

Every family with young children has a poor relation, one that needs help, needs caring for and, of course, needs financial support. No, I don't mean the white-haired granny or aged aunt; I mean their local school. In fact, the more I look at my own establishment, the more I realise just how dependent I am on the families of the children in the school. Not a situation peculiar to my school, but a country-wide dependency, and one that seems to deepen as each term goes by.

Let's take that familiar organisation, the Parent Teachers' Association, formed to foster good relations between teachers and parents and to raise money, with the odd event, for those luxury items needed in school. That role has changed dramatically, on the fiscal side. Now the school is actually dependent on the fund-raising activities of the P.T.A. and the amount raised, in our case, actually equals the money provided by the Authority as general allowance. The use of the money has changed too. No longer the luxury item: the extra computers, the swimming pool heating bills; now the money has to be used for books, to subsidise lessons in the curriculum areas such as creative art which need resourcing, and even to the purchase of gloss paint.

Why should children need to be bought gloss paint, one might ask? The answer is, the paint is for the parents to use to redecorate classrooms that in our case hadn't had a lick of paint for nearly twenty years. It actually took 66 parents and teachers the half-term weekend to re-decorate the school. Hence, the dependent relative needing to be cared for. Why do it? Is this really the parents' responsibility, some might ask? But parents care about the environment that their children have to work in, so they are willing to give their time and efforts. The children appreciate the end results greatly; cleaner, brighter and more colourful classrooms bring about a more positive attitude to schooling and certainly improve the school atmosphere. Perhaps painting and decorating ought now to be a compulsory course at Colleges of Education, and teacher certificates appended to paint rollers!

Parent effort doesn't just stop at the occasional painting "party". Each day the parents help with the running of the school. An excellent idea to involve them in the schooling of their children. Beyond question, this enhances the education partnership. It's the degree of dependency that one might question. To return to our granny analogy, one might enjoy helping with the difficult hedge clipping job a few times during the year, but taking over the maintenance of the whole garden is perhaps going too far. Parents help to sort the library, mend books, help with administration, with duplicating, in making items of furniture, help in the classroom, help on trips, etc. etc. etc. Take this parent support away from our schools and the quality and range of educational opportunities suffer dramatically. Clearly these skills are needed, but how much greater might they be if they were professionally provided and financed to give proper backing to our talented volunteers?

Undoubtedly, parents want the best for their children: some are able to give time; some, financial support; others, for no fault of their own, neither. Could this cause a wide discrepancy in schools? Certainly the amounts raised by P.T.A.s varies widely, as does the availability of parent help in school. Will there be a need for compensating action to be taken to equalise the situation if trends continue?

As a headteacher, I have become something of an expert scrounger, sending out "begging" letters to parents, asking for sponsorship from local firms, planning all sorts of fund-raising activities, or asking for help from local organisations. I'm always surprised that people continue to give, and at the amounts raised. Considering the continual demands made upon them, parents' generosity never fails to amaze me. The only sort of complaint I have ever received was with a ten-pound cheque, and it came in the form of a postcard which merely said, "Wouldn't it be nice if the airforce had to hold a jumble sale for a new bomber and schools had all they needed?" Not a comment from a raving pacifist, just someone who wanted education moved to a position of far higher priority.

I think that parents' support is tremendous. They realise the value of education and know it is an investment in the future; a future that is to be our children's. They realise that the best investment must therefore be in people, as it is these that actually make a country. Education therefore needs proper support, both financially and in esteem, so as to stop its slide toward the biggest charity in the country. So to end, I feel I must say to all parents, yet another, heartfelt, "thank you".