

FAILURE IN SCHOOL

The question of failure in school is not taken sufficiently seriously by those in positions of responsibility in education. Too often, this anomaly is considered at school level as just a natural retribution which inevitably catches up with the stupid, lazy or recalcitrant pupil. And yet, any child in the hands of a good teacher is capable of making progress, showing interest and being cooperative.

This is why at the Ostia Congress in March 1990 a workshop concentrated the attention of European Lasallian headmasters on this problem. It was realised that the annual number of failures in some countries is very worrying. Figures show that Belgium has among the highest numbers in the world. This may, however, be explained by the fact that the school leaving age is 18 and education is of a very high standard. Figures for 1986, for example, show that:

- * 32% of pupils are below standard on leaving primary school;
- * 58% of pupils are below standard on leaving secondary school;
- * 54% of pupils are 2 years or more behind in their studies on leaving secondary school.

To these figures should, of course, be added the many pupils who leave school without any qualifications or certificates. If we consider working class or immigrant children, figures show that, depending on the schools involved, 30%, 40% or 50% of pupils who leave primary school with their certificate fail in their first year of secondary school or are immediately put in for technical courses.

It is a complex problem affected by numerous factors: socio-cultural factors; difficulties involved in transferring from one type of course to another; school policy with regard to advice on choice of courses and to assessment; the way a school is organised and run, and whether, as some, it operates a strict selection procedure. The problem has, therefore, to be considered in its widest sense. First we need to say more precisely what we understand by failure in school.

The school failure is above all the pupil who fails the end of year exam and has to do the year all over again. But personally, I think that any pupil can be considered "a failure" when he is not happy at school, when he goes to school reluctantly, when he does the bare minimum, when he finds himself in a position that does not suit him, when he wastes time and disturbs the others. For older pupils, failure means plans for further studies and so on falling through. Failure can be defined as the inability of a pupil to master the knowledge and skills offered him by a course of studies. Why does failure occur?

There are innumerable reasons. Some lie with the child himself; others with the family, social background, teachers, the school system, society. It is easy enough to trace the origin of difficulties:

* the pupil:

- Did he have the ability to cope?
- Was he interested, motivated?
- Did he apply himself?
- Was he followed up and encouraged?

* the studies:

- Were they within the capability of the pupil?
- Were the teaching methods used appropriate?
- Was assimilation ensured by means of lessons, exercises and revision?

* assessment:

- Was it done properly?

These somewhat technical questions give rise to a number of more fundamental ones:

- * What values does our society offer young people today? In a world where money, competition, material values and selfishness count, why should students study and for whom, when what they expect of us is an example of disinterestedness, solidarity, generosity, and respect for nature?
- * What is family life like? Do mothers still exist who pick up their children after school, chat with them, make them tea and encourage them to do their homeworks? How many parents are capable of making their

children stay in the house and regulating their use of the television and personal radios?

* How does the school function? Does it make allowance for the changing behavioural patterns of young people today? Does it take into account what they know already, what they can do, what they really are, what they accomplish as a group? Much of this is often quite remarkable but the school set-up cannot make use of it. The curriculum is often too general and sometimes overloaded, and this makes it hard for teachers to structure their courses and the work set for pupils. There is still much research to be done on how young people learn and organise their knowledge in a world dominated by audiovisual input, and one in which the media impart much more information than the school and are much more expert at doing so. The traditional method of teaching - the teacher standing in front of his class - is still all too frequently used, because it is easier for the teacher. It is forgotten that pupils learn by doing and by making mistakes. The social and financial status of the teacher has been devalued: he has lost his standing and has become a civil servant whose work and pay depend on the number of pupils.

Continuous assessment which checks on progress and remedies problems is still not widely practised. Final exams are often badly organised: papers are too long; questions are wide of the mark, lack balance, are sometimes illegible and different from the kind normally asked; and marking schemes are not fair. It happens also that exams are set with the express intention of sorting pupils out and settling accounts with such as have been thought difficult or awkward.

Each of the problems we have considered presents us with a challenge because, in one way or another, in each case we are all able to furnish at least a part of a solution. Failure in school can be ended under certain conditions: if pupils are put in for courses that suit them; if teachers, happy to be teachers, well-trained and better paid than at present, give interesting lessons; if parents and teachers agree to attend refresher courses, and genuinely work together; if they make use of the services of medical, psychiatric and social centres; if teachers work as part of efficient teaching teams, more concerned for the success of each individual child than for the reputation of their school; if the research that has been done on the psychology and sociology of young people, in education, on teaching methodology and on testing do not remain in the realm of theory, but lead to practical applications which can help all adults involved in education.

Failure in school is a source of suffering for the pupil; it can ruin his future; it is the source of much bad feeling in the home; and it costs the State a great deal of money. There has to be a widespread campaign against failure in school, especially in Lasallian schools. Every child is a child of God, a young prince, especially if he is in some way underprivileged. To be a Lasallian teacher means making use of the latest advances in education in one's work.

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