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Unanimity of view about education does not exist. This will surprise no-one. The same can be said about most if not all areas of interest and concern. We cannot even agree on what we mean by education, let alone on its effects.

There are those who talk of having graduated from the University of Life - by implication decrying the benefits of formal instruction. Perhaps nothing teaches as effectively as personal experience, but progress will be fitful and uncertain if it depends on this only.

The Latin root is 'educere' - to lead or draw from; but how much time is spent on instilling information into rather than encouraging the development of innate abilities and skills? Indeed, how could it be otherwise? We cannot keep inventing the wheel. "No man is entire of himself - we are all part of the main". We cannot and should not operate in a vacuum regardless of the work of others.

There is no implicit contradiction in providing a basis of received information, of learning tables by rote, on which the pupil can build, which provides the essential nutrients on which he can thrive and develop. This is in no way to diminish the valuable role of interesting and relevant practical work.

We have rightly a healthy scepticism of the expert; but at the frontiers of knowledge we need the specialist, dedicated to his limited field.

That concerns the margin. For the majority there still exists the conflict between the romantic and utilitarian views. One is broad, even grandiose; the other specific, perhaps even mundane.

H. G. Wells saw human history as "more and more a race between education and catastrophe". Lord Brougham, on a less melancholy note, saw education as making a people "easy to govern, but impossible to enslave". I suspect few will disagree with the second part of Brougham's proposition even if there are reservations about the first.

History abounds with examples where increased standards of education have led to increased levels of dissatisfaction and strife. Intellectuals are perhaps prone to exaggerate the revolutionary role of philosophers, political theorists, students and others with intellectual pretensions. In practice, any broad-based education enhances the capacity to question, whether or not it is given the rationale of a particular credo.

Awakening consciousness may be thought of as the bright side - although the results may be unpredictable.

The dark side is indoctrination whether by selective omission or positive propaganda. The Jesuits were supposed to have said, "Give me the boy until he is 7. I will give you the man." By the age of 7 the process (of indoctrination) was complete. Dryden neatly put it:

"By education most have been misled;
So they believe, because they so were bred.
The priest continues what the nurse began,
And then the child imposes on the man."

Many, probably most, parents see education less in terms of shaping the world than in children acquiring the necessary qualifications for a 'good' job. Understandable enough, particularly when unemployment is so high. Their views are reinforced by employers lamenting the quality of school leavers and advocating greater emphasis on vocational training.

The needs of the working world cannot be ignored. The decline in the status of engineers since Victorian days is misguided. Yet - quite apart from the enforced leisure of unemployment - the average person's free time has increased. Quality of life is not easily measured. It is not just about home and working conditions and holidays abroad. For all but the destitute and starving, it has as much to do with spiritual or mental matters as with physical. The uplift which can come from a moving musical, literary or theatrical experience adds much to the quality of life, even if much sand has to be sifted to find the gold. Education which does not at least open the door to an appreciation of such delights is incomplete.

Parental influence in our schools is increasing. Will that influence be conservative, in favour of the traditional rather than the novel? Will it lead to a more vocational regime?

First signs are that, far from being obstructive, parent governors are well-meaning, but unsure of their position and generally ineffective.

I have no fear for the outcome. It must be right to involve parents. That will not stop initiatives, but will require the professionals to persuade rather than decide.