

The ability to learn is perhaps the most valuable of man's assets, for it allows experience to be used creatively and, to a certain degree, for man to influence his own destiny.

Since the Industrial Revolution learning has, for most of us, been given expression in formal education and the mass school system. More recently, particularly in the post Second World War period, and the emergence of new nations, a worldwide understanding developed which saw the school as a universal symbol of hope, development and peaceful co-operation within and between nations and cultures. Today, that hope has given way to a more pragmatic, even cynical treatment of schooling. 'Hopes', based on education, have been overtaken by 'realities' based on economics.

There are a number of explanations for this, but they do not belie a situation in which, whatever their shortcomings, schools are still the best institutions we have for seeking to understand and learn constructively about human development. Herein lies a challenge for our times.

The very notion of constraining the provision of learning opportunities implies a limiting and diverting of human talent. It raises the basic human paradox of choosing between individual fulfilment with communal need and gives power into the hands of those who select: the priorities for education spending, the candidates who are to benefit, the accreditation procedures to be followed. As parents throughout the world know only too well, formal education now controls the gateway to life chances.

Of course, education provision must take account of technological change and social upheaval, and in particular the need to select and train effectively those who are to lead. But it must not become trapped into a narrow, instrumental mould. More than ever before our formal education institutions are open for inspection and comment. The nature of the curriculum and the standards of performance are key reference points. However, the right to influence carries within it the responsibility to understand. Employers expect new employees to be literate and numerate, but they should also make clear what particular skills they seek and know the indicators for those skills. Profiles and reports, as well as examination performance, indicate commitment and individual achievement. Do the work places reflect these values? Good learning involves at its core the evaluation of experience.

By the same token, teachers and lecturers must offer knowledge and skills that engage the issues of the times across a full spectrum of possible interpretation, and not rely upon their control of examinations to protect 'limited academic' interests.

No society can allow one particular group to be the arbiters of acceptable knowledge. If education is to eschew narrow professionalism and be open to meet the challenge of change it is the self interest of professionalism that is being challenged, not education.

What is the point of going further and further down the high tech. road if those freed from unnecessary labour are not given the opportunity to benefit from and seek the dignity of self fulfilment?