

Some Thoughts on Education

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The dictionaries define education as "the bringing up - as of a child", "the training that goes to cultivate the powers and form the character", "systematic instruction", "Education forms the common mind".

Since my training college days I have been more interested in Education, note the capital E, and find S.E. Curtis' "History of Education" my reference book as to why what happened when. His writings, of course, are general but thoroughly researched - yet one has to compare some general happenings with the particular ones experienced personally.

My own working class background necessitated good performance at school. "None of us had your opportunities lass, so you mun do your best."

No anticipation of my getting a Scholarship Pass to High School. Non-one in the family had EVER done so (and my cousin was denied his chance because of the inverted snobbery of his parents).

Great family discussion, "Can she, can't she, shall she, must she?" before it was finally agreed that I could go - financially blessed by joint wages of my uncle and mother - and dressed up by the generosity of donated clothing coupons by a now-proud family.

Incidentally - they are the sort of folk who went to evening classes for carpentry, car maintenance, to make up numbers so that deserving lads wouldn't lose out on instruction by classes being closed.

If I thought Primary School an alien world, full of children while I was the only child in an interested family of seven adults living in one house - then High School was a SHOCK. Scholarship was a dirty word to some of the long-established teachers. Panic if and when we got best marks in the class, anxiety if we showed more than promise in the sports field, agony if we produced remarkable art work.

By our second year we scholarship girls took over the upper two classes of the three stream year.

Up to VIth form diligently kept up to scratch doing homework by a family who couldn't understand the use of Latin or the need for French (and who adamantly refused to let me learn German!) - but which appreciated 'book learning' and commended application. Geography was remote, history was past, "Learn from its mistakes. Find out what went wrong. Progress is positive."

Once School Certificate gained, on to work in a Nursery School. Second VI studies not economical - war years had taken their toll in many, various ways. Was further education at University or Teacher Training College worth the cost - or the final product? Again good common sense prevailed over the family purse.

At College I realise that we were all accepted on our own merits - all equal - no class barriers - just recognition of worthwhile effort.

A church college with a lot of sympathetic history, the child being considered before the subjects taught. My goodness, methods of teaching were thoroughly expounded and reasoning given by experienced tutors who had comparisons to offer.

We all worked hard. Those students experiencing unease, anxiety or lack of interest because they had chosen wrongly were given utmost counselling and were advised of their best future.

Some were 'weeded out' after the first term - something unheard of these days when it seems that ALL students who choose to teach are encouraged to last the course - and come out as TEACHERS. Those with unsocial habits and those who defied the rules laid down by authority were expelled. Our manner of dress was criticised, shorts (only worn for games) had to be only two inches above the knee.

Teaching practices were extremely well prepared and monitored by our tutors. The visited schools were staffed by willing, helpful teachers. I have remembered with gratitude the kindly assistance and try to do the same for any students coming my way.

Yes - education has changed. We were given detailed programmes, precise timetables, a strict (narrow) curriculum and definite targets in almost every subject.

It may have been a little restricting to those who wanted to experiment - but if you did show an excited willingness and a genuine need to individualise then a co-operative headteacher usually let you try out new ideas.

Criticism was expected but the blessing of a successful trial was a great bonus.

Present trends leave too much valuable time to experimentation and I really doubt whether there is a full and true assessment of projects and their contents. Time does not allow.

It is not sufficient to 'do' a FARM project just to itemise a list of animals one can see there. Even a reception class can be taught animal sounds, family names, natural foods, natural environment. The maths side can compare sizes, amounts of food eaten, space needed for natural movement. Art/craft - tactile, rough, smooth, colour, camouflage. Science - food, growth, pelts, feet, mouths. R.E. - most domestic animals are

mentioned in our scriptures. Use the Bible for reference. Stories, poems, drama - unending availability.

But once projects take over the school - and that can happen so easily - one must monitor the progression of teaching and learning.

It is so comforting to get good results - but are they at the price of much repetition? So boring for the children. Advance is the motto.

The one thing I notice particularly in schools these days is the complete lack of genuine curiosity. The early days of Infant Inquisitiveness seems to get dampened down before the children arrive in school. Such items as different coloured and shaped roots of trees, a box of nuts and bolts, photographs of past and present views of local places - all placed at the children's level, get ignored by them.

In Science we fabricate experiments for the children - monitor and mark the results. Of course there is need for such definition, but oh! for the opportunity to watch an impromptu session of children experimenting for FUN.

A visit to the Devonport Gun Crew Run should encourage the construction of crane, pulleys and winches. But does it? We are all so aware of the need to 'get through the syllabus' - being answerable to society for results. Who ARE we answerable to? Goodness knows - but the guilt feeling is always there, that we aren't doing 'something' for 'someone'.

The curriculum is so wide that we teachers fear we cannot know sufficient 'in depth' of all subjects. We teach the basics and some embroideries - all worthwhile knowledge - but do the children learn? Surely they should WANT to. Life is an excitement; it should be enjoyed.

An elderly uncle of mine, denied 'school learning' by infantile illness and leaving school very early - was a mine of self-taught education. He was always alive to everything around him. The names of flowers, colours of leaves, flight of a bird, changes in nature, the propagation of plants, the care of animals. He learnt because he was interested - and that is why all children should learn.

Some things need to have interest encouraged - it can be arranged. It is never too early to introduce a definite teaching point.

Quotes I live by:

"A good foundation is the core of good education - don't undermine infant education by undervaluing it."

"Every child possesses a creative spirit and our job is not to teach creativity but to stimulate and nourish what is already there."

"If one is not prepared to take the opportunity - make sure it is presented to others."

"Many things we can wait for - but not the child. Now is the moment in which his bones are formed, his blood is constituted and his brain developed. We cannot answer his tomorrow - his name is Today."

"The more talents are exercised the more they develop."

"Mothers and teachers hold their children's hands only for a while, their hearts forever."

"The growing point of education is in the classroom."

"Teachers must be sensitive but not expiate to society."

None of these is to be taken lightly. The hidden meanings require thought.

Child-centred learning in the right hands produces confident, happy children with a steady improvement of standards, knowledge and application. But it needs to be in the hands of experienced and able teachers. There are lazy children.

Teachers are given libraries of books to read, learn from and implement.

We TRY to comply with all the modern trends and follow the blueprints for each ever-expanding subject.

I have often been told that my heart overrules my head. It may - it probably does. It is a common phenomenon. The world of education is wider - the opportunities of learning are immense - the demand for expertise is emphatic. NOT for us the leisure to let the child learn from osmosis.

If a child-centred interest is to be encouraged one often has to plant the core of interest. A good teacher knows when that is necessary and chooses the moment.

To my Teacher

Put learning in my way, then stand aside
to guide my footsteps.
But do not push.
My steps are small because my legs are short -
and there is so much to see that you have seen
but see no more ... too bad.

When I have travelled all the roads through
books up hill and down
my head will overflow with so much knowing.
Don't make me go too fast to see and heed
this lovely world.
Let joy keep pace with growing.