Education Today

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Today when we mention education most people think of the word in its narrowest sense - a period of time in an institution where children or adults are introduced to specific skills and given information about specific subjects. The word 'educate', however, has a dual source from the Latin verb 'educare', which means to bring up (children) and from 'educere' which means to draw out. In the widest sense education is a continual process from birth to grave; a gradual drawing out, developing and exten ding of the natural powers and qualities we have been born with. All through life we learn - from books, from observation of the world around us, from our varied experiences and from contact with others. Gibbon, the historian, once wrote that, "every person has two educations, one which he receives from others and one, more important, which he gives himself."

The rate of learning, however, is not uniform. If you sub ject two people to exactly the same experience they will not necessarily come out with the same conclusions; give two people the same book and they will not absorb the same material; give two people a list of facts and they will not retain the same in formation. We learn at different rates and in different circum stances according to our level of intelligence, our previous experiences and the amount of concentration we feel the particu lar activity merits. We also learn at different rates throughout our lives. Although we are not emotionally and physically mature until we are about twentythree years of age, the human brain reaches its peak at about sixteen years. It is therefore vitally important that in our early years we build a strong foundation on which our learning will be based.

Schools are the obvious answer - places where children are collected together with an informed person in charge, who has himself studied the subjects considered essential by a particular society to be basic subjects for study, and the way the children develop and learn. Schools are not a new concept. Children in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome were subject to the same discip lines and taught the same skills we are today. In fact it would be difficult to find a brand new concept in education one that has not been conceived and tried before. Theorists and educa tionalists would often have us believe they have discovered a brave new world in education rediscovered occasionally maybe, but not discovered. Froebel died over a hundred and thirty years ago yet we are told today that children learn through play and must be given structured activities as if it was a radical new idea! In fact, one of the things that distresses me most in education today, is the tendency of many of those who are promo ted to higher office to then attempt to justify their promotion by uncovering and extolling the virtues of a basic truth that the rest of us, they apparently think, have missed. In fact, so eager are some of them in their quest for unique knowledge that they will acclaim loudly the theories of anyone who writes a thesis on his or her view of the latest approach to education. Thus arise disasters like the William Tyndale school, where the radical approach to the people involved was at first praised to the skies then later condemned when the extreme policies had already had a disastrous effect on a whole generation of school children.

Methods which have been tried for generations are not neces sarily the best. We must all have open minds and be prepared to examine any 'new' approach; but we should not be in haste to throw out of the window what we know does work, to replace it with something we have not been convinced will do so.

Our complex modern democratic society accepts that it is the right of every child born in it to have an education which will enable it to play a role in that society according to the level of its ability. The paramount questions which arise at this stage are: How is that education to be provided; what form will it take; and at what ages will it begin and end?

The history of the British government's involvement in education is a long one, beginning with the granting in 1833 of #20,000 to voluntary societies to enable factory children to be given two hours a day of formal education at primary age. Pre vious to this all education was in the hands of voluntary soci eties, individuals or churches. In 1902 the Education Act laid down the basis for our modern system when Local Education Auth orities were created to be responsible for the organisation and funding of local education at all levels, with the provision of government grants; although private organisations could continue to run schools and colleges and receive government aid. This continues to be the basic system today, although some of these primate schools now fall into a bracket that receives no govern ment or local authority aid. The government appoints inspectors, H.M.I.s, who make sure that satisfactory overall standards are being achieved in educational establishments in all authorities. Local authorities appoint advisors who advocate the methods of teaching and set standards the local authority wishes to perpet uate. In the last few years the line between the two has become somewhat blurred and most advisors now have peripatetic assis tants who do the job the advisors were originally appointed to do.

Added to this dual control by government and local author ities each school has a board of governors or managers who deal with the appointments to and the internal running of schools. Although this has long been the

established system it is considered by many people to be far from satisfactory. Basically it means that education is controlled by people who are noneducationalists. The government, civil servants, local authority workers, architects, and governors all play their part in appoin ting people at all levels and controlling the organisation and building of schools yet their expertise in the field of education is often limited to the fact that they themselves once received a basic education. The vast majority have never worked in a school and have no training based on the development or needs of child ren. This seems to me ludicrous. You must train for three, four or five years to become a teacher, but you need no training to appoint one! Architects design schools for teachers and child ren often with little regard for the needs of children or their natural behaviour patterns. What person who has ever dealt with young children in large numbers would build a wall with off-white walls that would not wash without the paint coming off and cream floors that have to be cleaned with a special machine and cleaner every day? Yet the new school in which I teach was designed in this way. Most of the shelves were not within the reach of the children and storage space was limited to one small stock room, a visual aids' cupboard and a shelved area curtained across in the middle of each room. I have been a teacher in three brand new schools and each time problems like these have arisen. Most new schools are either overcrowded or half empty within ten years of having been built because no heed is taken of the future housing plans for that area.

