

3 Understanding the task and the curriculum

In all circumstances, we would recommend that Church schools must be distinctively places where the Christian faith is alive and practised. Church schools will seek to offer excellence in education, and in so doing they will above all be concerned to develop the whole human being through the practice of the Christian faith.

The Way ahead para 4.60

(Author's note: to be able to achieve 'excellence in education' in Church schools all those involved in contact with schools on behalf of the church must be aware of how 'excellence in education' is currently understood.)

You know how it is in schools. You can't mention God or Christ. You are not allowed to do anything that suggests worship. We had to move our congregation out of the school and convert a barn in which to worship.

The comment recorded above was made to the author with all the sadness of a gentle Christian soul caught up in a conflict over the appropriate use of a school building. It will find much understanding among church members who share some of these perceptions. It will be regarded as unbelievable by those who know schools. They will be puzzled as to how anyone in this country could so misunderstand what is being attempted in schools. This chapter is offered to help church people understand more about what is really happening.

Understanding the task

Imagine three people sitting at neighbouring tables in a restaurant. On the first table is Amy, who speaks five languages and works as an interpreter for the European Union. She is reading a book on fell walking. At the next table is Bertha who is involved in the development of the next generation of computers. While she eats her meal she is listening to a recording of Verdi's *Requiem* on her personal stereo. At the last table is Christine who works as a receptionist for the

local doctor. While she is eating she is beginning to plan the design of her next embroidery project.

For each of these people schools will have provided an important part of the formal education that has equipped them to do their job and to follow their leisure interests. Schools have done the same for the waiter, the cook and all the others involved in the preparation of their meal. Schools are required to provide an education for everyone that will prepare them for ‘the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life’ (Education Act, 1996).

It is easy to forget the range of interests and abilities with which a school has to deal. In a class of 29 five-year-olds it may be difficult to discern which child will grow up to be a computer wizard, an artist, a footballer or a waitress – probably none of them. The education that is offered to all the children in the class must take account of and be appropriate for these and many other possibilities.

In the same class of five-year-old children:

- some of the children will come from homes where both parents are committed readers and books line the walls, while others will have seen adults in their home rarely reading anything but a newspaper or a TV listings magazine.
- most of the children will have been to nursery school or playgroup every day for the past two years, while a few will have remained in their home environment or with a child-minder until entering school;
- eight of the children are likely to have some contact with a Christian church and probably three or four with another faith, while the majority will have little or no contact with any community of believers.

No judgements should be implied from the above statements about what constitutes a better or worse situation. Given this range of experience, how do schools approach their task?

Understanding the curriculum

All schools in the maintained system (that is schools within the state sector) including Church schools in England and Wales, must use what the law calls the basic curriculum as the foundation for their teaching programme. The basic curriculum consists of religious education with the subjects of the national

curriculum. The national curriculum subjects are English, mathematics, science, technology, history, geography, art, music, a foreign language (in secondary schools only), physical education and, in Wales, Welsh. The outline and basic content for each of the national curriculum subjects is developed in England by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and approved by the Secretary of State. The QCA also arranges for the assessment of the progress of all school children at 7, 11 and 14 through a programme of testing, at 16 through GCSE and at 18 through A and AS levels, NVQs and other approved examinations. In Wales the Qualification, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) undertakes this work and approval is given through the National Assembly. Individual schools must work within this framework in the production of detailed programmes of work. In addition, every school is inspected every six years against a framework published by The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and related to the national curriculum. There are equivalent arrangements in Wales for the assessment of pupils' progress and the inspection of schools. These are developed by Estyn, the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales.

This pattern of national support for the curriculum created by legislation passed since 1988 still allows freedom for individual schools to choose methodologies and approaches that suit their own areas and the needs of the children living within them. In this context the unique position of religious education is important. Alone of the subjects that schools must teach by law, this subject has a locally agreed syllabus. These syllabuses are created by a conference that represents local interest groups including the Christian Churches. They may use national resources or work from other local authorities as a resource for their work. For most schools the Local Education Authority (LEA) is responsible for these locally but for voluntary aided schools, with a religious character, they are often determined by the relevant diocese or faith organization. Christian churches are required to be involved in the process of determining and supporting the LEA syllabuses for religious education through membership of local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) which are required by the Education Act 1996.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Since the passage of the Education Reform Act 1988 schools have been required to provide a curriculum that promotes:

the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at school and of society.

