INTRODUCTION

The idea of the common school was most clearly articulated by John Dewey, throughout his extensive writings. It was seen to be crucial if the formal education of young people were to achieve its fundamental purpose of preparing the next generation to live harmoniously together, despite the important differences in culture that the students bring to that community. More positively, the intermingling of those differences in the community of the school would be seen as an enrichment of those very differences.

However, such a rationale for the common school is not so clearly evident in the historically very different climate of Britain where schools have substantially been provided by voluntary associations (mainly faith communities), though maintained by the state. These very different circumstances, specific to Britain though they are, challenge the rationale for the common school. This chapter, therefore, starts with the English and Welsh context, but the philosophical issues raised are of wider significance.

Following the Department of Education Circular 10/65, almost 80% of the maintained secondary school population in England and Wales were being educated within the comprehensive system by January 1977. That had required, in the majority of local education authorities, the abolition of selection at the age of 11 in most areas and a common educational experience for all young people across the ability range and social classes. That, at least, was the ideal. However, although the comprehensive school aimed to be a ‘common school’, that was still seen to be compatible with a segregation of schools along religious lines; the 1944 Education Act had permitted and supported voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools within the maintained educational system. Furthermore, the ‘common school’ was, and continues to be, in fact if not in intention, diluted not only on religious grounds, but also, in many areas, on those of social class and ethnicity. There is in England an increasing segregation of young people by class and neighbourhood, so that there is little or no interrelationship between the ‘exclusive wealthy’, often educated privately, and others (Dorling et al., 2007). The neighbourhood school, intended as the ‘common school’, would instead seem sometimes to exacerbate the division of society into class or religious-based communities.
The principles that lie behind this dilution of the ‘common school’ (maintaining religious identity, parental choice, restriction of the authority and powers of the state) need to be considered later, but first it is necessary to set out the arguments for the ‘common school’. Reconciling the different educational and ethical principles is not easy—and possibly it is impossible—but it is first necessary to see what these principles are.

THE COMMON SCHOOL

The reasons for seeking a common school experience in Britain were various and indeed were argued about over a long period—as far back as the 1930s (Simon, 1994, p. 13)—even though the post-war Labour Government was at first unsympathetic.

The negative reason for moving to a common school system was that the basis of selection at the age of 11 was flawed. The basis of that selection had been the tests whereby a minority only was regarded as suitable for a ‘grammar school education’, the others not so and to be placed in either ‘secondary modern’ or ‘technical’ schools. This belief, supposedly empirically founded, reflected the more ideological belief of the Norwood Report that there were three types of child—those who are good with abstract ideas, those that are good with their hands, and those who are simply good (Norwood Report, 1943). Intellectual ability was deemed to be genetically determined, a fixed trait that could be accurately measured at the age of 11. Once this belief had been undermined, partly as a result of the research of Philip Vernon and others in the 1950s, which showed how the so-called fixed intelligence could be unfixed by preparation for the tests, then the postponement of selection was surely inevitable. The positive slant on this was given by the Conservative Minister of Education, Edward Boyle, in 1963 in the preface to the Newsom Report, 1963, where he talked of the need for the opportunity for all young people ‘to acquire intelligence’.

However, the politically and morally stronger driving force had to do with the connection between schooling, creation of a common culture and the contribution therefore to the development of community. The fight for the common school was essentially a moral one in terms of achieving greater social justice and equality, respect for persons and preparation for citizenship within a democratic order. R. H. Tawney, in his book, Equality, highly influential on Labour Party thinking, argued thus:

... inspite of their varying character and capacities, men possess in their common humanity a quality which is worth cultivating and ... a community is most likely to make the most of that quality if it takes it into account in planning its economic organisation and social institutions—if it stresses lightly differences of wealth and birth and social position, and establishes on firm foundations institutions [schools] which meet common needs, and are a source of common enlightenment and common enjoyment (Tawney, 1938, pp. 55–6).
And these words were echoed in the 1978 Reith Lectures given by A. H. Halsey, who had been a powerful influence in the development of the comprehensive system of education: ‘We have still to provide a common experience of citizenship in childhood and old age, in work and play, and in health and sickness. We have still in short, to develop a common culture to replace the divided culture of class and status’ (Halsey, 1978). In understanding, therefore, the arguments for the common school, one needs to address the principles of equality, including equal respect for persons, and the preparation for living in a community that requires a common culture to overcome divisions arising from ‘wealth and birth and social position’—and, one might add, religion.

Britain, in comparison with the USA, had woken up relatively late to these principles—at least to their significance to educational provision. The United States had supported from its earliest days the common school to serve the local community, whatever the ethnic and religious background of the members of that community. Indeed, the greater the diversity, the more important was the common school seen to be. One of the most significant advocates of the common school, precisely because of that diversity, was John Dewey—not in order to eliminate diversity (to homogenise the community) but to enrich the community through its acquaintance with diversity. This was essential, not simply as a matter of cultural enrichment, but as a condition of growth. One’s personal growth required a community that was culturally rich and diverse enough for the person to benefit from the interaction within it—testing one’s own ideas against those of others, being challenged by and coming to see a new perspective on matters of human importance and learning to live in a community as a prelude to the life of a citizen.

