

"If wishes were horses beggars would ride." This seems an appropriate slogan when considering the present state of education. Schools are expected to find a cure for many current social problems or, conversely, if considered to be showing some forms of liberal approach, are accused of being the cause of such things as delinquency, permissiveness, vandalism and the general lowering of standards.

I suppose because everyone has had some experience of school, usually as a pupil, it is not surprising that often teachers are subjected to a whole variety of directives and guidance. How many other professions receive the degree of advice and criticism as that handed to the teaching profession? Of course the work of the schools should be monitored and parents given the maximum encouragement to be involved in their children's education, but in the final analysis, the responsibility must rest on the professional decisions of the staff of the school. Obviously they may not be always right, but in my experience decisions are made with the welfare of the pupils as the main consideration and this is the dominant factor affecting the actions of virtually all teachers.

There also seems to be much wishful thinking behind many suggestions made about what we should be teaching. These include such things as information technology, computer studies, world studies, political studies and many others. Without doubt all are worthwhile, but such suggestions are rarely backed by positive action to supply the necessary resources, particularly in expensive hardware, and the teachers who have either the knowledge or commitment. Of course, the easy answer often given is that the new subject should be related to or supplement existing courses. This is a ploy which is rarely successful. Perhaps a more pertinent question is, what do we leave out? It is easy to suggest additions to a curriculum but, if something is added to a timetable, inevitably something must be dropped. On one hand we are often harangued for the poor standard of numeracy and literacy and demands for greater emphasis in these areas yet, at the same time, we are told how essential it is to widen the curriculum.

What can be dropped? Virtually all the work in the secondary sector, whether we like it or not, is influenced by the demands of external examinations. Professionally we may wish for a wider curriculum but as far as the general public is concerned, too often the prime yardstick for measuring a school's success is the results of its external examinations. This is what I regard as schools being in the market place.

Of course parents should want to know what examinations are available and what results are achieved, but surely five years' education in the secondary sector should be more than the sum total of examination results.

Unfortunately far too often the progress of remedial pupils, the surprising achievements of pupils of average or lower ability is not given the credit it deserves. Originally the Certificate of Secondary Education was introduced to cater for the average and lower pupils and a grade four pass was to be the optimum level for this group of youngsters. What in fact has happened is that in an attempt to give it status it has become yet another external examination striving for parity with the 'O' level.

Many of the original ideas of the C.S.E. have been lost in this scramble for status.

Of course it is essential that every child is encouraged to achieve their maximum potential, but I sometimes wonder how much is lost in overall education achievement when youngsters are subjected to the pressures of examination syllabus and the best they can expect to obtain is the lower grades of 4 or 5.

Many of these pupils are splendid, hard working youngsters but are simply limited in academic ability. By the criteria of examinations, it is easy to regard them as failures. Fortunately there is an increasing tendency for employers to look further than solely examination results and often ask searching questions about such things as character, determination, loyalty, honesty and reliability. In this situation, many average and below average youngsters come out very well indeed. The concept of overall assessment is becoming more widely accepted and it now seems likely that there will be some form of standard method of recording personal achievement.

Of course, it will be necessary for this system to be accepted by all employers, otherwise it becomes yet another way of identifying a youngster who may be considered a failure because of the lack of success in academic work.

I believe in the principle of equal value. Providing a youngster is working to the maximum of his ability then he has to be given credit for this achievement. The old cliché in school reports, "Could do better," is sometimes unfair to a youngster who has really worked hard and it can cause unnecessary concern to him or his parents.

On the whole, the able child is well catered for and we are very conscious of the needs of remedial pupils, yet in the middle lies the vast majority of the school's population and they, sometimes, seem to be

ignored. We acknowledge the gifted youngster and we are aware of the trouble maker, yet again it is so easy to miss or ignore the conscientious, average pupils.

It is to this group that such things as continuous assessment will be of greatest value. We must also be able to view these youngsters in a wider concept than pure academic work, for example in areas such as Art and Music. In the inner city areas, there must be many youngsters who have a great deal of innate ability in such subjects, but it will never be developed. Whereas the child from the middle class home is very likely to receive private tuition and additional help, many inner city children, by the very nature of their environment, are denied such opportunities. If we genuinely believe in the equal value of all children, then it is in these sort of areas we should be giving additional help. It is very pleasant to send peripatetic teachers into schools where pupils already receive private tuition, but it is in the less fortunate areas that these resources should be concentrated. Who knows what gifted youngster may be produced?

This may seem to be stating the obvious, but it is well to remember that it was not so very long ago that there was a marked difference in the capitation allowance made to grammar schools and those in the non-selective area. This, of course, could never be equated with the concept of equal value, but, unfortunately, if pure academic ability and achievement is to be the yardstick of success, such anomalies could quite easily appear again.