A Woman's Eye View

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I am a mature student at Plymouth Polytechnic, Faculty of Social Science.

Given the length of this paper (approximately 1000 words), what follows can only be perceived as a cursory account of my views on education. I will begin by giving a brief background of my life's experience, which will reflect these views.

I was born and brought up in a third world country. Due to the economic climate I was deprived of a secondary education. On my arrival in England, at the age of 15 years, I was accepted at a Convent School to study for one year. At the end of this period, I left school with 'O' levels (2), RSA's and typing certificates. I subsequently gained one more 'O' level as a day release student.

I entered nursing school at age 18 years (S.R.N. training) and was forced to abandon my training when I decided to marry and have children. In those days, nursing was a 'vocation' demanding almost total dedication. A transfer to another Health Authority needed special dispensation, and was very rare. After 5 years I returned to nursing, completed a one-year practical and became a State Enrolled Nurse. I then worked as a 'night nurse' for several years. For most of this time I was given the responsibility of being in charge of the ward allocated to me. Nevertheless, State Enrolled Nursing is a second rate training with no future prospects.

I am now a single parent with two teenage children. This seemed the appropriate time to restructure my life. I approached the Director of Nurse Education, informally, with a view to undertaking a conversion course offered to S.E.N.'s who wanted to further their careers. The S.R.N. qualification was the first stage in this process. I was refused this opportunity as I did not have sufficient "certificated knowledge" which could be turned into a viable commodity. The fact that I had the skills, proven ability and necessary experience was beside the point. I was so angered by this attitude that I kicked against the system and went into higher education. My decision to take the BASPA/- DCW course was a positive move, as I have no doubt it will enable me to continue to work with people in a constructive way.

Because of my personal experience, I see the problems with the education system as sexist, racist, class orientated and sadly lacking in community co-operation. Within this bureaucratic process, children are taught to conform and how to be competitive. However, on leaving school some children are unable to cope with life as they have not been prepared for the harsh reality of unemployment.

Whether we like it or not, formal schooling is here to stay. It lays the foundation for future learning resources, without which it would be difficult to grasp the complexity of the technical age we have moved into.

Although I accept that most of our learning is done outside of the classroom, I disagree with writers such as Ivan Illich, who advocate de-schooling. The notion that individuals should be responsible for their own de-schooling, i.e. to be able to choose their own time for learning, is far from an egalitarian system. The beneficiaries would be the middle and upper classes. Most working class people in our society would not have the same opportunities. Due to economic pressures they are forced into the labour market at a very early age. If they are fortunate enough to get employment it is usually unskilled and more often than not part-time. The de-schooled utopia would never come, not least because the idea has arisen from and is dependent upon those who have emerged from the formal education system. It reinforces the loyalty of teachers of the existing school system and in many respects can be seen as counter-productive.

In reconstructing the education system, I feel that positive discrimination in the employment of women and blacks in higher salaried posts and the employment of non stereotyped staff in all departments would constitute role models of enormous significance. Despite the Sexual Discrimination Act, women are still being discriminated against. In education, the scales system operates against them if they leave work to have children, or work part-time, thus preventing female teachers from rising to the highest administrative positions. The provision of creche facilities would help to overcome this problem. At present, the majority of teachers in primary schools are women, which reinforces gender stereotypes, that it is a woman's role to care for young children, whilst headmasters take on managerial positions. Even in secondary education, with the exception of single-sex schools, women teachers tend to do traditionally female subjects such as home economics and art subjects whilst men predominantly male subjects, e.g. maths, physics and technical drawing.

I feel that equal opportunities in schools will not only benefit the teachers but will also help in the overall development of the boys and girls they teach.

In the inner cities, children of West Indian origin are seen as under-achievers. A number of Saturday schools and self-help projects were set up to provide supplementary education, with more black teachers in what has been termed Education Priority areas, e.g. Lewisham, London; Saturdays could be used for extra

curricular activities. Black children are as capable of learning as white children. Even in Plymouth, for example, my son (the only black child in his school) was unable to read at age eight and a half. I approached the acting head to discuss the matter. He told me, rather flippantly, "Some kids are born with it and some aren't." (This may not have been a racist remark; however, I felt that it reflected certain attitudes directed at certain children.) I subsequently taught my son to read in six weeks, much to the school's astonishment. He has recently sat 7 'O' levels and is staying on to take 'A' levels.

There is a need for community development work, not only for ethnic minorities in the inner cities, but any area of social deprivation. Schools have a number of resources which could be utilised to provide community education, e.g. adult literacy, evening classes - recreational or otherwise - and play schemes for the under 11's.

On placement recently, in conversation with a Primary School headmaster, I asked his views on community work. He replied that his job is a type of community work, that is, preparing the children for a place in the community at a later date. I was rather perturbed by this remark as he had repeatedly refused the use of "his" school for summer playschemes. The aim of the playscheme is to enable local people to help themselves by organising and running activities for their children collectively. Surely a headmaster who is sympathetic to community needs would be more effective in his work. A little co-operation on his part could only enhance the relationship between parents, teachers and pupils. Schools are very resourceful and should not be seen as a separate entity. In the broadest sense they should be seen as part of the community as a whole, offering formal education, playschemes, Saturday school, self-help projects, etc.

"At the highest level of generality we must consider the ultimate consequences of educational processes for the quality of individual life and aid for the whole nature of the society of which the school is part."
(1)

Conclusion

At present I feel that the inadequacies of the education system could be improved by encouraging equal opportunities for teachers and pupils alike.

Learning is a continuous process and although I believe in the formal education system I feel that education should be openended. Individuals who have "missed out" on education at an earlier age should have the opportunity to "catch up" if they so choose. I consider myself very fortunate to have entered higher education when I did, for with continual cuts in education, places for mature students will inevitably decline.

1. Culture, Ideology and Knowledge, p. 8.

Bibliography

1. Culture, Ideology and Knowledge; O.U. Press, Course E203.
2. De-Schooling; Ivan Illich.
3. The Education of the Black Child in Britain; Maureen Stone.
4. The Feminist Reconstruction of the School; Jane Marshal (working paper), University of York.