

WELFARE: Who Cares??

Residential In-service May 13-14 1996 at Wodonga

"SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY IN PARTNERSHIP"

Opening address by

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INTRODUCTION

It is a long time since I have had to face a class of constantly pressured Year 12 students who had only one question concerning their studies in mind, namely, will I get a sufficient score to enter the University; or a class of outwardly indolent, mischievous Year 9 students one of whom, after I had just introduced myself to them at our first session, asked me "do you believe in God" only to have that challenge followed up as if a part of a corporate strategy, by a second student, right on cue, who without blushing inquired "And did you have intercourse with your wife before you married". You would have to agree, not a backward interchange in the first five minutes of meeting!

Since then,. the classroom setting for students and staff has become even more open, turbulent, stimulating, demanding and problematic. I say this not to tell you what you already know but merely for me to acknowledge before you something of the pressing realities you, who are so committed to the wellbeing of students, have either to work with or transcend day by day, year by year, cohort by cohort. The subjects of several workshops you plan to have reflect some of these realities.

Now the organizers of this conference have asked me to place your "concerns within the broader context of the community in which our schools and our students must play a key role". In response, I bring three key issues to your attention, .each of which clearly needs more consideration than I can give in this opening address.

1. INEQUALITY WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY

All communities display social stratification to some degree. After the Second World War, Australia as compared with the western world was reasonably egalitarian, both in social attitude and in the distribution of incomes. In recent years we have become more individualistic, aggressive and competitive.

2.

In 1994 the top 30% of our population had more than 50% of the total income while the lowest 30% received only 10% of the total income.

Let me quickly add that the point is not so much money but what money (especially that which we frequently call discretionary) makes more possible - namely recreation, health care, transport, social outings, entertainment, cultural experiences, supplementary education.

This social differentiation according to income and thus opportunity is most importantly for educators reflected geographically as Professor Bob Gregory's recent (unpublished) survey of the suburbs of Melbourne confirms. It is the case, in general terms, that the western and northern suburbs are at a disadvantage when compared with those of the east and south. This socio-economic disparity in turn leads to differences in social and political power. Thus a universal educational policy applied simplistically across Melbourne without qualification only reinforces the disparity between the areas. This is the social context you have to both work in and reckon with.

The social differentiation is made even more sharp and is of more fundamental concern when we allow for the changes occurring in the nature of the so-called labour market. In February 1995 unemployment was nationally 8.4% but for young people it was 22.7% (full-time and part-time job seekers). In some areas unemployment for young people is as high as 46.3% (Mornington Peninsula and 56% for Inner Melbourne) But the recent improvement in employment is mainly in terms of part-time (2 hours or more) and casual at that. This is the case for men as well as women now.

Furthermore, amongst those who are employed full-time, there is a growing gulf between those who are very well paid and those who are poorly paid. The situation has now reached the stage that we can talk about "poorly paid workers" again. Finally the work opportunities are skewed towards those with the higher level of skills. This uneven distribution of employment, income and

personal opportunities for adults and children shapes the context in which educational planners and individual teachers are to see to their vocation.

2. GOALS IN EDUCATION

I now raise a longstanding chestnut. What is the purpose of education? Is it to foster a sense of discovery within the student about herself and the world or is it to prepare the student for paid work. The realistic answer is, both. Currently, as I see it, the emphasis is almost solely on the latter and if it is, it is 20 years too late. It is quite clear that, in the foreseeable future as it has been in the past decade, there will be a considerable number of young people and even mature age people who will be, characteristically, moving in and out of paid work. And even those for whom employment is more probable, many will move from one context to another and perhaps one type of occupation to another.

If this description is applicable, then it means the emerging adult needs to develop himself in two ways. Firstly, to develop his mind to be able to think; to think imaginatively, empathetically, analytically, evaluatively and constructively and not necessarily either in the context of a particular academic discipline or a technical skill. (It's interesting how so many of M15 were classics scholars!) Secondly, the student needs to have developed her own self so that she is eager and able to make changes and venture forth into the new settings that the changing and indifferent labour market might require of her. Here I am talking not about intellectual attainment but psychological and spiritual maturity.