In *Democracy and Education*, therefore, Dewey refers to ‘education’ as a ‘social function, securing direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong’ (Dewey, 1916, p. 81). The school is an extension of the group to which they belong, enabling the kind of growth that the family and the village are too limited to provide. It anticipates the wider community into which they are growing up, and enables the young person to contribute to, to enrich and to shape that community:

Roughly speaking, [schools] come into existence when social traditions are so complex that a considerable part of the social store is committed to writing and transmitted through written symbols . . . As soon as a community depends to any considerable extent upon what lies beyond its own territory and its own immediate generation, it must rely upon the set agency of schools to insure adequate transmission of all its resources . . . Hence, a special mode of intercourse is instituted, the school, to care for such matters (p. 19).

School, therefore, is the agent of the community in order to make available what it, or the larger society and culture of which it is part, has accomplished. Part of that accomplishment lies in being able to live
together and, despite differences, to have shared understandings, aims and interests, so that each can find support and sustenance in the other. But that relies upon the maintenance and enhancement of a common culture, compatible paradoxically with the coexistence of diverse cultures, arrived at through the meaningful interactions of the members.

COMMUNITY

The importance of ‘community’, both as the life of the group through which learning takes place and as that for which the school is a preparation, would seem central to the arguments for the common school. But what is meant by community?

‘Community’ is more than an aggregate of individuals. It is the social context in which individuals are able to relate, interact and cooperate with each other in a particular way. That interaction is possible because of certain shared beliefs, values, purposes, and understandings, which do not need to be made explicit. Indeed, they may rarely be articulated, but they are embedded in a range of practices that bring people together and are significant in their lives—economic activities, for example, or family or religious ones. Because of this, individuals do not feel totally alone, their sense of identity lying partly in the sense of belonging to a wider group of people. A person might belong as well to other communities with which he shares other, possibly complementary values and aims—perhaps, for example, membership of a political community, or again of a religious community, which meets and shares understandings and mutual support. Moreover, communities are often, but need not be, located in a particular physical space. We speak now of ‘on-line communities’. Academics belong to communities of scholars across different universities and have a sense of belonging to their distinctive professional discipline.

Such communities can be more or less strong, more or less large. They may well be constituents of wider communities, to which they contribute as a community. For example, a religious community or a village community might shape its activities to benefit the wider political community of which it is part. Indeed, it would be the claim of religious communities (in defending the faith-based, and therefore not ‘common’, school) that, in the initiation into their distinctive form of life, they are better able to make a more valuable and effective contribution to the wider community from which, educationally, they have kept apart. The strengths of their distinctive traditions have not been diluted or impoverished at a vital stage of growth. Belonging to a community would bring its own discipline because such membership is partly defined by recognition of the rules, whereby the individual members see each other as fellow members of the group, and of the norms of appropriate conduct.

By contrast, as Dewey argued, people may live closely together (let us say, in a neighbourhood—or indeed in a school) but without any real communication or reciprocity and thus without any sense of community. There may be forms of interaction, for example, in the provision of
services for payment, without there being shared aims, values and beliefs. Indeed, because of social and economic arrangements, the machinery of public and private services might be orchestrated to serve efficiently some common goal, without the individuals providing and receiving such services constituting a ‘community’.

For it to be a community, there would need to be shared perceptions of the purposes that those different activities serve and through which communication between the members of the social group is made possible. Again, as Dewey pointed out, ‘Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—likemindedness as the sociologists say’ (p. 4).

Education could, therefore, be different for different communities with different economic bases—for example, a rural farming community in contrast with an urban one—or indeed with different religious and moral beliefs. But if such communities are to cooperate together and to live in harmony, then there would seem to be a need to educate their members to see what is common between them and to foster a sense of community that bridged the different ones to which they belong.

However, what members of a community have in common would change as the wider social, economic and cultural climate changes. And such change, without due care taken, could lead to a denial of community, with the breakdown in relationships and the reciprocal lack of understanding that would follow. Religious communities, once united, sometimes fragment into separate, and occasionally hostile communities with little basis for communicating across the divide, exacerbated by different histories. Indeed, a community might disintegrate where the economic gap between rich and poor becomes so great as to create very different ways in which self-interest is pursued, and in which values are created and embedded in practices. There is no ‘likemindedness’.

But two factors need to be considered. On the one hand, the communication and responsiveness associated with community do not and should not entail consensus. The benefits and strengths of community lie in the communication of differences, and thereby in the growth of that community through the seriousness with which those differences are addressed, reflected upon and modified. But even that serious sharing and addressing of differences requires a sense of community at a different level—an understanding that, beyond the differences, there lie commonalities of value and aim, which bring them together.

On the other hand, such commonalities of value and aim might be so thin that communication on matters of human importance becomes very difficult. Cultural differences might be such as undermine any sense of community. For example, what could conceivably be meant by a notion ‘Britishness’, which would both transcend cultural differences within Britain and yet help create a community in which consideration of difference would be seen as an enrichment?

