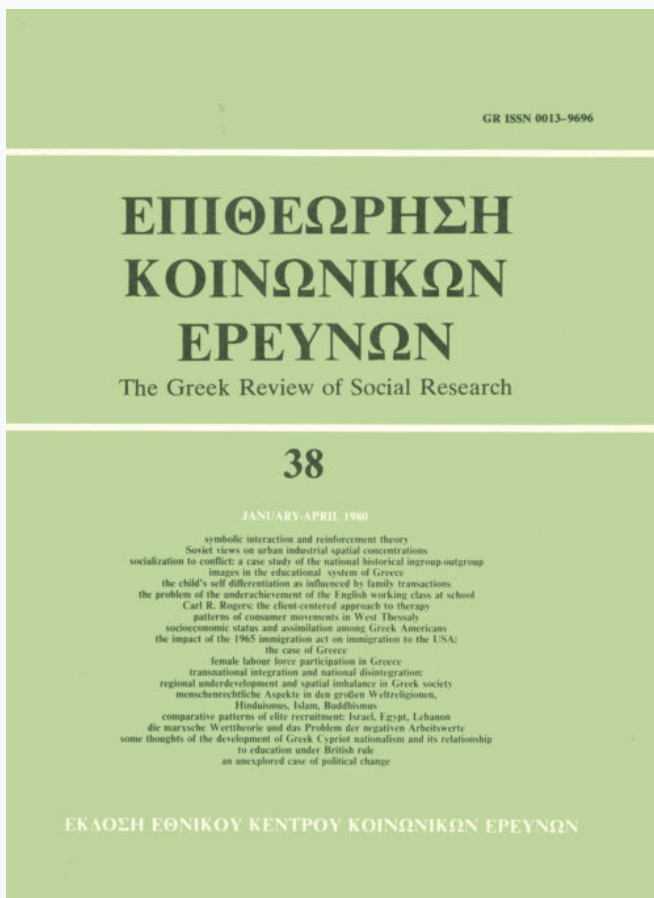


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### The problem of the underachievement of the English working class at school: Special reference to the "community school"

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# the problem of the underachievement of the English working class at school

*special reference to  
the «community school»*

by  
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## ABSTRACT

The argument around the problem of the working class underachievement at school has been moving away from the concept of cultural or linguistic deprivation of the working class student, which prevailed as a main explanation of the problem in the '60's. As a cause of the above issue there is, in the 70's, a considerable emphasis upon the internal organization and the education content of the school which transmits the middle-class values of the society and represents the middle-class culture as «total culture».

The «community school» in England within the radical approach has developed in an effort to search, mainly in socio-economically deprived areas, for alternative rather than traditional ways of affecting the school performance of the underachieving student. This outlook may involve radical change not only in the role of the school within its community, but in the selection and organization of knowledge at school as well.

## the problem of the English working class underachievement at school

In Western Europe the structure of the educational system reflected the stratification of social classes and provided for a long time differentiated educational opportunity according to one's station in life. Fees regulated the entrance to secondary education, so, poverty undercut «life-chances» even when the child's level of ability was very high.

Our society, as Halsey (1961) points out, has placed education «in a central institutional position as both a source of technological and cultural change and as a vast training apparatus for the highly diversified manpower requirements of a technological economy». The times favoured the activation of both humanistic and realistic concern for the prevention of wastage of human talent, aiming simultaneously at an individual self-fulfilment and at the maximisation of general and personal welfare. This movement coincided with the growing belief that human capacities were less the property of individuals and more the product of social and cultural context.

In this light the fundamental question ever since has been, how could social differences affecting educational attainment be reduced to differences of natural attainment. In other words could equality in educational opportunity be implemented and how?

In England after the 1944 Act, through which fees were abolished in maintained grammar schools, and with the parallel rising of the general standard of living, through full employment, equality of educational opportunity could be thought of as an indisputable fact. Since then sociology has come into forum along with its statistical data from large scale surveys, which kept disproving the existence of such an ideal situation.

The focus shifted from poverty to social class as a determinant factor of a child's educational performance. It was the middle-class children who mainly pro-

fited from the available chances through an educational system financed by all members of the state.

Some statistics demonstrated that working-class children were under-represented in selective secondary and higher education, others mapped out the culturally and socially underprivileged areas, still further research attempted to provide an explanation for the subtle correlation between social class and the educability of children as well as their social mobility. It is within this context that «orthodox» sociologists of education have been mainly working.

The function of the assessment process was scrutinised. The Robbins report (1963) confirmed evidence that intelligence tests at the age of 11 having a selective purpose were accompanied by tests of attainment in English and Arithmetic as well as by teachers' reports which many times favoured children from upper social classes.

The movement against the «sponsored» system of social mobility which has been prevalent in England resulted in the abolition of 11 + exams, while more comprehensive schools secured the grammar school type of training for a larger number of students. As R. Turner pointed out, it remained to be determined whether the comprehensive school in England would take a distinctive form and serve a distinctive function which preserves the pattern of «sponsorship» or would approximate the American system of «contest» mobility.

