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The Proper Balance Between Academic and Vocational Subjects¹

JESUS PAREDES JR.

I AM very grateful to Father Rector and to the faculty and administration of the Ateneo de Cagayan for the risk they have taken in inviting me to participate in this seminar. I say it is a risk because of a fundamental difference of opinion between them on the one hand and me on the other as to the final end of my trip from Manila which they had the generosity to finance. As the program indicates, they have planned on my giving a talk this afternoon on the "Proper Balance Between Academic and Vocational Subjects." My conscience tells me however that I have come not because I want to give any talk but because I want to revisit old scenes, renew old friendships and recall the joys they gave to my youth. I feel as I stand in your smiling midst that I have come not as a guest but as a member of the family returning home.

I am listed down in the program under the category of "resource persons and guests," together with Father James McMahan, former rector of your "branch" in Manila, and now

¹ Paper read at the Seminar on Home and Community Education conducted under the auspices of the Ateneo de Cagayan at Cagayan de Oro City, 23-25 November 1956. Mr. Paredes, Executive Secretary of the CEAP, was killed with President Magsaysay in a plane crash, 17 March 1957, two days after this article was sent to press.—Editor.

regent of your school of law which ranks second among the schools of law in the Philippines operated by the Society of Jesus. Feeling rather important at being classified as a resource person, I brought home the program to my wife. But while she agreed quite readily with me that I was not a guest, it was only by an act of faith that she resisted the temptation to doubt my claim as a resource person. Like every wife who complies with her duty, she believes blindly in my resourcefulness—in spite of budgetary evidence to the contrary. And if I do believe in it myself, it is only because through some mysterious alchemic process known only to the Filipino housewife, the family budget is balanced every month.

And thus it is that if at the end of this talk I have not succeeded in effecting a balance between academic and vocational subjects, it will be because my better half, who is better at balancing than I, is too busy balancing the family budget to lend her help at balancing the curriculum.

I

As I studied the statement of the topic assigned to me, I felt that it contained within itself the answer to the question it implied. What is the proper balance between academic and vocational subjects? If we follow the sequence of the words in the topic, we will get an intimation of the idea that this balance should be effected by giving academic subjects precedence over the vocational. Now, whether or not this was the intention of those who framed the topic, I would not know. But I am sure that if a devotee of vocational education were to state the topic, it would stress and give the place of honor to vocational subjects and add academic subjects as a necessary evil.

I think it is proper to state here that my sole qualification to speak on this topic is the fact that I have not had a vocational education. I know as much about vocational education as the person who ran a tractor over his potato farm because he wanted to raise mashed potatoes.

I cannot even claim to have an open mind on the subject. For my entire schooling, as far as I can remember, has been on the academic side. And if my report cards in the public school where I finished the elementary course, show passing marks in basketry and wood-carving, it is probably because my teachers kindly mistook desire and effort for achievement or performance. And although I took the course in constitutional law under very good law professors, I did not know until years after passing the bar that the Constitution of the Philippines contained a provision to the effect that among the things which "all schools shall aim to develop" is "vocational efficiency."

It was with interest that I noted the position of this objective in the Constitution. It comes last in the enumeration of those great educational purposes which all schools in this country are enjoined to pursue: moral character first of all, and then personal discipline, civic conscience and vocational efficiency. I thought it was probably the intention of the framers of this document, by placing vocational efficiency last in the order of importance, that our educational system should not merely aim to make our people into hewers of wood and drawers of water, but first and foremost inculcate in them those moral and spiritual values which their immemorial faith in God inspires, and which will insure the survival of the regime of justice, liberty and democracy which the Constitution ordains.

But if it may be said from all this that at the time the Constitution was adopted vocational education was not deemed important enough to be given first importance in achieving a balance in the curriculum, I wonder if the same relative unimportance could be justified in the light of present conditions. I read recently of a report of the UNESCO to the effect that of 20,000 lawyers in the country, less than a thousand were making a living at their profession. The Director of Public Schools told us the other day at a meeting of the Board of National Education that over 80,000 Normal School graduates are unemployed; that approximately 19,000 are being graduated every year for a turn-over of only 6,000 positions avail-

able in the public schools and probably the same number in the private schools. A recent survey of the causes of children dropping out of the public schools before completing Grade VI during the three school years from 1952 to 1955 shows that of approximately one million one hundred fifty thousand persons who stopped schooling, more than one third are not employed at all, and that those who work at unskilled occupations like agricultural laborers and domestic servants and who have some form of employment either at home or outside receive a median monthly wage of from ₱11 to ₱15; the median of total employment per year being only five months.