The main area for controversy, however, lies in the problem of how much control central government should have over educatio nal establishments, as opposed to local government control, and where should that control begin and end?

The first disadvantage of central control is obvious. Changing governments mean changing policies. No overall long-term plan is possible if central control is complete, because a new government may mean a complete change of direction. Education becomes a political football and no party ever places education at the top of its list of priorities. Yet the youth of today will one day be in control of the country at all levels and the better their education the better the future prospects of that country are. The present government has been criticised for its attitude to education and justifiably so. The cuts have been savage. They may attempt to point to rising costs and say they are spending more money on education than ever before, but the argument is a false one. Rising numbers in classes and shortage of basic materials and inadequate buildings and closures of nurseries and colleges bear witness to this - to say nothing of the eroding salaries of the teaching profession. The truth is that schools today are expected to be equipped with more and more costly basic equipment - science equipment, language laboratories, gardening tools, art and craft materials, televisions, video machines, computers, tape recorders, cameras, radios, elaborate P.E. equipment - the list is endless. These do not figure in the accounts of previous governments on anything like the present scale, but the costs have to be met by schools today. Children now stay at school longer than they used to. The leaving age is now sixteen but most stay on to take some form of final exam, and many return again to add to their examination results. All this enters into the escalating costs. Education, to keep pace with modern technology and society's demands, must have a constantly expanding budget not a contracting one in real terms. The pupil-teacher ratio has often been quoted as evidence of improving standards, but that, too, is entirely false. It takes into account none of the thousands of non-teaching appointments or part-time teaching appointments. The constantly expanding size of schools and the expansion of the number of sub jects that are supposed to be covered by a school and the constant changes in the system, mean that more and more organi sation posts are created each year and actual class sizes go on rising.

Reliable forecasts by experts indicate that unemployment in this country will probably have reached seven million by the end of this century. Politicians make no comment and continue to close technical schools and cut university places. Could their negligent attitude towards education have sinister implications? Could it be that they have decided that an ill educated unemp loyed section of the population will have a more muted voice and cause less trouble than a well educated one? Place their atti tude towards education side by side with the deliberate buildup on the front of law and order and the armed forces, and this may not seem so farfetched an idea.

What then have the opposition to offer? The Labour Party seem to place about the same emphasis on education that the Conservatives do. The only clear educational policy that deserves mention is the proposal to abolish private schools com pletely. On the surface this may seem desirable to many people - but is it? Firstly, it is anti-democratic. It is part of the democratic idea that people should be free to use the money they earn in any way they choose within the law. If they choose to buy a large car, become alcoholics, take holidays abroad or spend their money on their children's education, they should be free to do so. Secondly, they provide a viable alternative to a set pattern of education. We are all familiar with some of the con troversial schools based on unusual concepts of education like Gordonstoun or Dartington. Not so many of the public are aware that there are also schools in this group which provide special ised remedial education for problems like dyslexia. Thirdly, it is impossible to abolish private education. Should the govern ment close down all private schools in this country, many of them would simply re-establish themselves abroad and people who wished would accordingly pay for their children to go to school in France, Switzerland, Germany, etc. A few thousand children would then fall back into the state system and the state would have to pay for their education. The kudos of the education would rise, not fall, and nothing would be gained.

The third alternative party, the Liberal and Social Demo cratic Alliance, has unfortunately produced no clear statement on their policy for education, but Dr Owen has stated that educa tion should be given more priority in government and that unemp loyment is here to stay, and we must plan accordingly. This sounds a realistic and frank statement for a politician to make, so let us hope that he can persuade the Alliance to make a clear statement of their policies so that there really is a third alternative.

Whatever the main party in office, it would seem that the cost of educating the nation's children is so vast that a degree of central government control is inevitable, whether we like it or not. How far, then, should this control extend? Some people advocate complete government control. Looking at countries which operate in this way, it would seem that this would mean that every school at each level would have the same ratio of

staff and pupils; every school would teach the same subjects at the same time each day; every subject would be clearly defined in a central document which laid down exact lesson content at each stage and every teacher would be trained for a set group of children in an establishment which was centrally controlled in the same way.