Still there was the problem of «early-leaving» to be confronted. The Robbin Report (1963) ascertained that the proportion of the children remaining at school at the age of 15 was for those of high ability 92% in the upper, non-manual group, compared with 60% in the lower manual group. For those in the middle range of ability the proportion ranged from 68% to 17%. (The last survey carried out the Department of Education found only 20% of children in classes C and D stayed on at school, compared to 74% of children in A and B homes, *The Guardian*, May 13, 1978.)

The family as an institutional unit came into focus to be correlated with a child's achievement at school. There has been a wide range of research covering patterns of child rearing at home (love oriented or power asserting techniques of control), ambition and achievement syndrome in the family and income correlations.

As Olive Banks (1968) points out it is difficult to discover a technique which can study parental behaviour as distinct from attitude. Newson has also argued that it is the values behind child rearing techniques that are important, rather than the techniques themselves, and these values need to be seen in the context of the whole situation in which the family lives.

Eventually in the 1960's the concept of the «cultural deficit», related both to value orientation and linguistic theories gained momentum in accounting for the

underachievement of children who, as a result of an impoverished environment in their early years, are deprived in terms of the «dominant» cultural stream which the school puts forward.

Considerable attention was given to language. In England Bernstein had illustrated a connection between differences in language—immediately related to social structure—and educability. Although he denied that he intended to convey any judgement of inferiority in regards to his speech codes reflecting the two social classes, his views were used by Jensen (1968) in his argument biased against all forms of working-class behaviour to support that middle-class language was superior in every respect, «more abstract and necessarily somewhat more flexible, detailed and subtle». Intervention programmes in the United States were based on the assumption that lower class children came to school without a language with which they could learn, in fact they were treated as if «they had no language at all» (W. Labov, 1969).

Labov demonstrated that these children were not deficient in linguistic or cognitive experience and there was no reason to believe that any non-standard vernacular was in itself an obstacle to learning.<sup>1</sup> Labov confirmed that the social situation was the most powerful determinant of verbal behaviour and that an adult should enter into the right social relation with the child if he wanted to have any effect upon him at all, which «is just what many teachers cannot do». The teacher, though, ought to approach the teaching of the standard language through the knowledge of the child's own system instead of disregarding it (Labov, 1969).

W. Labov (1969) also cautioned that «before we impose middle-class verbal style upon children from other cultural groups, we should find out how much of this is useful for the main work of analysing and generalising and how much is merely stylistic—or even dysfunctional».

In England Bernstein—among others—claimed that the concept of cultural or linguistic deprivation had served to direct attention away from the internal organization and the education content of the school as another possible cause of the underachievement of the working class student.

Micro-technique sociological research since 1970 has picked the school as an investigation ground and the «new» sociologists of education enter the stage, some expressing irritable impatience with the mistaken route

1. B. Bernstein (1970) also stated categorically, «There is nothing, but nothing, in the dialect of such, which prevents a child from internalising and learning to use universalistic meanings. But if the contexts of learning—for example the reading of books—are not contexts which are triggers for the children's imaginings, are not triggers for the children's curiosity and explorations in his family and community then the child is not at home in the educational world». (This point is referred to later).

the «orthodox» had followed in regards to the problem of the equality of opportunity within education (Corbutt, 1972). The «teacher's deficit» and the problem of cultural relativity in connection with the sociology of curriculum came into debate pointing to a new direction.

Both Keddie and Corbutt have underlined the teacher's tendency to confuse in practice the social, moral, psychological and intellectual attributes of a student, with his ability to move and penetrate into a «high» sphere of knowledge. Thus teachers deprive a group of students of categories of knowledge because they have not explored ways of imparting this very kind of knowledge to students coming mainly from working class background. In this case the definition of a situation comes true.

The problem of teachers' deficiency reflects differential degrees of imperceptibility. There is the inflexible teacher who does not recognise and value the life experience and potential that a child brings to school from his own family background; in this case the alarm is justified. But, there is also the teacher who is both sensitive to the problem and willing to help, nevertheless, «it is far from evident exactly what could be done or how» (A. Cashdam and G. Esland, 1972).

Floud, in 1961, inferring from Bernstein of the 1960's and following the line of thought of «orthodox» sociology in education, would suggest as a solution «the financial re-allocation as between primary and secondary education so as to make extremely small classes the rule in the early stages of primary education» rather than, as it was customary, at the advanced stages of secondary education.

Yet, Bernstein of the 1970's—still pointing out as a major handicap the material inadequacy of schools in slums and problem areas as well as the high turnover of teaching staff there—moves a step further to suggest that the problem of cultural discontinuity may have to be confronted more radically. The dichotomy between a working class family and a middle class school may be bound to have disappointing implications for both the parents and the child. As Bernstein (1970) puts it, «A wedge is progressively driven between the child as a member of a family and community, and the child as a member of a school. Either way the child is expected, and his parents as well, to drop the social identity, their way of life and its symbolic representation, at the school gate. For, by definition, their culture is deprived and the parents are inadequate in both the moral and the skill orders they transmit».

In the course of the argument it was made clear that the school's function hitherto has been to transmit the mainstream (middle-class) values of the society and the failure of children to acquire these values lay either in their pre-school environment which would not cultivate the same ethos or within the nature and social organiza-

tion of the school which processes the children into «achievement rates».

