

The Child – As Father or Mother?

by
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According to recent ILO [in 1988] studies housework occupies as much adult time as does paid employment. Being an unpaid task, it can truly be classed as a vocation or calling, and might be expected to fill a considerable proportion of the school curriculum. The tasks involved in the care of home and family are a long way, however, from filling fifty per cent of the school timetable. This would matter little if indeed the tasks associated with home and family care were of minor significance in terms of the overall welfare of society. But this is far from being the case.

The level of responsibility involved in the care of a single young child must, on some as yet-to-be devised non-economic scale of social and moral values, at least equal that of the highest paid, highest powered executive in the business world. Fifty per cent of the child's intellectual development takes place in the first five years of life, and in those years the foundations for effective and artistic skills are laid. The quality of care and attention received will lay the foundations for the child's entire lifetime, and will be of major significance for all who subsequently live and work with him or her.

School Objectives

How, then, do we set about preparing parents for this supreme responsibility? In the formative years of childhood, from five to sixteen years of age, children are removed for the major part of their waking hours from the traditional sources of knowledge and experience relating to traditional methods of home and child care. Their time is occupied within the educational establishment of the school, which seeks to prepare them for future life by offering them knowledge and skills associated, largely, with paid employment outside the home.

Whatever else they will do in the future, the children in school at present are certainly the parents of the next generation of children. Whether or not they come to be employed in the economic sphere, pupils will embark upon the establishment of a home of their own, probably with a partner, and, even if they have no children they will be involved in the care and assistance of others in the family and in the wider community. Extra-institutional forms of support within the community in times of sickness and distress are, nonetheless, essential for the smooth running of society because they lie largely outside the economic sphere of life and are therefore less easy to quantify and evaluate. By removing generation after generation of children from the community and concentrating their attention on forms of employment which lie inside the economic sphere, the education system is affecting society in unexpected directions.

Vacuum

The Western developed world has created a form of society in which a high standard of material welfare co-exists with an appalling incidence of loneliness, frustration and misery. The host of problems created in this way – vandalism and crime, suicide and drug addiction, child abuse and mental illnesses – are tackled *after* the event by remedial measures undertaken by highly paid experts. In sweeping aside all aspects of the non-professional, non-working, non-institutional based extra-economic world, we have come to deny not only children but the sick, the lonely, the old and the disabled – and that is almost all of us at some time in our lives – the right to love, care and

attention which is an essential part of community life. Remedial action at the point of breakdown is increasingly seen as the only option. Desire for a strong community and support for family life remains the province of religion – especially fundamentalists – which are fast gaining ground in the vacuum created by present trends in the established education system.

Home Skills

The full might of the wrath of feminists in the education world is poised to descend upon any intelligent girl who has the temerity to suggest that she envisages taking the role of housewife and mother seriously in adult life. For all but the “low achiever”, or those who are attracted to a career in catering, home economics is considered a very optional extra. The teaching profession is well aware of the significance of the home background in terms of the pupil’s abilities and behaviour at school. Nevertheless home economics has remained a subject more closely concerned with the arts of kitchen-craft and cookery than with the full range of skills within the home. This is perhaps inevitable, given that the training of home economics teachers does not involve visits to the home of a representative sample of their potential pupils – and, particularly in the inner city areas, the cultural gap in Britain today must be seen to be believed. Many a home does not even contain the equipment necessary to produce a cooked meal. This is more than a mere economic problem, for children raised in this way have little chance of developing sound home-making skills.

Ill-Prepared

The loss of skills associated with infant and child care across the socio-economic range is giving the most grounds for concern. Traditional interactive child care skills take much more time and experience than can be offered within a school timetable and school setting alone. These skills were once developed alongside other adult tasks, incorporating the young child into the family and the community so that it came to an awareness of self and personal worth, of “safe space”, as Anthony Fry, a psychiatrist, has called it in his recent book of the same name. Recent studies suggest that the replacement of interactive activities with passive, non-interactive television viewing, coupled with the erosion of personal and place security are factors behind the frequent failure of children to develop a sense of self-esteem and personal worth in adolescence and adulthood. Parents raised this way are ill-prepared themselves for the tasks of parenting.

Omission

Nowhere is the confusion in relation to the question of child care more apparent than within the teaching profession itself. Economic pressure and social expectations are increasingly weighed in favour of combining work in the profession with raising a family, and delegating infant care to a non-family person. Indeed, it is not uncommon for teachers to embark upon the responsibilities of parenthood in a fog of ignorance which they would consider horrific if it involved paid professional work. The question of a person’s sex, and their actual potential child rearing intentions has been rightly judged irrelevant in deciding professional competence at interview. It has, however, led to an assumption that child care arrangements, and care of the home generally, are, and should be, a matter of secondary importance, to be woven around professional responsibilities and delegated when necessary to a person of lower earning potential. This is misleading, and has wide implications in terms of personal and family stability. Home and family care has been left out in the cold as a serious

adult responsibility in Western society. Successive generations of children are paying an increasingly high price for this omission.

This article was from NASUWT Career Teacher Journal, Summer 1988, pp26-27, when the prescriptive National Curriculum was being proposed in the Education Reform Bill. Since that time the Education Reform Act of 1988 has promoted an education system geared almost exclusively to the employment market. In this article Frances Hutchinson argues strongly that Britain's education system must recognise that raising a family requires skills, which it is the duty of schools to provide.