This may all sound perfectly reasonable to some people but I think anyone involved in education can see the dangers. Non educationalists at government level would dictate the pattern. Mistakes would be nationwide and very difficult to correct because of the vast expenditure involved. Vast sums of money would be wasted should a new government wish to make radical changes and only remain in office for a short length of time. But the worst effect would be the less obvious one. The best lessons are often unplanned. They arise from unexpected oppor tunities in and out of the classroom. The arrival of a fire engine to put out a fire in a nearby house; cranes working on a site adjacent to school; American and French visitors to the school; trees and plants uprooted by vandals, are just a few of the events that spring to my mind as having led to questions, impromptu discussions and activities of immense value. These and much more would be lost if one was tied to a rigid timetable. The individuality of the teacher would disappear too. Under the present system, we all tend to use the gifts we have to give an extra zest to lessons. If our talent lies in music or art, we give more emphasis to this in our classrooms and in our present ation of lessons. If our strength lies in drama or language, we enliven the proceedings by dramatising events or stories. This provides for variety and in giving we enrich the syllabus. All this is lost if there is a set, tight pattern of presentation, and a rigid timetable. I personally feel that all the indica tions are that the state intends to exercise more direct control over education and I believe it has already reached the accept able limit of interference.

The control at the moment is balanced by the degree of con trol exercised by the Local Education Authorities. Unfortunately the present government is not content to accept local authority control. The rate capping bill effectively stopped the Local Authorities making their own decisions on finance. In fact, at the recent salary negotiations between the teachers' unions and the Local Authority, one of the chief officers of the Authority actually said that they could not agree to a rise in the offer made, whether it was justified or not, because if they did, they would move over the limit and be penalised by the government. Every one percent they offered, he said, would normally cost them one million pounds, but with the new law in operation it would cost them two and a half million pounds. The reply, of course, was that if they disliked the status quo they should say so and complain to the government, not to the unions.

Not content with tying the Local Authorities' hands in this way, Sir Keith Joseph then suggested that even if a big award was agreed to by arbitration the money to pay for the extra amount would not be available and there would have to be cuts in jobs, supplies, etc. to meet the new award. It appears that he feels that teachers should sacrifice themselves and their families to pay for the education of the rest of the country's children. The Local Education Authorities could, of course, stand up against the goverment's edicts, but Plymouth is a Conservative council by nature and political bias, so even at this level education be comes a pawn in the political game.

The third element of control is that of the governors. As these are individual appointments they are as effective as the people appointed to the posts. Even at this level politics enter in and some governing bodies are politically biased, though attempts are often made to prevent this happening. You cannot ask a prospective governor what his political opinions are unless he has previously declared them, as these are not supposed to be political appointments. Thus you may end up with a board of governors who will always toe the party line in any subject that arises. You may also end up with governors who like the kudos of the appointment but feel obliged to turn up to meetings about once a year and are totally ignorant of how the school operates and content to remain in ignorance.

Where then does safety lie? I should like to say in the hands of the people most involved teachers themselves. How ever, the profession is often bedevilled by problems within as well as without. "As many men, as many opinions" seems to sum up teachers as a whole. Unions were created to deal with problems that arise with governments and employers and to protect the individual, but unions are only as strong as their members allow them to be. Teachers seem to have missed the elemental point that unions function by the motto, "United we stand, divided we fall." In the past many members have resigned from a union be cause they were dissatisfied with the way it functioned. They formed small splinter unions that have no real power and very little voice. Had they stayed inside their original union and fought from within they could have achieved much more. They could have taken office and fought to change the direction the union was taking. If enough had spoken out they would have been effective. Many teachers seem to feel that there is something demeaning about association with a union. They quote words like 'professional' and suggest that strikes are harmful and that money is a word that cannot be mentioned. They belong to a union because it provides them with an insurance policy if anything happens to them professionally the union will fight on their be half and they are covered financially for any accidents. This is utter hypocrisy. We all work for a salary and they, like everyone else, expect to be paid. Some of us may be second salary earners and have a satisfactory income apart from our salaries; but this does not alter the case that for most people that salary must be sufficient to keep a family. Surely if we are to preach morality it is only right that we should fight for the poorest paid members to be adequately reimbursed for all the time and training it took to make them teachers. Like it or not, society equates money with status and the lower a teacher's salary falls the lower his or her status in the social structure becomes. Professionalism is an outdated, term people today equate it with soldiers and footballers, the professionals created by the media. As for strikes - yes, they are harmful and undesirable but surely it is necessary and ethical to make a legal stand against injustice. Unions fight for standards as well as salaries. They protect the interests of the children as well as the people who teach them. To use a union simply as an insurance and be prepared to accept salary awards which other people have gone on strike for and lost money to gain, is surely the true immorality.

What then can we hope for in the future? Beleaguered with out and within, the prospect sometimes looks grim. Would it be too much to hope that teachers should unite and say, we believe in the cause we serve? We will control our own destiny. We will only vote for a government that will pledge itself to make edu- cation a priority. We will fight as one for standards we feel are necessary and not be intimidated or coerced into accepting less. We will be appointed and controlled by people who have spent some considerable time working in schools and have qualifi cations related to education. We will not operate systems or use methods we do not believe in. "Such stuff as dreams are made of" - but I shall go on hoping, for "Hope springs eternally".