Pierre Bordieu (1967), who has worked with a group (at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne) within the area of education and culture, points out that «lower class children who do not bring to their school work either the keenness to learn of lower middle-class children or the cultural capital of upper-class children, take refuge in a kind of negative withdrawal which upsets teachers and is expressed in forms of disorder previously unknown». Bordieu advocates systematic and widespread educational priority programmes relevant to these children. These programmes, Bordieu thinks, the present education system «can dispense with as long as it is aimed at children from the privileged classes». He stresses that, «a society which allows the most privileged classes to monopolise educational institutions—which as Max Weber would say, hold a monopoly of the manipulation of cultural goods and the institutional signs of cultural salvation is rigid in the extreme».

In the same line of thinking M. F. Young has also noticed that patterns of social control are associated with curricula, and, changes in this direction will be resisted in so far as they are perceived to undermine the values, relative power and privileges of the dominant groups involved. In his words, «the construction of a corpus of knowledge is inextricably linked to the interests of those who produce it, who generate their own self-justifying standards of evaluation».

The sociological analysis of the organization of knowledge in curricula which M. F. Young attempted leads to stirring questions in the following line of thought: By what criteria are some areas of knowledge defined as much more «worthwhile» than others? In what way is «academic» knowledge superior over the every day commonsense knowledge available to people as being in the world? Does early specialisation intensify distinction between subjects in terms of mystified prestige? M. Young (1971) suggests that «the granting of equal status to sets of cultural choices» which simply accord with the beliefs of dominant groups at a particular time, would involve a massive redistribution of the labels «educational», «success» and «failure» and also a parallel redistribution of rewards in terms of wealth, prestige and power.

There has been a growing awareness that the traditional curriculum has failed to meet the «needs» of many children with a working class background. The problem is far from being solved.

O. Banks admits there has been a preoccupation in the past with «who is selected», and a «tendency to forget, as M. Young argued, that education is about the selection of knowledge as well as of people». Although she thinks that the «new» sociology of education «has opened up a useful dialogue with the traditional one»

she warns both against a simplistic «blame the teacher» line of argument and a harmful connivance at the particularities and structural constraints of our technological economy on the present Educational system.<sup>2</sup> O. Banks admits that the teaching styles or subject matter may have to be readjusted to the «needs» of the working class student, but she rejects any attempt to change the curriculum and goals of schooling on the account of unproved «needs» of a class of students.

I agree with O. Banks that a thorough change in the curriculum in favour of the working class student might imply «connivance» at the «structural constraints of our technological economy» and prove very harmful indeed.

On the other hand we may connive at the fact that «70 per cent of the working population of this country hold either skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled manual jobs. It is with the children from homes whose parents are manual workers that the greatest educational difficulty arises, the greatest wastage of ability is apparent and the gap between the teacher and the child most manifest» (J. Raynor, 1972).

Bernstein suggests, perhaps «the contents of the learning in school should be drawn much more from the child's experience in his family and community. This effort would refer to the working class child in an attempt to help him move from the «particularistic» orders of meaning he is familiar with, through his background, to the «universalistic» cognitive categories which a middle class child naturally acquires throughout his different upbringing. This Bernstein says, is not «compensatory education; it is education»; for it does not try to instil into the child middle-class values since the social experience which he brings to school will be reflected back to him as being valid and significant, and, taken as a starting point, it will be interwoven and gain new

2. The close relationship between education and economy can be clearly illustrated in China where, despite the country's clear cut ideology, the conflict between the two antipodal approaches to education has remained for long unresolved. On one hand there was emphasis on a strongly centralised structure, built on the foundation of the existing traditional schools according to the old Euro-American pattern, expert-oriented, devoted to more, better and longer «regular» schooling, aiming at an elite by criteria of excellence in academic achievement. The supporters of this line were confident that it best served the requirements of a modern society supplying planned amounts of well-trained manpower for decision making in heavy industry. The alternative scheme stressed decentralisation flexibility, more political study and practical work to balance academic standards and ensure social justice by closing the gap between the «schooled» and the ordinary workers, by relating the education closely to the reality of the needed labour. This scheme reflected the economic policy which encouraged light industry and agriculture, innovation and initiative from below and small-scale labor intensive investment.

There have been year-to-year fluctuations, sometimes the two approaches have coexisted side by side and even after the crisis of the Cultural Revolution (1966) with the practical and manual orientation having gained ground solidly over the academic achievement, the conflict continued with set back decisions (Price, F.R., 1970).

meaning in the learning experience that the teacher creates. It is important that a linkage between the school and the life outside it be established in a way that adds to understanding and coherence.

Both Bernstein and Keddie think it necessary that reading material was connected to some familiar aspects of life, and teachers could understand forms of English language which they did not themselves use as well as a life-style which was different from the middle-class one. «If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher», Bernstein remarks.

A. D. Edwards and D. H. Hargreaves (1976), have refuted the prospect of the compatibility between «mainstream» and «subculture» for the future working class child on the account of problems of identity, loyalty and possible social dislocation endemic in a bicultural life.