3. HUMAN IDENTITY

But there is a third profound factor I am bound to highlight today, namely, "human identity". Our youngsters are not stupid. They are well aware of the big if distant issues of sustainability of the biosphere, growth of the world's population and the chronic disparity between the so-called North-South nations.

They are well aware of the more immediate issues even if seduced by the inane, plastic, consumer driven, frantic lifestyle of so many adults. They are also well aware that there will not be jobs for all. Yet our society through its economic preoccupations, public debate and social mores continues to define the worth of a person in what she looks like, what he does and how much she earns. Thereby we adults do not so much promote a conspiracy of silence about the problematic nature of employment but a public lie about in what human worth rests. For who of us defines the worth of our newly born daughter or ageing father in terms of their productivity. And our schools are asked to sustain this lie by conditioning students to see education as being for jobs primarily, if not only. And that lie is being driven by our government at the behest of the captains of commerce and industry. Is it any wonder that so many young adults, bewildered by the issues before us all, facing uncertain employment, disillusioned by the frequent lack of human warmth in both the family home and the public domain, needing to find a place in this inauthentic adult world, say no either by anti-social behaviour or by suicide. (Suicides in Victoria 1980-1990 = 31.3% for 15-19 year olds)

The issue before us all is to begin our own search for meaning. This search is not to be found in mathematics, languages, economics or computer sciences as such. Rather, it is to be found in yearnings of our own spirit and in the wisdom of contemporary friends, perceptive writers past or present. And mark you our teacher can be one of our friends and frequently is.

You have come not just as professionals but as educators committed to the welfare of students. At a time when families have become nucleated and so fragile at that, and secondary settings of socialization like youth clubs and parish churches do not have the general appeal of past years, the local school (primary or secondary) is the major if not only sure context of socialization within our society at this time. Is it any wonder that you and your colleagues have so many social tasks put upon you by an anxious and frustrated community and its government.

It is neither my desire nor my interest to add to your questionable list of duties. Rather I want to highlight one delightful role that you inescapably have which is so potent for good and which does not require any extra activity for it lies at the centre of your vocation.

I am sure that, when you look back on your own student days, you can clearly identify one, two, three, maybe four teachers who had a profound effect upon you - not that you let them know, at the time! And what made them significant for you? Maybe their appearance, but not likely. Maybe their intellect, but not likely. Was it not more to do with their interest in you, their interest in their subject, their curiosity, their enthusiasm, their integrity, their firmness, their patience and yes their humanity. Yes, they believed in you and they believed in the search for truth. I have every reason to think that students of today are drawn by the same virtues.

So how can we take this further.

Firstly, let us not diminish the profound role of education by accepting the limiting function merely of preparation for employment. And let our strategies for education be related to the social context of our students.

Secondly, let us support one another within our own particular schools by establishing as necessary and as possible cells of teachers who are wishing to evoke and make evident this quest for meaning amongst the students.

Thirdly, let us share with parents and the local community this understanding of how education at this profound level is vital for the development and sustaining of young adults in the changing labour market.

Fourthly, let us further develop strategies within and through the conduits of the existing curricula whereby this personal search is acknowledged, raised to consciousness and furthered.

Fifthly, let us further order the life of the class and of the school as such and our own relationship on the conviction that every human being, and that means every student and every staff member, is of intrinsic worth.

CONCLUSION

You may be disappointed in what I have said, for there is nothing new in it. But should there be? Human beings do not change in their "esse". What needs to be recognized at all times, including today, is that life is not about amassing possessions, or qualifications, or plastic experiences or partners! Nor is it really about doing. It is about being; knowing and rejoicing in one's self, knowing and rejoicing that you are connected to others and to this mysterious universe. It is this sense of self-consciousness which gives us the purpose, the security and the hope to participate in life with all its changes.

You good teachers, you have a wonderful and vital vocation. Continue to grasp it and enjoy it.