

To me, education is a process by which an individual is encouraged to grow. Does the education system in our society achieve this? I believe not. In fact, I believe that in most cases the individual is stunted by our system.

The principal reason, which I shall develop in some detail, is that for many people (including, I suspect, many educators) education is a process by which an individual is fitted into society. Of course there is not necessarily a contradiction between these two definitions - if society were such as to encourage its component individuals to grow then the two viewpoints would mesh nicely together. Does our society encourage us to grow? No. We are told to conform and consume, and the decision not to obey requires courage and determination.

So the conflict is this. Do we design an education system which encourages each individual to develop in her own way, in the full knowledge that her subsequent life will be that of an outsider, or do we instead train people to be conformist consumers? Again, it may be that there is no difficulty here, and that the overwhelming majority of people only have the potential to turn into automata. This thought is so depressing that I shall assume otherwise.

To talk of "designing" an education system is, of course, to dream. Our system was never designed, it evolved in response to a variety of pressures. But what does it actually do, then? How does it manage its astonishing success in antisocialisation? How do you teach people not to rock the boat, or, even better, not to even think of rocking the boat? Which techniques most effectively deprive people of all their self-confidence and critical ability, so that they apathetically accept their lot and automatically consume whatever the television tells them to?

Well, it is all quite clever, really. Young people are herded together in large authoritarian institutions, put into uniforms, told to compete, and then assessed and graded like eggs. If they object in any way the message is clear: "the system is far too powerful for you to change, and besides you are not mature enough to have worthwhile opinions yet". There are many other, equally nasty, messages. I will cite three:

- (1) "if you toe the line we will give you privileges and coopt you into the system as a non-commissioned officer",
- (2) "learning needs teaching", and
- (3) "if you succeed here you will get a job".

This last one is exquisitely ironic in a time of mass unemployment. The whole school environment (commuting, punctuality, breaks, supervised work, authority, and promotion) is that of a factory. To pretend that school can prepare people for the dole is therefore a cruel deception. Is it any wonder that those on the dole get depressed and feel that their lives are wasted? (In fact, of course, the very reverse is true - few jobs offer anything more than a planned way in which to waste your life.)

If you want to train people for the dole you need to give them confidence in themselves. No system which demands competition (and therefore failures) and insists that learning needs teaching (and therefore teachers) will ever produce people who can find meaning in everyday life unaided. On the other hand a system whose definition of education is closer to the one with which I started this essay has a far better chance of producing people who know themselves well enough to be able to live a happy life without being defined by a job.

But how is this definition of education to be put into practice? First of all it is essential to realise that a teacher cannot also be a policeman. Only if there is no element of coercion in the teacher/taught relationship can the two people negotiate a reasonable contract together. What do I mean by a contract? I mean that the pupil decides what she wants to study, and the teacher decides what she can teach, and the two of them try to match their respective aspirations and abilities. What does it mean to "teach", though? So far I have glossed over this point, only referring to the dreadful way in which people are given the impression that learning needs teaching.

To me a teacher is somebody who listens very carefully to the pupils, widens the pupil's horizons by suggesting new avenues of research and encourages the pupil in her struggles. The pupil is helped to grasp the essentials of the subject under consideration by provocative questioning from the teacher. In this way the teacher will gradually be able to render herself unnecessary, which is one of the objects of the exercise.

Only teachers of this sort, working in a non-authoritarian system, will be able to encourage people to

achieve their potential. This new sort of "school" would help people

- (1) to realise that a job is not their only goal (particularly if it is a mindless job in a destructive industry),
- (2) to have the self-confidence to challenge authority and develop autonomously, and
- (3) to appreciate that education is for life, and life is to be lived, not tamed.