I would agree with K. Worpole, who is looking at the problem offering a compromise solution. He writes (1974) «To talk, though, of building a new 'working class' culture and replacing 'bourgeois culture' is as nonsensical as making the community an exclusive focus in other kinds of study. The new culture that needs building and in which process schools could become a very important force is one which integrates much of the old with the best of the new, and potentially vast, cultural forms that are becoming available to us. We should perhaps talk about the possibilities for a 'common culture'».

#### the «community school»

The «community school» as a term cannot be pinned down to a narrow and precise definition. For the purpose of this paper the term is used to indicate an attempt to make the school and its surrounding community more aware of each other's potentialities for mutual benefit through closer interaction. The school is no more insular and inward looking, it reaches out to the community and welcomes it inside.

There is no blue print for community schools. Their objectives may vary according to the challenge of their particular environment and the aspirations of the principal and the staff. a) A community school may share with its surrounding community facilities provided on the school premises. The community is encouraged to use the gym, classrooms, the swimming pool, workshops, crèches, library in a dual rather than in a joint way. This is in fact what the Plowden report (1967) outlines as a community school, simply «a school which is open beyond the ordinary school hours for the use of children, their parents and, exceptionally, for other members of the community». The maximum deployment of plant and resources is promoted and an

improvement in the quality of activities pursued for mutual benefit is expected.<sup>3,3a</sup> The stimulus of economic expediency behind the development in this direction is unquestionable. b) It is usually presumed that a community school cannot avoid a commitment to the local community which is more profound than the addition of a youth or adult wing to a school could create (A. Fairbairn, 1977). There is a certain confident paternalism about its role of an educational institution as catalyst of community development. The school regards as its essential function to try and «blur» the boundaries between «child» and «adult» education, learning and leisure, academic and popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

3. According to R. Ashcroft (1973), «there is little evidence one way or the other, it may be that intensive use of school capital by non-school personnel is detrimental to school performance (however defined)».

3a. The Lawrence Weston School is in a new large housing estate of Bristol. The school decided that when the school library opened in 1962 it should provide for adults as well as children attending the school, since there was no public library on the estate. The successful outcome of this scheme made the school more aware of its role in the neighborhood. A full-time community officer was appointed to encourage and organize extra curricula activities at school for both children and parents. There was a good response on the part of the community and interrelationships developed as a result, f.e. in the school choir are to be found a pupil, his parents and his grandparents. A crèche allows mothers of young children to pursue various courses at the school. Letting children under the age of 11 (the starting age at the school) use the library eased the often problematic transition from primary to secondary school. Moreover, the involvement of the school in the community seems to have affected the scholastic performance of its students favourably, e.g. in three years the number of children staying on at school after 15 increased by 75% (R. Ashcroft, 1973).

Within the same frame of mind but on a much larger scale there were constructed two complexes in the 1970's, the Abraham Moss Centre in Manchester and Sutton-in-Ashfield Centre in Nottinghamshire, to serve as community centres in urban areas with a high proportion of working class population. They both include a comprehensive secondary school, a further education college, a library, sports facilities, adult education centre, a pensioners' club, youth centre, students union and a small short residential wing. What was envisaged was not a school surrounded by a number of other buildings but an «organically integrated unit». Accordingly the school theatre is the public theatre, the school library provides a study centre for adults in daytime, coffee bars and dining areas serve the pupils and the adults alike, the crèche serves the needs of the Health Clinic, of adult education students' and is an integral part of the school's homework facilities as well.

The school encourages all local citizens to take part in the wide range of activities on offer. At Sutton Centre the school has adopted in its programme additional evening two hour sessions run by the teaching staff and covering all areas of the school curriculum even introducing new ones. Students can also attend and many do. Some of the most successful evening sessions have been family classes in subjects as widely divergent as German, cookery and screen printing (S. Wilson, 1977). In this way not only do adults and school children work along side each other but also personal contact between teachers and parents is facilitated on a work basis.

4. The Countesthorpe Community School chose to fuse the pastoral and academic role of the teacher so that the tutorial role would come at the centre of the academic system rather than on the periphery. Professor G. H. Bantock (1975) remarked that at this school the instrumental aims (i.e. academic achievement) were underrated in favour of the expressive (i.e. socialisation). As he put it, «so-

Ideally adults may join daytime classes in O and A level subjects as well as recreational and creative ones. Few community schools can claim such a step towards integration with their community (f.e. the Countesthorpe College). However, the new and live interrelationship between formerly separate organizations of school, social centre, and adult education centre is believed to affect the progress of each unit favourably f. e. The demands of the adult may influence the development of the school curriculum; the growth of design education, social studies and environmental education have owed something to this interchange (A. Fairbairn, 1977). By reinforcing the image of education as a continuous and lifelong process this type of community school aims at bridging up the communications gap between generations, at easing the transition from school to work and at enlarging the social conscience of the community.

Also one of this school's main concerns is to contact parents in a consistent and personal way so that they might come to appreciate more its potential and advance its academic goals when becoming involved in their children's work at school.

