

My own education was one which led me to value the broader opportunity which achievement at school gives to a great number of people. But my own experience was not one in which it was essential to have good education qualifications in order to succeed in life. That was something that came later. Even so, the capacity of those who are well-educated to be fair-minded and balanced in their judgements always impressed me. It is a strength which I would like to see the schools of today emphasizing in everything that they do.

Nowadays the fact that qualifications touch almost every single person before reaching the age of 21/22 puts a good deal of pressure on their families, their teachers and on young people themselves. I am glad that the range of qualifications which are available are becoming steadily wider and I hope that they do not become so confusing as to lose their value. Nothing is worse than that a young person's achievement should not be recognised for what it is.

How much each school can add to these people's achievements is a question which is debated with increasing frequency. The place of the family is given more recognition nowadays than it was in the past and the balance between the effect of the school and the effect of the home is now rather delicately judged. There will never be a substitute for a good home but equally there will never be a substitute for the influence of a good teacher.

The way in which the quality of teachers is judged varies. At the present time I am glad that it is thought to be essential that each teacher should present to the pupil a mixture of high skill and experience, devotion and kindness and care for the future of the individual. These qualities are sometimes overlooked. They do not emerge solely from training colleges, nor are they necessarily qualities which can be enhanced simply by good management. They are very personal, very individual and very different from teacher to teacher.

The homes from which each child comes present an even more confusing array of influences. It must be very difficult nowadays for a school to be able to pick out the strengths and weaknesses which lie in the make-up of each child and I marvel at the skill which enables what is strong to be brought out and what is frail to be made better. But however difficult it is for the school to spot the influences of a home, it will always remain important for parents to help the school to understand their own child.

The days of possessive parents seem more or less to have passed. Parents, however, still remain very proud of their children and I hope that schools will never forget to share the achievements which a pupil reaches inside school with the pleasure that the family experiences in the privacy of their own home.

The contrast between private and public life is something in which everyone who takes part in local politics finds both enjoyable and frustrating. For my own part I have a particular pleasure in trying to match my understanding of what it is that families want for their children from the policies and plans of the large and sometimes distant organisation of the County Council.

The match between private aspiration and public service will never be perfect and the frustration of not getting it will always face anyone who takes responsibility for public affairs. But in the end, frustration is out-balanced by the pleasure of watching children and young people grow into maturity, in the knowledge that parents and their teachers want nothing for them but the best. Education has changed in its outward shape over the many years in which I have taken an interest in it but it is still largely a recognisable and traditional mixture of home and school, with long-established truths and values battling it out with the changing demands of a highly innovative future.

Every child takes pride in achievement. Each has differing abilities and interests. If we care they will respond.