Even within an academic discipline there may be rival communities, separated by different philosophical understandings of that discipline and
‘at war’, through their rival journals, with each other. This sociological aspect of intellectual disciplines is recorded by Stephen Toulmin in Chapter 4 of Human Understanding (1972)—the professional advancement of a field of knowledge, the emerging dominance of key ideas, the articulation of the provisional state of the field through books and journals, the gradual challenging of those ideas, the application of the accepted tools of criticism to the provisional state of knowledge, the critical examination of those very tools of criticism, and hence the evolving nature of the discipline. This professional protection, and yet evolving nature, of an intellectual discipline does itself constitute a community of like-minded people into which a new generation is initiated. Indeed, it is the function of the school in part to introduce young people in the school community to the culture inherited from the professional cultures, thereby to extend their understandings and possibilities of growth beyond what would be possible had they remained simply within their local or family community.

CULTURE

Logically linked, therefore, to the notion of community is that of culture, and the prime importance of schools to initiate young people into a cultural inheritance—whether that be the specific cultures cherished by particular groups or a common culture that transcends the particular ones and creates unity amidst diversity. Talcott Parsons defined ‘culture’ as a ‘heritage or a social tradition’. As such it is, first, something transmitted or handed on from a community; second, it is something learnt (not ‘a manifestation of man’s genetic constitution’); third, it is shared: ‘Culture . . . is on the one hand the product of, on the other hand a determinant of, systems of human social interaction’ (Parsons, 1952, p. 15). People belong to different cultures that are the bases of identity within different communities and through which they interact with each other. A Muslim will think and act in a particular way because he has had handed down and has learnt, even if semi-consciously, a way of understanding the social and moral worlds he inhabits, which ways will be shared by others with whom he is able to interrelate in a manner permitted, or encouraged, by that tradition.

It is necessary to distinguish here the meaning of culture in its descriptive and evaluative senses (see Williams, 1965, pp. 57 ff.). Descriptively, culture embraces those shared practices, and the understandings and values embedded within those practices, through which groups of people make sense of experience, value certain things and activities, are able to anticipate how others see things and attribute particular significance or meaning to them. One might well talk, for example, of ‘craft cultures’—the shared practical understanding of problems and their solutions, the learnt skills for addressing the problems, the standards of workmanship expected, the loyalty to those others working in that craft. And indeed, in the past such craftsmen have formed guilds to maintain those skills and values and to transmit them to the next generation.
Such shared practices and understandings, therefore, are embodied within traditions that are transmitted through common activities, language, symbols, example and instruction. Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy*, claimed that ‘to live in the working classes is even now to belong to an all-pervading culture, in some ways as formalised and stylised as any that is attributed to, say, the upper classes’ (Hoggart, 1957, p. 276). To identify a culture in this descriptive sense does not indicate approval or recognition of those practices as valuable. It makes sense to talk of ‘gang culture’ or of ‘slum culture’ or of ‘teenage culture’ without any implicit approval of the values picked out by it. But it would be equally wrong for educators to treat such cultures with disrespect, for to do so would be to disrespect those young people whose identities and self respect are acquired, at least partly, through those cultures. Indeed, it would be important for the educator to seek what is valuable within them—the sense of solidarity provided, the implicit response to social injustice, the search for respect in a hostile world. For although the outsider may not value the shared beliefs of a particular culture, those internal to it do so. Culture shares these logical features with the concept of education, namely, a descriptive sense of education, referring to the learning that has taken place, and an evaluative sense, in which such learning receives the seal of approval—it is a worthwhile learning, it meets certain standards. Just as we talk of the cultured person in this evaluative sense, so we talk of the educated person.

Hence, culture in the evaluative sense refers to those values and understandings, embedded in certain practices, which are seen to enhance the distinctively human capacity for understanding, feeling, relating and adapting. From such a vantage point, one would be able to see the inadequacy of other cultures, not least those that are brought into the school from the diverse communities in which the young people live. That is not to disdain such cultures; rather is it to recognise that, given the changed economic and social conditions in which we live, there is a need to expose children from a rather limited and limiting cultural framework to one that broadens their horizons. The literary culture—of books and poetry, of history and science—should be seen as empowering those within a purely ‘folk culture’, putting them in touch with the fruit of others’ work and achievements.

