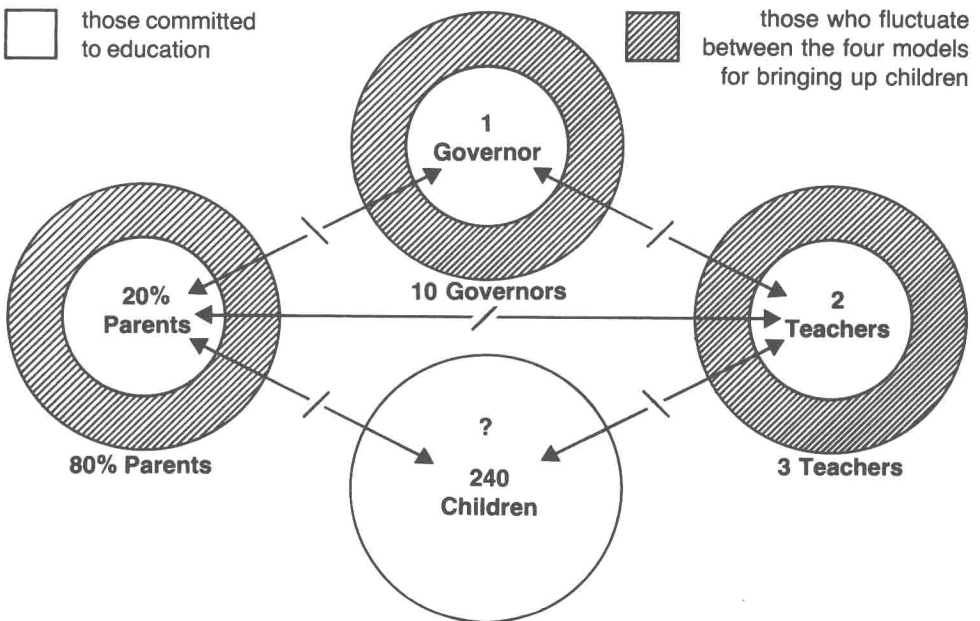
Fifth, in any community there has to be some accommodation of differing points of view. This process of accommodation should not be a compromise, nor be seen as such – still less a matter of expediency. Rather, it should be a conscious choosing of priorities, based on the awareness that not everything

Figure 1 The importance of shared values

a A school with shared values showing good relationships



b A school (known to the author) without shared values, showing confused communication



can be done or agreed. Ovid's maxim *Discors concordia* – agreeing to differ – points to a necessary ingredient of being civilised. Yet this is only possible on the basis of some viewpoints being held in common. These need to be clearly articulated and accepted by all, otherwise the element of proper disagreement and controversy will threaten the whole enterprise.

Sixth, in real-life situations there is frequently a clash between the different values held by the same person or community. Freedom of speech, for example, may need to be curtailed where someone is defaming someone else's character. A hierarchy of values has to be established and no institution can run effectively without agreement as to what is at the top of the hierarchy. A morally-committed vegetarian, for example, could not work in an abattoir, nor someone who believes in the sanctity of human life, in a prison where torture is tolerated. There are limits to the principle of accommodation.

Finally, it matters very much what values are held. The 'excellent school' depends on more than having a measure of agreement, as Tim Brighouse noted on another occasion:

Some of the shared value-systems we have are quite pernicious and they can be successful in a kind of pernicious way . . . Most of our schools beyond question have unspoken assumptions in their organisation, their timetable and their curriculum which reinforce individualism, materialism and minimise the need for co-operation.³

This is a challenging observation and the question of prevailing assumptions will be discussed at some length in Chapter 3.

Schools cannot escape the responsibility of wrestling with these problems and seeking to make explicit their agreed starting-points as yardsticks against which to measure practice.

An ideal school?

One way of approaching such a task may be to imagine walking into an ideal school. What would it look like and feel like? Figure 2 offers one possible picture which readers may be interested to compare with their own ideas. The school could be a primary, middle or secondary, comprehensive or independent, state or church school. The word 'student' is used as that currently most favoured in secondary schools, but the model applies to primary schools, too.

A break-down of the attitudes and principles fostered, together with their opposites, is appended in the form of a possible evaluation exercise for a school (see Appendix page 252).

