

The Spiritual Dimension and Autonomy (1998) by Christopher Clouder

Abstract.

Political authorities decide much of current educational reform and the teaching profession is expected to comply with an increasing number of demands issued by those in authority. This has a long tradition and serves to ensure that service to the state itself, or its manifestation as an economic entity, is prioritised. Because of this there is a tendency to disregard the immediate relationships within the school community, which serve as a basis for moral and spiritual development. Teachers' autonomy and a greater respect for their vocational capacities are prerequisites for addressing the questions raised by the inclusion of spiritual concepts in education.

In considering the spiritual dimension we should start from the premise that teachers are essentially idealists and society at large views and therefore maintains schools as a benefit for children and future generations. Why would we go to the enormous effort of educating if we didn't believe that by so doing we could make our world a better place? The differences arise when we try to find a mutually acceptable definition of what we mean by 'better'. There are innumerable views, often antithetical, of what this concept could imply, from the passing on of traditional values of the past to enabling children to be adaptable for an uncertain future. However, there would be general agreement in all cultures that such goals as 'peaceful', 'happy' and 'fulfilled' should be encompassed within it.

If one could weigh education, as in a pair of scales, then, in most respects, the twentieth century would prove to have had the most educated world population ever, yet, ironically, we have also experienced horrific examples of genocide on a scale hitherto unimaginable. Together with a sense that there are infinite opportunities offered by technological development, we are also haunted by an awareness of catastrophic human moral failure.

The educational reforms that are endemic around the world are, in part, due to the cognisance of this paradox. After more than a century of compulsory education in many countries, there is a general feeling that the wellbeing of children could be better served, but questions arise as to the method. Many of the reforms that are currently being put into practice are Government inspired, following the ancient tradition of Charlemagne and his counsellor Alcuin in the ninth century, who ordered that all monasteries became places of instruction for the young novices and sons of nobility. "It has seemed to us pre-eminently useful that the bishoprics and monasteries which the Lord Christ has vouchsafed to entrust to our governance should not be satisfied with living a regular and pious life, but should also perform the service of teaching... It is no doubt better to act well than to have great learning, but knowledge is required even to do rightly." ¹ Spiritual development lies precisely in this ability to act well, and although knowledge is fundamental to this ability, the question remains as to what sort of knowledge is required and, more fundamentally, what is the individual's relationship to this knowledge? The attitude to knowledge and its acquisition is where the intangible begins to make itself felt and consequently is disregarded by an utilitarian approach to education. In this area centralised edicts are of little consequence when met with individual perception and strong inner ethical values.

Many of the traditions of contemporary education in Europe lie in the last century in the time of the so-called *Springtime of the Nations*. At this time in Western Europe nationalism was rife and the forging of the identity of a people consequently meant excluding those who did not fall within its definition, who therefore became victims of prejudice and even genocide. A recent book on the psychological history of the last

century by Peter Gay is in fact entitled *The Cultivation of Hatred*. The national governments saw a need for state intervention in the schools in order to create loyal citizens and, accordingly, the State supplanted the Church. In the last decades of the 19th century, National Schools became the pre-eminent providers of education and now in many States the expenditure on education is the largest of all calls on a Government's budget. Darwinian thinking and Bismarck's so-called 'Sporting Wars' influenced much of this. After the Austrians had lost the battle of Koeniggratz, General Moltke, the then Minister for Education declared that the reason for this was that the Prussian schoolmasters had beaten their Austrian counterparts. The defeat of France in 1870 at the hands of the Prussians also proved a watershed and the country quickly took up the idea that to obtain *La Revanche*, for the loss of Strasbourg, children would have to be brought up with a strong sense of national identity, so the *Loi Ferry*² was enacted in 1882 with the prime aim of achieving such a goal. In the light of this phenomena perhaps we should question why what is being introduced into the UK is still called the National Curriculum, apparently at a time of increasing globalisation of economy, technology and social forces.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to consider the international league table syndrome as war by other means. League tables have rungs that are there to be climbed and set the competitive parameters within which schools will increasingly have to operate. The reaction to the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) bear this out. The USA did not do well enough because it only obtained the average score and came 28th. President Clinton described the test as one 'that reflects the world-class standards our children must meet for the new era' and he called for a national curriculum and national standards for school tests. If a large, confident and prosperous nation feels threatened by such research, what about those who performed worse? In Germany a special television report was called 'Educational Emergency in Germany, in France the education ministry pulled out of a study of adult literacy because it showed the country was doing badly and in Britain such reports are used to justify an even greater centralisation of educational decision making. In Singapore there was a different effect. Although the schools did best of all in science and maths it was found that they did poorly in literature: consequently, so as not to repeat such a failure, the subject has been totally dropped from the secondary school curriculum.