However, such an evaluative sense of culture—picking out certain ways of knowing, understanding and feeling as somehow illuminating and life-enhancing—is constantly in danger of being ‘frozen in time’, disconnected from the daily lives of young people, thereby creating an ‘educational elite’, a people set apart, with a contempt for those not within the cultural circle. Certain kinds of cultural manifestations (in art, music and literature, say) are picked out as objectively superior—the high culture to which only a few are admitted. And indeed that position is picked out by such phrases as ‘the cultured person’. Furthermore (to anticipate what is to be developed below), such a view of ‘high culture’ can so often militate against the notion of a common school, for its exponents will argue for ‘a place set apart’ (a sort of monastery, to use Michael Oakeshott’s metaphor [1972, p. 69]), into whose treasures only a few can be initiated.
But for Dewey and his followers that was unacceptable. He was scathing of the division of people into culturally different types, as he thus interpreted Plato, whose influence seemed to lie behind the continuing tripartite division of young people (with their respective tripartite division of provider institutions):

In some individuals, appetites naturally dominate; they are assigned to the labouring or trading class, which expresses and supplies human wants. Others reveal, upon education, that over and above appetites, they have a generous, outgoing, assertively courageous disposition. They become the citizen-subjects of the state, its defenders in war, its internal guardians in peace. But their limit is fixed by their lack of reason, which is a capacity to grasp the universal. Those who possess this are capable of the highest kind of education—and become in time the legislators of the state—for laws are the universal which control the particulars of experience (Dewey, 1916, p. 90).

In the promotion of the common school, such cultural manifestations had to justify themselves in terms of the illumination that they could give to all young people, and the art of the teacher lay in being able to make the connections between such cultures, on the one hand, and, on the other, the frame of mind, the interests and aspirations, the problems and concerns of the diverse human beings brought together in the school.

THE COMMON SCHOOL REVISITED

The common school, therefore, would seek to do three things: first, to understand and respect the different cultural traditions that the young people bring with them into the school; second, to reconcile those cultural differences, which, if ignored, fragment the wider community so that it is no community at all; third, to connect those with the more universal cultural traditions and achievements of the arts, crafts, sciences and humanities—what Dewey refers to as the ‘accumulated wisdom of the race’—through which their own ways of thinking and doing might be illuminated. But for this to happen, there has to be a connection between these more universally held cultural traditions and those that shape the present understandings, interests and aspirations of the school students.

This, of course, generates the paradox of the culture of the common school. On the one hand, the common school, as Dewey argued, seeks to create a common culture whereby people are able to live within the same community, able to communicate fruitfully with other members of the community. Indeed, as Tawney argued, ‘What a community requires, as the word itself suggests, is a common culture, because, without it, it is not a community at all’ (Tawney, 1938, p. 17). Such a school would foster those shared aims and values, and those academic, aesthetic and craft traditions that have been inherited and that enrich the broader community, of which the school is part and for which it is a preparation. On the other hand, the common school brings together people from different
communities, maintained through different cultural traditions that are central to their sense of identity and that embody distinctive visions of the life worth living. How is it possible to reconcile these two—creating a common culture whilst respecting and supporting the distinctive cultures within the school community? The reconciliation requires not only a valuing of the different beliefs on matters of human importance but also the disposition to sustain them with a view to reciprocal benefit. Diversity, of different kinds, is welcomed, not because it makes life more interesting, but because it is an inevitable consequence of the inherited social traditions, reflecting different histories, economic circumstances, social positions, and life experiences, and because this diversity provides different insights that make possible yet further growth. It is an assumption that no one (and no one culture) is in possession of the whole truth and that each will benefit from the insights of the other.

This ‘democratisation’ of knowledge needs to be explained further, lest it be interpreted as the adoption of a purely relativist position (although it should not appear alien to those who are familiar with the ways in which knowledge grows within the ever evolving professional and academic disciplines) and lest also it be seen to militate against the creation of a ‘common culture’. Jonathan Sacks, in *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), explains how someone living consciously within a religious tradition, must thereby believe in the truth of those propositions that articulate that tradition. The extreme version of this is that such a tradition contains the whole truth and anyone else outside it is in error—a heretic, say. The antithesis of such a position is one of simple relativism; each tradition, though important for the person concerned, is a subjective state of mind, no better or worse than any other such tradition, to be tolerated if doing no harm to others, but not meriting public support. The synthesis of the two is that the subscriber to any such tradition, though *a fortiori* believing in the tenets of that tradition, might well recognise its evolving nature—its traditions may give yet greater insight through its interactions with other traditions and through taking seriously the criticisms arising from them. Critical discussion, in the light of alternative viewpoints and traditions, should be seen as a source of, not a barrier to, growth within community.

It is within such a context that Denis Lawton (1975) and others (e.g., Holt, 1978) argued for a common curriculum. What Dewey referred to as the accumulated wisdom of the race, embodied in the different ways we have come to understand the physical, social and moral worlds we inhabit, should be made available to everyone irrespective of social class or ethnic background, although no doubt tailored to meet the specific contexts and experiences that the learners bring with them to school. It is the right of everyone to be enabled to enter into what Oakeshott referred to as ‘the conversation between the generations of mankind’ in which each might be introduced to the voices of poetry and history, science and religion.

In such a common curriculum the humanities and arts in particular would be the vehicle through which young people would be able to address matters of deep human and personal concern, and indeed the
differences that, on the one hand, give a sense of identity to the individuals whilst, on the other hand, dividing them. That common curriculum would have a central place for those matters of personal concern, over which, however, there is no consensus in society. This is not to say that beliefs that are held as a matter of consensus are necessarily good: to be sure, their value is a further question. But a measure of consensus is necessary for the achievement of a cohesive society. Such matters—the use of violence, poverty and injustice, the exercise of authority, relations between the sexes, racism, consequences of environmental change, diversity of moral foundations—would be explored in the light of evidence from literature, history, religious traditions, social and physical sciences. In such an exploration, as Dewey argued, the understanding would be enriched by the diversity of beliefs within the school community.

