

Education can be defined in two ways: Firstly, as an intellectual and moral training; and secondly, as a mere provision of schooling. Unfortunately, these definitions are not equivalent, and I would suggest that in our society the practice of concepts embodied in these two notions actually militate against each other. Current events and prevailing attitudes amongst the majority suggest that our idea of "schooling" completely belies the objectives experienced in the wider definition. In my opinion, education of young people should be a continuous and extensive developmental process involving both the parents (or responsible substitutes) and "professional" educators. It should encompass every facet of an individual's personality and should aim for a degree of moral integrity and intellectual awareness. The reasons why these objectives are not being fulfilled are manifold; but I shall confine myself to two readily identifiable areas of criticism the involvement of parents and the direct role of the teaching profession.

Most parents are unable or reluctant to regard their role as one of active participation in their child's education. Whether due to their own inadequate formative experience, or due to uncaring attitudes fostered by our increasingly materialistic society, they regard education as beginning and ending with the school day. Ignoring, or oblivious to the valuable opportunities to enrich their children's lives by introducing them to music, art, sports and a multitude of other activities neglected or underemphasized by the average school curriculum, they shift practically the entire responsibility for the child's development to teachers. The school, therefore, provides a very convenient scapegoat and is subsequently deemed responsible for every shortcoming or aberration.

I am not suggesting that parents should replace teachers or even usurp their authority in any way, but that they supplement their child's schooling by encouraging a wide spectrum of intellectual and aesthetic experiences. Children need positive guidance, both moral and intellectual, from adults whom they respect; they do not automatically develop their potential, partly due to the absence of self-discipline, and partly to the incessant pressures inherent in our consumer society to squander one's time in meaningless pursuit of instant gratification. Parents, therefore, have a valuable role in diverting emerging enthusiasms and abilities into constructive channels. If adults use their own time in a creative and constructive manner, then desirable attitudes are likely to be inculcated in their children. It is generally recognised in the United States, for example, that the highest proportion of children of exceptional ability tend to come from Jewish or Oriental backgrounds. Such backgrounds are characterised by strong family ties and a commitment to learning. There is frequently a conflict between intellectual fulfilment and the attainment of pleasure, and the suppression of immediate personal gratification is often essential for the long-term achievement of intellectual goals. This concept, although perhaps simplistic, is usually alien to children. I am not advocating a rigid structuring of a child's environment, but the provision of a stimulating atmosphere which predisposes towards self-awareness and personal enrichment.

In this context, the importance of the natural environment is paramount but often overlooked. I think that part of the significance of 'nature' as educator is that it is experienced subconsciously by the young child and so is not part of a deliberate thinking process. Later in life, these feelings are rationalised and verbalised to some extent, perhaps adding to their richness, but at the time they are actually experienced, the child's awareness is greatly enhanced by natural outdoor activities, to which he can respond freely and happily. Wordsworth, of course, recognised this subconscious process in the 'Prelude', when he claimed that the sights and sounds of the natural environment sent a voice which "flowed along my dreams". I agree to a large extent with the tenet of the 18th century Romantics, that education in the first instance should be addressed to the emotions rather than to reason. However, it should be remembered that Rousseau's "noble savage", the embodiment of an imagination inspired by, and responding to, every part of the natural environment, was perhaps a rather extreme reaction to the preceding "Age of Reason", in which rational thought, rather than raw, emotional experience, was revered. The ideal surely lies somewhere between the two although imagination and experience are more relevant than rationalisation in a very young child, it is erroneous to disregard rational thought altogether, since ultimately the maturation of the child's intellect will depend upon it. The successful parent or teacher is one who advises the child on how to supplement these valuable experiences with intellectual ability encouraging him to make comparisons, formulate theories, search for reasons. Unfortunately, however, many adults are unable to instigate these processes because they are themselves oblivious to the beauty around them!

Just as Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that man was corrupted by the evil influences of 18th century civilization, I think that our increasingly sophisticated and decadent society today is detrimental to modern man. The trivial and tawdry, stereotyped stimuli emanating from our high-technological market-place have the effect of anaesthetizing our powers of perception and discernment.

Ubiquitous electronic playthings such as television and video machines, not to mention the incessant drone of "rock" music, and the unsolicited but insidious propaganda of the pedlars of the materialistic dream utopia, all tend to induce a permanent lethargy in young and old alike. Personal ideals and awareness of beauty either do not exist, or take second place to the acquisition of coveted commodities.

Whilst not going so far as to agree with Rousseau that a primitive return to nature is our only antidote to this corruption, I believe that natural, simple living is necessary for the restoration of man's inspiration. A positive effort, on the part of all those who claim to be concerned with the education of children, must be made to resist the subtle but baleful indoctrination around us and to encourage the development of individual judgement.