Simultaneously, there was a prevalent belief that education was an industrial process and as such was allied to the market forces thought to be found in society as a whole. Naturally, there is a connection between the economic environment and schools, yet there is a prevailing one-sided approach that makes a healthy balance more and more difficult to attain. The 'Market solution' is proving to have a great attraction for politicians all over the world. The market is seen as a mechanism that can produce its own rules and has the added convenience of removing direct responsibility from the individuals themselves. In this context to wave a banner of "freedom of choice" is self-contradictory. Apparently there must be inequality so that the good prosper and the weak fail, but out of this an educational system should magically appear from which everyone can benefit. Self-interest and competition are assumed to be the key to human nature and everyone is understood to be driven to work by these basic human instincts. What was previously preserved as a secret garden is now given the attributes of a pressurised market place. It is hardly surprising that there is a common feeling of insecurity: "The century of childhood is therefore ending in ways unforeseen at its commencement. The essence of the vision of childhood at the beginning of the century was the powerlessness of children, their dependence; good parenting consisted of the preserving and the prolonging of this, in part at least by the exercise of parental authority. What has happened in the second half of the century is that parental authority has declined, and children have demanded and received an earlier access to the adult world: they have not been willing to accept the attempt to prolong childhood into the late teenage years."³ A recent (1995) MORI poll found startling evidence of this insecurity. Over 1000 adults were questioned and more than three out of five adults thought that childhood today is worse than when they were children. Three in five also

thought that the world that today's children will inherit will be worse than the world inherited by children of their generation.

When we look closely at the ideas behind the present reforms we find that they are in fact not new at all. Already in the seventeenth century Robert Boyle saw the world as "...a rare clock, where all things are so skilfully contrived that, the engine once being set a-moving, all things proceed according to the artificer's first design, and the motions of the little statues... who perform their function on particular occasions, by virtue of the general and primitive contrivance of the whole engine.." ⁴ In fact, in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the study of nature was called 'mechanical philosophy' and the word mechanical itself was changing its meaning from being a reference to manual operations and practicality to denoting the nature of machines and automatism. After the Industrial Revolution this view of the world became part and parcel of the concepts in the study of economics. Goldwyn Smith, Professor of Modern History at Oxford, wrote in 1859: "The laws of the production and distribution of wealth are not the laws of duty and affection. But they are the most beautiful and wonderful of the natural laws of God, and through their beauty and wonderful wisdom they are not without poetry of their own. Silently, surely, without any man's taking thought, if human folly would only refrain from hindering them, they gather, store, dispense, husband, if need be, against scarcity, the wealth of the great community of nations." ⁵ Note the admonition not to interfere in the process with the unfortunate human propensity for thinking. A beguiling automated Utopia beckons 'What in operation is most useful, that knowledge is most true.'⁶

There has, however, been a long-standing reaction to this extreme view of human nature as being part of a greater mechanistic device. Charles Francis Voysey stated in his book *Individuality* "Spiritual culture cannot be tested...by competitive examination, like mathematical knowledge, and so, in a materialistic world, little counts that is not marketable, while visible proofs of information are desired far more than right thinking and feeling."⁷ In our decade we have a similar challenge with the concept of the 'selfish gene'. The attainment of 'right thinking and feeling' is what David Hargreaves in his new booklet *The Mosaic of Learning* calls 'moral ecology',⁸ and he goes on to warn that, unless schools can respond with a rapid improvement in civic and moral education, then the politicians will seek more authoritarian solutions and once again we will face a form of an imposed moral order. Where, then, is this 'moral ecology' to be found?

In an OFSTED discussion paper called *Spiritual, Moral and Cultural Development* there is the following statement: "Spiritual development relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. 'Spiritual' is not synonymous with 'religious'; all areas of the curriculum may contribute to a pupil's spiritual development."⁹ Here is, in fact, a satisfactory basic definition of spirituality that needs further exploration together with an emphasis on 'all areas of the curriculum', not just a reference to the 5% of school time which it is suggested should be allocated to the teaching of religion. There is no such thing as innate badness in children as has been underlined in the report of the Commission on Children and Violence (1995)¹⁰. There is no evil gene, although some children can have a greater predisposition to aggression than others. Norwegian researchers have found many resilient children who grew up in completely unpropitious circumstances and managed to thrive in such an environment, and have coined the term 'dandelion children' for them. Whereas with other children who were at greater risk the school and teachers could make a crucial difference. "Most researchers now agree that some schools are more effective than others in promoting good work and behaviour. This doesn't mean that schools can eliminate the effects of social differences between pupils... Research evidence suggests that pupils' behaviour can be influenced by all the major features and processes of a school. These include the quality of its

leadership, classroom management, behaviour policy, curriculum, pastoral care, buildings and physical environment, organisation and timetable and relationship with parents".¹¹

We must consider not only what is taught but also how it is taught, and this raises the question of the gesture in teaching. Teachers' attitudes to their material, the pupils, the institution in which they work and themselves are gestures in this sense. Pupils readily absorb both implicit and explicit gestures, and these therefore have to be consciously differentiated by the teacher according to the age of the pupil and the student. It is the gesture that educates in the moral field more than knowledge or prescription. If we are trying to find a form of 'right feeling and thinking', which are qualities of the human spirit, we have to work with the element of the human will.

