

## “God bless the child that’s got his own”



The project of Canadian education has been to forge a nation out of diversity. On the prairies, people of different languages, religions and customs—Ukrainian, Norwegian, Doukhobor, Irish, French, American, Hutterite, Chinese, Mennonite, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, and others—were, and are, given a common language and shared experience through school, a central agency of socialization.

A publicly funded education system has public or state objectives and imparts skills useful to society. A common education system (the government sets the curriculum even for private schools) inculcates shared knowledge and values. Education induces conformity to those values, and a valuing of conformity itself. The Canadian social contract emphasizes respect for the authority of government and obedience to the rule of law: our constitution guarantees not “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” but “peace, order and good government.”

From the perspective of government policy, education is a means to an end, and consequently students in the system can be seen as means to ends—so much clay to be moulded—conditioned creatures rather than free individuals. Human beings *are*, to some extent, products of forces beyond their control. Who among us can claim to have chosen his genes, his family, his first school or the era in which he was raised? Who can discount the extent to which these forces influenced if not shaped who he is? But to view a human being as only this is anathema to the meaning of human existence—that a person be the author of his own destiny.

So pity the good student. At his mother’s knee he learns, perhaps, that the purpose of his life is to know, love and serve God in this world and to be happy with Him forever in the next. Then he goes to school.

He encounters others at least as intelligent and virtuous as his parents, but who have very different beliefs and values. He learns to listen to his teachers, to study and apply himself. He may be told that religion is based on superstition. He absorbs an attitude of cultural relativity.

As time goes on he discovers he gets more from a one-hour PBS television documentary than from a week of classroom drill or homework. His friends think that a U2 concert is more important than anything happening in school, and that the meaning of life is to be found in sex, drugs and rock and roll.

At university he tackles Plato, Sophocles and Chaucer only to learn that the canon of great books is not to be trusted—they’re all written by “dead white guys.”

When the teachers undermine the parents and the mass culture undermines the teachers and the creators of knowledge undermine each other, the result can be confusion and despair for the student who passively accepts what others teach. He needs to be able to think for himself. It is not sufficient for our education system to inculcate obedience to authority and respect for the rule of law. Each individual’s own reason must be nurtured and developed. The extent to which Alberta education does this is discussed by Larry Booi and Patricia Clements in this issue.

As the song says, “God bless the child that’s got his own.” His own mind, his own integrity, his own capacity for choice.

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