For that to happen, however, the school would not only welcome diversity of moral tradition but also actively support it—nurturing the beliefs within the different traditions. If Muslim or Christian or Jewish or atheist students are to contribute intelligently to the exploration of matters of human importance, then they need to be helped to understand the richness of their respective tradition—the literature and poetry, the art and customs, the theology and historical evolution of its institutions and beliefs. The common curriculum requires also the support of diversity. It requires, too, the procedural values whereby the interaction of such diversity might be fruitful—a point developed very thoroughly by Lawrence Stenhouse in the Humanities Curriculum Project that he led (see Stenhouse, 1975).

EDUCATIONAL AIMS REVISITED

The political drive for the common school was that all young people should be educated, not just a privileged few who were able to access a minority—but apparently superior—cultural tradition. To understand this, one needs to reflect upon competing concepts of education to see how different concepts shape the idea of a common school, or indeed the idea that there should be no such thing.

‘Education’ has both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning. It is descriptive when it refers to whatever packages of learning are presented to the students—a grammar school education, the educational system of Sparta or the education of diplomats. But, in many respects, that descriptive sense is parasitic upon the evaluative sense where we talk approvingly of an ‘educated person’ or when we contrast ‘education’ with ‘indoctrination’ or mere ‘training’. ‘Education’ is attributed to those activities and attainments that are judged to lead to an improvement of the person in terms of knowledge acquired, understanding achieved, skills mastered, values developed. In other words, education (as opposed to training for specific skills or jobs) lies in the introduction to a form of life that is judged to be worthwhile—which is consonant with the dignity of being a person, howsoever that is conceived.
However, because of the evaluative meaning of ‘education’, there are inevitably differences of opinion on its precise application. People differ in their views about what learning is valuable, or indeed about the authority of those who are in positions of power to decide what learning is most valuable (what constitutes the ‘high culture’, against which people’s interests, tastes and beliefs might be assessed). It is important, therefore, to recognise three different ways in which educational values are supported and justified because the kind of justification given (the ethical basis of education, if you like) affects the significance attached to the common school.

In the first place, ‘Intellectual excellence’ is, for some, what constitutes an educated person. In John Henry Newman’s words, ‘Liberal education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence’ (Newman, 1852, p. 121). That intellectual excellence lies in the mastery of those distinctive forms of knowledge and experience whereby people are able to think more effectively about the physical and social worlds they inhabit. The school experience, therefore, becomes the initiation into those forms of knowledge through the subjects that, at their best, distil the logical structure of those different forms in the most economic way for the organisation of learning. The ideal has been to introduce the young learner to the key concepts and ideas embodied in subjects in an ever more disciplined and theoretical way. However, the tendency, at its worst, has been the mere ‘transmission of knowledge’, which Dewey condemned so roundly—formulae to be memorised, disconnected from the cultural experiences that young people bring with them to school and with which they need to be logically connected.

Newman’s words have been echoed many times in the shaping of educational provision and judgements (see, for example, O’Hear, 1987). Anthony O’Hear wrote strongly in defence of ‘traditional learning’ in the following terms: ‘Education . . . is irretrievably authoritarian and paternalistic . . . imparting to a pupil something which he has yet to acquire . . . The transmission is . . . inevitably between unequals’ (O’Hear, 1991, p. 5). And he further condemned the ‘egalitarianism’ that lay behind the pursuit of the common school (in place of the grammar school and a separate education for some) as the malign influence of Dewey: ‘It is highly plausible to see the egalitarianism which stems from the writings of John Dewey as the proximate cause of our educational decline’ (ibid., p. 28), for that rather distinctive pursuit of intellectual excellence has to be in a very special kind of community, separate from that of everyday life in which the rest of the community lives and pursues its livelihood. According to Oakeshott, in his defence of liberal education, ‘In short, “school” is “monastic” in respect of being a place apart where excellence may be heard because the din of worldly laxities and partialities is silenced or abated’ (Oakeshott, 1972, p. 69). Or, again, schools and universities ‘are, then, sheltered places where excellences may be heard because the din of local partialities is no more than a distant rumble. They are places where a learner is initiated into what
there is to be learnt’ (p. 24). The conception of education we see here is one in which a relatively small number will be in a place set apart, which is removed from the community, and where they can ‘be initiated’ into a very different cultural community (esoteric by ‘common standards’), one that is specialist and that is disconnected from the ‘busyness of everyday life’. Indeed, the metaphor of ‘initiation’ (the inaugural lecture of Richard Peters [1963] was entitled ‘Education as Initiation’) is significant, indicating an entry into a very different form of life, into mysteries that are not obviously connected with the form of life left behind. Since many young persons are unable to shine intellectually, there are limits to how far they might acquire ‘intellectual excellence’ and thus be part of a culture that, though superior, is by no means common. Such young people are, therefore, rejected as ineducable in this sense and directed to places and courses where they can learn to be useful, falling on the wrong side of the unexamined distinction between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’.

