

During the 35 years that I have been concerned with education, initially as a customer and then as a provider, it has come to me that one of the problems we have in education is the number of people complaining about how bad the education system is, instead of identifying the good things about the activity that is now there for all. Such complaints tend not to be productive in the educational sphere of activity, but no doubt do produce welcome boosts to the battered egos of those who make them in an attempt to forget lost opportunity. My own educational experience is probably similar to theirs in starting at a standard county primary school and then continuing at one of those now outlawed institutions - the grammar school, which required passing the oft-maligned eleven plus examination. Whilst still at school, I attended night school and day release during my last year, and then having missed university on the first round of application, crept in by the skin of my teeth to a London university college, whose charter had just been changed to allow admission of male undergraduates, and in consequence, was desperate for people! Having survived the rigours of being one of thirty men amongst 900 women, most of whom were not of the predatory type, I then went to what is, in my opinion, the pinnacle of conventional universities, namely Cambridge, to do research for three years. I can therefore claim to have experienced as broad a range of educational institutions and methods as most of my contemporaries, and possibly a lot more than some of them. On the basis of this range of experience as a customer, I am convinced that education should be regarded as a privilege shared between teachers and fellow learners, and not something to be debased by being claimed as a 'right' alongside social security and free school milk from a reluctant establishment.

As a provider of education, I have taught in a college of technology, and in a conventional university. I spent five years with the Workers' Education Association as a tutor organiser in a 'deprived' rural area - North Devon - although the deprivation was largely identified by those seeking it from outside with the jaundiced eye of the problem seeker. Currently I work for what is one of the greatest unconventional educational bodies ever established, namely the Open University. My experience as a provider therefore is such that education must be regarded as a generally shared privilege and learning experience between those at either end of the piece of chalk, but still we are surrounded by the notice-seeking, drum banging, 'education is a right' brigade (or should it be left brigade?), whose major contribution that I can see, is to so distract people from the true act of learning that the original objectives of education are long forgotten.

The Concise Oxford dictionary suggests that privilege and right can mean one and the same thing, and seems to me therefore, that those concerned with education, and in its widest definition this means all of us, would be well advised to keep this firmly in mind at all times. With the advent of the Open University and countrywide interest in all other areas and levels of continuing vocational and non-vocational education, it is quite possible for anyone and everyone to participate in the experience of learning. The argument used by the drum banging right brigade are twenty years out of date and it is now possible for everyone, regardless of income or station, to extend their mind and alter their lifestyle.

One is led to suspect that the 'education is a right' brigade are possibly too lazy to extract themselves from their pits of righteous indignation to take the opportunity that is there for the seeker of knowledge. Today, therefore, it is becoming less necessary to adopt the traditional view that all education has to be pushed rapidly into peoples' heads during the formative years of their lives. This view led to the situation whereby a kind of national lottery took place to establish those who 'got educated' and those who did not, and the criteria for success were to say the least, difficult to establish, and there was no proven common denominator to the so-called privileged class who got it. However, one suspects that some of these people who did not get it would not want it given the chance, even if it were wrapped in tissue and presented on a silver salver.

This has therefore produced a race of people who regard themselves as educational have-nots, but really are educational don't-wants who are still affecting the learning situation today with their incessant bleating. Many people today, despite the bleating, are able to see the range of opportunity available to all, and more and more people are taking this privilege which is there for all. It is the small men who continue to whine from all levels of society who prolong the confusion between right and privilege in education.