

What is the outlook for education in the United Kingdom? Is it to be an increasingly uneasy truce between a demoralised teaching force and a disillusioned generation of young people living in an increasingly divided Britain?

It would require a rare optimist to argue that will not be the reality of the next few years. What, then, can teachers do to improve the situation, or indeed how can they continue to operate and retain their sanity when their actions are scrutinised and criticised from all sides?

At present, the employers are seeking to link increases in pay with clearly defined contractual obligations. To attempt to clarify this hazy, ambiguous and contentious subject seems to me, and I am sure to most parents and to the electorate, an eminently sensible thing to do. At a time when the miners look like losing their battle with the government, it seems absurd for the teachers' leaders to imagine that they can do better.

The miners will lose because they have failed to convince all their own members and other workers that what they are fighting for is sensible, or desirable. People who have seen colleagues and competitors lose their jobs when the things they produce cannot be sold are unlikely to agree to their taxes being used to dig coal that can only be sold at a loss.

Teachers are very suspicious of efforts to clear up their conditions of service. Their leaders' reluctance to negotiate on this will be seen by the rest of society as foolish and unrealistic. Whatever the merits of their case for extra pay teachers cannot expect public sympathy and support unless they negotiate realistically on this issue.

Instead of adopting a hostile posture to the clarification of terms of service, teachers and their leaders should welcome this opportunity to examine and discuss the role of the teachers and with the help of the media to involve the whole of society in a way not previously possible.

The miners' strike has caused huge financial losses, but it is an event from which progress in many areas may follow. Every day for nearly a year the arguments of both sides have been subjected to intense public scrutiny. Education is a subject of great public interest; a public debate on it is assured of similar scrutiny. I think that strike action by teachers is likely to have as little effect as that achieved by other groups of workers. The money that is lost by striking teachers would be better spent engaging Saatchi and Saatchi and other media manipulators to present the teachers' case to the public and to seek a rational solution to the basic problem. That problem is simple but all-embracing - what does society want from its educational system, and what is the role of the teachers?

The position of the teacher in the U.K. is different from that in all other countries and many of the differences are attributable to influences from that uniquely English institution - the Public School. The social prestige enjoyed by these schools has led to many aspects of their organisation and curriculum being imitated or transferred to other schools. When parents pay a school large sums to look after, care for and educate their offspring there is some measure of congruence of expectations and obligations. This is much less so, especially in large secondary schools.

What happens when a pupil fails to produce 'work' set by the teacher? In some schools the teacher knows that the parents not only expect the 'work' to be set, but expect the school to ensure that the 'work' is done and to as high as standard as possible. An implicit part of the teacher's job, then, is to encourage, but if necessary to impel, pupils to do good work. The teacher can invoke a variety of sanctions, including physical punishment, to enforce compliance to his wishes. In doing so, he knows he is performing the role accepted by him, his pupil, the parents and the school.

When a teacher is operating in a school where this clear acceptance of shared values, objectives, and the means to pursue them is not valid, there is conflict, 'indiscipline', and stress. That, unfortunately, is the situation most teachers find themselves in today.

This situation has existed for some time, it is getting worse and the rate is increasing. In the past, teachers could blame the Headteacher for being too weak or too remote or too something else, but at least the scapegoat was identifiable and visible. It is generally recognised that Headteachers are no longer the powerful players in the educational drama they used to be. Indeed their position is even less enviable in many ways than the teachers in 'their' schools.

As the power of the Headteacher has declined, governors and parents have been encouraged to take a greater interest in what is going on in schools and to exercise more influence in their running. The effective removal of the Headteacher as a buffer between teachers, parents and the L.E.A. has resulted in a growing feeling of isolation and vulnerability in teachers. It is hardly surprising that teachers feel that their efforts are

not understood or sufficiently valued by society.

The low morale of teachers has more to do with self-doubt, lack of public esteem, frustration and stress than low pay.

No progress can be made to improve the present situation unless there is a thorough-going debate involving all interested parties in education. If it does take place with full exposure by the media, the debate is certain to be a lengthy one.

There are two questions which are particularly important. The first involves the content of the school curriculum. Can the educational establishment accept that the present one is totally inappropriate for young people today and tackle in a realistic way the problem of replacing it with one which has more relevance at a time when a quarter of school leavers do not find any employment opportunities?

The second involves the role of the teacher and especially his relationship with his pupils. Is the teacher to be perceived by his pupils as part of an authority structure which prepares him to accept his allotted place in society, or is the relationship to be one which encourages questioning even that of his own motives, ideas and actions?