The Irish Journal of Education, 1970, iv, 1, pp. 30-38.

THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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There is a growing dissatisfaction with American public schooling. Three recent developments suggest the death knell of the public school movement. One group of the American public rejects the public school in favour of private education designed to foster the intellect and ensure acceptance of the student at a prestigious college. Another group sees the public school as hostile to religion and intends to send its children to nonpublic schools supportive of religious instruction. And a third group regards racial integration with hostility; the flight of white students into private schools is expected to leave some public schools entirely black in the 1970s.

THE RISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Probably no movement in American history has exhibited such profound cultural significance as the genesis and development of the public school. The American Dream has, from the early days of the republic, placed great faith in education as the open door to individual opportunity. Public schooling, first in the common school, later in the high school, and most recently in higher education, has symbolized the reality of the democratic ideal.

Public schooling was called into being during the first half of the nineteenth century to educate the citizenry and prepare them for enlightened public activity. Yet the leaders of the public school movement knew full well that schooling is at best but one method for molding the young, and in some respects a superficial one. Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, Caleb Wiley, Calvin Stowe and others realized that schooling might provide technical skills and basic knowledge, but it was the press and participation in politics that really educated the citizen. Public schooling was to play only a relatively minor part in the education of the public. Informal education, given by public libraries and lyceums, mechanics' institutes and learned societies, agricultural organizations, newspapers and pamphlets were to hold the key to educating the public at large.

Following the Civil War, outstanding teachers, political leaders, friends of youths of all persuasions were committed to the view that public schooling was to be extended beyond the elementary years, through and beyond the high school. Thus public support for secondary education and

higher education came into being. The rich or the established middle class were persuaded to support the secondary schools for the poor on the grounds that only then would America have a skilled labour force properly aware of its appropriate role in society and insulated against contamination from foreign political and social doctrines. The public school would combat poverty, squalor and disease in the slums, and would work closely with community, church, library, farmers' institute, and county fair in regenerating urban and rural life in America. The public school movement was made to appeal to anyone rendered uncomfortable by the rapid influx of immigrants to the United States. The task of the school was extended to Americanize or socialize these newly arrived. The public school movement was also supported by the many different groups of immigrants who saw in education the proper instrument for social mobility, the avenue out of the ghetto. In addition, the public school supported, more by chance than by design, the Protestant religious posture. To Americanize, in this view, was to inculcate the dominant morality commonly referred to as the Protestant Ethic.

The conclusion drawn from this brief account is clear and simple. During the past one hundred years or so, popular schooling became a legatee institution, to which were delegated many residual purposes and functions. Although this doubtlessly infused popular schooling with new vitality, seldom in history had so much been expected of the school. The 'whole child' concept of schooling involved a radical redefinition of the public school movement, one that forced the school into the struggle for improved social insight and interest. In effect, adequate public schooling depended upon teachers who possessed social vision and not a little courage.

Consequently, no other country in the world has ever assembled its social resources and put together the support of such a diverse population in the cause of free, public schooling. It began, we noted, as a result of the inextricable tie between education and the policies of a free society. Horace Mann saw education as the engine of a new republican America; a half-century later the progressives viewed public schooling as the instrument to realize America's promise; John Dewey saw the public school as society's great instrument for shaping its own destiny. In brief, the public school movement became co-extensive with the education of the public.

All of this has been done, but now it seems that this social movement is *passé*. One cannot as easily date its end as its beginning, but it is evident that old distinctions have vanished; one can no longer determine where public schooling ends and the rest of the world begins. The 1960s represent

the final decade of traditional rhetoric about the enterprise: is the institution viable? what is the proper 'role' of the public school? Many find this conclusion distressing and deplore the accusation. However, it is possible to hypothesize that the 'public school movement' has come to an end with the result that we no longer can assume that we know in any sense what public schools are for. And, as a consequence, the 'movement' in America, no longer commanding the respect and hearts of the American public, is now in the process of being replaced by a different set of educational institutions. Let us look at how this came about.