Getting parents and members of the community to participate in the decision making process at the community school has similarly been a not less important part of such a school's commitments. Making decisions at a more immediate level, and involving more people in this process is seen as a challenge to the central government's increasing power and a means of supporting the control of the ordinary citizen over his own destiny (C. Poster, 1977). c) According to the radical viewpoint (E. Midwinter, 1972) the community school should be identified with its community «in every aspect of life of each for the better health of both». Thus the community school should have a community

cialisation in all its vagueness and undemanding quality is the perfect bogey hole for the academically underachieving staff member».

M. Armstrong (1975) refuted this attack, he argued there was an equal concern at Countesthorpe Community School with both social attitudes and academic achievement which he supported did not necessarily coincide with examination successes, nor did learning with competition. In Armstrong's words «we accept the goal of a democracy of shared meanings and the definition of opportunity in terms of «access to forms of knowledge, modes of perception, ways of thinking—in short to varieties of reality as opposed to equality simply of access to educational institutions».

Armstrong also did not admit «that the ability to grasp meaning varies ineluctably from child to child in a way that no social engineering can erode». He pointed out that Countesthorpe was a school which hoped to explore the ways in which the structures of popular education (in the form of curriculum, method, disciplines, relationships) had inhibited the growth of intellect and also search for more productive alternatives. As an alternative M. Armstrong regards the attempt to make the student's immediate experience a starting point, as well as try and stimulate his curiosity about what lies beyond it, so as to bring the student into grips with progressively widening circles of understanding.

In this view M. Armstrong is close to B. Bernstein's and N. Keddie's aspect of the problem of the working class underachievement at school.

orientated curriculum in an attempt to «identify education and life». Although the followers of this view think that their principles can have a much wider application, this kind of community school is mainly concerned with the problems of the materially poor. It aims at developing the social skills of its students on relevant and realistic sources in the hope that they would participate constructively in solving local problems including f.e. when necessary, slum clearance and youth unemployment. A community orientated curriculum could also be justified by bringing parents into school projects that are life-centred.

The aspiration to introduce a radical curricular reform having the community as a starting point does not imply, as E. Midwinter (1973) says, that «a slum district should have a slum school. It means that the values and the vocabulary and the aspirations of the family and its inhabitants should be respected at all times and used as a base for action. The ethos of the school's sub-culture must be the starting point for any discussion or advance».

Existing community schools in England represent both the moderate and the radical approach to the community school ideal. There is a considerable overlap of the characteristics of the schools representing both views, yet these with the radical outlook have concentrated overtly on the contentious issues of curriculum reform, the attitudinal change within the teaching profession, as well as the contribution of the school in the possible rehabilitation of its community.

#### **the community school within the radical approach**

Before I look at the Liverpool Project which is one of the most influential attempts, representing the radical approach to the community school in England, I shall give an outline of the American experience in this direction. It is a precursor of the English scheme in socio-economically deprived areas and became very much a point of reference.

In the United States the idea of the community school as a school which should be concerned with general community welfare sprang up from a series of attempts to solve the problem of the underachievement at the traditional school of Negro and white lower class children.

During the 1960's the concept of «cultural deprivation» was introduced in the United States placing the emphasis on differences of culture rather than on material circumstances as an explanation for the depressed performance at school of the above children. This approach sparked off large structured programmes of intervention at the preschool age of the deprived children in the hope that the much acclaimed and already existing equality of opportunity through schools could be turned into the reality at the equality of achievement at school.

In a later attempt to evaluate the outcome of these programmes of «Compensatory Education» in the United States there has been a series of negative findings (1968-69). A study of a thousand selected projects found only twenty one studies where there was clear evidence of success, and many of them were rather limited research projects affecting only a few children (*Educational Priority*, Vol. I, 1972). A. H. Halsey (1972) comments that most of these programmes had put forward vague unrealistic objectives, f. i. «breaking the poverty cycle», an aim which was supported only by very inadequate theories. Yet, Halsey writes, «it would be wrong to dismiss compensatory education as a series of 'parer programmes' because of weakness at this level of theory. Clear knowledge about such relationships is inadequate on any analysis, and is perhaps only by experiment and research in this way with educational change that better theory will be developed».

A number of positive findings in the American Project can be traced in the ramifications of what was thought to be a simple educational problem. In the beginning these action programmes introduced changes in the child's experiences within the formal school setting, then increasingly they tried to influence larger areas of the child's experiences by encouraging some parental involvement within the child's home and finally they took one step further in changing the school organization and control in such a way that it would be more open to the influence of the community. Several Projects, notably the Headstart group in Mississippi, have argued that schools must be related to the wider community's problems, they must be concerned with general community progress rather than education alone, and curricula must be changed to promote such a relationship.

As the idea of this type of community school gained ground, there developed in the United States community oriented curricula for such school which emphasised the need to inform students as to how they could get involved and contribute in the change of their community. «A Book about New York City and how to change it», is the title of such a community text book.

In England in 1967 the Plowden Report on Education drew attention to the schools in run-down areas with high unemployment and high staff turn-over. It recommended «positive discrimination» for these deprived schools to be implemented through an action-research programme. It was approved for the Educational Priority Areas (EPA) in Britain and a major pioneering effort was launched in the direction of social rehabilitation of the community through schools.

