

Kaveh Ahmadianteherani  
Former Student, College  
of Further Education,  
Sociology and Economics

My personal experience of education has been mixed. I have been to schools in three different countries, spending the majority and final years, in England. I was never happy in my work at school, but compensated for this outside the classroom and in the absence of teachers.

I came back to England in 1979. I didn't start a full curriculum until the September of that year. I joined a private school, one which I had attended for a time some five years previously. I found that having come from a far more intensive system of education, I had already covered most of what was taught to me, with the exception of English, French and History. I actively participated in lessons but found the homework a tedious affair. The second year at this school proved to be the most fruitful of my whole education, but at the same time I was increasingly aware of the money-making motive of the school, and also I felt that I had outgrown the attitude and protective environment of the school. Increasingly it occurred to me that the other children there were in some way removed from the real world or were there for reasons of prestige. I didn't like to think of myself as belonging to either of these groups; I knew that the reality of life could come to me one day and I felt increasingly uncomfortable in the neuroticism which had started to take hold of my particular year.

By this time my English had reached an acceptable level. During that summer I sat the thirteen-plus examination. I passed and was offered the choice of three schools. I chose a technical school - there was a tendency for practicality in my decision making. When I arrived at the school, no-one wanted to know. Immediately I was placed in all the lower groups; for all my efforts that summer I might as well have gone to a secondary school. Another point of error on the school's behalf was to put me in the 4th year. I never went through a 3rd year of secondary education. This would have been all right if I had kept to the academic subjects, but I took a number of specialised sciences, in which I fell a long way behind. There was no-one of any authority to advise me on these matters, and my parents, being relatively new to the education system in this country, were in no position to judge either. So I was bottom pupil in the bottom groups. Added to this was the new system to cope with and new peer groups to deal with, which was no easy task. I soon lost my footing and became despondent in the work. From there the labelling theory took over. This did not simply apply to me, but also to many others, and teachers' bias also came into play in a mild form for many of us. The only teachers who took a serious interest in me were my English teacher and Geography teachers; the others soon gave up when they saw that I may become a blemish on the score sheet of examination passes. Rather than look into the problem, they made excuses for me and themselves. I was never happy about being labelled as having difficulty in learning.

That extra year of teaching may have made a whole lot of difference to my attainment at school. Whilst I was ahead of other pupils in the second year, I had not gone beyond that year. In effect I did one year twice and missed the next stage of my education. The reason for my placing in the fourth year instead of the third year, is due to my birth date. From what I gather I qualified for the fourth year by a matter of days. I hadn't come across the word "bureaucracy" at that time in my life! In fact I was quite flattered to have been put a year ahead of others my age, and I firmly believed that being in the bottom groups would only be a temporary thing. I was wrong.

At first it was only the sciences which suffered, as they were in the main alien to me anyway. Later, as the year came to an end, I found myself covering new ground which the other pupils had already covered, and who found the work easier. Looking back, it was at this time that I became despondent about the work. Only my English Language survived.

The last year of school was good fun. By this time, I had resigned myself to failure. I did not pass in any great number of homework pieces and no-one cared. I was not a disruptive pupil, in fact I was better mannered than some of the teachers, so they let me "get on with it." I was put in for C.S.E. exams for all my subjects and I duly failed them, except for my English and Geography, and perhaps Art - the only thing certain about that topic is that I would have had a better pass if the teacher had not thrown out my folder within three weeks of the exam.

I am glad to know now that those exams did not set an irreversible path for my future, as the teachers had preached to us. As I know now, in case of failure apply to the College of Further Education and do any five 'O' levels, from scratch, in one year, cost free. This was something that the teachers kept from me, and I don't remember ever seeing a Careers Officer at school.

The one thing that I did study in class was the behaviour of the teachers. The majority of them were more confused than the pupils. Being an all-boys' school, things like patronisation and timidity, or even "over courteous" behaviour were noticed and utilised. Some teachers were provoked into tempers, and we watched them, rather like a toddler having a tantrum. Some of them had nervous breakdowns. I still wonder if they

were qualified for their jobs, under the same education system. Probably my favourite teacher was the English teacher, probably due to the fact that on the first day he hit the boy next to me for saying the word "yeh" instead of yes. He was the only teacher to take an interest in things outside the subject and the only teacher who was not made fun of; he didn't even have a nickname. He made it clear that he was a no-nonsense sort of person, which I admired. There was no pretence about the status quo, he didn't like us and we were filling in time, and we'd all be better off if it weren't for the exams.

The odd thing about school, and even in further education, is the common dislike of examinations. There are several reasons for this. Ultimately everyone agrees that it is not a fair assessment of knowledge. The teacher does not have an opportunity to participate in the assessment of the child that he has been teaching; comments like "he does better in class than in the examinations" didn't count. Also a great many alterations are made to impress examiners, rather like job applications - "the more easily the examiner reads the paper, the more likely you are to get away with mistakes"; "put in a few dates and figures to show you know what you are talking about". Impressing the examiner is big business and essentially cheating, as in revision. After all, if the subject matter is learnt, a student should be able to recall it without further reference, but for examinations there is always this mass memorising to do. After the exam, most of it is promptly forgotten.

A pupil spends five years of a life in preparation for such exams, and what are they at the end of the day? A test of memory which has been accumulated over five years and revised in a final year. How accurate can the test be when a pupil's performance can be affected by something as fragile as the state of his mind on the day? What does that piece of paper, at the end of the day, say about that person, and what does it express in the job market? I believe that there is very little notice taken of school qualifications in the job market; it is still only the armed forces and civil service who require 'O' and 'A' levels, on the whole. Increasingly I find that employers are setting their own tests to prove literacy and numeracy; simple 15 minute tests, administered to everyone, 'O' levels or not. Increasingly employers have become wise to the fact that 'O' and 'A' levels mean very little in terms of competence and enthusiasm, or any of the pre-requisites of employment. I myself noticed that the best lecturers in college are those who re-entered education after gaining experience of working life.

Common sense is taking over from state education at the school leaver's end of the job market. This is not surprising, considering the nature of qualifications and the crude, subsistence level at which subjects are taught.

Subjects at school didn't seem to correlate with the living of life, options gave the impression that a particular combination of 'O' levels prepared a person better for a particular area of higher education. This is a mis-representation in most cases. There are courses to do an 'A' level in one year, from start to finish, without a prior 'O' level qualification in that topic.

Qualifications, unless specific, as for example trades or secretarial training, are only worth the paper they are printed on, and only of value to an individual as an access to the higher education strata. 'O' levels mean nothing and are worth nothing in modern society. The G.C.S.E. has yet to prove itself.

Education is essential. However, it is time for a radical change in the subjects taught. Many of the things taught in school, children can be made aware of in much shorter and more striking ways, and often if allowed will become aware of them through the media and documentaries. This would allow far more room for subjective matters to be dealt with in the classroom, and the idea of a test should be abolished for compulsory education; it causes far too much anxiety and confusion for the little value it has.

The goals of education should have changed along with the mode of society and as with society it should have a more specialised direction. And in an age where a great deal more information can be stored and communicated in a fraction of the time and space, more details and subjective assessments should be made of pupils.

Education, with modern technology, should be able to afford more time to the pupil's individuality, which it has always been accused of lacking.