

'Education should be a partnership between pupil and teacher' - it is a long time since this idea was first suggested, yet, tragically, it is still not happening. I believe that it is vital, since motivation to learn - or lack of it - is one of the things that most influences how much is learnt. "You can take a horse to water but you can't make him drink", as the saying goes. Sadly, this is a very fair description of the atmosphere in many secondary school classrooms, where harassed teachers attempt to teach children who "just don't want to know". I have seen many classes of 14 and 15 year olds, sullen and morose, bored stiff with anything the teacher has to offer, keen on nothing except that which will offer a little diversion, whether it be teacherbaiting, talking to a neighbour, or just daydreaming.

Yet in contrast, only a small minority of children seem to feel this way in the primary school. In schools in which I have taught I have found classes of 7, 8 or 9 year olds bubbling over with enthusiasm, full of zest for anything, with an eagerness which a good teacher has no difficulty in harnessing, so that they are keen to learn. So what goes wrong? Where has this enthusiasm gone? More important still, how do we get it back? for without motivation to learn, education is bound to fail.

Is it purely a maturational change, inevitable as children grow older? I think not, for enthusiasm is certainly not an emotion confined to childhood, though obviously the light-hearted gaiety of young children is bound to diminish somewhat as they develop cares and responsibilities. It is, however, important to ensure that this change does not come about too suddenly and stressfully, as I think it does at present, at the change from primary to secondary school. The children are suddenly propelled from a cosy family atmosphere in class (where they spend a large proportion of their time with one teacher in one room) into a frightening early adulthood, where responsibility is thrust upon them. They must learn a timetable, change class every lesson and find their way round a vast new school, bigger than anything they have ever seen (far too big, in my opinion!). They must know where they should be at all times, be responsible for a set of books, belongings, money, pens, food, etc. (the loss of any of which may get them into trouble). The atmosphere is impersonal and unfriendly; they know hardly anybody - and there may be more teachers in their new school than pupils at their old. No wonder the 11 year olds are lost and uncertain. They have to grow up fast - too fast - in order to cope, and in doing so they lose a lot of their freshness and zest for life. Some never learn to cope, and have mounting problems throughout secondary education.

How can we prevent this happening? Basically, we need to tackle, and reduce, each problem in turn. There needs to be more contact between primary and secondary schools so that the children are already familiar with the new school when they join it. Perhaps some of the secondary staff could visit feeder primaries to teach the occasional specialist subject; perhaps 4th year primary children could visit the secondary school regularly to make use of specialist equipment; and so on.

The second improvement I would like to see is for the atmosphere and arrangements in the 1st year secondary to be more like the primary school. I would suggest that these first year children need a more effective "home base" in the school and should be all housed together in one area of the school. They should remain in their base class for as many as possible of their lessons, only moving out for lessons such as science, games, etc. In this way they would gradually learn the responsibilities needed, so that by the time they start their second year they are ready to branch out and can do so with confidence.

The next point I want to make to help improve the pupils' attitude to school concerns the syllabus. When secondary modern and technical schools were first created, the aim was to provide an alternative to the grammar school, a different and more suitable education for the less academic child. Unfortunately, this aim was lost and what resulted was a toned down version of an academic education. To a large extent, this is still true, even in the comprehensive schools, and it is still wrong. It is tragic that children have been deluded into feeling inferior because they fail to get into grammar school. In fact, an academic education is a long hard grind, needing a great deal of hard work often in uninteresting subjects, to prepare children for further education in an academic or professional field. For the vast number of children for whom this is both unsuitable and unwanted, a far more practical and directly useful education is needed, which would be both more valuable and more interesting to the children. As mentioned earlier, motivation towards learning is quite vital if children are to learn; since this motivation often does not come naturally, the teacher must create it. The quality of teaching is of immense importance here and all teachers should spend their lives aiming to improve this. But of equal importance is the choice of subject matter to be taught. I think that no subject (or topic within a subject) should be taught unless those who are teaching it can clearly and rationally justify its inclusion in the syllabus, not only to themselves, but also to those children to whom it is being taught (or in some cases

inflicted!). Most teachers would thus have to expend considerable thought on this matter and, I hope, a dramatic improvement in the syllabus would result. Academic subjects are all very well for those children who wish to follow advanced academic education but detailed study of such subjects is of little relevance to the average child who will forget irrelevant subjects as soon as possible. Obviously a general knowledge of history, geography, science, arithmetic, etc. is necessary, and an improvement of literacy skills is vital, but there are so many other subjects of vital importance to young people that are hardly touched on in many schools - those subjects that will be of direct relevance to them in their future lives (life skills they could be called).

