

One of the questions I frequently ask at an interview for a new teacher is: "What do you feel that you can contribute to the staffroom?" The resultant answers are generally illuminating as to how the interviewee sees the role of the staffroom within the school. Answers range (usually) from very serious responses - "I feel able to contribute towards discussion upon profound educational matters of the day" - to "Well, I am not at all sure." One of the key words I wait for in an answer is "humour", and it is surprising how little I hear it, for teachers are generally (at least at interviews!) a very serious group of people.

Yet the education of young people should be a much more happy happening than it often appears. Gradually, new appointments to a school (at least this one) do shake off the interview image of total seriousness in the application of their job within the school and they become a better educator. Children do respond more positively towards an adult who is able to be more in tune with the real world of the child, rather than the children who are continually confronted by teachers who have (or appear to have) little or no knowledge of the world outside a building called a school. Quite often these teachers are a dual person, that is conveying what they consider to be the "publicly acceptable image" of a teacher while at the school and away from the school a different person.

This ambivalence is important to recognise - for the people at the receiving end of such a person (i.e. the pupils) most surely do. Children are remarkably perceptive in summing up a new teacher and adjusting their responses automatically. But is this picture of the teacher a personally inflicted one or is it the result of something else?

I believe it is quite often something else - namely, the structure of learning within a school. Please don't interpret my thoughts that a school should ideally be a crossbreed between a holiday camp and certain popular T.V. quiz shows. No, but the structure generally should be taking much more note of the real worlds the pupils live in and will go into in the future. If this is not possible, is it because of lack of knowledge by the teachers of such worlds - how many teachers have trod the path of school, further education, teaching post? So is it, then, that such teachers feel "safer" in applying a more traditional role to their everyday work? Or is it because of an external imposition upon the curriculum from other sources - e.g. examinations or parents?

I believe that the curriculum can be more realistic to the needs of children yet still encompass "traditional" elements. Children do need to acquire skills of literacy and numeracy for their world, yet how often are they faced with totally inadequate ways of achieving such skills? The race to become good at the basic skills frequently leads to neglect of skills that children generally already have and are crying out to be developed by teachers. Language, artistic and athletic talents are there but frequently pushed underneath the child's surface or relegated to afternoon sessions at school - i.e. "we do the real work in the morning" syndrome. This is immoral, for children's natural talents are of a communicative nature, yet many in education of a supposedly learned quality ignore this fact when designing and implementing a curriculum.

Children should be encouraged to express themselves in a whole variety of ways, yet often are requested to sit still and quiet so as to listen to a delivery about some matter unconnected to the real worlds of the listeners. Is it, then, a surprise that some children "switch off" their capacity for achievement? I do not believe it should come as a surprise to any thinking adult when it does occur. All too often I am saddened when former pupils return to see me shortly after they have left the Primary School to complain of "boredom" and being treated "like a baby" at that new place of learning. What chance for many of them in their remaining years of compulsory education? Their naturalness for learning, hopefully seized upon and developed at the primary stage, is curtailed by many at the secondary stage, but for what reason? Can the examination-dominated curriculum be the reason? But can the objectives be achieved by some other means, perhaps with pupils' co-operation instead of so much apparent antagonism? In many fields of secondary education, the answer is, "Yes, it can".

A school should be a vibrant place that children, teachers and all parties involved in education create together, not a place that is continually under siege from one section or dominated by another. Education is about people, an inter-reaction of minds, with knowledge and experiences to challenge life. Teachers are told to "prepare children for the world they are going into". How much of the present curriculum in schools does that?