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Some Thoughts on
Private School Education

by N. WESTCOTT

IT is natural — and right — that parents want their children to have the best education possible. Unfortunately factors like finance, physical or mental handicaps and transport difficulties often limit the choice of schools, but since I was lucky enough to have four normal daughters and also to be able to afford the cost of private school fees, I had a completely free choice as to whether my family would be educated at Government or Private School.

I, myself, had been educated at a Private School, but that did not mean that I believed that my children should automatically follow in my footsteps — initially, I thought there was a great deal to be said for a Government Junior School training, to be followed by five years in a Private Senior School. My reasons for this were several:—

1. I thought my children would benefit from meeting and mixing with children from all kinds of homes and not just those of a fairly similar level, such as one finds in our Private Schools.
2. There was a Government Co-Educational Junior School within easy reach of my house and I thought there were several advantages to be gained for my four daughters if they learnt to mix and work with boys as well as girls.
3. I wanted my children to grow up as good South Africans and I thought they would possibly have a better opportunity, intially, of making friends among our different groups, if they went to a Government School.

As all parents do, I asked my friends and acquaintances who had children at this school, whether they were satisfied with its education, and it soon became apparent that the difficulties and weaknesses which they were experiencing applied to Government Schools in general. One also spoke to teachers at both Government and Private Schools and made enquiries generally about education. Very soon I realised, that, if I were to give my daughters the best possible education I must send them to a Private and not a Government School. The reasons for this decision were varied, and one hopes that most of them are only temporary. However, they were — and still are — valid, and they give rise to a feeling of general uneasiness about education in Government Schools.

Mr. Westcott is a parent whose interests in Education are shown in this article. He is one of the many who give time and thought to improving our schools.

First and foremost of my reasons was the benefit for my children of being taught in small classes. The individual attention which teachers could give if they had only twenty pupils to handle, outweighed the possible benefits of a mixed class which was overcrowded. I did not — and do not — think that any teacher can fulfil the duties of teaching if there are forty or more children to control, some quick, some slow, some co-operative, some antagonistic. Surely the bright child must be held back while the slow child struggles to keep up? The Private School offered small, well controlled classes and on the sporting side, it offered opportunity for each child to have organised games on pleasant uncrowded sports fields.

Secondly, the Private School offered specialist staff in fields which I considered important in the general education of any child — a qualified speech teacher; a trained music mistress who taught children the joys of listening to music and understanding it and not merely singing songs in class; gym and games mistresses who had the time to concentrate on all aspects of physical development in an uncrowded gymnasium and on adequate tennis courts and hockey fields and in a large swimming bath; a trained art mistress.

Arising out of the private school atmosphere created by small classes and the generous ratio of staff to pupils were many benefits. Teachers had the time and the opportunity to concentrate on

the all-round education of pupils and not merely academic success. Small classes fostered more intimate relationships and teachers could guide and develop personality, initiative, self-control and social responsibility because they had the time and opportunity to do so. Weaker children had the benefit of individual attention, brighter children were encouraged to go beyond the limits of syllabus and necessity.

The Private School offered the advantages of a "House" system which could be developed to the full. Children learnt team spirit and the need to think of others and work for the good of all — instead of having to live within the unavoidable restrictions imposed by shortages of staff, inadequate room, overcrowded playing-fields.

I found too, that the Private School could give a healthy religious background to the lives of its pupils. My investigations showed that tolerance was the keynote of this aspect of the school. Although the underlying factor was Christianity, there was tolerance of the religion of others, and girls who did not belong to the Church of the majority, were not singled out or rebuked or criticised. The emphasis was on good behaviour, consideration for others, respect for different views, the need for co-operation generally, the right for each person to have her own opinions provided she was not offensive over them.

In a nut-shell, I realised that the Private School offered the broadest possible education for my daughters. Academically they were taught by teachers trained in their subjects; on the physical side they were in the hands of experts who had the time and facilities to devote specialist attention to all; on the religious side, there was a healthy approach; on the artistic and musical sides there was opportunity for the children to learn and appreciate some of the graces of life, and, the system adopted by the Private School encouraged its pupils to mix freely together and to develop poise and initiative.

The atmosphere of the Private Schools impressed me enormously. One was conscious of the good manners and the friendly, but respectful attitude of the children. They seemed happy and proud of their school and the spaciousness of it created pleasant working conditions. The pupils thoroughly enjoyed the 'extras' which they were offered — concerts, plays, handwork exhibitions, hobbies and clubs where they could learn photographhpy, weaving and the like.

There was a fair proportion of healthy competition, but at the same time, girls were taught that to help and encourage their weaker fellows was the right way to temper academic and sporting success. Parents too, were able to keep in close contact with the staff, because of the small numbers which teachers had to handle, and I was conscious of the well-knit organisation which enabled parents, staff and girls to take an interest in everything which went on in the life of the school.

The one doubt which one possibly had — that of a "snobbish" atmosphere — was soon dispelled. The Private Schools teach their children tolerance and they also teach them to shoulder responsibility. They aim to turn out sensible, reliable citizens and the record which they look back on with just pride, shows that they succeed well and truly in their task. They make every effort for their pupils to mix with children from other schools; they encourage debates and discussions with people of different views; they organise visits to institutions of historical and social interest. In fact, they try to turn out good South Africans who are 'educated' and not merely 'taught'. I, for one, am certain that the few "snobs" who come from Private Schools suffer from the handicap of "snobbish" parents and that the schools do everything possible to remedy their misfortune!

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