In the 'ideal' school, the shared value-system would help to unite staff and students in one common aim. The values would not be constantly talked

Figure 2 An ideal school

Appearance

Visually attractive – evidence of thought in design and use of colour, shape, furnishings, pictures, plants, flowers and display of students' work; well-cared-for impression free of rubbish and clutter; creatively-designed grounds – car parks and cycle-stands well-hidden and areas for people to sit or walk around quietly and for younger children to explore and enjoy

General atmosphere

Lively but without sense of pressure – a place where everyone can find some fulfilment; timetable generously planned so that students and staff have some time each day to pursue their own studies in an atmosphere of learning; emphasis on individuals gaining real understanding not on superficial covering of a lot of ground; all areas of curriculum have high status; competitive element played down and examinations not regarded as be-all-and-end-all; extra-curricular activities highly valued; focus on wider community development.

Integrity

No discrimination against individuals; everyone able to express views; widespread discussion of controversial issues in order to get beyond prejudice and mindless opinions

Staff

Aware of influence of example in dress, speech and general manner – not role-playing but exercising leadership without being dogmatic or pompous; courteous to students and each other and willing to listen; careful in staffroom not to *enjoy* criticising people

Head

Enthusiasm and drive without over-imposing own personality; open to ideas yet prepared to take decisions; creating atmosphere in which everyone feels important and part of running of school; honest and fair avoiding favouritism or victimization; concern for seeing proper respect for the school

Students

Self-disciplined and attentive out of interest or because they understand importance of what they are doing; able to organise much of their own learning themselves; avoidance of sense of failure and under-achieving but also of self-importance and cocksure attitudes; evidence of proper self-respect without need to hide behind false image

Teaching methods

Variety, including some team-teaching; individuality and non-uniformity appreciated because of

Organisation

Minimum of meetings but decision-making people alive to views and reactions because they see to it they

Discipline

Uniform approach throughout school beginning with earliest age-group so that students

awareness that people need
to approach education
differently and make
different claims

have time and skill for
informal listening; no
undercurrent of bad feeling
allowed to develop;
opportunity always
available to voice
grievances and these care-
fully investigated; good
system of communication
so that everyone is aware of
what is happening

aware they help to create
atmosphere; disruptive
students treated justly and
firmly but with reasoning
wherever possible

about or paraded in any obvious way, but they would form the backcloth to everything that happened.

Possible reactions

I suspect that there may be at least three possible reactions to this picture of an ideal school. Some may view it as ludicrous because so far removed from what actually happens and so transparently unattainable. Such ideals do indeed frequently feature in the aims and objectives for courses in schools, colleges and universities. Yet the teacher facing a row of apathetic, gum-chewing, weirdly-dressed, ill-disciplined teenagers in the secondary classroom, or coping with the increasing numbers of primary school children whose behaviour is disruptive and whose span of attention appears minimal, may well laugh at this imaginary projection of what a school could be like. The difficulties are indeed enormous and must not be underestimated. The rhetoric of high-minded educational theory is one thing, the reality is another.

It is, however, the purpose of ideals to act as stars to guide a course. What matters is not their unattainability, but the inspiration and discipline they can give. It can be argued that when the situation is grim, idealism assumes even greater importance as a means of raising people out of their rut. In this sense idealism becomes the only realism. It is also the case that stars are seen best on a dark night, but the eye has to get accustomed to the darkness before being able to appreciate them.

Others may find fault with my ideal school because they prefer an alternative blueprint – perhaps one where streamlined efficiency and preparation for the world of work receive first place, or where particular cultural traditions are inculcated, or where students are sent out with a mission to reform society in a particular way. If pressed far enough, this objection may not simply spring from a difference in emphasis but may be a fundamental attack on the concept of education itself. Discussion of this will form a large part of Chapters 2 and 3, where I examine what is distinctive

about education and what is corrosive of it, why the latter is unsatisfactory, and why I regard education as desirable.