This is achieved in schools by planning a contribution from the programme of teaching, the 'hidden curriculum' and school worship. The Education (Schools) Act 1992 first provided for the inspection of these aspects of a school's task.

While it is usually assumed that schools understand about the mental and physical development of pupils, there exists no universally accepted definition of the words spiritual, moral, social and cultural in this context. Therefore it was a part of the curriculum that caused many schools and school inspectors considerable difficulty. Much work has been done to support schools in these areas, not least by some of the churches. There is now much greater understanding and experience in the field but policies for each of the four concepts, requiring a contribution from so many areas of a school's life, can be extremely difficult to coordinate.

Spiritual development

Christian churches will have their own understandings of what is meant by spiritual development. Such understandings will vary between churches in the emphasis they give to private prayer, public worship, service and self-discipline among other aspects of the Christian life. What is a community school with pupils from a number of different faiths to understand by spiritual development when each faith will have its own range of understandings? What does spiritual development mean to those who have no faith? Many schools will adopt a working definition that identifies the spiritual with the emotions and particularly with individuals' responses to the high and low points of human experience. Schools will seek to ensure that there are opportunities for pupils to reflect on their experience at school as part of the process of spiritual education. In addition, they will wish to teach pupils about the way in which different faiths respond to human experiences and feelings. Christian churches may be able to resource such work by providing people who can talk about their own spirituality, and by helping schools to plan work in this area. In some instances schools may use the facilities of a church to provide the atmosphere in which pupils can explore contemplation and reflection on their own lives and those of others. For those who wish to understand more about spiritual development in schools a good introduction is *Feeding Minds and Touching Hearts* by A. Brown and A. Seaman (2001).

Moral development

Much work has been done on the development of some aspects of moral understanding and behaviour among children and young adults. Less has been done to communicate this work to those outside the world of education. Young

children learn first the way in which their family does things. When they come to school they may well find that how their family regards certain aspects of behaviour and how school regards them are quite different. This may not be because school and home are opposed but because the circumstances are different. In their early years at school, children will be encouraged to learn and abide by the school rules. This learning is usually reinforced by the presence of adults. The aim of such rules must be to help children to learn not only to obey but also to understand the benefits of obeying the rules. Only if this is achieved will children and young people come to accept them for their own, and therefore obey the rules even when there is no possibility of their being caught breaking them. Teachers working with children towards the later years of primary school will be familiar with this stage of moral learning.

A dilemma for referees of football matches between primary schools is the advantage rule. In adult games it is accepted that if the rules have been broken but the side offended against wins some benefit from the situation, the referee does not have to take action. He or she can allow the game to proceed to play the 'advantage'. In primary school football, if the referee fails to stop the game for each breach of the rules, the game will come to a halt anyway, amidst cries of 'it's not fair!'

Later in their development, young people need to develop the understanding that many life situations are too complicated to be solved by the application of simple rules. Within the study of literature or religion there may be many occasions when the question 'Why did he do that?' leads to a moral debate. Here the difference between the rules that a person wishes to live by and the daily dilemmas of living become the fundamental stuff of moral education. Within this area the churches may be able to provide schools with individuals who are able to explain and discuss with young people how their personal faith provides the basis and the strength to resolve such dilemmas. It is unfortunate and at the same time natural that at the time when young people are wrestling with the acceptance for themselves of a standard or faith by which to live they are most liable to pressure from their peer group. Moral education is not as simple as some would have the public believe, nor does it automatically lead to socially acceptable behaviour – civil disobedience as a way of opposing unjust laws may be a morally appropriate action.

Social development

The first stages of the school's contribution to a child's social development take place in the first few weeks of a child's experience of school. In the family, children experience sharing the attention of one or two adults with perhaps one

or two other children. Sometimes children will have had the total attention of the adults in their lives. When children arrive at school or playgroup they have to learn to share the attention of the key adults with several other children. They have also to learn to cooperate with the other children in the group. From these early experiences grows an understanding of how to survive in and contribute to the school and, later, society in general. The experience of taking responsibility, raising money for charitable causes, caring for others and participating in making decisions are all aspects of the social development programme that schools provide. In some of these there may be opportunities for schools and their pupils to work in partnership with churches.

Cultural development

In their *Guidance on the Inspection of Nursery and Primary Schools* (HMSO, 1995) OFSTED give the following advice to inspectors.