A Fulbright exchange professor who stayed one year in the Philippines has reported that one out of every 117 Filipinos is enrolled in a college or university; that this ratio is second only to that of the United States. But he points out that whereas the average individual income in America is approximately \$3,000, that in the Philippines is barely ₱1,000. Now, he was tactful enough to conclude from this that Filipinos love education; but another visiting observer, Ulf Oestergaard, UNESCO specialist in secondary education, has bluntly recommended "to divert students from necessarily entering upon professional careers through universities and colleges and thereby stop the constant drain upon the semi-trained men power of the rural districts of the country."

The Constitution provides for the establishment of a government that shall "conserve and develop the patrimony of the nation": but legislation aimed at giving Filipinos from now on the exclusive right to this development either lies gathering dust, practically unimplemented for want of adequately trained citizens, or, if initially implemented, only ends in frustration because Filipinos have not been trained to withstand the rigors and demands of competition with aliens.

These are but some of the facts which may be cited at random from the many which we all know, and which should give us cause for serious reflection in attempting to answer the question: What is the proper balance between academic and vocational subjects?

These are probably the facts which the members of the Catholic hierarchy in the Philippines had in mind when in 1953 they said: "A serious regard for the needs of the country as well as a sane spirit of patriotism demands that vocational training be given stress in the educational system. For lack of vocational training, the Philippines, according to many critics, is fast becoming a nation of lawyers, accountants and typists—and worse still, of misfits and vocationally displaced persons. There is need of good Christian educated men and women to take their places in society as contrasted with those of the white-collared jobs. There is greater need of respect for these occupations in the spirit and example of the Carpenter at Nazareth and the Fisherman at Galilee. The dignity of labor and the dignity of the laborer must be given real meaning."

II

Now there are those who, viewing all these things, believe that the only way to achieve a balance in the curriculum is to tip the scales in favor of vocational subjects. They would stress preparation for the special activities of life in accordance with what former Director of Private Schools Manuel L. Carreon has called the "philosophy of bread and butter, rice and fish, of earning to live, of learning by doing." They would establish more vocational schools and encourage or compel increased enrolment in different types of vocational courses, agricultural, trade, commercial and industrial. They would even prohibit the opening of new academic schools as Secretary of Education Pablo Lorenzo did in 1951 by limiting the grant of permits to high schools with at least 60% of the curriculum devoted to vocational training.

And yet it would seem obvious that the problem of balance cannot be solved simply by prohibition and dictation. For if it is true that academic education alone is not sufficient, it is equally true that vocational training alone will be also inadequate. A former director of the St. Rita's School, Balingasag, puts it this way: The idea of vocational courses is fine, but surely we must teach our children to read and write, teach

them citizenship. The pupils who now come into high school in the present post war years have had less education than former primary graduates. As a result those now entering high school, except those from high grade private schools, are not able to read nor able to construct sentences nor able to handle the four fundamentals!

Why not revamp the high school schedule to fit the circumstances of the present day? Why suggest, even request, that we add vocational subjects while they compel us to add Spanish? Let us all be realistic. Let us look at conditions today. If our farmers and mechanics and tradesmen are going to be good citizens they must be able to read and write—and *think*. No amount of vocational training will teach our future farmers how to raise more and bigger and better pigs than their fathers, unless they can read and *understand* farm magazines, etc!

If we go into vocational training the way we went into National Language without first preparing teachers, we shall only be teaching the pupils to do what they see their fathers do, not to *raise* pigs and chickens, but to let them *grow*, to let nature take its course! How many trained teachers for vocational courses are now available? How many would be needed to establish such courses in so many schools now existing?

The vocational idea is good, but let us take time to examine its various angles, look before we leap, map out our course so as to be sure we can reach our destination. Just what is our destination? Many towns here in the southland have radio technicians, graduates from Manila schools, who just sit around waiting for papa's coconuts to ripen because the half-dozen radios in town do not need repairing often enough to keep them busy! Local homes have no electrical gadgets to be repaired, and there won't be any in the near future with ICA boosting prices!

Another Catholic school director from the north says: The intensification of vocational education is an unfortunate move. It betrays a materialistic and socialistic mind. Production seems to become the goal of man.

The intellectual deterioration of the last years can boast of college students who are practically illiterate. A simple English or vernacular text does not convey any meaning to them. Added stress on vocational education is a new blow to the intellectual life of youth. Totalitarians hunt down the intellectuals; this trouble is spared them here since intellectual life is not even given a chance. This is another battleless victory of communism, a victory of matter over the spirit.

III

Schools are said to have trained too many people who shun manual labor. This is a sad fact; but people don't love labor merely because of technical training. Don't we see for instance the graduates of Trinidad farm school as the most persevering white-collar-job hunters of the Mountain Province? And with reason. As boys they had to toil under the burning sun at a work far exceeding their young strength. The psychological consequence was a loathing of all farm-work. Labor for them never had any other meaning than material toiling. Religion being tabu, labor has no spiritual meaning.

