
Editorial

Lifelong education

Just as it is said that the last thing fish, were they anthropologists, would discover would be water, so is retirement *per se* almost entirely omitted from the gerontological agenda. Health and welfare; housing; income maintenance – these and other issues are examined down to the last hip replacement and penny-pinching benefit decrease. Yet there is little rational debate about the outstanding question: the termination of work and family-raising, the very activities which, throughout history, have identified adulthood. In the UK, for example, some 11.3 million of the 14.8 million people over 55 are no longer economically active, whilst the majority of these, and others under 55, have seen their children reach maturity. That is a fifth of the population, and, of course, the same fraction, more or less, holds good for many other nations. It is a demographic irony that the survival of many more people for a ‘natural’ lifespan has coincided with this great retraction in the endpoints of vocational and familial involvement, thereby creating a massive Third Age, lasting up to a third of life, beyond that juncture.

Because it is unprecedented, we have no lessons from the past to succour us. Historically, humankind has worked and raised children . . . and died; usually before one or both of those missions had been accomplished. For those few who did survive, it was typically not for long, nor in sufficient numbers, for a social case of moment to be constructed. One is tempted to term Third Agers as ‘postadult’, in order to emphasize how novel the situation is. Nor have we considered seriously the impact on society of a

quarter of the adult population finding themselves swept from the mainstream, at whatever cost in self-esteem to the individual and wasted capacity to the community.

It is important, at the very least, to seek opportunities for these ‘postadults’ to discover new identities to replace the old dog-tags of working and parenting. The self-respect and constructive purpose that would entail could be crucial, not least to the stability of society. One lesson we have learned from history is the danger of denying large sections of the community full and realistic citizenship. Older people, for example, are forced to label themselves retrospectively, using outworn career badges in default of any new ones. Ex-secretary; retired fireman; one-time civil servant . . . these are the descriptors. They state what older people were when they were ‘real’, productive citizens; they are held, socially, at arm’s length – compare the annoyance felt by women when asked ‘what does your husband do?’

Education, in its broadest sense, is one illustration of the kind of opportunity older people should be encouraged to seize with a view to life-enhancement. Recent research suggests that meaningful participation in some such style of activity may be as significant in determining well-being as health, money, and the more obvious indicators. And yet only two or three out of every 100 people over 65 are engaged in any brand of recognizable educational activity, and it is but cold comfort that, in every measure of constructive pursuit, Third Agers – demonstrably those with the spare time – lag substantially behind

the much busier Second Ager.

There are barriers to educational access, some of them material – money, transport, and so on – some of them cultural – the malign folklore about learning difficulties in old age, or the perpetual association of education with the young in our reward-oriented society. For many, retirement means a plunge into an unscheduled existence. The dictates of work and family imposed a natural timetable around which to organize: it seems that, without this, many retirees tumble into an abyss of inactivity.

But there are gleams of light in the sombre darkness. The University of the Third Age, now celebrating its 10th year, is a model of good practice, with over 200 groups and over 30 000 members. It demonstrates how adult education may be self-mobilizing and unfettered by an obsession with resources; it shows how an *à la carte* menu is infinitely superior to the *table d'hôte* one which has dominated educational provision for centuries; it illustrates how education for its own sake, without thought of qualifications or

preparation for work, is highly satisfying. Above all, its portrayal of older people organizing and running their own programmes overturns in a nonce the popular image of elderliness.

Older people have conventionally had things done for or to them. Through their involvement in self-help education, and in similar examples in allied fields, older people have planted a colourful banner, emblazoned upon which is the motto that, in modern times, older age is as long and as imperative as younger age. From that it follows that the urgings of recurrent educators, those advocates of lifelong learning, because 'life is long', should be heeded. In that the primary focus of education is, or should be, its direct and immediate value for the participant there and then (and given the poor evidence of the knock-on effect of education as a prerequisite of future life-chances), there is, logically, no reason why as much money should not be spent on the education of a 75 year old as on a five year old.

Eric Midwinter, Visiting Professor in Education, University of Exeter, UK.