Second, however, there is a broader understanding of the educated person, one that is concerned with nurturing the whole person, the intellect and capacity to reason being but part, and that therefore not only respects but starts with the significant experiences and the diverse cultures that the young people bring with them to school. The experiences that are significant to them in the formation of their beliefs, values and tastes, and the consequent form of life that they bring with them to school, are what need to be ‘educated’, thereby being transformed in such a way as to enable the young people to grow in understanding of everyday matters that affect them and to be more intelligent in the management of their lives. (The idea of ‘educating interests’ was, in the light of Dewey’s work, well developed by Pat Wilson, 1974.) Education here lies in the introduction of the young person to a form of life that recognises the essentially social and moral nature of the person, not just the purely intellectual, and thus their connection with the community (or indeed, several communities) of which they are physically and culturally part. For Dewey ‘education’ concerned the ‘more intelligent management of life’ —a life that was already being lived, shaped by experience, connected with family and community, but a life that needed to be made sense of by the young people themselves and to benefit from new experiences. The culture of the local community was insufficient to prepare young people for the world as it was evolving economically and socially.

Third, therefore, the aims of education should be to enable young people to live actively within and to contribute to the community—a condition of which would be a common culture that Tawney and Halsey spoke of. Today that is no doubt embraced by the relatively recent curriculum development of ‘citizenship’. But certainly the educational aim of ‘social solidarity’, by contrast with the emphasis upon individual autonomy and intellectual excellence, was part of the moral and political drive to create the common school in Britain. Schools might be limited in their capacity to create a more equal society (in terms of the distribution of wealth or power), but they might be able to create a more ‘fraternal society’.
Just as in the USA secondary education was to be directed towards a system of common schools based on the principle of social solidarity, so too was there a growing movement towards such a system in Britain. So Godfrey Thomson, in 1929—possibly the first writer to introduce ‘comprehensive’ to the description of educational possibilities for Britain—argued as a result of his American experience, that ‘the social solidarity of the whole nation is more important than any of the defects to which comprehensive high schools may be subject’ (Thomson, 1929, p. 274). Therefore, far from taking place away from the community (as was advocated by those who singled out intellectual excellence as the primary aim, undisturbed by the ‘busyness of everyday life’ or the world of work), education should enable the young person to be more intelligent within the community, to extend his or her understanding of the community’s activities, aspirations and problems, and to enable that community to provide a richer environment for personal growth. The common school is where that was supposed to happen.

This is not always palatable. There have been spectacular examples of the demise of those who took seriously such a view of education. Eric Midwinter, working in inner city Liverpool in the 1970s, questioned the prevailing benchmark of a successful school as that which enabled young people to escape from their deprived communities. Indeed, a constant refrain of those who argue for the return of the grammar school is that it gives the opportunity for the most able young people in the community to move out of that community to a ‘place set apart’ for the kind of learning that supports greater social mobility. Midwinter pointed out the oddness of a criterion of educational success that required a small minority to reject their very family and community background. Rather should success be measured in terms of how that education provided the consciousness whereby that community might be transformed into something better—education was essentially political. He argued: ‘as a theoretical goal we had defined the community school as one which ventured out into and welcomed the community until a visionary time arrived when it was difficult to distinguish school from community’ (Midwinter, 1972, p. 160).

This, however, creates a dilemma. The common school is the neighbourhood school, and as such it reflects a particular kind of community, unlike and cut off from other communities that, in simple social and economic opportunity terms, might be much more liberating. The common school might be common solely to those within the deprived neighbourhood, reflecting the depressed hopes and lack of aspiration of that community. And the Midwinter solution, which would have gladdened the heart of John Dewey, namely, to centre the organisation of learning around the intelligent response to that deprivation—helping them ‘to manage their lives more intelligently’—was seen to lead to the neglect of that understanding of education that was concerned with the pursuit of ‘intellectual excellence’ conceived more liberally. Such deprived communities, so it was argued, needed the ‘uncommon school’—the grammar school—to enable the more able few to achieve their intellectual potential. It would seem that the notion of ‘the common
school’, conceived in quite different social and economic circumstances, has never quite solved that dilemma.

However, in not solving it, then such a school or school system has failed to achieve a fundamental aim of education, namely, to enrich young people from diverse cultural settings through the active acquaintance with each other and with the understandings they severally bring to the wider community. Perhaps in addressing issues of poverty in society, it might not go amiss for those who are well off to work and converse with people who are poor and who have to cope with the consequences of that poverty. In failing to achieve that communication, the school does not create a common culture that transcends differences—a common culture within which all can learn to live together in community and to recognise the basis on which respect can be afforded everyone equally, whatever their background.

