

Education and Social Reconstruction

Stan Chu Ilo

The debates about faith-based schools and Blacks-only schools in Ontario raise fundamental questions about the goal of the educational enterprise in Ontario schools. What is the vision of the educational enterprise in our schools? In other words, what are the expectations we have for graduates from elementary and high schools in the province? I think in the present conflict, the question is about two conflicting philosophies of education which are not clearly articulated but implicit in the debate. The first is the position that sees education as oriented towards the self-actualization of the students. This perspective, drawing from the writings of the American pragmatist, John Dewey, envisions an education that orients the curriculum towards providing the students with an enabling environment that helps them to actualize their potentials. The focus is on the individual student needing guidance and direction to realize his or her hidden capacity through a reconstruction of experience. Here, education is an end in itself, not a means towards getting a job or developing a deeper faith in one religion or the other. This is where one could place the advocates of the Blacks-only school, who argue that the present educational enterprise in Ontario's school does not offer Black students the opportunity for self-actualization.

The second position is the one which sees education as social adaptation or social reconstruction. The curriculum here reflects the values of the wider society, and helps the students to adapt to the ethics and values of the wider society. Education in this aspect is a function of cultural knowledge, social integration, and adaptation. This has been the very predominant goals of most educational process in the Western tradition, going back to the Greek peripatetic schools of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In Ontario, the Blacks-only school cannot fall under this category, because the society in which Blacks live is not a compartmentalized world from other racial groups. In addition, the idea of *Black* like the foremost Africanist, Franz Fanon noted is not a univocal concept. The condition and situation of African migrants from continental Africa is different from that of Black migrants from the Caribbean. Each country in the Caribbean or Africa has its unique character and challenges. This is why the curriculum in Haiti is very different from that in Jamaica for eg, and the educational system in South Africa is very different from that of Nigeria. In terms of faith-based education, it is evident that Catholic education has been a heritage that most

Ontarians, will like to hand over to their children, and so constitutes an essential part of the cultural tradition of mainstream Ontarians. Catholic education, for all its limitations in Ontario, is playing an indispensable role, in preserving religious education and forming the character of many of children from all Christian and non-Christian traditions.

However, in the process of social adaptation, to a faith community or a political community, there might arise the need to question or change some entrenched values in the community. Sometimes, some values that a particular society or faith community has taken as normative might become irrelevant, oppressive, or detrimental to the good of the society or particular groups and members of a society. This is where sometimes education for adaptation or immersion into a particular culture or social milieu moves from mere adaptation to social reconstruction and change. This process is always difficult and slow, but very rewarding at the end of the day. Progressive societies are always open to the 'grace of great things' which goes beyond the limitations of one race, or religion or sex. Progressive societies always transcends itself in time beyond the imprisoning walls of prejudices and biases to the fresh and renewing power of diversity, love, solidarity, and community. This does not mean the rejection of continuity and traditional values, but the conscious attempt to understand and appropriate them in new ways in the light of new challenges. Every society faces the challenge of reconciling the need for individual actualization of each child in school with the need to maintain the common good of society at the same time.

It is, therefore, important to emphasize that the schools are not isolated from the wider society. The question and debates arising from the goal of education in Ontario should be seen as fundamental questions about the identity and direction of our wider society. What is the role of racial identity in Ontario? Are there minorities and groups that are suffering because of the nature and structure of our society? What role does our society have for religious education? It will be a grave error to restrict this debate to the mere concerns of some religious groups for inclusion or some racial group for an identity. The school is the mirror of the society. Every educational process is informed by the assumptions and beliefs of society on such fundamental questions as the nature and destiny of the human person, the common good of society, the meaning of life in society, and the realization of the ultimate good and happiness of every member of society. These values form the worldview that underpins the educational process; and those who are formed in an educational process are

expected to be formed according to this worldview. The content and character, then of the educational process are shaped by the worldview that informs it.

The debates about education in Ontario school is, therefore, a debate on the worldview that Ontarians advance for their societies and for generations yet unborn and the vision of the kind of society we seek in the province. The Greek poet, Pindar, once noted that the goal of education is to help us become who we are. That incidentally is what a worldview does; it is a mirror through which we see who we are. Thus, these debates should open up the space for discussion on the kind of society we are building, and the values that we wish to pass on to our children. Such values will evidently define the issues of racial identity within a multicultural society, the role of the Christian religion and Catholic education in the province, the kind of society we are building for ourselves and our children beyond the immediate ends of today.