

# Reclaiming philosophy for educational research<sup>1</sup>

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The paper notes the decline in philosophy of education in educational studies from its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. The explanation is manifold, but includes the more utilitarian and managerial concerns which find less room for the questioning of assumptions distinctive of philosophical enquiry. The paper then uses the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training to demonstrate the central importance of philosophical thinking if one is to pass from the ‘disguised nonsense’ to the ‘patent nonsense’ in much educational research, policy and practice.

## Introduction

This lecture arises from the conduct of the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training for England and Wales.<sup>2</sup> In the review of evidence, many of the issues to be resolved seem to be essentially philosophical rather than empirical. Why, then, is there, on the one hand, so little awareness of these issues amongst those leading the reforms, and, on the other hand, so little interest in these issues from those professing to be philosophers of education? These musings gave rise to my belief that philosophy needs to be reclaimed, first, for those who are actively planning education and training, and, second, from the philosophers of education, who, too often preoccupied with their internal discussions, fail to get to grips with the detailed practice of education and training. And so tonight I shall make two lots of enemies: those who are not philosophers and those who are—which, by reason of the law of the excluded middle, means everyone.

First, I start with a nostalgic look back to the time when philosophy was flourishing in university departments like this one in Birmingham (nostalgia being forgivable, I hope, in someone in so-called retirement), not because it was a ‘golden age’ to which we should return, but because it was a time when philosophy was seen to have a central place in deliberations about the content and conduct of education and in the research which should inform those deliberations.

Second, I shall point to a subsequent decline in the importance attached to philosophy of education.

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Third, I shall introduce the context of my argument—the Nuffield Review.

Fourth, I shall illustrate my thesis with concrete examples of where failures of a philosophical kind affect that which is being reviewed—that ‘working through examples’ being, as Socrates showed, a way to think philosophically.

Fifth, I shall reflect upon the notion of evidence, which, though permeating these examples and crucial to the research reviewed, rarely receives critical attention.

Sixth, I shall pull together what has been implicit, namely, what I believe it is to do philosophy and why it is so important at every level of educational thinking.

### Happy days

The reason for the title of this lecture needs to be explained, for, until comparatively recently, philosophy was a flourishing discipline within departments and colleges of educational studies. It might be worth while reminding ourselves of the background to this.

When I was appointed to the newly created Department of Curriculum Studies at the London Institute of Education in 1974, it was because the study of the curriculum, and of the research into its development, required an integration of the so-called ‘foundation disciplines’. I was to be the philosopher in a team of a sociologist, a psychologist and an historian. The role of the philosopher was to keep the empirical theorists and researchers from getting in too much of a conceptual muddle.

Possibly the most striking example of this view of philosophy was illustrated a few years earlier by the Farmington Trust’s research into, and curriculum development of, moral education. This required a team of three: John Wilson, the philosopher; Barry Sugarman, the sociologist; and Norman Williams, the psychologist. Put rather crudely, it was John Wilson’s aim to clarify what was meant by ‘being moral’ (and then by ‘moral education’), and then Barry Sugarman’s and Norman Williams’ job to find the facts about how such a state of being could be brought about. Neither Sugarman nor Williams quite approved of this division of labour. It was pointed out that there had not been agreement on what it means to be moral after 2000 years of work by philosophers from Socrates onwards and that Sugarman and Williams could not be expected to hang around for a further few years until Wilson had found the solution. But it resulted in a pioneering book (divided appropriately into three parts—the philosophical analysis, the sociological dimension and the psychological facts about development), entitled *An introduction to moral education* (Wilson *et al.*, 1967).

The story which lies behind this view of the philosopher, and of the role he or she was seen to play, has both a sociological and a philosophical dimension.

First, the early 1960s saw the creation in Britain of a specific education degree—the BEd. It could be taken at both Honours and Ordinary level. The Honours level was usually a 1 year top-up to the very practical and professionally oriented Teachers’ Certificate which took 3 years to complete. To be an Honours degree, it had to be academically respectable—a respectability to be achieved only if the

prevailing theory of education (which Professor Peters, at the Hull conference of 1964, referred to as ‘undifferentiated mush’—see Peters, 1977, p. 140) was replaced by systematic studies in the so-called ‘foundation disciplines’. Posts were created in the philosophy of education in most, if not all, of the many colleges of education, then under the academic wings of university institutes of education, a post-war development following the McNair Report (1944). For example, under the academic supervision of the Institute of Education in London alone, there were about 30 colleges of education, stretching to Canterbury in the south. Some of these colleges, such as that of Homerton, had excellent teams of philosophers teaching on the education courses.