FOSTERING DIFFERENCE—AGAINST THE COMMON SCHOOL

There are several reasons, however, why people may remain unconvinced by the argument for the common school based on a common culture. First, the common school, unless there be established an intricate arrangement of bussing, is the neighbourhood school, and the neighbourhood school in inner cities fails to attract the diversity of cultures that, for Dewey certainly, was one of the major educational benefits of the common school. Second, so long as there is parental choice as well as well endowed private schools, schools will, in many areas, remain culturally selective. Third, the values that underpin the common school, in order to accommodate people from very different religious and moral traditions, inevitably remain at too abstract, even vacuous a level. Fourth, the common school would require central regulation through financial means (for example, a condition for government grant) or legal enforcement, both of which would militate against the principle of subsidiarity in educational provision.

The first objection I shall deal with briefly in the conclusion where I consider a possible way forward. The second, the right to parental choice in a quasi-market of educational provision, raises issues that this chapter cannot deal with. I shall focus on the third and fourth from the point of view of faith schools—or indeed of any other that asks for separate education on the grounds of ideological difference.

A major difficulty in seeing the common school as the purveyor of a common culture, through which all might live in respectful understanding of each other whilst maintaining separate cultural traditions, lies in the abstract nature, indeed seeming vacuity, of the aims and values and understandings that would underpin the wider community. Can there be a common culture in any meaningful sense? The basis for the faith-based school (the antithesis of the common school) is that the maintenance and enrichment of different cultural traditions requires a place set apart. The moral and educational values that shape our lives are embodied in
concrete situations, in specific institutions, in particular practices, which have been handed down through the generations.

The Chief Rabbi of the UK, Jonathan Sacks, speaks of any complex society (for that is what we live in) as ‘A confusing mixture of reasons and associations which emerge, like a great river from its countless streams and tributaries, out of a vast range of histories and traditions’ (Sacks, 1997, p. 55). Each of these histories and traditions might well make a contribution to the overall good of the larger community. However, each major tradition is preserved and developed within its own narrative or story, and it will continue to enrich the wider community only where that story is preserved, enriched and passed on to subsequent generations, within which the individual finds his or her identity. The story that Sacks gives is of a society that is constituted, not by Hobbes’ social contract between otherwise self-seeking individuals, but by ‘families, friendships, voluntary associations, charities, congregations, and moral traditions’. It is a rich mosaic of these different associations. Within the Jewish tradition, the idea of contract gives way to that of covenant, and thus to a very different account of relationships and obligations, of responsibilities and loyalties—and indeed of the common good. Furthermore, this very different account is embedded in practices and rituals that have to be understood from the inside, as it were. It cannot be grasped simply from a theoretical account. He argues:

This is a morality received not made. It is embedded in and reinforced by a total way of life, articulated in texts, transmitted across the generations, enacted in rituals, exemplified by members of the community, and underwritten by revelation and tradition. It has not pretensions to universality. It represents what a Jew must do, in the full knowledge that his Christian neighbours in Mainz are bounded by a different code (p. 89).

Are we seeing here a powerful argument against the common school—against the belief in a wider community that, despite the diverse cultures and communities within it, is based upon common social aims and moral values? If values are embodied within particular cultural traditions, what sort of tradition could conceivably transcend the ‘confusing mixture of reasons and associations which emerge . . . out of a vast range of histories and traditions’?

Indeed, it would be the argument of those who wish to preserve those traditions that such a preservation takes precedence over the attempt to base social cohesion upon values that transcend those traditions. Such ‘transcendent traditions’ partake of another tradition (let us for the moment call it a secular tradition), in which the significance of religion is sidelined in the form of life to be nurtured. This concern is expressed well by Jacob Neusner in his book, *Conservative, American and Jewish*,

Civilisation hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer thread of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then
the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding (Neusner, 1993, quoted in Sacks, 1997, p. 173).

Would the common school enable Neusner to remain both American and Jewish—or, more importantly, would it be more effective in helping him to convey to his children the ‘great chain of learning’ of which he felt himself to be the guardian?

It is the argument of the separate faith traditions, first, that each embodies a particular view of what it is to be human and to be so more abundantly, second, that such a view of what it is to be human should permeate the educational enterprise, and third, that from such a developed understanding of what it means to be human the student is able to make a more significant contribution to the wider, pluralist community.

This was made clear in the Vatican Council documents on education, which point to the responsibility of the Catholic parishes to retain control of education: ‘It is necessary that all teaching and the whole organisation of the school, and its teachers, syllabus and textbooks in every branch be regulated by the Christian spirit . . . so that Religion may be in very truth the foundation and crown of youth’s entire training’ (Vatican Council, 1965, para. 80). That ‘Christian spirit’ required the school to have special regard to the needs of the poor, to the promotion of justice and to the welfare of the wider community that the Church should serve. In its later publication, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education argues that the Catholic School ‘has its place in any national school system’ (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977), particularly since the values that it upholds could be undermined by the very different values within the wider, more materialist and secular society in which, as Charles Taylor argues in his recent book, A Secular Age (2007), religion has gradually been expelled from the public realm. What is being expressed here is the possibility that the values that are promoted by the common school themselves partake of a particular ‘faith’—a faith in a secular society, which embodies a particular (and disputed) understanding of human nature and of the consequent aims of education.

