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"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." I first heard this more than twenty years ago and have not forgotten, which just goes to suggest that those who take educational statements too literally may be apt to get it wrong. Of course it has stuck in my mind because it is largely true. But as a practical educational philosophy in a state school with between thirty and forty pupils to a teacher, and of mixed ages and abilities more often than not, taken literally it is a non-starter. Much of what children learn in school has to be learned by listening, if only because by no stretch of the imagination is it possible for them to learn everything by doing. It follows immediately that the fundamental background requirement for any classroom for at least a significant part of the day is a quietly ordered but stimulating environment in which individuals can both work comfortably, and, when necessary, hear the teacher. How frequently these days is this gentle norm rudely shattered. It is not surprising. Society generally has lost or abandoned much of its order. It would be remarkable indeed if this were not reflected in the behaviour of children in school. Even reasonable sanctions are now frequently regarded by some as 'harassment', the most gentle of reproving slaps a 'beating'. Schools are being urged constantly to re-examine what they teach and how they teach it - reasonable enough in so far as from time to time in a changing world such an exercise is necessary. But one hopes that this mania for self-examination, urged on teachers more often than not by those not engaged in classroom teaching, will not lead eventually to a national core curriculum using only 'approved' methods. The great strength of the English state system, for so long the envy of the world, was that it brought immense variety, both of curriculum content and method. Learning is a very personal business and so too is teaching. If the system is to continue to flourish both these fundamental truths must be fully realised by teachers and administrators alike, and sufficient freedom given to the practitioners at the 'sharp end' fully to use their unique and personal gifts in their own unique and personal way - always granted, of course, that the children are learning profitably and happy in the process.

It is a personal view, but I would argue that it is not so much what is learnt at the primary stage, always provided it is wholesome, but the attitudes to learning that are picked up on the way. Ideally the Junior child should leave his school eager to learn more, secure in the knowledge that he has the fundamental skills necessary to do so.

The task of the schools has not been made easier in recent years, either by the cuts in expenditure or by the frequent and in many cases unjustifiable assaults on the competence and suitability of those chosen and trained to teach. It is a thick-skinned teacher who is not nowadays constantly looking over his shoulder to see where the next attack is coming from. If the past few years are anything to go by, he will be pretty certain it will be from the Government, who by edict, interference and punitive penny pinching has done so much to lower the morale of those in state schools in recent times. Of course Local Government has been under attack as well, and this too has had a detrimental spin-off in the schools. Authorities where hitherto education officers and teachers had worked hand in hand making the best use of reasonable resources now find the two partners increasingly at loggerheads. When officers are being hounded by cost-conscious County Councillors and ordered about by politicians in Whitehall, they clearly feel they can no longer afford the same degree of consultation with their colleagues in the schools. It is a grave mistake - the need to work together was never more vital than in these difficult times.

Today's children will not be children tomorrow. Their chance is now. They cannot wait for better times, for a more favourable G.N.P., for an upturn in the economy. It is bitter irony that those on whom we shall all depend in years to come are being deprived of the necessary resources so vital to their education and welfare. How can one teacher adequately cope with the educational needs of 39 children in a class of mixed ages and abilities? Such iniquitous conditions are still to be found in spite of the recommendations of H.M.I. years ago that classes containing children of mixed ages should not number more than 24.

We who have been privileged to serve in state schools in the post war years and who have witnessed and helped to bring to fruition the great vision of R.A. Butler's 1944 Education Act can now only hope that in years to come the new young generation of teachers will not have to witness the system's continuing decline. The ones I have met have impressed me greatly. Children are still children, as ever. Their parents want the best for them. In a democratic society it is the parents who have the power to change the attitudes of Governments. Is it therefore unreasonable yet to hope for better things?