

Education and Public Relations

By Pedro T. Orata

1. Public Debates on Education

PUBLIC debates on educational matters are very much in the air in many countries. In the United States, they are usually held under the auspices of the Parent-Teacher Associations; in France, under the management of the major newspapers; in England, under the Local Education Authority. In each case, the parents of school children, representative laymen, as well as teachers and educational officials take an active part. In these debates are taken up all kinds of problems that confront the schools and other educational institutions. In the last issue (September 1956) of the *Ladies Home Journal*, for example, is recorded an open forum discussion among twelve persons among whom were: a professor of English, Harvard University; an official of the General American Life Insurance Company; the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the principal of a high school in Brooklyn, New York; the Minister of the Trinity Community Church of Minneapolis; a mother of three children; three high school and elementary students; and three journalists. This forum discussed the question: "Are high school standards too low?"

Following were among the opinions given on this problem, taken at random from a long article in the *Journal*:

Housewife: I think educators are showing a great contempt if they feel that people who are going into vocational fields are incapable of learning English, history and other subjects basic to their personal well-being and good citizenship.

High school principal: To graduate pupils from high school without requiring effort and achievement I consider grossly unethical—evil.

Ford Foundation representative: High-school requirements in terms of our society would certainly include English, mathematics and history. I am convinced the high-school diploma should not be given unless it has been earned by meeting those requirements. (This does not seem to me to be undemocratic. You don't help a youngster by blurring over his in-

adequacies or failures and giving him a diploma he does not deserve.)

President of M. I. T.: I think the guaranteed annual pass is a most unfortunate and unhappy development.

English Professor: Schools should have limited but rigorous objectives. Students need to know what intellectual labor means, to know the sense of growth that comes from insights won—I am speaking of character as well as intellect.

A community church Minister: You have most people assuming that they are going to get their high-school diploma if they go through their twelve years.

An insurance representative: It seems to me that many high-school courses have been watered down to suit the average student and that the average high-school graduate of today has not been trained to use his mind.

A P.T.A. member: I was an unhappy PTA member when my children were in school, because all we seemed to talk about in PTA meetings was how to provide curtains for the school stage, how to get a movie projector, how to get towels for the school, and so on—nothing of basic educational importance. I think people should be encouraged to consider the major questions, such as, what kind of people should the schools try to produce?

A journalist: I am still receiving letters about my article, 'The Challenge of Soviet Education' (*Journal*, May 1956). I am sure that the 'educators' are out of step with the classroom. It is also significant that almost every letter from a teacher ends with: "Please never mention my name."

In France, *Le Figaro* (an independent rather conservative newspaper) sponsors frequent public forums on all kinds of questions—economic, social, religious, educational, as well as political. In two recent issues of the paper—5 July and 13-14 October—education was the subject for discussion. The first debate in July was entitled: "Reforme de l'Enseignement" (School Reform), which was centered on the reforms proposed by the Minister of National Education. The main features of the proposed reform were:

1. *Democratization of education.* One of the speakers referred to the fact that in higher education (university), only 4 per cent of the enrollment comes from the families of workers and only 3 per cent from those of the peasants. He said: "This is caste system, not a democracy."

2. *Creating a middle or intermediate school,* after the primary grades of 6 years, which should be partly identical and partly differentiated in its curricular requirements, and should be for children of 11 to 13 years of age.

3. *Abolition of examinations up to the age 13.* The *baccalaureate* should no longer be the only means of access to higher education, but that there should be worked out a system of equivalences of courses and curricula so as to make university education accessible to a much larger group of students.

4. *Prolongation of compulsory education up to 16 years of age.*

5. *Adaptation of teaching to actual needs* at all levels of ability and aptitudes of pupils. This will mean that, while high standards will still be maintained, the students will not have to be subordinated to them, that is, the school curricula will be adjusted to individual differences more than ever before.

In the open forum were included a politician (of no lesser standing than Paul Reynaud, a former Prime Minister of France), a well known writer, a journalist, and three educators. The discussion was free and no attention was given to the speakers' standing in national affairs, the only consideration being given to the merit of their respective contributions. No decision was reached, but the problem was discussed *pro* and *con* frankly and critically.

In the open forum in October, the subject was the French polytechnique institution, and the verdict was: "Unanimite sur l'utilite de l'Ecole... et sur la necessite de la reformer" (Unanimity on the utility of the school and on the need for its reform.) At this forum were two non-polytechnicians and four that were—representing various facets of polytechnique education. It is interesting to note the variation in ages of the participants as follows:

Louis ARMAND, president of the French railway (nationalized), 51 years old; General HARTUNG, former president of the society of the friends of the Ecole Polytechnique, 80 years old; Pierre HELLY, director-general of calculating machine factory, 58 years old; Charles-Henri MARECHAL, an engineer, 26 years old; Ambroise ROUX, deputy director-general of a General electric company, 35 years old; and Thierry MAULNIER, 47 years old, member of the staff of *Le Figaro*.

