

Some Thoughts on Primary and Secondary Education

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The dual role of education should be to capitalise on the gifts the Good Lord gave us and to equip us to live as full a life as possible, not just for ourselves but also for our fellow men.

Since we are such diverse beings, education must seek to cater for each and every one of us from the very bright to the severely retarded, always seeking to raise the level to the highest plane, thereby stretching our capabilities. Both state and private sector schooling should play a part.

With the advent of the third industrial revolution - the microchip - which can replace so many human work functions, educators must remember that leisure time will be extended and the nation as a whole has not been accustomed to this concept. Therefore every type and concept of tuition is vitally necessary to fulfil this dual role if we are to take our rightful place as a first class nation in the 21st century.

PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY education are the most important years of our lives when our attitudes and interests, our capabilities and fortitude are all waiting to be moulded, either successfully or adversely. What a tremendous responsibility the primary school teacher is asked to shoulder: one which teacher training colleges should recognise more stringently, both in the vetting of the applicants and in training and retraining. Thank goodness the system is returning to a more disciplined class atmosphere with the teaching of the three R's in their rightful place at the top of the curriculum. The earlier in life we can learn to communicate one with another, the more exciting will be the rest of our lives. The trendy laissez-faire classroom teaching where anything goes - and usually did - was an awful failure and the sooner it works itself out of the system from teacher training downwards the better it will be. It is encouraging to note that despite the lack of an academic council, co-operation between primary and secondary schools over the curriculum is on the upward trend. Having moulded and set our primary school children on the right road with an interest for learning and communication, it is important that no hiccup occurs during this transition period when the sheer size and newness of the 'big school' can overwhelm a first year secondary pupil causing loss of concentration or lack of interest, especially in schools where discipline has been allowed to lapse. Children always thrive better when they know exactly what is wanted of them - so do parents.

SECONDARY EDUCATION, locally, is in the midst of a bitter debate. An enormous pity, as the only major area of pre-comprehensive education that gave cause for concern was the secondary modern school. Had it been greatly enhanced with determination to stretch it to its maximum capability and hence to avoid the stigma of a second-class learning establishment, the resultant trials and traumas which are blighting the educational expectations of the children and causing their parents great concern would have been avoided. As it is, with a mix of comprehensive and grammar schools, the proposed total abolition of the selective system is disastrous. The abolition of the remaining grammar schools, some of which are single-sex, is ludicrous, especially at a time when a very telling report from Northern Ireland on the 'O' level passes in grades A to C knocks the rest of the United Kingdom for six. The province has only grammar schools and the ratio for success is N. Ireland 63%, England 57% and Wales 51%. The concept of comprehensive education as a neighbourhood facility with the community using the same facilities both academically and leisurewise, keeping an identity all of its own, had very many advocates. With the falling school rolls, neighbourhood schools may no longer be able to retain this one-identity advantage having to admit comparatively large numbers of pupils from other areas to maintain viable numbers, especially if they have a sixth form. The local schooling no longer has a corporate identity but is diffused perhaps with pupils who do not value the opportunities which are on offer.

The argument that children at the tender age of eleven are harmed by the competitive nature of the selective system is ridiculous. How can a standard be set and achieved without a test? Most of life is to do with achievement, and competition is tantamount to achievement. Children need to understand this facet of life from an early age, and competitive sports are an ideal way of accomplishing this. Separate tertiary schooling is not ideal for this reason. Quality teaching, facilities and identity are best achieved in a school with an integrated sixth form.

Much has been written on the role of commerce and industry in education and the necessity for equipping pupils with the knowledge which industry requires. Whilst co-operation is moving apace, it would be most beneficial for science teachers to spend time at local concerns and conversely for employers' professional staff to spend time in schools. The acute shortage of senior maths and science teachers could be supplemented from industry and the armed forces if the will was there. So much talent goes to waste.

PARENTS AND GOVERNORS play an important part in a school. With the advent of latchkey children, one-parent families and the permissive society, it becomes increasingly difficult for schools to combat crime. Crime, which has spread alarmingly from disobedience, truancy and petty theft to major vandalism, intimidation, organised crime and drugs. It is a frightening blot on our society especially as the age of the culprits appears to become progressively younger. Head teachers, unfortunately, no longer have the deterrent of the cane. Parents must be made responsible for their children's behaviour through the courts and the soft side of social service provision must be tightened up whilst still retaining a caring service. Private boarding schools have a great advantage in this respect. Governors are expected to reflect the aims of the school, be aware of the curriculum, sit on teachers' selection boards for hiring, but very seldom firing staff, watch over the discipline and generally involve themselves in all aspects of school life. An awesome task. Is the present system of political nominees and selected parents the best way to fill a governing body? The short answer must be "NO".

A RECIPE FOR CHANGE should reflect value for money and copy all the better points of the private system. Education should be funded nationally, with a voucher system offered to parents to spend at the school of their choice. A board of governors should be responsible both academically and financially for all aspects of the school. Governors should be selected from local professions and industry with a professional bursar cum manager to advise them. A school would stand or fall by its competitive success.