

# OF SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

BY MARY WARNOCK

SCHOOL IS for education, whatever the ability or age of the pupil. Education, properly so-called, must always look to the future and must supply children with something they will need, and would not have if they had not been to school. The goal of education is life *after* education. This does not mean that education must be narrowly vocational. School education need not equip children to cook cordon bleu meals; but it should teach them how to read a recipe (or anything else): how to weigh, measure, and adapt quantities and be intelligently critical of the instructions they are given. It should give them that upon which specific expertise can be built. Children cannot be taught how to form adult views; but they should be taught how to distinguish well-founded views from prejudices, good arguments from bad. The facts children learn at school will be forgotten; the opinions they hold will change. But that they can do something they couldn't do before is the proof that they are really being educated; and this is true whether the new skill is as complicated as building an airplane or as simple as tying shoelaces.

But we must regard school not merely as a place for acquiring new skills but as a social environment on its own, the first that most children become familiar with, after their own homes. It is at school that, for the first time, a child exists as an equal with contemporaries. Whatever we may be told about the responsibility of the family for moral education, there is no doubt that it is at school that most children learn that they must adapt their behavior to rules and conventions, that fairness is a fundamental value, and that individuals have no right to make exceptions for themselves. Each child must learn how he or she ought to behave and what behavior—bullying, aggression or dishonesty—will not be tolerated in the school environment. And so the teacher is a teacher of individuals, even if she spends most of her time facing a class. The impact she makes on a child is essentially that of one person on another. No amount of sophisticated electronics, no amount of distance teaching, useful though these may be for certain specific tasks, will ever be a substitute for the human interchange between the teacher and the individual pupil. It is a

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heavy responsibility for the teacher, one that requires confidence and deserves respect.

The teacher must be, professionally speaking, an optimist, an individualist, and a believer in free will. This is implicit in the nature of education itself. A teacher seeks not to change the circumstances which make up the world of a child, but to open up a whole new world to be explored. The teacher is not obliged to think of children as formed by their families, or income brackets, but simply as themselves, able ultimately to take responsibility for their own improvement, capable of learning that, with effort, they "could do better." This schoolteacher's jargon, so irritating to parents when it appears on the end-of-term report, actually encapsulates the teacher's philosophy. People can, if they will, help themselves along the educational road. Nobody need be without hope. When a teacher first encounters a child, she should be able to put out of her mind anything she may know about the child—who the child's parents are, how much of a nuisance the child's older sister was, that the child has been on probation. The teacher should strive to regard pupils as persons in their own right, able, if treated rightly, to learn, to understand, "to do better." A teacher should be ready to be surprised. She should never say, "Here is a child from a broken home, expect trouble." The optimism involved in teaching is precisely that you never know how far your pupils may go. I am not saying that teachers should be kept in ignorance of their pupils' social circumstances. I am saying that the teacher's particular professionalism consists in being able to regard a pupil as a free agent, not wholly determined by circumstances.

So the professional relation of the teacher must be, first and foremost, with the child, not with the child's parents or family or background. For the child coming to school is being offered the chance to start again, to be a new, independent, different person, no longer bound by the chains of his situation. And this is as true of the child from a prosperous home as for the child of deprivation. I well remember myself the joy and freedom of school, happy though I was at home. But at home I was the youngest of a family where success and good sense were expected. To be "schoolgirlish" was to merit contempt. At school there were no such constraints. There was nothing to stop me giggling with my friends, being enthusiastically religious, or getting a crush on my Latin teacher, all of which I did. At school, all equally have the opportunity of experimenting and trying out a new world. This is the function of education. □