This group discussed the following problems relating to the French polytechnique:

1. Does the institution still correspond to the needs of today for such an institution?

2. Are certain changes and adaptations necessary?

3. Does it measure up to expectations in furnishing leadership in modern industry and in the army of today?

Among the points taken up and in which there was a fair unanimity of points of view were: First, the polytechnique should devote two years to theory and two years to application, so that the graduates would be ready to go to work as soon as they finish their courses and would not have to flounder around and waste valuable time. Second, there is need for strengthening the curricula in science and mathematics and for relating the subject matter to practical work. Third, enrollment in the polytechnique may be increased this school year from 250 to 280 and next year to 300, provided however, that the facilities will be correspondingly increased so that each student will be given only first-class training in well-equipped laboratories and under competent staff members. Fourth, there is no need for teaching the students information which they can easily find in manuals and similar documents. It would be better if they are taught how to make use of such media for finding the solution to the problems that confront them in their practice.

As in other open forums, there was no indication that the conclusions reached or recommendations made were to be followed. The fact is that the discussion is opened in every case and it reaches all elements of the population in the capital city of Paris and in the provinces. The high quality of the contributions is quite obvious, and it would be surprising if they were not taken into consideration in final decisions rendered by the appropriate authorities. We have always thought that French education was so centralized that there was no chance for public opinion in influencing reforms, but the contrary is in fact the truth. There is not a subject that does not find its way into the public forum and in which the French people, including maids and unskilled workers, do not express an opinion. The fact is that they are perhaps the most literate people in the world when it comes to the question of being concerned and posted on public questions of the day.

In the next article, I shall take up the implications of the trends towards public debates on education for the reform of the schools in the Philippines, particularly with respect to the work of the new National Board of Education, the work of the hundreds of PTA's all over the country, and once again, the improvement of community schools. We take great pride in our democratic system, but I wonder if we are making use of the process of discussion in getting adults and representative laymen to express

their views as to educational reform and reorganization that is obviously in the offing.

2. Open Forums on Education

In the last article under this column I described recent trends in the United States and France towards giving laymen and parents as well as teachers and students opportunities to express their views on questions about education. As tax-payers and consumers of education the public have the right not only to know what is going on in schools, but also to help make decisions about school policy, curricula, and methods of education. To the extent that they are denied this right, the educational profession is deprived of the advice of patrons who are most concerned about what should be offered in school. In the United States, parents and laymen have all the right to take part in deciding broad questions about educational policy, and this right is being extended every year and in all sections of the country. In France, the open debate is a tradition which is finding its way more and more in to education which, though highly centralized, still, is becoming more and more the affair of all the people. The democratization of education is in the way in France, and the newspapers are helping through their sponsoring of frequent debates on all kinds of educational problems.

This trend is not without counterpart in the Philippines. In 1947, through the Joint Congressional Committee on Education which made a thorough enquiry about education at all levels, both public and private, thousands of open forums were organized by the members of the Board of Educational Consultants and its technical staff. These forums were scheduled in every nook and corner of the country, in cities and towns and in the remotest barrios of the nation, to sound out the people on such problems as these: Should the double-single session scheme in the primary grades be continued? Should the seventh-grade be restored? Should the high-school and college be opened to every boy and girl who has the ability and aptitude and can profit from the instruction that is offered? Should the curriculum be confined to academic subjects, or should it include experiences that will teach the students methods of work with their hands and heads? Should home economics be given only to girls, or to boys as well? Would you be willing to pay additional taxes for the support of the schools in order to carry out the reforms that you have suggested or approved?

The turn-out in the open forums was most inspiring. The people stayed hours to debate the issues, pro and con, but always came out with almost unanimous verdict in favour of liberal (not Liberal) educational reform. They wanted Grade VII restored and the double-single session abolished as a matter of right, and they were willing to pay the bill in the form of higher taxes to hire more teachers "on the

sole condition that the money should not go into the hands of racketeers." I attended several of these forums, and I can testify that the people can be trusted to decide rightly if given the chance to do so. As I read about the public debates on education in France and the United States I cannot help feeling that we are missing a great instrument in the present effort to reform the educational system of our country. It is for this reason that I make the following suggestions for what they may be worth to the Department of Education and the Bureau of Public Schools, which are doing everything possible to improve educational standards.

