

Education

Professor J.E. Phythian
Staff Tutor, Mathematics,
Open University; First
Professor of Mathematics
at University of the
South Pacific, Fiji
(1984-1987)

As I look out over the blue Pacific ocean from the University of the South Pacific, Laucala Bay, Suva, Fiji Islands, I am thankful that it is 'education' that has enabled me to both make the break from the U.K. and given me the means of being able to support myself whilst over here.

Perhaps this summarises two of the vital results of an education: the curiosity to look further afield both in academic, domestic and geographic areas and also to provide a means of support in a currency which has an international value.

Perhaps you say that this is looking at the higher echelons of education and that as originally conceived, education is a training for living - learning the social, cultural and life-science knowledge of our society. That our society in Western Europe is fast changing means that education is not just a school/college/university experience - either it goes on for life or we opt out at some point short of death with traumatic consequences.

Some people feel so strongly that society is going the wrong way and that the young will be 'polluted' with the education that is on offer that they opt out for Alaska snow wastes or South Pacific primeval island life styles.

Although they make their protest - the rest of us have to live on with our Western culture and indeed we would ruin the 'loner's' solution if we joined them.

We ask if predetermined 'progress' is inevitable via the educational environment! The Minister of Education for the Fiji Islands tells me that he wants to put more micro-computers into Fiji schools and to enhance mathematics teaching therein. This will expand one area of education - will lift up job aspirations and will better fit those educated for a more technical job. But as well it will separate some young people from their traditional village community even more. I noticed this in my own Grammar School education near Ormskirk in Lancashire - most of what I learned was foreign to my yeoman farming parents and to that extent was a possible barrier.

How, then, can education claim to better fit us to go back to our communities to help them when it divides us from them and sometimes makes us foreigners to them and them to us? However, parents still insist on further education for their children because of the job possibilities. My mother put it another way - "You are educated, you will never be bored in life." How can a different form of education help prevent the mindless vandalism and savage youth incidents in our society?

Certainly the Indian idea of giving education to all-comers on the grounds that they will find something useful to do if they are educated has had some success - but it is the culture imbibed with the education that has helped to get this message across.

Certainly in Africa there are more job aspirations and even marriage aspirations for the educated, and until recently the aspirations did materialise. Some education officials in East Africa saw the dangers of widespread secondary education leading to much unemployment, disillusionment and possibly disorder. Certainly many Eastern European countries are very careful to choose those who will go on to further education from amongst the cadres of those committed to the present political regime, thus hoping to minimise any possible 'misuse' of education against the State.

Certainly education leads to freedom and so power, both to understand, to lead and to transform the lives of communities and nations, and a little can go a long way. In Uganda, if Amin had not had the experience of ousting the Kabaka (king) of Uganda in 1968, it is unlikely that he would have been confident enough to overthrow the Obote regime in 1971.

So although our school education is a beginning to prepare us for life in society it should also point out our cultural responsibilities to that society which has nurtured us thus far - perhaps this is where we in the West have fallen down badly. We teach too much academic cold-hearted facts, many of which are good maybe for specialists, but we fail to teach the things about our culture and society which matter most. Whilst no-one can question the value of sin 30° there are moral problems, e.g. hydrogen bombs, racial tension, and care within our society which are left to amateurs, if at all.

Our educational system needs its specialist side, no doubt, but the handing on of our heritage and the attitudes of care and concern for our community are not taught. Indeed, in Western society we are taught to be individuals, to live if possible in an isolated way and develop ourselves in isolation from the community - no wonder that our product is a relatively isolated ego-centred individual.

We should bring back the teaching of many of the ideas of our culture and heritage, moral decisions both personal and in a community and where the power to maintain moral standards comes from - only I believe

from a deeply religious conviction and experience - something which schools have opted out from teaching - perhaps these are the hardest to teach because we are talking about a living example and not just the assimilation of hard facts.