The American experience of the «compensatory» education programme in the 1960's and the controversial debate that it had raised within sociological and educational circles were sufficient to pinpoint wrong concepts and unrealistic targets for the British endeavour.

A. H. Halsey, among those who have worked for the development of the community school in the last decade in England does not entertain any illusions about the abolition of poverty or the practising of an egalitarian policy. He states explicitly (1972), «The traditional social pattern of selection remained remarkably stable. The school is only one influence among others, and, in relation to the phenomenon of social stratification, probably a fairly minor one. School reform helps but the improvement of teacher/pupil ratios, the building of new schools and even the provision of a wider variety of curricula have at best a limited effect as counterweights. There has been a tendency to treat education as the waste paper basket of social policy— repository for dealing with social problems where solutions are uncertain or where there is a disinclination to wrestle with them seriously. But it was now increasingly plain that the schools cannot accomplish important social reforms such as democratisation of opportunity unless social reforms accompany the educational effort. And it also became more evident that the schools are hampered in achieving even their more traditional and strictly 'educational' purposes when in societies changing rapidly in their technologies and in the aspirations of their populations, a comparable effort to make the required change in social structures and political organizations is lacking».

In other words the community school cannot reconstruct the community unaided. If it is successful at all unattended needs of the neighbourhood for health, housing, employment and similar services will finally jeopardise the school contribution to communal wellbeing.

### *The Liverpool Project*

Thirteen primary schools in the inner decaying area of this extremely economically depressed city were attached to the EPA project. E. Midwinter (Director of the Liverpool Project, 1968-1971) comments on the physical inaccessibility of these schools, the inadequate preschool provision in their locality and the hardly existing parental involvement in the schools' aims; consequently the educational attainment was well below the national average correlated with social disadvantage.

The Project was an endeavour a) in the short term to develop a balanced relationship between school and home so that the child's education would be more stable, b) in the long term to transform school into an agency alongside other social and communal organisms working towards community regeneration.

In the conclusions of this Project there is particular emphasis on the following points regarding such community school.

1. The balance of the curriculum should change from

«academic» to «social» based on the realities of the immediate environment. Referring to the traditional teaching of the urban child as «a quick-dry cultural gloss onto the pupil», E. Midwinter points out that the social, locality-centred curriculum is «psychologically more accurate. It begins with the child's experience and works purposefully outwards».

The community-orientated curriculum, based on themes rather than subjects aims a) at a more critical and constructive adaptation of the children to their environment, b) at better results in traditional subjects since they are linked to the student's immediate, relevant experience and they are imbued with a high sense of social purpose. Thus, f.e., a group of students organizing an old people's club are not just doing the pensioners a service; history, English, music, art, drama, technical subjects, domestic science are related to the activity all invested with the incentive of a relevant purpose. E. Midwinter writes, «We were amazed by the manner in which children faced with creative challenges about firsthand experience, were able to 'articulate'. Nor was it all non-linguistic; the Project teemed with examples of incisive and imaginative writing, evoked by the stimulus of the immediacy. Over the three years convictions grew that more and more, it was this kind of talent that needed to be liberated and this kind of tool that needed to be primed». c) Also in realising that education is about himself and his community just as much as about a more remote middle class world the child will gain a sense of his worth and parents will more readily give their interest and support.

2. The second point of emphasis in the conclusions of the Liverpool team was that it would be appropriate for EPA schools to increase the time devoted to pursuits and entertainments that could involve parents and community. The arts should not merely be a means of self expression in the EPA community school but they should have a more socially definitive role to play. E. Midwinter emphasises that despite the fact that parents had found schools off-putting and incomprehensible as their children did, the EPA Projects have helped to «exorcise» the persistent image of «the feckless, apathetic, working-class parent». The survey confirmed the real interest of parents in their children's education so that the advantages of their support, skill and knowledge should be fully exploited for both the educational and social benefit of their children.

3. Social environmental studies should concentrate on skills rather than on information. The verbal and creative method should be placed at the disposal of social purpose and expertise so that the child is equipped to look at this world more articulately and sharply. If there develops a more socially aware community it could use the existing channels of social welfare benefits or the existing means of political protest with increased skill. This leads us to a more problematic point.



4. The necessary change of teaching attitudes. Historically, says E. Midwinter, there has been immense pressure on the teachers to be the defender of the status quo and act as guardians rather than critics of the social scene. Teachers in EPA areas will have to become «social prosecutors rather than social defenders if the school is, in effect, ...to become a positive influence on social change». A. Halsey also made similar remarks, «EPA community education presumes that the Educational Priority Area should be radically reformed and that the children should be 'forewarned and forearmed for the struggle'. This does not mean that the teacher should form a revolutionary cell in the classroom but that both teachers and children should develop a critical but tolerant attitude to a range of social institutions, ideas and aspirations».

Many conclusions of the «priority» schemes in England which point to alternative educational solutions have been attacked by radicals and conservatives alike. Quoting Prof. Bantock, R. Ashcroft agrees that «the notion of informality and that of the school do not finally mix. It is precisely the purpose in setting up such separate and expensive institutions to enable learning to take place that they shall introduce coherence and order where none previously existed».