Second, at the same time, the dominant mode of philosophizing within universities was that of ‘conceptual analysis’—the close attention to the meaning of key and often contestable concepts as these were revealed in the different usages of particular words. Through a closer and systematic examination of language, one might contribute to the solution of problems which often arise from the bewitchment of intelligence by the unreflective use of language. The analytic tradition within the philosophy of education took seriously the advice of Wittgenstein: ‘My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense’ (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 1.464). Hence, the newly developing and academically respectable discipline of philosophy of education examined such logically interrelated concepts as ‘education’ and its ‘aims’, ‘indoctrination’, ‘teaching’, ‘learning’ and ‘concept formation’. It distinguished between the value laden nature of ‘educational aims’ and the more measurable notions of ‘objectives’, ‘goals’ and ‘targets’. It showed the misdirected teaching and research which follow from too narrow and behaviourist understanding of ‘learning’. Through such systematic analysis, key concepts and practices of ‘child-centred education’, such as ‘growth’, ‘needs’, ‘learning through play’, were criticized and transferred from the list of ‘disguised nonsense’ to that of ‘patent nonsense’. A powerful philosophical attack on the 1967 Plowden Report ‘Children and their Schools’ had a profound influence on subsequent attitudes towards that Report and to the conception of primary education which it embodied. Furthermore, for example, the logical structure of subject matter was differentiated by the philosophers into its different forms, shaping Her Majesty’s Inspectorate’s (HMI’s) ‘Red Book’ plans for a curriculum based on ‘areas of experience’ (HMI, 1977), whilst geographers were upset to discover that, unlike the historians, they had been identified by the philosophers as a field, not a form, of knowledge.

Hence, as educational studies gained academic respectability in the training of all teachers and as philosophy was taken to be the guardian of conceptual clarity within such studies, including research, so the pre-eminence of philosophical studies seemed assured. Turf wars there may have been with sociologists over such matters as whether knowledge was under control or out of control (see Pring, 1972; Young, 1972), but these were easily dealt with by showing that the sociologists were mistakenly wandering into philosophical territory about which they were generally ignorant.

### Unhappy decline

That assurance of indispensability no longer seems to prevail. A recent paper in *Educational Theory* is entitled 'Why aren't philosophers and educators speaking to each other?' (Arcilla, 2006).

Although philosophical studies are a requirement of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recognition for research training in education, this requirement is honoured more in the letter than in the spirit, such studies being the 'philosophy of the social sciences' rather than of education, and very often taught within social science departments. My investigation in 2001 showed that only seven of the 15 respondent departments (out of the 22 which had ESRC Mode A recognition) had in fact a distinctive philosophical component, and that component, in one case, confined to ethical issues raised by research. Few people, who had responsibility for the philosophical component, had a background in philosophy or had any contact with the flourishing Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain.

My unfinished repeat of that survey would indicate that the contribution of philosophy to research training has declined further and severely since then, despite its being a requirement for ESRC recognition. The teams of philosophers of education of two decades ago no longer exist outside one or two universities, and retiring philosophers are not replaced. The Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain is in one sense thriving—its Annual Conference each year cannot accommodate all who want to come from the UK and abroad. Few of its members, however, are now able to get posts in universities. Its journal is high on the Social Science Citation Index, but so much of its content seems to be of philosophers talking to each other rather than to the wider educational readership, not addressing the issues and problems which confront the educational decision-makers, the practitioners and the researchers. Arcilla's (2006) diagnosis of the problem, in the issue of *Educational Theory* referred to, is that, in failing to give the guidance to educators which the social sciences both promise and seem to deliver, philosophers have been excluded from the conversation with educationists and have sought comfort in a purely theoretical world tagged on either to social science or to the post-modern embrace.

Of course, there are exceptions. The Impact Series started by the Philosophy of Education Society is a laudable attempt to be relevant, and excellent monographs have been produced, but it is interesting that the one with the most impact was written by the now retired main stream philosopher, Mary Warnock, reflecting on where things went wrong following the Warnock Report (1978) quarter of a century previously.

This may be a little unfair. The climate has changed since the 1960s and there is a deep suspicion of theory of any kind unless its relevance to improvement of practice is clear and unmistakable. That suspicion of theory which does not have obvious practical pay-off is reflected in a range of influential papers and publications often referred to in this context—the Hargreaves annual TTA lecture in 1996, the Hillage Report on educational research in 1998, or the Secretary of State's address to the Annual Conference of the Confederation of British Industry in 1999. The message throughout seems to be that educational theory, and research in particular, should

be addressed to the solution of practical issues of policy and practice. And the protest that would come from philosophers that we first must address what it means for some policy or practice to work, or for a problem to be solved, or for a theory to be relevant, or for a practice to improve, cuts little ice. As research is modelled on the social sciences, it needs to show results which can be backed up by evidence, and evidence is not provided by those who dispute the meaning of evidence. Politicians are in a hurry for results, and are understandably impatient of those who answer questions with yet more questions. Socrates, if he were alive today, would not have been asked to take hemlock, but neither would he have been invited to join the ranks of political advisers.