Rousseau recognised the need to found a general humanity when he opined that the "child should be educated to be a man, not to be a priest, a civil servant or a soldier". Two hundred years later this tenet has never seemed so relevant; and yet instead of implementing ideas on naturalness we still doggedly train people to fulfil specific "ideas" in a society where, ironically, incompetent distribution of resources and accompanying mass unemployment have decimated the number of those roles available to fill! The individual of today must be taught how to cope with 'leisure', by exploring every facet of his personality. Diversification is far more relevant than a narrow channelling of energy towards goals that can no longer be realised. One element of stereotyping which exists in education from early secondary school level, is the rigid division of pupils into arts and sciences. Curricula are arranged so as to produce a polarization of the school - and later the university - population, into two separate and almost alien cultures. There is, on the one hand, the technocrat, almost devoid of aesthetic appreciation and dismissive of mystical experience, interpreting experiences through a diet of graphs and mathematical theories. We have the arts graduate, on the other hand, who is usually extremely limited in his knowledge of scientific phenomena, and whose mode of thinking is confined within the realm of abstract, academic meditation. But surely rational analysis is not incompatible with aesthetic imagination and creativity? These two spheres of human activity must interact for man to fulfil his potential. Although we cannot, in our complex society, reincarnate the "Renaissance Man", we can make sure that different attitudes prevail at a basic level in schools.

In this context, it is disappointing that a recent survey (published in the Sunday Observer Magazine, Autumn 1984) on attitudes to education within society reveals that the greatest resistance to a wider curriculum actually comes from parents who, at the same time, are seeking a greater influence in deciding what is taught in school. It appears that in most cases parental aspirations have not taken account of our changing society. The subjects least preferred by parents (such as craftwork and home economics) were those which would probably be of most value to the unemployed. (It is significant that art was regarded as least important by 35% of those questioned!) In those few cases where schools have attempted to widen the horizons of pupils by teaching the "whole personality", the experiment has usually failed due to parental resistance. It is again patently clear, therefore, that attitudes prevalent in society at large will have to be adjusted before the professional educators can implement any broadening procedures.

Education, however, must be implemented within a realistic framework. Although we should never lose sight of the wider philosophical implications of what we teach our children, there should always be a sound, practical basis for our methods. I personally do not see why a wider curriculum should result in a lowering of standards, but it must be recognised that numeracy and literacy are vitally important, not only when seeking a job, but as essential tools of self-expression. There is a danger that in throwing away the proverbial shackles to allow the child to "find himself" the basic skills will be completely ignored. However laudable the intentions may be, this progressive approach, if taken to extremes, produces just as many misfits, unprepared for the real world, as the old fashioned methods. Young people require a firm foundation of intellectual skills on which to build their own personalities, and in order to take advantage of any wider opportunities on offer. I believe that creative fulfilment and the acquisition of basic skills are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent.

The recognition of individual needs and abilities, so vital to this creative process, is sadly lacking in many institutions. All children need to be extended to reach their full potential but whereas disadvantaged, slow learners are treated sympathetically in the present system, it is still not widely appreciated that very able children also have special educational needs. Many schools impose their own arbitrary "normal" standards, deviation from which is discouraged, or even punished. The phenomenon of the "gifted child" is one which many people, especially teachers, find hard to accept. The very phrase sounds elitist and undemocratic! It is a fact that people are always ready to help those they consider inferior to themselves, but rarely to help those whom they suspect to be superior. Each culture defines its own gifted people, but these "children of God", as Plato referred to them, are distinguished by their outstandingly high intellectual or cultural abilities. These gifts may occur as a result of environment, genetic endowment or (more likely) as a result of interaction between the two; and one can, of course, postulate the existence of such abilities in every individual, implying an immense source of potential waiting to be tapped. But whatever the philosophical considerations, these gifts, when they do manifest themselves, must be fostered, for the benefit of both the child and society as a whole. It is a fact that "geniuses", being so few in number, rarely achieve positions of power within society, but their contribution is often one of influence over people less intelligent but more powerful than themselves. The gifted students of today should, therefore, be encouraged to use their greater insight not only to attempt to solve the vast array of political, social and economic problems which beset us, but also to redefine these problems in a creative way - to seek radical solutions to old dilemmas. This will only come about if the gifted are nurtured in the 'matrix' of the school. Children who are intellectually advanced often find it difficult to relate to their contemporaries, with whom they are unable to communicate because of difference in interests and language ability. Frustration and boredom, caused by routine tasks imposed by un-imaginative teachers, can lead to disruption and aggressive behaviour in some instances, and apathy or withdrawal in others. Teaching materials in schools are not, on the whole, sufficiently challenging. Teachers' expectations and perceptions of all children's abilities must be raised if we

wish potential to be fulfilled. Schools should provide opportunities for children to learn at their own pace in a stimulating environment, where high standards are respected. Too many bright children are stunted by being made to conform to undemanding regimens devised by "trendy- leftist" educationalists to appease their pseudo-egalitarian teaching colleagues, although fortunately many of these outmoded ideas, mainly vestiges of the 'sixties' era, are now being treated with the contempt that they deserve. It is obviously impossible to divorce education from politics, and so sad that it is the children, as guinea-pigs, who suffer from the effects of politically-inspired experimentation.

In conclusion, it is difficult not to be extremely pessimistic about the immediate prospects for education in this society. The concept of education as an integrated development of all aspects of the individual - moral, intellectual and physical - is apparently not enshrined within the walls of our present Department of Education. Clearly, not enough attempts are made to reconcile the educational requirements of the individual with the demands of society; and those very demands are questionable, being more conducive to mass indoctrination than to individual assertiveness. Our society is becoming far too passive, and abilities should be developed through activity, not passivity. Pestalozzi said that education should draw upon the faculties of "self-power" inherent in the human being, and that the teacher's task is "to give a helping hand to the instinctive efforts" of the child. Educators, both parents and teachers alike, would do well to bear this in mind.