Midwinter prompts the development of the «open» school which should be closely interlocked with its community for mutual benefit until «a visionary time» came when it would be difficult to distinguish the school from its community.

Ashcroft believes that there is little evidence on which to make policy decisions for or against the «open» school in terms of either «cognitive or affective development». So he suggests that the «closed» school which puts the emphasis upon structured learning of the traditional disciplines should not be undermined; he proposes that more resources and more imagination in teaching methods conjoined to the traditional purposes of the education may be a preferable option to community schooling.

On the other hand B. Bernstein considering the boundary relations between the inside and the outside of the school finds that they «are now more open». He refers to the openness of the architecture of the new schools compared with the old ones, the weakening of the barrier between home and school, the teenage subculture and the culture of the school, as well as the diverse penetration of the outside within the school library and through films shown to the pupils.

If we accept the above evidence as true then there seems to be a shift of emphasis from the insulated «closed» school to a more «open» one. Three official reports, Robbins, Plowden and Newson, have already questioned the «isolationist» policy of schools and by inference, suggested there would be small profit in educating any individual without continuous recognition of the nature of his daily existence (G. Mitchell, J.K.

Richards, 1976). We cannot afford to dismiss this view particularly when it comes to policy making for future schools in economically depressed areas, aggravated by the disadvantage of a wide cultural difference between family background and school.

No supporter of the radical community school can possibly have underrated the importance of the reallocation of resources discriminating in favour of EPA schools; on the contrary, it does not follow though that financial support is enough. As E. Midwinter (1972) writes, «it is difficult to believe that, of itself, hot water running in carefully planned council flats will enliven an interest in education». On the other hand he admits that «of itself, education cannot compensate for the malpractices and injustices of society. It can contribute, but it can only contribute profitably in a propitious community climate».

Excessive dependence upon the community though is considered to be self-limiting. There are those who believe that schooling's basic nature is to broaden horizons, which does not happen if it is too closely tied to an immediate environment; so, one of the fundamental aims of education is at stake, when school acts solely in the light of the immediate interest of the individual. As one critic remarks, «the total culture,<sup>5</sup> the student's place in it and therefore his possibility to move in it are too easily lost» (Secretariat, CERI, 1973). The implications of curricula that reflect socio-economic local orientation seem to be obvious. A. H. Halsey points out the danger, that of «creating a second class education for second class citizens».

Other thinkers have also been concerned with the same dilemma. D'Aeth thinks that schools in rural areas of the Third World should adapt to the specific demands of their environment because, despite the truth that a small number of children would take advantage of the traditional formal schooling and reach out of their limited background most of them will not.

James Coleman, in his very interesting article on «The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity» (1968), also tackles this problem. He writes, «it is one thing to take as given that approximately 70 per cent of an entering Highschool freshman class will not attend the college; but to assign a particular child to a curriculum designed for that 70 per cent closes off for that child the opportunity to attend college. Yet, to assign all children designed for the 30 per cent who will attend college creates inequality for those who, at the end of highschool, fall among the 70 per cent who do not attend college. This is a true dilemma and one which no educational system has fully solved».

The fact that social mobility based on the equality of

5. The concept of the middle class culture as «total culture» has been disputed. N. Keddie (1973) refers to the mainstream (middle class) culture as a minority culture «which is then said to stand for society at large».

opportunity through school has proved ineffectual over several years now, made it necessary for the Liverpool team to become preoccupied with the problem of the majority of the school children who were bound not to escape from the reality of their local environment. As E. Midwinter writes, «obviously remembering the needs of local boys with the latent talent to make good», they chose not to direct the Liverpool EPA programme towards academic successes of the few «in a misty future» but work instead on pragmatic aims of immediate relevance to the majority of the children.

There is a growing belief (B. Bernstein, N. Keddie, E. Midwinter, M. Armstrong) that starting to work from the immediate experience of these children outwards would broaden their horizons rather than limit them. It has already been tried (The Compensatory Programme in the US) and proved that starting to work from middle class categories of learning which are alien to these children does not affect their educational attainment as favourably as it has been expected. This might be because of «lack of more imagination in teaching methods» or the «teacher's deficit», reasons which have been questioned as providing a full explanation for the underachievement of the working class pupils. Curricula vested with a social purpose relevant to the students did produce some encouraging results, f.e. the Liverpool Project. These results, I think, should weigh upon future policy making for schools in this direction having in mind (1) that social relevance does not mean superficial understanding of the immediate reality «seeing the local sights and writing occasional essays about them»<sup>6</sup> but an investigation which can widen the social views of the child, and (2) that the aim of a locality-centred curriculum is not to be «soporific», fitting children into slots in an ascriptive manner but, as A. Halsey writes, «to accept that many children must live out their lives in deprived areas and to inspire them to think about it boldly rather than lapse into resigned apathy».

The question is, can this be possible? Schemes conducive to the attainment of the above aims through family involvement, the change of teaching attitudes, collaboration of schools with employers, have been criticised as unrealistic.

