In common with all countries in the world, the size of the enterprise of education in England has, in the years since the war, increased with explosive force. The rise in the birth rate and the fall in infant mortality have played a significant, but probably not the major part in this increase. During the last ten years the numbers of pupils in maintained schools has risen by 658,000 or 11 per cent. In the next few years it will rise much more rapidly – perhaps nearly twice as fast. The important point about this increase has not been the size which, though substantial, was modest by comparison with most other countries, but that it was almost wholly unexpected. The educational plans which were drawn up in the last year of the war were based on the figures of the inter-war birth-rate and a demographic projection which postulated a largely stable population with at most a mild and passing increase. The size of the increase, and perhaps even more, its continuing high level undoubtedly retarded progress towards the goals of the 1944 Act.

At least as important, however, has been the increase in numbers staying on in school beyond the level of compulsory education. In 1954, there were 340,000 children aged 15 and over in school. By 1965 this had more than doubled to 775,000. Partly this is a reflection of the growing realisation that the educational system is now probably the most important means of distributing life chances in the society. Partly it is that education creates its own demand; parents almost always want their children to have as much education as they themselves received, and normally want more. Finally the lengthening of the period of schooling is obviously related to the explosion of knowledge and the increasing complexity of the social and technical skills which each individual must acquire. All this expansion is clearly reflected in costs. Public expenditure on education in 1964–5 amounted to 1,578.6 million pounds or 5.4 per cent of the G.N.P., compared with 559.8 millions in 1954–5. There were in January, 1965 over 8 million children in school and some 369,000 teachers. In summary, education is now by far the largest single occupation in the country. Taking those teaching and those taught, it absorbs between one fifth and one sixth of the total population.

All this accelerates change. For example, secondary education is now a different kind of process than even before the last war. Adding numbers ultimately produces a qualitative as well as a quantitative change.
Selection is a principle even more than a technique and elites are always minorities. Thus, though some of the current trends in English education are the result of deliberate policies, implemented in the light of new insights, new research or new social ideals, others are the outcome of pressures created by a process of explosive growth.

Nursery Education

The 1944 Education Act required Local Education Authorities to "have regard to the need for securing that provision is made for pupils who have not attained the age of five years by the provision of nursery schools." 1) In spite of a later circular drawing attention to it, 2) this requirement has so far been little implemented. In 1950 there were about 21,000 children in state provided nursery schools and classes. The latest figures for January, 1965 show a total of just over 38,000. As a percentage of the age group this is barely more than constant. The reasons for this neglect have been shortage of staff, of resources generally and perhaps a feeling that with a compulsory age which is the lowest in the world, the need for such provision was relatively small. This position shows some signs of changing at the present time. To an increasingly widespread belief in the social value of pre-school experience has been added the need to secure the return of married women teachers to the profession as early as possible. It would probably be unfair to suggest that the latter consideration has been the more powerful motive in prompting Local Authorities to a consideration of their responsibilities under the Act. But it is certainly true that more attention has been given to nursery school provision since married, part-time women teachers have been accepted as an essential part of the staffing of schools. This tendency will be reinforced by the strong recommendation of the Plowden Committee that an early start should be made to the provision of nursery education for at least 15 per cent of all children between the ages of three and that of compulsory schooling. As a spur to the Government the Committee points out that in no country which they visited was nursery provision as meagre as in England. 3)

1) Education Act 1944. Section 8. Subsection 2(b).
2) Circular 8/60 Addendum 2.
3) Children and their Primary Schools. (The Plowden Report) H.M.S.O. 1967. The Report was published after this article was in the press. It has therefore only been possible at this stage to incorporate the Report's recommendations on points previously selected for discussion.