

In an ideal education system every individual would achieve full potential academically and physically. The sadness of all the systems that have been used is that the potential of so many people remains unrealised, leaving large sections of the population with untrained minds and unskilful bodies.

The most successful teaching arouses in the pupil a desire to learn, for the motivated learner acquires far more skill and knowledge than from any one-sided teaching process. Patrick White, a Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, made one of his characters say, "I dunno, I forget what I was taught, I only remember what I learnt."

Built into all of the young of the animal kingdom is the desire to play. There are many educational theories of play but the one I find most appropriate is the Instinct Practice theory which proposes that the young in play are rehearsing the skills they will need as adults. Fifty years ago Dr L.P. Jacks coined the term "skill hunger" and identified the years 9-13 as the skill hungry years, the period when, if given the right learning situations and appropriate guidance and encouragement by parents, teachers and others, young homo sapiens can be transformed into a skilful and knowledgeable young adult.

In physical education we capitalise on the play instinct, placing pupils in learning situations where they can structure their learning. Play may seem a haphazard process to the unenlightened but it goes like this: explore, establish, repeat. The learner explores the nature of a new situation, establishes what is possible and then repeats the useful things discovered until they become personal skills. Of course we can learn from watching others to find what they have discovered and so in our structure of learning there are opportunities to watch others and copy them, including the demonstration of skilful teachers, particularly at the secondary school stage.

The young child needs to be physical in a wide variety of circumstances. Self-confidence comes from being able to overcome problems and situations presented by the environment. There is a need to discover one's body and what it can do. There is a desire to be independent and not have to rely on the skills of others. A child's view of himself is linked to the number of skills in his knapsack. It is the key to social mobility. There is a natural appetite for skill and this appetite can be either satisfied or starved.

At the primary school stage the programme content is now highly appropriate, much better than ever before, but the general level of expertise in the teaching of physical education at primary level gives great cause for concern. Initial training of primary school teachers rarely reaches an acceptable level, with some students receiving no training in this aspect of education. Also, because of erosion of advisory staff, in-service training cannot be offered in the depth needed by teachers. In many areas in-service training in primary P.E. is non-existent.

For the secondary school stage pupils will find that all the teachers of the subject are specialists and the facilities for physical education are generally very good. In the absence of a national curriculum, schemes of work can vary from school to school as long as they meet the requirements of the heads, parents, the local authority and H.M.I.

Since P.E. is largely non-examinational, then one might think that teachers would be free to devise the most suitable programme to meet the needs of their pupils but this is rarely the case. P.E. grew from elitist roots. Schools were judged by their academic and sporting achievements and heads pursued visible trophies letting the Devil take the hindmost. Some heads and parents still judge the quality of a school's P.E. by the trophies acquired by teams and individuals with the Devil still taking the hindmost. Maybe one in five pupils fall into the elite category yet all programmes were structured to meet their needs. The remaining pupils were short changed. Individuals still have just one body to carry them through life but there has been so little opportunity of understanding the elements of skill and fitness.

Happily within the past few years the scene has changed for the better. The old values have been questioned and the new generation of heads have been among the first to query traditional practices. Similarly the new age of physical educationists has begun to devise programmes that will meet the needs of the widest spectrum of pupils, from the unskilful to the very gifted.

The effective P.E. programme in the secondary school begins by compensating for what has probably not happened in the primary school, providing for the skill hunger that still remains. In enjoyable learning situations pupils become aware that they too can become skilful and discover the pleasure of moving skilfully. Gymnastics, games, athletics, swimming and dance, still form the core of the work for the first three years but the modern approaches aim to give all pupils a range of useful skills while preparing the ground for health and fitness with real understanding. For senior pupils the programme aims to meet individual tastes, introducing

them to a wider range of optional activities. Sadly the very attractive options programmes of a few years ago have now had to be restricted because of cutback in staffing.

The Age of Leisure had been predicted for a decade or more but no-one expected it to arrive for so many people through massive unemployment. People confronted by leisure need skills to enhance the quality of their lives. Such skills come from a relevant education curriculum, particularly skills in the creative arts, as well as in sports, games or the ability to lead a physically active life-style. Perhaps not everyone can be a capable performer in these areas but everyone is capable of learning how to appreciate the skill of other people.

In spite of the severe economic restrictions of the present time I believe that this is a stimulating period for education, a time when all concerned are intent on making the curriculum highly relevant and I find it satisfying to note the real contribution being made by physical education.