G. Smith (1975), research officer at the West Riding EPA Project, confirms that in stable and settled communities educational programmes could play an important part; this could easily be undermined at a time of job crisis. G. Smith writes, «The experience of operating the home visiting project through the 1972 national coalmining strike underlined how quickly this (an effective relationship between school and parents) could change—how fragile was the educational impact».

This may be true. It points out the correlation between communal stability and effective school-home relations, it underlines the difficulties in times of instability but it does not minimise the effect of such a relationship when possible. It is to this end that the Liverpool team primarily worked despite the unfavourable environment and met with considerable response.

The job of a teacher who chooses to become «a social prosecutor» within conventional educational system can be at stake. R. Ashcroft gives the account of C. Searle, a former teacher in the East End of London, who was dismissed from the school after he published an anthology of poems and photographs entitled «Stephen Words» written by working class students in a London secondary school, «a vivid exploration of the lives of children, young men and women living in working-class London». The headmaster agreed to the suggestion that it should be published, the school governors rejected the idea of the publication of the book on the grounds that the book was «unbalanced» and that the photographs and poems were too «drab». However, «the content of the poetry both literary and social was outstandingly good».

Ashcroft comments, «Nowhere have I seen better illustration that children may do better in traditional subjects (in this case English) if these traditional subjects are related to the lives of the children».

The children's expression is often highly intolerant of the social situation within which they find themselves; there are teachers who think they are right to be intolerant. In this case, I agree, extremely radical interpretation of school-based community development is very likely to be defeated within conventional educational systems. E. Midwinter also admits that change of attitude, from the teacher as traditional defender of the status quo to the teacher as guide in a critical investigation of the issues facing children and parents in decaying surroundings, this kind of change, obviously expressed in a tolerant way, «is liable to throw some strain on the profession. It may well be the major obstacle to complete community schooling...».

Another relevant question that Ashcroft raises is, for how long can it last, «a fruitful collaboration» between employers and former students who were encouraged to social change. «Few organizations», Ashcroft comments, «are willing to finance their own downfall, and it is arguable that the closure of many American community development projects is a consequence of this paradox. The more successful they have been (given the radical's criterion of success) the more they have been subject to termination.»

There is a real dilemma for those who are genuinely concerned with associating education in a statutory context with a social reform. Despite the fact that there is the wish to develop at community schools «a critical

6. I share R. Ashcroft's reservation on this point.

but tolerant attitude to social institutions, ideas and aspirations), it is not unrealistic to say that this is an attempt to create political consciousness within the schools. Because «tolerance» has not always been the «hand maiden» of social change the reaction of the traditional power structure in the present society would not perhaps be so willing to endorse a scheme which would set at risk its continuity in the future.

Even if we leave aside this controversial issue, the possible effect of the community school on the development of its community has been considered dubious.

Ashcroft expresses the scepticism of the radicals who view partial educational solutions to problems of deprivation as irrelevant; there is the fear that these partial solutions may lead to the defining of social change in «extremely low-key terms», i. e. in the attainment of adventure playgrounds, crèches, football pitches, etc. for the underprivileged, «whilst major structural change in social stratification and status will go by default because it does not fit easily within the conceptual framework of community action».

The radical view puts the emphasis on the change of the structure of opportunities for jobs at a national and international level as well as on a more equal provision of all the other elements of citizenship in the affluent society, regardless of the social, familial and racial origins of its members. In matters of economic negotiations the radicals feel it is the Governments, Trade Unions, political parties and major pressure groups representing the underprivileged rather than community development projects that will carry more weight in effective decision making. Social services through school in this view are considered no more than a palliative with no long term prospects.

All the same R. Ashcroft admits «the EPA experiment achieved significant progress in some relatively minor areas of social reform; perhaps that was all it would achieve given the resources and time for its implementation».

I think that minor progress in community development through the school is neither undesirable nor does it contradict or undermine efforts of more powerful agencies aiming at social change on a bigger scale. On the contrary, it reinforces them. A. H. Halsey (1972) does mention that such «educational programmes may make considerable impact on the political consciousness of the poor... and such political awakening may be the most effective means of ensuring that gross inequalities between social and ethnic groups are eradicated».

#### conclusion

Notwithstanding the innate controversies and the technical problems<sup>7</sup> involved, the radical concept of the community school seems to be worthy of further development. To my knowledge there has not been until now any other major attempt that can claim better results than the EPA Liverpool and similar projects in improving the underachievement of working class students in deprived areas as well as in promoting their social participation as against either resignation or negative rebelliousness. Schools whose context is mainly drawn from aspects of the «symbolic world» of the middle class and which cannot provide a linkage with the outside life of the student have helped to alienate both many lower class students and their parents from the concept of schooling. It is then the hope that the community school starting from its immediate environment and working outwards might benefit its students better and possibly eventually contribute in the creation of a «common culture».

7. E. Midwinter, points to technical difficulties which he does not consider insurmountable (1973). «There are examinations to be abolished or modified to a community need; there is the problem of published materials which may increasingly be met by teachers workshops; there is the question of teachers faced with novel curriculum halfway through their careers. It is no good pretending these can be easily swept aside; similarly, there is no point in presuming some of these difficulties cannot be surmounted».

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