The argument against the common school, therefore, is one that recognises the pluralistic nature of society, such pluralism lying in fundamental differences within constituent communities about the nature of persons and the consequent educational aims that reflect those differences. It argues that there is a need to recognise this in the provision of education. Furthermore, it sees the role of the state to be not one of arbitrating between these different understandings and consequent educational aims, but one of providing support for them within the national system. It should not support, to the exclusion of others, the institutionally embodied aims of any one position, whether that be of a religious faith or of a secular one.

This raises quite fundamental questions about the role of the state in educational provision. Certainly, until recently, the government distanced itself from the details of what was taught and how it was taught. Indeed,
when Marjorie Reeves was invited to join the Central Advisory Council for Education in 1947, she was told by the then Permanent Secretary, Redcliffe Maude, that the main duty of members of the Council was ‘to be prepared to die at the first ditch as soon as politicians try to get their hands on education’.1

The detailed organisation of education—its aims and its content—by central government is comparatively recent in the UK, in particular with the creation of a national curriculum in England and Wales in 1988. Prior to that, there was in effect what the political philosopher, Paul Hirst, refers to as ‘associationism’ (Hirst, 1993). By this is meant the recognition of what Sacks referred to as the ‘confusing mixture of reasons and associations which emerge, like a great river from its countless streams and tributaries, out of a vast range of histories and tradition’, in which society is seen as constituted of such ‘associations’, each pursuing its own aims and activities, albeit compatible with, and hopefully contributing to, the general good. The recognition of such voluntary associations (the churches, the social clubs, schools and universities) should limit rather than enhance the power of the state, whose function would be to support such associations and curb the excesses through which harm is done to others, to the general good and indeed to benefit of their own members.

COMMON SCHOOL OR COMMON SCHOOL SYSTEM?

The arguments for the common school are based on a particular understanding of the aim of education, namely, that education aims to create a more cohesive and enriching community, shaped by a common culture, from which all benefit, whatsoever the cultural background from which the learners come. That common culture lies not in the elimination of the cultural differences, but in the sharing of values and ideals that emphasise our ‘common humanity’ and that see the interaction of cultures as something enriching. It is enriching because there is always something to be learnt from the attempt to understand how others have made sense of the social and moral world they inhabit. And it is enriching because it enables young people to learn how to work respectfully with others, even where there are differences of view about matters of profound human importance. To repeat the reference to Dewey: ‘Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—likemindedness as the sociologists say’ (Dewey, 1916, p. 4). Furthermore, such a common school, far from neglecting such cultural differences, would respect and support them, because only then would the diversity of traditions enrich the lives of others within the community. The common school must teach the Muslim members to understand the humane depth of their religious beliefs, expressed in art and architecture, poetry and philosophy, technology and medicine—the contribution that Islam has made to civilisation. It must value ‘the great chain of learning and wisdom’, which,
in Neusner’s words, constitutes the rich Jewish narrative. But what the common school also does is to bring these narratives together for the benefit of the whole.

On the other hand, the defenders of those traditions argue that such an ideal is rarely attained: the religious spirit gets submerged under a secular ethos inimical to the traditions they wish to uphold; and morality (and thereby the educational enterprise) is, as we saw, ‘embedded in and reinforced by a total way of life, articulated in texts, transmitted across the generations, enacted in rituals, exemplified by members of the community, and underwritten by revelation and tradition’ (Sacks, 1997, p. 89). The maintenance of a tradition requires more than a small space set apart for the study of one’s culture; it requires a ‘way of life’ that permeates all that one does, and the school should embody that way of life.

Furthermore, it is argued that traditionally the state has had the more limited function of supporting the various associations that make up society and that, in their various ways, contribute to society’s good. The overall community is made up of smaller communities, each with its own distinctive cultural narrative or tradition. To enforce a common schooling with a distinctive ethos, perhaps inimical to that of the contributing cultures, is a form of centralisation that is indefensible. It is indefensible, first, because it assumes a central or government wisdom about the aims of education (for example, the current concern for economic growth and efficiency) that is unfounded, and, second, because that wisdom necessarily is to be found in complex traditions that embody a distinctive view of what it means to be human and to be so more fully.

How then might one escape from this impasse? To some extent it is already rather dated at least at the secondary level. It has been stated many times by government that, as the education and training leaving age is being raised to 18, no one school or college can deliver to all young people the education and training they are entitled to. Partnerships or strongly collaborative learning centres are required (see the Nuffield Review, 2007), in which schools of all kinds, colleges of further education, universities, employers and voluntary bodies will work in cooperation to provide the range of experiences that enable young people to ‘manage their lives more intelligently’. In such a context, the faith-based school would not be isolated but would be within a wider partnership, drawing upon, and contributing to, the resources and the expertise of the other partners and of the whole. But how that might be done has not yet entered into the public debate.

NOTE

1. Conversation with Dr. Reeves before she died in 2003.

REFERENCES