THE DECLINE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

A number of rather recent developments suggest the death knell of the public school movement. The first occurred around the time in the 1950s that the Russians moved ahead of the U.S. in the space race. The American public blamed schools for the shortsightedness of the American space programme. The weaknesses of American education were exploited along with threats, insinuations, and loyalty oaths to ensure that American education was purged of seditious elements. The result of this wave of criticism and attack has been to purge public schooling of the evangelical kind of liberalism generally associated with social and political reform. The public school had been charged with imparting social knowledge, bringing about a truly socialized disposition in students, dealing with problems of living together, and infusing students with the desire to shape and improve the quality of human existence. Now, it was charged, the schools must serve a quite different purpose, one that is truly germane to education, namely, the cultivating of the intellect.

This redefinition of the task of public schooling has been in force for a number of years, but for all intents and purposes it has not been eminently successful. The teaching profession remains true to the conviction that public schooling must continue to be an instrument of social reform and exudes a good deal of optimism about its power to shape and improve human life, even, if need be, at the expense of cultivating the intellect. As a result, the public school movement is no longer supported by a rather large number of parents who take issue with the teaching profession's definition of education. These parents intend that their children will enter higher education, and give short shrift to an education designed to produce social knowledge which, although desirable and necessary in a democracy, does not necessarily help the student do well on college entrance examinations. In short, one very large group of the American public rejects the public

school in favour of private education designed to foster the intellect and ensure the student of a better than average possibility of being accepted by a prestigious college or university.

A second factor contributing to the demise of the public school movement is the legal decision rendered by the Supreme Court of the United States concerning school prayer. The majority of teachers at the time of Horace Mann and throughout the nineteenth century did not object to religious instruction in the public school. Indeed, a long relationship between religion and the public school existed. However, with the growing number of immigrants of different faiths, some of them not Christian, with the growth of humanism, of atheism, of relativistic philosophies, and of new scientific theories such as Darwinism, there was created widespread indifference, and even hostility, in regard to the Christian tradition in the United States. Given such a turn of events, it came to pass that in a society increasingly detached from its religious origins in any functional way, whenever the school touched on religious subjects it was likely to find itself challenged by some group. The strict secularists were aroused by the fear of a state-promulgated school prayer and the potential of a state established religion.

But what of the opponents? Interestingly enough, a large segment of the American public is convinced that the United States is fundamentally a 'Christian nation,' and is afraid that with the banishment of prayer there will follow an abandonment of religion as a whole in the public schools. Worse still, it is asserted, the schools will become hostile to religion and religious practices. Thus, public schooling will become more and more a 'godless' institution.

As an answer to this predicament, many honestly religious believers intend to send their children to private and denominational schools supportive of religious instruction. Indeed, several articles that have appeared in public and in scholarly journals, predict that the growth of nonpublic schools, enhanced by the religious issue, will sooner or later force the public schools into the role of a minority.

A third factor is the effort at equalization of public schooling. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled unanimously on five cases involving segregated schools, four affecting state laws and one the practices in the District of Columbia. A year after the 1954 decision, the Court delegated to the District Courts the task of implementing the decision 'with all deliberate speed.' And as fast as the District Courts acted, whites who wanted no part of 'race mixing' for their youngsters, erected barriers to integration. One proposal was to turn the public schools over

to private concerns, and Prince Edward County, Virginia, abolished its public school system entirely. Tuition grants were given to pupils who attended private schools, and tax relief was given those who contributed to the support of private schools. The white community, having more wealth than the Negroes, provided for their children in a system of segregated, private schools, but the Negroes had no school from the Fall of 1958 to the Fall of 1963, when a privately financed school was set up for Negroes, which operated until 1964. Negro parents began a long legal process of suits and appeals. Finally in 1964, the District Court ordered the reopening of the public schools. When the schools did open, about 1,600 pupils registered. All but seven were Negro. The rest of the white children remained in the private schools of the Prince Edward School Foundation.

