

Learning is a process which we cannot avoid. We go through it more consciously, and with a greater sense of purpose, at some periods of our lives than others. To enjoy learning is a realisation which comes slowly - as is the respect for those who help us to learn.

In my own early life the stages came one after another: I had to learn, I came to enjoy it and I respected those who taught me well. After becoming a teacher I felt that keen pleasure which comes from being able to teach some things adequately. More keen still was the pleasure of watching children learn, opening up their minds, digesting everything and making it part of themselves. But after teaching classics to very clever boys - for five or six years - two other realisations emerged: one was that the real excitement would come when these pupils came near to the edge of their capacity. Everything they learned at school was well within that range: the full challenge would be faced later, when they worked for degrees or did research. Second, the business of learning in the classroom began to show itself as being only part of the process. As a tutor and then a house-master I saw that those items of learning which occur in lessons need to be supported: I began to realise that families, friends and other people interested in helping the process of growing up were as important as the teacher - and that opportunities to learn from others, to develop confidence and to understand how to live with each other had to be organised, arranged, and, in a word, administered.

Those are the early parts of my thinking and experience which partly explain the way I now work in education and the way I look at it. Learning is part of living, it needs to be under the hand of good teachers in the classroom and within a context of well-ordered support outside the classroom.

But other realisations grew: I moved away from the idea that learning was easy for everyone and that not to learn quickly or efficiently was in one way or another a matter simply of will. To draw benefit from education was not something which everyone found to be equally easy. That it should be made equally easy seemed impossible - but that the opportunity should be equal for everyone was not out of the question.

Equality of opportunity is an easy slogan. It took time for me to see the difficulty of making it a reality. Who your parents are, where you live, how well motivated you are, how intelligent you are and what is expected from you - all these questions began to take on a solid dimension. They came up time and time again as one looked at the differences between schools and localities, as one realised what money meant in buying good teachers, good books and good premises. And I began then to see that inequalities and the resources that are needed to equalise educational chances between people from different backgrounds and with different attitudes were a matter of political and economic thinking as well as of social concern and pedagogic quality.

This is some way away from the ideas with which I started but the questions to be answered are the same: good learning comes from good teaching and from good support. But by now I know that that support is drawn from any number of sources not all of which can be a matter of organisation and administration. Friendships and families have an immeasurable influence and they in turn are helped or hindered from other directions, not least from the media. What is out of the question is the attempt to channel, to direct and, from the position of an outsider, to shape other people's lives by manipulating the influences which work on them. Almost equally out of the question is the attempt to nullify influences which seem to impede people's development and to destroy their capacity or their enjoyment in learning - almost out of the question, but not quite. Since I believe that the forces which work for people's good can, if they are spotted in time and are well marshalled, do something to cancel out the influences which stop them from developing their ability to live a full life.

This underlines two messages from one who is responsible for any part of education: the positive part of the work must always outweigh those aspects which are defensive, frustrating or are a matter of locking the stable door too late. Hindsight is a poor encourager. Second, there are very many ways of improving education, of making access to it easier, of taking it further and - constantly - of making opportunities for everyone as just and as equitable as one can. There are many ways of doing these things and most of them have not yet been thought of. So, alongside being positive and just and supportive, the educator must give equal importance to good ideas - at the stage when they are still ideas.

To believe in innovation sometimes looks like restlessness or the chasing after fashionable phantoms. But the more acceptable side of it is the readiness to weigh new ideas seriously, to work out how to try them in practice and to give encouragement to people who have ideas - preferably good ones. Unless we believe that those parts of education have not yet been invented which are going to be important to the children of pupils who are in this generation still going through the process of formal schooling, there is little hope. There must be development and there must be growth both in ideas and in good practice.

To be open-minded, to be ready to weigh up the benefits of change, to encourage good teaching and to organise the structure of education in as efficient and uncluttered a way as possible requires the educator himself to remain fresh, open and unprejudiced. This tall order can only partly be met - and even then not from inside the profession of education alone. It is important to try to understand how learning is itself advancing in the spheres of both the academic and the artist. It is important to struggle for the comprehension of what is new. It is important to know about the way society is moving and, as far as possible, not simply to know but to do something about it.

Finally, the world is small. Countries do not differ very much in their philosophies or aims of education. They do differ in their practices. They differ in the amount of energy, political and social importance and money which they devote to education. But nowhere, it seems, can it truly thrive unless learning is treated as something which is part of the whole of one's life, unless it is respected as a continuing and crucial activity and unless it is given all the support, formal or informal, which the educator and his friends can muster.