The French philosopher Alfred Fouillée asked: "Having taught the elements of the positive sciences - mathematics, astronomy, physics - in what respect will you have changed the heart and ensured the rule of justice? All you will have developed is the intelligence, properly speaking; but to know is only one of our functions. An education of the feelings by means of literature, the arts and history is not less necessary than the education of thinking, and the whole must culminate in education of the will."¹² In more modern terms "Chemistry can be taught in myriad ways but, however it is taught, the teacher will always be giving directions, explaining, demonstrating, checking, adjudicating, motivating, reprimanding, in all these activities displaying the manner that marks him or her as morally well developed or not. Teachers who understand their impact as moral educators take their manner quite seriously. They understand that they cannot expect honesty without being honest, or generosity without being generous, or diligence without themselves being diligent. Just as we understand teachers must engage in critical thinking with students if they expect students to think critically in their presence, they must exemplify moral principles and virtues in order to elicit them from students."¹³

What is needed is a new concept of curriculum that is not programmatic on one hand nor impracticable on the other, but a way of working that is a framework of observation within which the teacher and the child can be constantly creative. Each individual has an innate desire to find their own way of relating themselves to society, and the task of the educator is to make oneself a kind of prophet of the child's future, leaving it free but helping it acquire that which will be of use later. This has to be related to the specific demands of the present, not of the past. We must look beyond our list of statistics, bar charts, graphs and attainment targets to the meaning of the gesture. "In previous centuries nations measured their success by military power. For most of this century they were measured by economic power and a ranking in the GDP tables. By 2020 my guess is that we will have moved on again. Our obsession with growth and GDP will seem as odd as the 19th century fetishisation of armies does to us now. Increasingly, societies will be judged by very different criteria: by quality not quantity, wellbeing not income, balance not growth. When that happens we will see early dissenters, like Wordsworth and Ruskin, Carlisle and Gandhi in a new light."¹⁴

These great figures were wrestling with the questions we are facing today. The spiritual dimension is that which 'endures' and must be developed in freedom and eventually becomes an individual moral yardstick and cannot be achieved by either confinement or commandment. It is an area for which 'a curriculum', in the standard sense of the word, cannot be written, and such an imposition actually runs the risk of denying its existence. Teachers, in order to be able to work in this field, need autonomy to explore their own spirituality as it is not a subject in itself that can be defined and codified as others. The spiritual lives in the complex area of human relationships and intentions. In spite of its non-material nature, it is nevertheless tangible for both educationalists and the children alike, but its use, as an educational concept, would involve a radical change in the prevalent view of the teacher as merely a deliverer of a pre-ordained curriculum. The knowledge needed for this task is a sense of evolution, not just a

biological sense, but also in terms of the human psyche, so that the needs of the child are met according to their own spiritual development and that they do not become objects within an abstract subject-centred programme. Attempting to turn the clock back to either narrow nationalism or outdated mechanistic concepts becomes less feasible with the recognition that there is such a thing as a 'spiritual dimension'. It is indicative of the opportunities for a reappraisal of education that currently presents itself that the 'Promotion of Pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development' has become an issue of debate that is likely to have profound effect on both practice and theory in the future.

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- ² James Bowen. *A History of Western Education*. Volume 3 (1981) p.320 Methuen and Co.
- ³ H. Cunningham. *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*. (1995) p.185 Longman
- ⁴ M.B. Hall. *Robert Boyle on Natural Philosophy* (1965) p.150.
- ⁵ Goldwyn Smith. *Lectures on Modern History* (1868) pp.32-33.
- ⁶ Francis Bacon. *Nova Atlantis* (1626)
- ⁷ Charles Francis Voysey. *Individuality* (1915).
- ⁸ David Hargreaves. *The Mosaic of Learning* (1994). p.11.Demos
- ⁹ OFSTED discussion paper. *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development* (1994).
- ¹⁰ *Children and Violence*. Gulbenkian Foundation Commission (1995)
- ¹¹ The Elton Inquiry. *Discipline in Schools* (1989).
- ¹² Alfred Fouillée *La France au point de vue morale* (1900) op.cit. Gay *The Cultivation of Hatred*. (1995) p.503. Fontana
- ¹³ G.D.Fenstermacher (1990) "Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a Profession" *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching* op. cit. *The Heart of the Matter* Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (1995).
- ¹⁴ Geoff Mulgan *Money doesn't make the world go round* The Independent 27 February 1995.