A third possible reaction is that expressed to me by Charles Barnham, a Senior Adviser for Secondary Schools who has just retired:

I agree with everything you have written. It describes a situation which many of us in teaching have given our life's work to achieve. . . It has been achieved to some extent in some primary schools, but never, I think, in secondary education. WHY?⁴

Notes and references

- 1 Tim Brighouse: address given at a Farmington-sponsored conference, Westminster College, March 1985
- 2 Roy Wake: opening address given to School Curriculum Development Committee Seminar, May 1986 entitled 'Contentious Issues in the Curriculum'.
- 3 Tim Brighouse, speaking at a meeting on Education in Beliefs and Values, held at Farmington Institute, October 24 1985
- 4 I am grateful to Charles Barnham for this comment on an earlier draft of this chapter

2 Cross-purposes in Education

One major reason why the educational ideal is so often not achieved is because it is not thoroughly understood or is confused with other views about the purpose of education. Confusion can occur at a basic level because the word 'education' is used in ordinary speech with two quite distinct meanings which are, or should be, related. The first meaning loosely describes what schools, colleges and universities are about. Education in this sense is synonymous with schooling. There is, however, a far deeper meaning, one which is concerned with developing the potential of individuals to become persons in the fullest sense of that word. Schooling can only give impetus to the process, for education can and does happen outside schooling altogether. It is with this second use of the word 'education' that this book is primarily concerned.

Another, more serious, cause of confusion lies in the failure of so much educational provision to educate. It is necessary to make a radical distinction here. So wide is the gap between the two meanings that some people even argue that schooling is contrary to education. Schooling can do great harm when it teaches rigidity, boredom and uniformity; it can kill the natural instincts of curiosity, delight in learning and creativity which are normally present in early childhood.

Could it be that most people who are disappointed and disgruntled with education are really referring to the products of *schooling* rather than rejecting education in our second sense as an ideal? So much schooling is in fact taken up with concerns other than education. We need, therefore, to try to identify and examine these concerns.

Nurture and education

The twentieth century has inherited three ways of bringing up the young which need to be seen as distinct from education. The oldest of these is *nurture*. This is the idea that children are trained by upbringing, as well as by deliberate instruction, to follow in the footsteps of adults. Muslim children, for example, absorb Islam through their environment in the home as well as receiving it by direct teaching. This is an extremely effective method of

influencing the young because it works by immersion within a culture, and by example.

Nurture in some sense is inevitable because children are bound to be influenced by the adults in their environment. Deliberate nurture is generally part of what responsible parents and adults do – that is, those who really care for and delight in their children. In the West, however, because of uncertainty concerning culture, beliefs and values, and also considerable break-up in family and social life, the systematic nurture which used to be the norm is becoming rarer.

The relationship between nurture and education is complex and the two concepts should not be equated. Nurture can be the cradle of education, when it is conducted in a way which enables children as they grow to question and reflect upon how they are being brought up. It can, however, be simply another word for conditioning, having the effect of closing doors and producing tunnel vision. It can leave its recipients at the mercy of tradition, fortunate or unfortunate as this may be, unless accompanied by and extended into education. By building on nurture, education must seek to open up vistas beyond nurture.

Nurture of the right kind is of immense value in promoting education. But what do we mean by ‘the right kind?’

We need to be *treated* as people before we can begin to develop our potential as people for ourselves. Teachers and psychologists constantly draw attention to the crucial role played by adults in a child’s earliest years. A child deprived of love and security is handicapped for life. Systematic nurture, even of an educationally unenlightened kind, can – and usually does – provide this love and security. The child is the subject of attention from adults who care for it and who wish to pass on what they feel is meaningful and important. The child is therefore brought into living conversation with other people, and has a chance to grow in the ability to make relationships. Casual nurture, however, can be damaging; the child may feel neglected, unloved and unable to trust anyone. Such a child, will not easily develop a proper self-respect, and the journey towards becoming at all educated will be a long and arduous one.

Ideally, nurture should be characterised by another feature, namely an interesting and stimulating environment, in which the child has sufficient space and freedom to explore and to begin to make independent assessments and decisions. This is where much systematic nurture fails: it is too narrow, restricting and adult-bound. The child should be able to turn to loving adults, but should also have the freedom to be alone and enjoy discovering with its growing powers of awareness unfettered.

It would not be true to say that education cannot happen unless this right kind of nurture has prepared the ground. Fortunately, later experiences can remedy much of the deficiency, which is why schooling can be crucial. Even one teacher can make an immense difference. Nevertheless the great