

In the past few weeks I have been to a number of different seminars, talks and lectures at a variety of different venues but mostly in and around higher education and they have left me puzzling over what education is all about at this juncture.

First, I went to a day school organized by Jews' College at which its principal, who had just been announced as the next chief rabbi, was one of the main hosts and keynote speakers. It was the second annual lecture series under the title of "Traditional Alternatives" and took as its focus "Women and the Jewish Future".

It was most exhilarating in a number of respects. First, it excited an audience of almost 1,000 and it was said that there were a further 1,000 who had to be turned away through lack of accommodation and space, despite, at the last minute, a change of venue to a larger hall. Of course this level of enthusiasm was no surprise to the many women in the audience, nor to some of the women speakers, as Professor Alice Shalvi of the Hebrew University noted in her summing up.

The occasion had indeed been prompted the previous year by women who had complained that they felt excluded from the Jewish religious debates and wished to find their voice and place. What was rather more surprising was the serious desire to learn from rather difficult Jewish philosophy and law. All the seminars during the day were presented by high-powered and learned experts, most of them women.

The tone set at the beginning of the day was of a serious seminar discussion, albeit somewhat didactic to take account of those with rather less knowledge of the talmudic sources. But the form of the seminars was in essence talmudic with fascinating interrogation of key sources over a wide range of women's issues from divorce to abortion and contracep-

# Legion voices on the best of all worlds

tion to the place of the single woman, whether widowed, divorced, separated or without children and a husband. Although the day ended somewhat inconclusively with a round table panel descending to rather petty types of Jewish communal politics I found the whole event most fascinating for the challenges it raised and the intellectual and serious way in which the topics were debated. It also brought together certain yet to be resolved themes in my life, such as feminism and Judaism as well as education. And, most of all, it seemed to me to be an example of the very best of education practices in terms of intellectual discussion and debate.

The following week I was involved in an equally stimulating day of seminars for our part-time MSc students who enjoy two study days a year to complement their evening study. Two of the seminar speakers in particular raised the issue of what is effective education, this time in respect of schools. One speaker, Rheena Bavani, had been a member of the Macdonald inquiry set up by Manchester city council to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of an Asian schoolboy in a school playground. She spoke most eloquently and movingly about the style of the inquiry, its attempts to search for social justice and engage in

a participative mode especially with the local community, parents and the school.

It was a model of presentation, and insight into the pain of all of those involved made perhaps the worse by the fact that Manchester in its wisdom decided not to publish the full report. It has taken over two more years for the full report finally to see the full light of day.

What seems clear from her account of the Burnage report is that an effective school is one where not only the right policies are developed but where there is a participative style of management with not only the teachers in the school but also the parents, pupils and local community. She would also argue that this entails considerations of social justice for all pupils and their families regardless of class, race or colour.

There were echoes of these themes in the talk given by Professor Sally Tomlinson. She gave an account of her research into 20 different secondary schools, each with rather similar types of catchment area. She too concluded that an effective school is one with a positive ethos, particularly provided by the senior management, which is committed to searching for the best forms of education for all their pupils, regardless of their social or racial backgrounds.

She documented much of her con-



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clusions with detailed statistical evidence of the relationships between particular school variables and their effects on school processes and school results, even in public examinations.

These seminars seemed to point the way, as the previous seminar had done, to the necessity to effective education and learning of involvement and participation as well as respect for those who are involved in the process. Another way of expressing this is to think about how students progress on any course under consideration. In other words it is not just what you do as an academic or teacher but how it is received. I was particularly reminded of this when I attended an inaugural lecture last week given by an old colleague and friend of mine, Professor Hilary Land.

She gave a characteristically good lecture entitled "What are wages for?" with a judicious mix of humour, history and contemporary social analysis, especially of the current changes in the labour market and systems of social security. She too ended up with considerations of

social justice, this time through the social care system. She also pleaded for consideration to the expressions of feeling about the nature of care from those involved in caring. She quoted a number of moving anecdotes from others' research about the painful circumstances of their lives.

The reminder about forms of respectful education came not only from listening to this lecture but also from meeting up again with old friends and colleagues at the reception after the event. We all shared with each other just how much more difficult it is nowadays to maintain such kinds of consideration in situations of diminishing resources.

It is a source of great sadness to me that because of such tough resource constraints as now operate in higher education we are no longer able to give full consideration to the very best educational practices for all of our students. I have been involved in a number of degree validations recently and am struck by how it is now the resource tail wagging the academic dog rather than the other way round. I feel sure that the process of degree validations was created to ensure academic validity rather than economic viability.

Nowadays we never seem to get past those debates about whether the course is appropriately costed or affordable. We never seem to get on to the really interesting issues about either pedagogy or academic content. And we certainly never seem to discuss how well the students participated in any previous course that is being reviewed. I don't think that we get any sense of whether the students appreciated the form or the content of the courses under review.

What a pity all this is. And yet in the interstices of this growing bureaucracy about course validations - if ever there were now a misnomer - there are enormously exciting academic and educational developments, such as the seminars, lectures and talks that I and countless others no doubt still keep attending.