And yet there is another reason for suspecting the value of the more philosophical questioning. It is not simply a matter of its failure to produce answers to practical questions. The ideas by which we live can be dangerous, and the apparently poor standards in our schools, described so graphically by the Black Papers (see Cox & Dyson, 1969a, 1969b), were blamed upon the false ideas of child-centred philosophies of education. When I took up the appointment in Oxford in 1989, I shared a platform with Lord Joseph, formerly the formidable Secretary of State for Education under Margaret Thatcher. At dinner afterwards, he turned to me after the soup and asked if my name were Pring, a fact of life difficult to deny after 50 years. When I asked what I had done wrong, he accused me of causing all the problems in our schools. Though feeling chuffed at having been thus noticed, I did want to know how I had had such an impact. His reply was that I (or other people like me) had introduced teachers to the writings of John Dewey, in particular the purported view that education begins with and transforms the interests which the child naturally follows. It was on the basis of this assumption that the Plowden Report was so viciously attacked, the immense research which supported its findings rejected and the way paved for a very different view of education—one which supposedly evaded the errors of philosophers but which, unconsciously, did itself subscribe to a philosophical position which is both indefensible and pernicious, and which, dare I say, permeates so much of the evidence considered by the Nuffield Review.

The point is that we do live in a world of ideas. These ideas shape our thinking about practice (whether that be the practice of the teacher or the practice of the researcher) in many unacknowledged ways. One function of philosophy is to make those ideas explicit, to subject them to criticism, and to influence practice, not by providing alternative theories or bodies of knowledge for the guidance of practice, but by ensuring that the assumptions behind practice are tenable and coherent.

I shall pursue what I mean by this later (and indeed return to Dewey about whom Lord Joseph changed his views before he died). But first I wish to elaborate the context in which I make a plea for the reclaiming of philosophy.

### **Nuffield Review 14–19 education and training**

Upon my retirement from Oxford 3 years ago, I accepted the invitation to lead the Review, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, of education and training 14–19 in

England and Wales. This has now turned out to be a 6 year review costing over £1,000,000. The Review is not itself a piece of research as that is traditionally conceived—it does not aim to uncover new facts or test out hypotheses. But it does aim to review evidence of relevant research in order to provide answers to pertinent questions. But what are the pertinent questions? The ones to which politicians want answers? The ones which are constantly raised in the press? The ones which meet the needs of employers?

The answer must be, in the most general understanding of that term, philosophical. The review is about education and training for those aged between 14 and 19. There are many different aspects of this: institutional provision and the relationship between the different providers, funding arrangements, framework of qualifications, development of specialized diplomas, participation and retention of students, curriculum and modes of learning. All these factors do of course interrelate. But what could give coherence to such a range of considerations?

Since this is a review of education as well as training, what is to be included in the Review, and how the different elements which are included are to fit together, depend on what are seen to be the aims of education. Studies of efficient provision or of effective teaching, analysis of the ‘levers’ and ‘drivers’ of change (the new jargon which the Review has assumed) are relevant only in so far as they can be seen in the light of educational aims. But there is the rub, for there is little consensus, and even less analysis amongst those who shape policy, over the aims of education. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2005 White Paper, ‘14–19 Education and Skills’ (DfES, 2005), briefly addresses the aims by saying that education of these students should help all to realize their potential—and to stretch the most able (63 times in one small document). But one does not need a theological understanding of the doctrine of original sin to realize that not all potentials should be realized. Such empty generalities, passing for profundity, by-pass the ethical deliberation which should permeate all discussion about educational aims and therefore about curriculum content, quality of learning and its assessment.

The Review is therefore shaped by the question: ‘What counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age?’ The relevance of research and the appropriateness of evidence are coloured by the ethical issues arising from one’s understanding of education and the understanding of the ‘educated product’ of school and college. Furthermore, in pursuing this question, so one is entering different traditions of thought which embody different deliberations concerning, in the words of Jerome Bruner (1966), what it means to be human, how we became so, and how we can become more so. In pursuing this review, questions which are essentially philosophical could not be avoided—although so much of the research on learning, curriculum and assessment would appear to believe that they can.

The urgency of this question—and of the philosophical spirit in which it should be pursued—lies in the breathtaking simplicity of government analysis of the evolving system. It is declared to be, in the inevitable power point presentation,

a tale in three parts: the top part need more stretch; the middle three-sevenths need stronger vocational options; and the bottom one-tenth need re-engagement.