Not only was the question as to the purpose of the public schools in Prince Edward County challenged in a serious way, but, actually, the public school movement was repudiated by the white population. Put these two observations together and we recognize immediately that another segment of the American public today is unwilling to grant the public school the power to shape and improve human relations, particularly *vis-a-vis* race. If we are to believe the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the white and black races, are more separate than they were a year earlier when the Commission made its original report. Furthermore, before 1966, whites were leaving cities at a rate of 140,000 a year; since 1966 the rate has climbed to nearly half a million a year, leaving behind an increasing black and frustrated population. Patently, these whites wish to avoid the consequences of the law of the land as interpreted by the Supreme Court. Their flight to the suburbs, to lily-white ghettos, ensures them, they believe, of the opportunity to have their children educated with whites, by whites, for whites.

In effect, what is being argued here is that the public school movement in America, having taken up the cause of social reform, logically championed the desire of the Negro to achieve equality of citizenship by gaining access to popular schooling with whites. But by so doing, public education alienated another segment of the American public whose opposition to racial mixing in education was widely voiced in both the North and the South. To recognize this development is to acknowledge that public schooling today is regarded with suspicion and hostility by segments of the American public united in their fear of Negroes moving into all-white neighbourhoods or school districts, mindful of the increasingly secular posture of public education, and desirous of having their children placed in private

schools emphasizing intellectual achievement rather than seeking to upgrade the poor quality of the public schools that dissatisfy them.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The overriding tendency of those who reject public schooling today is to gain public aid—local, state, or federal—for private education. Thus, the leading battles over federal aid to education have long centered on the question of public funds for denominational schools, or more simply, on whether parochial schools shall be encouraged. What is ultimately at stake, it appears, is not merely the social orientation of American public schooling but the very existence of public schooling itself. If the opponents of public schooling are successful in winning public financial aid for private and denominational education, it is highly probable that we will see in the near future the establishment of two 'public school' systems; one black and 'public' in the traditional American sense of the word; and the other system operated under the auspices of different denominations, the goal being, it is argued, a more diverse and pluralistic American life.

From the standpoint of very recent developments, it is quite possible that the first school system, the publicly supported type, will be for the children of the inner-city and will be predominantly vocational in orientation. It will be publicly supported for a number of reasons. First, the destitute and near destitute poor of the inner-city cannot afford the luxury of private education. Secondly, only public resources can support a viable vocational and industrial type education; private venture schools find the cost of purchasing and maintaining such machinery prohibitive. Thirdly, the public schools will serve the purpose of helping the poor to achieve a modicum of skill necessary to make them productive members of society, thus reducing the number of welfare recipients. Fourthly, it will teach them citizenship and respect for law and order.

Such a system is fully in accord with the views of Black Militants and sympathizers of the 'Black Separatist' movements who call for 'Black Power' and 'Black Education.' Black history, cultural and language studies will be pursued and local control of education is a *sine qua non*. Above all else, this school system will have as its main purpose the countering of the intentions of prejudiced whites who, if not actually hostile to Negroes, wish to keep them in a subordinate role.

The second and larger school system will be a parochial-public type

system common in many European countries. The state and federal governments will be pressured to make monies available to denominational and private societies to assist them in providing schools. The position of these societies will be that of promoting the education of the students enrolled, but with minimal control and direction being given by the contributing governmental agencies. One case might be that of establishing a 'controlled' pattern, namely, total financial responsibility will be assumed by state or federal authorities and the children in such schools will receive an 'agreed syllabus' instruction, that is, nondenominational instruction following a syllabus drawn up by the state or federal authorities. Another pattern could be the 'aided' school type. In 'aided' schools, in return for state financial support, the school authorities would maintain standards required by the state authorities and would permit these authorities to have a minority on the governing bodies of the school.

These various generalizations bear heavily on the question: what is the future of the public school movement? Some will contend that the extent to which the present public school movement is repudiated will be decided by the victor in the battles of secularism and spiritualism, of social Darwinism and social welfarism, of racism and humanitarianism. No doubt these rivalries will be decided outside the educational arena, but to adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude toward them is to endanger not only the unity of the nation and of other nations but of the entire world.

