

It was George Orwell who said that by the age of fifty, people have the faces they deserve. This is a project about faces in education, and Robert Lenkiewicz's portraits will show you what hopes people bring to education, and what deserts they end up with.

Hope, after all, is what keeps education going. Parents hope schools will do good for their children; children hope schools will be fun, and in some way worthwhile. Teachers, and those who fund and support them, hope that the children they educate will make the world a better place. Even the most hard-bitten administrator, must have some hope that at the end of the day his efforts will bear fruit. Education is an industry fuelled by optimism.

So much, then, is held in common by pupils, parents, teachers, officers and the elected agents of the public. But, of course, all will have different hopes; all will have different ideas about the kind of good that education exists to do. Moreover, their hopes will be tempered by the world we live in: some will be confident that schools can change everything, while others will reckon that schools can only change very little. Some may even wish that, far from promoting change, schools themselves revert to an earlier era, and they will campaign for the restoration of grammar schools, or corporal punishment, or straw boaters, or whatever emblem they choose of a golden age.

So the aims of people in education are not as clear-cut as it at first seems. For one thing, entertaining hopes about education means making value judgements about what we see as important, and this is something on which, in our pluralist society, we find it difficult to agree. Hence the battles between rival politicians about the structure of secondary education, and even about what should be taught in schools. Plymouth is a part of the country which reflects these conflicts in a sharp form. It is one of the few places which retain a divided secondary school system, and there are plans to continue with selective grammar schools alongside comprehensives even into the next century. Yet the popularity of the comprehensive schools established a few years ago on the edge of the city by the Devon local authority is not in question. What are the real views of people on issues of this kind? The polarise nature of present-day politics makes it hard to be sure.

And for another thing, there is the relationship between education and society. A headmaster, for example, who believed that the examination system should be abolished because it actually had a harmful effect on school learning would get short shrift from his governors, and from pupils themselves as well as parents. As it happens, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools concluded, in their 1979 report on secondary schools, that examinations did, indeed, have a harmful effect on learning: but we can all recognise that, in present society, if the government abolished examinations someone else would soon re-invent them. So our hopes about education have to come to terms with the world as it is, and not as we might like it to be. Like politics, educational change is the art of the possible.

But what sort of change do we want? We are led back once again to the business of value judgements. And notice that they are moral judgements, because they concern not our own good, but the good of others: the good, in particular, of pupils. It's worth remembering that schools don't exist to promote the careers of politicians and administrators, nor - when it comes down to it - the personal wishes of either teachers or parents. All these people are responsible for deciding what finally goes on in schools, but their own prejudices must be subordinate to considering what is best for pupils.

This, of course, is not an easy thing to do. If, for instance, we happen to believe that our own schooldays benefited from rote learning, then we might want to use our influence as a governor or a teacher to insist on this, even though the 1982 Cockcroft report on teaching mathematics concluded that memorising without understanding was unhelpful to pupils. The idea of weighing evidence and reaching a balanced conclusion ought to be the mark of an advanced society, you might think: but if you look at the way newspapers and politicians handle value issues you will see that mostly they aim to present them as a reflection of their own policies and prejudices. And if you look at the minutes of council meetings, you will again find that there is little, if any, reasoned discussion: mainly it is a matter of the ruling group of politicians deciding their attitudes in advance, and then manipulating the meeting to achieve their ends. This is particularly unfortunate in educational matters, where it is not easy to discover the best course of action, and careful deliberation is of the essence.

There is, therefore, a sharp contrast between the way in which society takes decisions about its schools, and the way schools themselves try to get pupils to take decisions. For most teachers recognise that there are at least two sides to every issue, and want pupils to see that the quality of life depends on how we handle controversial issues. It is sometimes held that schools should be discouraged from discussion of

controversial issues. This, I would argue, is to misunderstand the very nature of education.

Another example of our failure to look closely at educational intentions is the current enthusiasm for any kind of scheme which links schools with industry. Most people have allowed themselves to believe, in a quite uncritical way, that the more the work of schools is relevant to what goes on in factories and offices, the better it will be for everyone. The government, for example, is diverting large sums of money into a small number of schools so that, from the age of fourteen, a proportion of pupils in these schools can follow courses which, until the age of fourteen, place an increasing emphasis on technical and vocational studies. And local authorities have been falling over themselves in bidding for this bounty. Councillors with reservations about the wisdom of allowing the government to influence their schools in this direct way, or who doubt the value of making schools in the image of industrial life, get short shrift in the rush for cash. It is as if the language of the counting house is all that is heard. And after all, it can be argued, if jobs are short, surely we must prepare pupils for jobs, and also help along the economy at the same time?