If the school population does not work, it is due to its unwillingness to work. This is not a technical but a moral problem. The student shuns labor: so does the farmer, so does the mechanic, so does the clerk; from the day that labor is emptied of its spiritual value, that very day production is lowered in quality and quantity.

Here also arises the question of the freedom of the parents. Since in the Philippines no school can operate without government permit, and now the provision is added that all schools shall give vocational training, how can parents select the training they want for their children? Practically the government makes it impossible. Are we perhaps back in the socialistic ideology: children do not belong to the parents, the state is the sole educator of the youth?

"Those who sought the life of the child are dead." May their idea be buried with them.

IV

And to all of these considerations, we may also add another, namely, that specialized vocational training without advertence to the parallel capacity of the economy to provide jobs for the graduates of such training, can only lead to frustration and disillusionment.

The CEAP in a memorandum submitted to the Department of Education in 1951 declared on this point: "In determining what kind of vocational education should be given, three factors must be considered *together*, namely the capacities of the students, their interests, and the needs of the country. The neglect of any one of these factors will lead to a nation of unhappy misfits and to a socially and economically unbalanced nation. The need of the country for trained workers in agriculture, industry and the trades has been sufficiently emphasized. But there are other needs too. The country needs now and will still need in the future, engineers, doctors, teachers and even good lawyers, not to mention other professionally and highly skilled men. Any good program of vocational education must take *all* these needs into consideration.

"The capacities and interests of the students can be determined only by a program of vocational guidance. This science recognizes that students are of varied capacities and interests. It would no more direct *all* students to be poultry raisers, piggery experts, retail merchants, and automobile mechanics, than it would direct all students to be lawyers, engineers and doctors."

The crux of the problem is: When shall vocational training be given? This presupposes a more important question, namely: How much academic or general or liberal education should be given to the youth in a democracy?

Citing the report of the committee of Harvard University professors in 1945 entitled *General Education in a Free Society*, the CEAP describes general education as "That kind of education which is based upon those studies which are formative of man's highest powers, and which hands down with organic growth the fundamental truths by which we live. The

subjects taught are religion, language and literature, history, mathematics, natural science, music and the fine arts, rhetoric, logic, social sciences, and (on the collegiate level) philosophy. General education begins *after* grade school and should be given at least in part, before any vocational or other specialized or professional training."

The CEAP plan calls for two years of high school as the barest minimum to be devoted entirely to general education. During this period, the vocational guidance program will be operative. With the beginning of the third year in high school, diversification of education can begin according to the findings of the vocational guides, and the school population can be divided into those who will prepare for college or university studies and those who will either work after high school, or go to a trade or a technical school for further vocational training.

This proposal for vocational guidance as a basis for diversification of education has been endorsed by the hierarchy.

V

It is time to summarize and end this talk. In approaching the question involved in the topic assigned to me this afternoon, I have tried to set the problem of balancing academic and vocational subjects in the curriculum in the context so to speak, of present day realities, the reality of a vast and daily growing unemployed force of Filipinos unskilled and untrained for the specific tasks which cry for performance in order to realize the potential vigor of our anemic economy, the reality of the danger that in our efforts to stress vocational training we might unwittingly be treating the child as a mere unit of production in the economic life of the state and denying him the moral and spiritual values which are demanded by the fundamental purposes of education in a free society. I realize that I have made no definite partition of the field of education into vocational and academic subjects. I have not, like the Harvard University report, proposed to assign a 2/3 share to academic or general education and 1/3 to specialized courses. Neither have I, like the National Educational Association of the United

States, divided the subjects in the high school into 33.3% for common learnings, 33.3% for vocational preparation, 16.7% for health and physical fitness and 16.7% for electives. I have deliberately refrained from this specification and distribution of areas, not because I believe the two categories may not co-exist in the same curriculum, so that it must be one or the other, like the Arab and the camel pushing each other out of the same tent. I do believe coexistence in this matter is possible and necessary—but whether one shall have a bigger room than the other I have refrained from deciding because I feel that the bases for decision are yours to give.

This is in keeping with the spirit which motivated the creation of our Board of National Education, in which I am your unworthy representative—a spirit which would make our educational program more representative of our wishes and the wisdom of your experience. This is in keeping with the mandate of the hierarchy saying: “The task of formulating educational programs to implement the vocational needs of the country is no doubt difficult and will entail much expense and sacrifice, as well as require fundamental goodwill and common sense. Surely, however, educational experts will not be wanting who will be able to provide adequately for these needs and at the same time observe the essential safeguards against violations of natural rights and freedoms. We charge especially the Catholic educational administrators [note the use of the plural] to devote serious thought and effort to this matter particularly with regard to the needs of their localities.”