The outcome must depend on our vision, our ability to foresee the portent of such a weakening of the public school movement. Moreover it is high time the teaching profession looked at the lack of consensus regarding the present function of public education. We have been excessively concerned with schooling as the development of personality or as growth leading to more growth or with the wish not to offend the majority of parents in the community. More than ever before there is a need to get clear statements from parents, students, teachers, and administrators concerning educational policy for our citizens. We must decide what we are educating for. On the primary level we are undecided whether to aim at creating millions of other-directed personalities, or problem-solvers who discard custom and tradition and judge each case on its merits, or whether the chief aim of education should be the handing down of that social and nat onal inheritance which is focused in religion. On the higher levels of education we do not know whether to educate for specialization, which is urgently needed in an ever-increasing industrial society with a strict division of labour, or whether we should opt for all-round individuals with a theoretical background.

Within this confusion and crisis, certain elements are clear. First, the United States has not always been united by a common and shared religion; it has been a welter of differing faiths, in which each has had to learn to let others alone, to respect them, and to co-operate with them. As Crane Brinton suggests, we are multanimous, not unanimous, in our orientation. The truth is that the United States has not always had intellectual or social unity, and it can be true to itself only by clearly recognizing the inherent diversity and pluralism which have been increasing decade after decade. Perhaps the fateful decision to make public schooling the one means for moulding the young and the institution best qualified to serve democracy's cause developed a temporary uniformity. Such a uniformity was needed for a period of time, but it is essentially a betrayal of the American heritage, and may be endangering the larger unity of the world.

Secondly, it is necessary to understand and make good use of non-school agencies—the mass media, the military, police and fire departments, advertising agencies, industrial corporations, sensitivity sessions, and the like—in order to make education relevant to the theories of today. We need to discover the frames of reference and the theories of education underlying non-school agencies with educative power. The theories of education of these agencies are probably implicit and not well understood by the agencies themselves, but this is exactly the point that needs to be understood. Marshall McLuhan has been trying to identify the frames of reference of the mass media, but the systematic investigation of the educational theory and practices of the other non-school agencies escapes us. Not understanding the educational stance of these aggressive and challenging educative forces, the school people attack them and are attacked in return.

Thirdly, at this stage in the historical development of the United States, there is good reason to believe that there is a definite need for the establishment of new national goals, achievable primarily through a system of public schooling. That is, a new crusade undertaken by the public schools to truly make real the promise of America, for all Americans. It seems embarrassingly obvious that we now have within our grasp, if we are willing to make the effort to exploit it, knowledge that is capable of turning the trick. A very stark fact of our times is that we can ask ourselves, what kind of nation can we have and what do we want? The problem is not that we lack sufficient knowledge; rather it involves the task of awakening the public's conscience to the imperative to assess, refine and test theories of planned change in terms of compelling national and international purposes. We stand today in a unique intellectual position; we have the wherewithal

to build a theory of social and cultural achievement, crossing formal and non-formal education boundaries, in complete accord with the canons of humanism, empiricism, naturalism, and scientific method.

Thus, it is quite clear that the case for a new 'public school revival' is inextricably tied to a need to make better use of a complex institution at precisely that point when a good deal of the optimism about its power to shape and improve human life is waning. The institution exists, but the optimism which generated its birth and adolescence is no longer there. All that is needed is to poll the American public and determine if there is not a generalized commitment to universal education and to the pursuit of happiness, a generalized commitment to democracy and justice. If the resulting survey clearly demonstrates an unqualified rejection of democracy, then there is little value to be gained in sending children to public schools. If, on the other hand, the results demonstrate an acceptance of democratic beliefs, then the public school movement still makes sense. But it must be an institution more sensitive to the larger world than the old one, for today's students, urged and fed by persuasive non-formal agencies to inquire and be active, will not be satisfied planning dances, publishing innocuous school newspapers that highlight class elections and athletic contests that are not only artificial, but irrelevant. Unlike the traditional public school concept which never obliterated differences but merely obscured them, the new public school must never be hostile to differences of opinion on social issues, political questions, or religion; it must link the big beliefs and labels—intellectualism, scientific method, brotherhood, religion, affluence, responsibility, internationalism—to student life and to the new American Dream.