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According to the dictionary, 'Education' is "systematic instruction, schooling or training, in preparation for life or some particular task; scholastic instruction; bringing up. Educate - Bring up from childhood, so as to form habits, manners, intellectual aptitudes."

For me, my experience of education as a pupil was fragmented and mediocre. The first two years spent in an overcrowded classroom in a prefabricated hut, only divided from another overcrowded classroom by a folding room divider, here the keener pupils struggled for recognition and the quieter pupils enjoyed the anonymity of the situation. Apart from the noise and general confusion of this place, my only other recollection was a huge mental home across the road, where the patients spent their day wandering around a huge field, some making loud, strange noises, occasionally appearing naked, and other times scaling the school fences and landing in our playground.

Following this seven years in a convent where I learned elocution, crochet, how to feel guilt, hardship, and best of all not to question religious issues.

My final five years were spent in one of the first London comprehensives. Here learning thrived. It was an enormous school but managed to remain personal, self expression was encouraged, 'Responsibility is the price of freedom' was the motto. The few rules were backed by reason. Every encouragement was given to learn at any level, there were vast resources. The headmistress was an amazingly strong, energetic woman, backed by her staff and pupils. A black music teacher untaught me much of the luggage I still carried from my convent experience. An English teacher whose voice was poetry would encourage everyone to read endlessly. Here you were given responsibility, support, encouraged in social awareness, a springboard of learning or anything you wanted it to be.

But of course this was at a time when there was money for education. Also employment was a right. Most people had a choice of jobs. But of course the more qualifications you had, the wider your choice was.

All very different from today, the comprehensives now seem to be run by administrators, they seem impersonal, many teachers seem to have no enthusiasm, money is gradually taken out as rolls drop, rather than spent on trying to improve the situation. Many schools seem unsure of their role and lacking in direction. Many teenagers that I come into contact with through my work with young offenders or my work with Youth Training Schemes seem to come out of the education period, totally unprepared for their adult life, they seem completely lacking in any skills. Most can barely read or write, they have no creative awareness, so find it impossible to be occupied in their long periods of unemployment. They have little knowledge of contraception, relationships, how to claim benefit, or what leisure facilities are available to them. I find this sad as they have been unchallenged, whereas with a little encouragement they are keen to learn all those things that are relevant to their lives.

With my own four sons ranging from four to fourteen, who have been to many different schools, because of the fact that we have moved several times, the general pattern seems to be that they learn in leaps and bounds from nought to five, and once at school, they slow down, they all seem to spend most of their time getting involved socially with the other people at school. There is also a conflict between the way I educate my kids, and the way the school does. This is about being competitive. I have always encouraged my own children on their individual achievements and never compared them or expected them to reach certain targets by a certain time, whereas the schools ignore many of the vital qualities they have and push them academically. I feel school is good in the way that it's an opportunity for them to mix with others fairly freely - much learning happens at play time - also it can be a springboard to learning and security. I'm sure that it's more relevant to have a clear understanding of your surroundings and of people, and to be unafraid of expressing your questions and opinions. I encourage my children to try many different hobbies and experiences. They have travelled from a young age, and got very involved in many of the tasks we are involved in, whether it be building or youth work or decisions or whatever is going on.

It is interesting that many people who visit our house comment on the children, saying how capable and intelligent they are, and yet the schools usually regard them as underachievers in their early years. Never questioning the quality of what they're offering, I feel strongly that education is my responsibility, ultimately, and that, given the right experiences, they can achieve anything they wish. Myself, I've found that although the schools I went to have some bearing on my personality and the way I think, it had no bearing on the career I chose, and I have been, in the main, self-taught or influenced by some fairly exceptional people. Also, when I was eighteen and leaving school I had no experience or idea of how I wanted to spend my life, that came much later after plenty of experiences. The thought of someone leaving school at eighteen, then spending three years

at college, then going back to school, to prepare people for life, is appalling.