First, the new National Board of Education can strengthen its decisions against vested interests if it went to the people first to rally their support on proposed reforms. If the proposals are really sound, the people can be counted upon to second them. If they are not sound, the people will say so and it would be best to withdraw or modify them. I understand that there is already approved by the Board a new scheme of education. It would have been wise, as I suggested to one of the consultants to the Board, to consult the people by means of open forums. But since the new scheme is now an accomplished fact, the next best thing is to inform the people about the new scheme, through such forums, with a view to getting their support. If the people rally to the new scheme, the Congress will have an easier time to put up the necessary funds. Otherwise, some members of that Body may even oppose the scheme, as indeed I have heard some do. The Board will have everything to gain, and nothing to lose, in consulting the people, and its doing so could already be the most effective means of implementing one of its basic aims, namely, to improve the education of adults. By their participation in discussion of educational problems, the people will be educating themselves as citizens of the Republic, which is after all the main objective of adult education in any country.

Second, the thousands of PTA's in cities, towns and barrios, whether for primary or secondary schools or colleges, and whether for private or public schools, should organize open-forum discussions as similar organizations do in the United States, to which may be invited as participants various elements of the population—businessmen, farmers, priests and ministers, journalists, parents, teachers, government officials, and others who may have something to say. They need not be lawyers or degree holders, the fact is, that some illiterate persons may be better educated than a number in town who hold diplomas. I say this on the basis of experience. Way back in 1936-37, as principal of a community school in one of the Indian reservations in South Dakota, I helped organize open forum discussions among the Indian adults who, for the most part, were illiterate. We asked them a number of questions, such as, "What do you think we

should teach your children to do that we have not done?" "In what way can you help us to do so?" Timid at first, they soon gave their opinions on the basis of which they and we (the teachers of the school) formulated the objectives of the school and planned ways of implementation that resulted in the parents cooperating in every aspect of the year's programme. The result was a scheme of simultaneous education of children and parents which is really what is meant by community education. It is this scheme that fathered the open-forums in the Philippines in 1947, and it was also the scheme which I tried to "sell" to my colleagues in the Department of Public Instruction and the Bureau of Education, through the then National Council of Education, before the war and after liberation. The fact is that the way community education has been started and organized in the Philippines has a striking similarity with that experience I had in the nineteen-thirties in South Dakota.

Third, the community schools of the Philippines should organize open forums to discuss their problems and to rally the people's support for educational reforms. I see no better way, and this can be done in barrios as well as in cities and poblacions. A few adults at a time will suffice, and if the programme is interesting more would come next time. I would advise starting with simple problems. What should be done about stray animals? How may water be brought to the community? How to make simple composts and how to use them later on. How to prevent tardiness among the children. Why children should have breakfast before going to school, even if it is only a boiled "camote". What to do in order to encourage the children to do their homework at night and before and after school hours during the day. How may the parents cooperate with the schools to enforce compulsory attendance? What can teachers and parents do together in order to improve discipline among the youth who may be inclined to be a problem?

Fourth, daily newspapers can well afford to give the French scheme a trial. Once a week or month,

one of the clubs or organizations in town or city — Rotary, Lions, Knights of Columbus, YM or YWCA, PRRM, JCC—may take charge of getting the speakers and arranging the forum, say at the Manila Hotel, the Escoda Memorial, the FEU auditorium, the PPSTA building in Quezon City, or the Teachers' Memorial building in Dagupan. The newspaper will provide the stenographic service to note what the speakers say, the editing of the minutes, and the publication of the discussion and the pictures (individual ones) of the speakers in action. The French scheme is to devote an entire page of the paper, headed by a bold headline such as: AUX QUATRE COINS DE L'OPINION, followed under with a lesser heading: *Polytechnique: Unanimite sur l'utilite de l'Ecole—et sur la necessity de la reformer.* Below the headlines are the individual pictures of the speakers—six in the row—with their names and connections, and ages. Then, of course, the discussion is reproduced in the form of minutes, the words of the speakers being reproduced after being edited in substantially the same words as they used. The action pictures are taken to portray the personality of the speaker. The row of pictures is worth the time of study and analysis that it may take.

In a democracy, the open forum is one of the most effective means of developing public opinion and of bringing it to bear upon all kinds of problems—social, economic, educational, political, or what have you? The open forum, in fact, was the first instrument of democracy way back during the times of Plato, Socrates and the sophists. It was carried over into the United States and has been in use ever since colonial days. In France, it has always been the method par excellence to get the leaders of different political persuasion to express their views through the radio and the press and in the open. We can ill afford to neglect this device in our country which is becoming not only "the show window of democracy in the Far East" but also its strongest ally and supporter.

Because reading ability, more than any other single factor (other than intelligence), influences the academic success of the student, reading is a key skill. The public tends to judge the schools system on how well its high-school graduates have mastered the 3 R's. Since ability to read quickly and comprehend accurately is important in high-school progress, in higher education, and in many jobs, those schools which give continuous effort to improving the reading skills of all students at all levels will be most likely to win the approval of their communities. — *Lyle M. Spencer, president of Science Research Associates, Inc.*