

England's inhabitants and visitors to its shores enjoy an unrivalled diversity of experience. There is an immense variety of geography, food customs, cultural activities, flora, fauna, etc. Any journey or visit, however short, reveals this richness and breadth of national life. This kaleidoscope persists despite the overwhelming dominance of a government and media industry centred in one small part of our nation.

However, in that sector of national life known as education, we seem to have opted for almost a complete lack of variety. From a relatively uninformed consumer point of view we seem to have at primary level a choice of two: viz. classrooms and chalk or open plan and talk. At tertiary level the choice narrow to polytechnics trying to become universities and universities trying to behave like polytechnics. Alas - at secondary level, we have no choice! Here we have a system that, as a philosophical cornerstone, admits of no other system. Unless, of course, you are deaf, naughty, or able to perform a few ballet steps.

Perhaps all is not lost. A wise and generous government has recently decreed that I don't have to send my children to the nearest school. Provided of course that I can afford the cost of transport, I may send my offspring to schools that I think are appropriate to their needs and that reflect my preference as a parent and a consumer.

So perhaps Shaun could go to that single sex school for boys that regards excellence in rugby as the highest attainment in life and has a long, established, and practised tradition of corporal punishment. Sally, whose progress with the violin continues to surprise us and amaze her teacher, would clearly benefit from attending the single sex school for girls across town that has a large and strong music department (admittedly it only has two language labs and has to get by on an IBM 4300, but I realise that you can't have everything!).

Finally, there's Kevin. Now here we have a bit of a problem. Our Kev's a bit of a slow learner. Yes, I know that he mastered that computer that we gave him for Christmas, and can write really complicated programs in three different languages. Yes, I know he earned more than a thousand pounds last month selling computer games that he had written. But when you put some real work in front of him (like they do at school), he just can't cope.

What Kevin needs is a small and friendly boarding school. Yes, you've guessed it. A single sex school, where no-one ever mentions exams and where he will have ample opportunity to acquire some self-esteem and confidence.

So there, my duty as a parent is done; parental responsibility has been exercised and consumer choice acted upon.

It's a nice dream, isn't it? Three children going to three different schools that are as different as they are. The reality is cruelly different. This educational system that insists that we belong to it, and know no other, seems to have the same menu on display in each school. Try to imagine an England in which all the restaurants, cafes and snack bars were part of a state monopoly that always served the same food. We wouldn't put up with that - or would we?

If the words above seem critical they are none the less kindly meant. What I am trying to say to the world of educators is this: Stop trying to be all things to all people. There are very few subjects that are so important that they must be included in every curriculum. Why not exploit your strengths and cut your weaknesses? If there is a ready supply of teachers of English and a shortage of historians or geographers, then why not cut the latter from the curriculum and enlarge the former? If there is a lack of playing fields, then why not eliminate outdoor games from school and replace them by fellwalking or snooker?

I can't avoid the feeling that educational resources of time, talent and money could with advantage be focussed more sharply rather than everybody having the same apparently inadequate ration. Then we would see that diversity and variety that is so characteristic of our national life style.