Life skills can be divided up into a number of areas. One area is that of training for future employment. This is touched on by schools in the study of typing, technical drawing, wood/metal work and use of tools, etc., but I feel the scope of this area should be widened considerably. Another area is training for future leisure - vitally important in the modern age or we will see, for example, young people on the dole turning to crime, alcohol, vandalism, etc. through sheer frustration and boredom. Music and craft subjects could be included here, as well as many others. Then there is the vast area of homecraft, covered in many schools merely by including cookery and woodwork in the timetable. Yet there is so much else of tremendous importance and interest - diet, food values and the growing and storing of food, as well as cooking it, sewing and mending, making clothes, curtains, toys, etc.; house and car maintenance, decorating, dealing with electricity and gas (reading meters, changing fuses, etc.); tax, pensions, social security, budgeting and financial planning; etc. etc. Another area is Family Care - this could be subdivided into Child Care (family planning, pregnancy and birth, child development, the needs of babies, looking after children, etc.); Health Care (hygiene, first aid, accident prevention, pests and diseases, etc.) and Family Care itself (family relationships, living together in harmony, looking after the elderly, etc.).

What I would like to see would be for the curriculum to cover both academic and life skills. It could perhaps be divided up into a set of broad areas such as: 1) Maths and Science, 2) Literacy and Languages, 3) Humanities, 4) Physical Education, 5) Home Craft, 6) Family Care, 7) Employment Skills and 8) Leisure Skills. In the first year or two of secondary education the children could be given a basic grounding in each of these eight areas. At the end of that time, they would be in a position to choose (with the help of the staff and their parents) perhaps three of the areas which they wished to study in greater depth - for example, a bright, academically-minded child might choose science, language and humanities. A girl whose ambition is to get married and have a family might choose home craft, family care and leisure skills; etc. In the 3rd, 4th and 5th years then, the children would be able to spend a lot of their time studying their chosen areas thoroughly (either making a broad study of all the subjects within those areas, or specialising even more and studying a few subjects in depth. They might go on to take exams in their chosen subjects). But at the same time, to keep their education on a broad base, they would continue to study the other five areas of the curriculum but to a much lesser extent and at a more superficial level. Skilled teaching would be needed here to keep their interest awake, since these will be the subjects they find either difficult or boring. Great efforts would have to be made to make the study interesting and relevant to them and their lives. But I am convinced that if the major part of their curriculum comprised subjects of direct interest and value to the children, their teachers would be rewarded by a far greater interest and motivation in their pupils, and, by implication, they would find far fewer disciplinary problems.

However, in addition to having an interesting curriculum, and interestingly taught lessons, many other things are necessary for learning to take place successfully. One of these is a good past learning experience on the part of the pupils. The saying "success breeds success" is completely true here, because success breeds confidence in oneself and increases one's motivation to repeat the pleasurable activity, whereas failure leads to confusion and guilt and a loss of self-esteem. Continued failure in spite of trying, punishes the act of trying so much that the child will try no longer but will give up, it being less painful not to try at all than it is to try and fail. Frequent failure therefore gives us a child who does not have the self-confidence needed to make a success of anything, and who has reacted by avoiding the punishing situation in any number of different ways - truancy, refusal to work, rudeness and defiance, etc. or just plain unhappiness. So it is vitally important for the teachers, while stimulating the child's mind and abilities, to ensure that he can and does achieve success in his work most of the time. This means a great deal of hard work and sensitivity on the part of the teacher. He must ensure that every one of the children has all the necessary sub-skills for the work in hand; that he has prepared the ground for them adequately and given them everything they need (both information, equipment and support) in order to complete the work satisfactorily. He must be ready and willing to help any child with a problem at any time (even though he may feel that the child only needs help because he didn't listen earlier!). He must ensure that he has not set work which is off-putting, because it looks either too difficult or too easy. He must check that the work will not be of overlong duration, so that the children get fed up half way through - especially children with a short attention span.

One could obviously write whole books on improving the quality of teaching, but this is not what I am attempting to do here. What I hope I have shown, however, is that some of the problems of children's attitudes to school nowadays, can be tackled directly by altering the organisation and atmosphere within the schools. Many schools, of course, are already doing just this, but there are still many improvements needed. If it can be done, however, I am convinced that the benefits would be enormous.