Cultural development is concerned both with participation in and appreciation of cultural traditions.

The school's approach should be active. Inspectors need to look for evidence of how the school seeks to enrich its pupils' knowledge and experience of their own or other cultural traditions, through the curriculum and through visits, clubs and other activities. Aspects of the curriculum such as history, geography, art, music, dance, drama and literature can all make positive contributions, for example, through opportunities for pupils to:

visit museums and art galleries;

work with artists, authors and performers;

develop openness towards and value the music and dance of different cultures;

appreciate the natural world through art and literature;

recognise the contribution of many cultures to mathematics and to scientific and technological development.

Guidance on the Inspection of Nursery and Primary Schools, Office of Standards in Education, 1995.

This guidance could be interpreted as taking a ‘national’ view of culture. It could lead some schools to think in terms of ‘our’ culture and ‘other countries’ culture. There is a more complex view of this whole area, which could be included in an interpretation of this guidance. This view takes account of a range of different cultures existing and interacting within even quite small communities. For example, in music, the local culture could include the choral society, the jazz club, the folk group and Radio One, or in the performing arts, ballet, theatre, film or street performers. It may incorporate contributions from English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Caribbean, Indian or African cultures. One of the contributors to the culture of every area of the country will be the Christian Church not least through the music, art, literature it uses in its places of worship and its services.

Somehow the school must provide an introduction and opportunities to explore all of these cultures and many more. No one individual will appreciate or become involved in everything. All should be able to find and develop particular interests and should recognize and value the maintenance and development of traditions that are important in the life of the community or nation.

All four of these curriculum areas are important as they acknowledge that schooling is about more than just academic learning and preparation for the world of work. The problems for the schools lie in coordinating and resourcing what is taught and in finding the necessary time to achieve all that is desirable.

Concern and care for pupils

A further part of the way in which schools demonstrate their response to the local situation is their concern for their pupils. Many schools become deeply involved in work to help and support their pupils through difficult periods in their lives. They are likely to give considerable time and attention to pupils who

- are coming to terms with tragedy;
- experience problems relating to peers or adults;
- have difficulties in learning or have other special needs including those caused by outstanding ability in a subject or area of learning.

Class teachers or tutors, heads of year and headteachers are likely to be particularly involved in this work but all adults working in schools will have their contributions to make.

In many schools care and concern for their pupils will spill over into care and concern for their parents. It may be that, in some cases, the best way of helping the child is to help the parents. There is a tension here for schools. How much time should they spend helping and supporting parents, when their prime responsibility is to teach children? The challenge may be greatest in areas where there exists considerable social pressure and the other support agencies are, or seem to be, difficult for parents to contact. Schools are open every weekday during term time. There are teachers and other staff on duty from before nine o'clock until well after four, and there are often staff in the building before and after these hours and during holiday periods. Primary schools are usually within walking distance of children's homes. No wonder it seems easier for some parents to bring their troubles to the school than to other agencies whose points of contact may be less accessible.

4 ***Understanding the hidden curriculum***

Church schools have the capacity to create an atmosphere in which God can be discovered naturally and without apology. This will include worship . . .

The Way ahead, para. 7.13

Worship

Every pupil in every school must attend an act of worship in school every day unless the pupil's parents exercise their rights to withdraw their child under the appropriate conscience clause. This means that even in the smallest school there will be at least five acts of worship each week. In many schools, because worship will sometimes be in key stage or year groups, there will be nearer ten. In some large comprehensive schools, because worship is often conducted in tutor groups, the number may reach over one hundred and fifty. In community schools the majority of such services must be of a broadly Christian character. In Church schools they will be within the tradition of the Church. This implies that the headteachers or worship coordinators of most schools are responsible for designing more acts of worship in a week than many priests or ministers, and that without the benefit of a liturgical structure.

The daily act of worship may be an important opportunity for some children and adults to worship God. For some others, perhaps, it will be their only opportunity to discover what it might be like to worship. For the rest it will be a time when they have to learn not to interrupt that which is important to others, even if they feel unable to participate themselves. The act of worship may also be the time when the school's values are made most explicit to children and to staff. In good schools there will be careful planning of the worship programme and visitors contributing to worship should be aware of how they are expected to fit into the plans. They should also seek to establish some understanding of how many of the school staff and pupils fall into each of the three categories described above, as this should influence what they plan to do.