But this is muddled thinking. We all know that unemployment is here to stay: we can see that the successful firms are those which replace people with computers. So what is the point of training a small number of pupils to compete with their friends for the same few jobs? It does nothing to solve the real problem, which is to create new forms of jobs and activities and help youngsters lead a fulfilled life in which work and leisure can certainly be different from what they are now.

In any case, such schemes simply train youngsters for today's jobs. But the one thing that is certain about the future is that it is uncertain: tomorrow's jobs will be different. British industry has a depressing record of failing to look ahead: and in supporting these vocational schemes both industry and the trade unions are showing the same old lack of vision, the same belief that tomorrow will be like yesterday. Well, it won't: it will need people with the enterprise and imagination to visualise new ways of making things, new kinds of services, new forms of organisation both in commercial life and in personal life. These government and Manpower Services Commission programmes are all based on the belief that you can train youngsters with transferable skills: but the high-level thinking which is needed for tomorrow's world comes from real education into the disciplines of our culture, not from teaching skills, which are in any case non-transferable because they depend on context. I argued this on a recent BBC2 television programme, and I argue it here again. Hence my belief in genuine discussion: unless we think about the ends of education as well as the means, we shall do ourselves - and our children - no good and possibly much harm.

So, inevitably in an activity which depends on values, I end up telling you where I stand myself. It is for you to decide whether you agree or not. But how do you decide? Is it really the case that in a pluralist society, there are no answers better than any other? Is it the case that all schools can do for pupils is to say, there is this point of view, and there is that: we are neutral; you must decide? Is there no way of resolving these moral issues - on which education must always depend - so that somehow we can be sure we are right? Or have we nothing, when it comes down to it, but our own prejudices to depend on?

If you are a Christian, or a communist, or a member of the ecology party, you will say that your decisions are based not on prejudice but on faith or conviction. But you may still have trouble reaching a decision on a particular case: communists in the French government of President Mitterand, for example, will have different views from those outside that coalition. And the Christian interpretation of a Roman Catholic will generally be different from that of a Jehovah's Witness.

It seems to me there is a vacuum here in modern society which is easily filled by unsatisfactory principles. All too often, in the absence of any better way, it is the principle of effectiveness which is used to settle issues; this usually means choosing whatever seems most useful or profitable in the short term. Hence our current worship of management, and the uncritical way in which we believe effective management is an absolute good. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that Belsen and Auschwitz were very effectively managed.

So is there a better way of making value judgements? If there is, it would have important implications for education: for how it is run, for how schools decide and implement a curriculum, and for how the curriculum is changed. We would no longer allow politicians to bounce us into a more centralised system of control, or to bribe us into vocational schemes which serve vested interests.

I believe the ideal of a liberal education, as it was set out by Aristotle in classical Greece and subsequently elaborated in the middle ages, represents a much more promising point of departure than our current obsession with individual rights on the one hand or the corporate rights of organisations on the other. And a liberal education rests on the idea that questions of fact and questions of value cannot be separated: to teach 'the facts' of science, as much as teaching 'the facts' of history, is to disclose values, to reveal particular theories about how things are the way they are. Furthermore, a liberal education draws a distinction between the speculations of science as one thing, and the pursuit of the true good of man as quite another. So, on this view, we cannot use the methods of science to tell us how to order our lives, to decide what is a good action, or to make a moral judgement. All we can do is encourage the virtues which make our lives good: and these virtues are not to be found in the rules of religions or the policies of parties, but in the qualities we bring to our activities. Doing something well - whether it is farming the land or bringing up our children - is the result of practical reasoning about the choices which face us and the consequences they have for all those involved. Our final judgement will claim not to be right, but defensibly better than others and therefore good. It is not the triumph of one opinion over others, but a synthesis which both draws on individual judgement and yet transcends it.

It follows that education should try to offer all our children access to a programme of studies which brings them on the inside of the world they will inherit. School must offer them an understanding of all the different ways in which our culture takes shape: as art, drama, science, mathematics, history and so on. This is a general education, but it is more than that: it is a liberal education, which goes beyond coverage of a wide range of topics to examine how thought must be linked with action. The aim must be to provide all our pupils

with the capacities to act in ways which are informed by the arts of practical reasoning. They will not all acquire these capacities to the same extent; a common curriculum does not imply common outcomes. But it does imply common access, in a variety of ways, to the experiences which make up a liberal education.

For these reasons I believe in comprehensive schooling, and I despise systems which purport to select types of children, whether in grammar schools, or in separate streams inside comprehensive schools. I was able to put these ideas into practice as head of a comprehensive school in Hertfordshire, and I wrote about them in the book you see in my hand. I hold these beliefs with passion but, I hope, with reason as well. And it is fitting that I end, as I begin - with hope.