

Some thoughts on the Education System in Plymouth

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To write on the education in Plymouth would be too large a field for me. I confine myself to writing about some of the pressing issues that came up during my career as a teacher, lecturer and headteacher in Plymouth.

When I was appointed in Plymouth almost twenty years ago, the years of expansion in education in this country had reached its zenith. Plymouth saw the building of new estates on the outskirts of the city. New schools were being built, there was growth and there were new opportunities in education. Towards the mid-seventies this expansion ceased and we were entering a period of contraction in the education service. Schools, even fairly new schools, were beginning to have falling rolls and empty classrooms.

Another issue of some consequence for Plymouth was the Local Government Act of 1974. Plymouth had always had its own locally elected Education Committee. This power was gradually transferred to Exeter. It was a great blow to civic pride and local democracy.

However, the subject which unwillingly occupied me every year as teacher and later as headteacher was the unresolved situation of selective versus non-selective education for Plymouth. This battle has now raged for well over twenty years and in the meantime our children and teachers and the educational climate in Plymouth have suffered. As an educator I am simply stunned that no compromise can be worked out that takes account of the wishes of parents to let both systems co-exist. In the end it is the quality of education which a child receives that really matters.

Plymouth offers a wide variety of schools and most of these cater for a distinct geographical area of the city whether it be for Primary or Secondary age children. All parents want the best for their children (though they may not always get it) and would choose the best schools. Even though most parents send their children to the nearest school. I feel this is a good thing. Much motivation for learning comes from working in familiar surroundings and growing up with your friends. A stable background and growing up in a friendly, caring community are the prerequisites for doing well at school. Many schools fulfil this role very adequately and they are also the centre for their local community.

We have affluent and deprived areas in the city, and the schools in these areas reflect all the attributes of their area. It is the schools in the deprived area which bear the brunt of society's culturally and socially disadvantaged. They are schools in areas of high crime, high unemployment, high divorce rates and many more social ills. Education in these parts of Plymouth has quite a different emphasis from the education found in schools in the areas of the well-to-do.

Is our education system doing its job? What is its job? Are we educating our children too much, or not enough? Is our education system geared too much to producing disciplined, efficient robots for the national economy. The greatest change in educational thinking in our times has come through the increasing emphasis on the right of the individual person. Every child, whatever her/his background, ability or circumstances must be given the opportunity to succeed in our education system. If the education system offers these opportunities it is up to the individual to avail himself of these opportunities. It is significant here to quote from a case in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg where a British parent brought complaints against her local education authority: The court confirmed the right of a parent as having final responsibility for her/his child.

How are we doing in Plymouth?

We have quite a few failures, but we hush it up; it's bad publicity! Very often it's they who contribute to the crime rate in the city. Many -the vast majority -pass through our education system almost unnoticed. They make up the bulk of our future citizens. Some do very well and obviously enjoy schooling.

The education system, its successes and failures, the way it operates, the values it inspires, are a reflection of the society which it tries to serve. Few schools can uphold ideals in education when the society they try to serve has lost its vision or has become confused about the real issues in education. Plymouth is no different here but Plymouth has retained some of its own good spirit.