The hidden curriculum

Many men and some women have learnt that sport is so important that they watch it for hours on television and read the sports pages of newspapers first. Where and how was this attitude learned?

For many of them it will be the result of learning in school. This is not learning in the conventional sense of having someone set out to teach the concept. It is, rather, learning absorbed as a result of being part of an institution. We may begin to acquire the attitude that football is a more important issue than life and death by being part of institutions that convey that message by the amount of time, attention and importance they give to the two issues.

While statutory provisions determine the content of the subject curriculum, more is learnt in schools than that which is taught in lessons. This learning is sometimes referred to as 'the hidden curriculum'. It is part of the school's contribution to the passing on of national culture and attitudes. Some aspects of this are very good and important. We need to ensure that children are helped to grow up within a society whose better institutions and traditions they understand and value. For example, we all need to help pupils learn that courtesy and concern for others are not optional extras, but part of the basis on which living in an overcrowded island can become tolerable. Most people will regard some aspects of the 'hidden curriculum' as essential and positive. Their views of other aspects, such as the attitude to sport mentioned above, will differ. Some people may regard one or two aspects as negative: they may perceive the school as encouraging an attitude to male behaviour that suggests that 'big boys don't cry' and find this inappropriate for their own children.

Provision of alternatives

When he grows up he will be a docker, just like his father and grandfather before him.

This has been an unlikely statement for almost a generation, but there are many equivalent statements that may still have some currency. If it were likely or possible for most children to follow their parents' footsteps then we would probably not need schooling at all. The whole development of school derives from the need to provide a level and range of education for children that can take them beyond their parents' circles of experience and knowledge.

Personally, I have often had cause to be thankful my children were not limited by my lack of knowledge of chemistry or geography. Within the schools that they attended there were teachers who had greater knowledge of and enthusiasm for these subjects than I have ever possessed. I am grateful that this knowledge and enthusiasm was made available to my children. This is a simple example to illustrate a profound point. If schools exist, in part, to provide alternatives for children and young people then care needs to be exercised over the rhetoric that

suggests that ‘parents know best’. There is a tension here. Parents should support their own children and their interests, but in partnership with schools not with battle lines drawn.

A further illustration may be useful to stress the importance of this point. Children entering school at the age of five in September 2002 will reach the earliest point at which they are currently allowed to leave in June 2013. Their working lives could last until 2062, assuming that retirement stays at the same age as now. Schools are now preparing children for adult experiences into the middle of this century and beyond. The work requires some considerable thought about what such experiences might be.

Only just over 30 years ago the electronic calculator was being demonstrated on the BBC’s *Tomorrow’s World* as a remarkable new device. The first model cost over £100. If that gives an indication of the pace of change that we have experienced in 25 years, for what changes are we preparing our children!

Teachers, parents, governors and all concerned with education need to be joined in a commitment to develop the education of our children for the second half of this century. The churches have an important part to play as supporters, contributors and partners in this complex process. The churches need to ensure that in seeking and accepting such involvement they have an understanding of what schools are required to attempt for their children.

Whenever a new priest or minister is to be appointed to a church the congregation should be asked to prepare a profile of the area in which their church is set. This is important in ensuring that the person appointed knows what work is expected or possible. Included in that profile should be details of local schools. For churches that regard engagement with the locality as important, these school details and the response of potential appointees to them will be crucial. Where work with schools is a key factor, care should be taken to ensure that potential appointees know this and by their attitude and experience show that they can fulfil this part of their expected ministry.

It is important that churches understand the organization of schools in their area and, as a result improve their contacts with them. Confusion and irritation can arise if incorrect or misleading terms are used.

Don’t they know that ‘Playschool’ was the name of a television programme?

Don't they realize that a nursery class and a playgroup are not the same thing?

Summary

This chapter has described some of the tasks that face a school today. These have included dealing with a range of abilities and experiences, curriculum issues, the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils, concern and care for pupils and their parents, school worship, the hidden curriculum, the provision of alternatives and anticipating the needs of pupils preparing for adult life in the next century. Care has been taken to avoid the use of jargon and to explain the terms used. In the resources and further information section there is a guide to different types of school and the meanings of some of the key words used in education (see Chapter 9). Leading or working in a school is a complex task requiring great energy and professionalism. Churches who are seeking to serve schools need to develop their understanding of all these issues.