

**WHAT IS
EDUCATION?**

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What is education? by Stanley Leathes

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STANLEY LEATHES

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BY

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TO
MY MOTHER

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PREFACE

It is written that there was once an undergraduate named Simkins who wearied his acquaintances with such questions as these—"Why were we born? Whither are we tending? Have we innate conceptions?"—until they said when they spied him in the offing: "Why was Simkins born? Is he tending hither? Has he an innate conception that he is a bore?" In asking—What is Education?—I may appear to imitate Simkins. Is there not an *Educational Supplement* of the *Times*? Is there not an Educational Section of the British Association? Are there not educational series and educational experts? Is there not a great educational enthusiasm, a great educational discontent? Then, how can there be any doubt as to what education may be? Yet—at the risk of sharing Simkins' fate—I have been impelled to ask this question and to answer it as best I could; and, having answered it, to consider some of the ends which public, purposeful education should serve: in the elementary school and after, in the secondary school, and at the University.

The results of education have been reviewed and found wanting by Principal Griffiths, in an address

to the British Association. With many of his conclusions I agree, but he appears to attribute our disappointments wholly or mainly to defects in the system or the teachers. I lay much of the blame elsewhere. The results of education depend chiefly upon six factors: the capacities of the children when born, the influence of the parents, the material environment, the formative pressure of society, the system of public education, and the teachers. Deliberate, purposeful, public education can in course of time do something indirectly to modify parents, environment, society; but at any moment these and the raw material are beyond our power to alter; public education is largely devised to remedy the consequences of their defects. The problem of education is therefore as extensive as the whole problem of society, and cannot, except for purposes of limited discussion, be treated as if only the system and the teachers were concerned. The moment any question of practice arises some or all of the other four must be taken into account.

wisdom No system can be so good as that which in the sapience of our seclusion or our debates we may comfortably imagine. Put supernal wisdom to direct the policy of the Board of Education; yet that wisdom would have to filter through the channel of official communications and official machinery before it could begin—flat and diluted—to influence local authorities and the people who teach. Centralised wisdom is useful; but education is not carried on in Whitehall; it is carried on in the home and the school. To command an

army you have to give the right orders and ensure that they are obeyed; to govern education by giving orders from a central office would be disastrous. The local authorities may not see so clearly as Principal Griffiths, but they are as good as the society which elects them knows how to procure. Invent the best, the most varied, the most elastic courses of study; equip them with all appliances that heart can desire; you will still be at the mercy of social influences. Lengthen the period of compulsion, and you have to reckon with the nature of the educands, most of whom, as Principal Griffiths observes, are not fitted to profit much by academic instruction. Shorten the period of compulsion, and you appoint the world as school-master, a harsh and careless pedagogue. Every practical problem appears insoluble when stated in words; every practical problem can be somehow solved, with time, thought, experience, good will, and perseverance. I see no ground for despondency; forty years is a short time in the history of a nation. The effects of public education are cumulative; in a sense every generation starts where the last left off.

It is comforting to observe that some of the remedial principles propounded by Principal Griffiths have already been adopted. He suggests that we should work for character rather than learning; that the natural desire for knowledge should be stimulated, whereas it is too often extinguished by teaching; that the Board of Education should not impose uniformity. All these principles have been accepted: it is easier