One should say that such simplicity of analysis—with all the practical implications in terms of learning programmes, student selection and school or college provision—needs no philosopher to point to the fatuity of the statement. And yet the philosophical spirit is clearly lacking both in the policy-makers and in teachers where such a statement is met, not with guffaw, but with wise nodding of the head.

### **Examples of the failure to see the relevance of philosophy**

I wish to illustrate these points by reference to the way in which the failure to attend to the very language of education limits or distorts the research evidence upon which the Review is asked to draw. Problems too often arise from the poverty of the language through which education and training are accounted for and then translated into policy and practice. There is a failure to attend to the underlying meaning of key concepts and a failure, therefore, to attend to the contestable nature of them.

This I shall do, starting with a prevailing understanding of teaching (and what it is to be a professional teacher), by examining the underlying logic of the prevailing language of education which permeates not only policy and practice of 14–19 but also the research into the problems which have to be tackled. A different philosophical approach, which in my view would be more defensible, would result in a different review, different understanding of evidence, different research and different recommendations for the future.

#### *Teaching*

Few educational researchers, and even fewer philosophers of education, have heard of Odden and Kelley, and yet their book, *Paying teachers for what they know and can do* (1997), had enormous influence upon the ‘performance management’ (sic) of teachers, as that came to be perceived by government. It provided the rationale for the 1998 Green Paper *Teachers meeting the challenge*, followed by a ‘technical consultation document’ on pay and performance management, and a further consultation document, *A fast track for teachers*—from which emerged an expensive initiative now abandoned. The book, therefore, had a profound effect, not only upon government policy (performance thresholds, fast-track teachers, inspection programmes to ensure ‘value for money’ and greater focus in initial training upon practical skill for achieving nationally set standards of competence) but also upon the very language of teaching which has to be made sense of by the Review.

Odden and Kelley (1997) argued that the traditional way of paying and rewarding teachers is out-dated. A more business oriented model is required. As they argue,

The tax-paying public, the business community, and policy makers still pressure the education system to produce results and to link pay—even school finance structures, more broadly—to performance.

This pressure arises from the felt need to raise standards, to improve ‘productivity’ in relation to these standards, and to hold teachers accountable for their professional

work. To enable this to happen, there needs to be much greater precision in what teachers are expected to achieve—productivity targets. There need to be clear statements of ‘standards’ against which the competence of teachers might be judged. All this adds up to a new vision for the profession.

In that vision, there is a direct link between the target or measured performance of the student, on the one hand, and the performance of the teacher, on the other hand. But what is meant by ‘performance’? It generally refers to those behaviours which can be observed and measured. They are the targets which the target setters (the civil servants sitting in front of their computers) decide upon and ‘cascade down’ to the local authorities, thence to the schools, thence to the teachers. They require a ‘standardization’ (a notion I shall come on to) of what is to be produced—witness the increased specification coming from England’s Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) of what needs to be done in order to achieve a particular grade at A Level. The government, at intervals, announces the performances required of teachers in terms of the performances required of students (measured in examination grades at different stages of their schooling) or in percentage increase in student performance.

That vision assumes a distinctive language through which to describe, assess and evaluate an ‘educational practice’ and thus professional engagement within it. Such a language draws upon new metaphors, and through these metaphors the concept of a profession changes. Professional judgement and development take on different meanings. Previous standards of professional judgement are replaced by externally imposed standards. And so, teachers and their ‘managers’ perceive what they are doing differently. What previously was seen to be of significance to professional judgement and development is demoted to the trivial and the irrelevant.

### *Means to an end*

One aspect of this new logic of educational language is that of relating the means of achieving a particular end or goal to the end or goal itself. There is a logical separation of the one from the other, and the appropriateness of the means is a matter of empirical enquiry. Does it or does it not lead to the desired results—to the aims which have been decided quite independently and outside the professional judgement of the teacher? The teacher now ‘delivers the curriculum’—a job which requires not deliberation about the aims of education but the competencies for successful delivery of a curriculum decided upon elsewhere. And, therefore, has arisen a ‘science of teaching’ and of a research programme (think of the £3 million given to Hay/McBer to discover what is a good teacher—although no one had access to the data upon which Hay/McBer’s conclusions were reached (Hay/McBer, 1997, interim report)) which includes the empirical investigations into the effective school. There is a need for the empirical evidence for finding out what works—‘what works’ being regarded as a non-controversial notion.

This ‘means/end’ approach to teaching has of course a long history. Tyler’s classic account in *The principles of curriculum and instruction*, as far back as 1947, influenced

generations of researchers and evaluators, but it encountered also generations of philosophical critics who resisted the impoverishment of the idea of teaching as delivering someone else's curriculum, on the basis of someone else's 'science of teaching'. And, indeed, as a result of such philosophical criticism and deliberation there was produced the most exciting curriculum developments of the last 50 years in the Humanities Curriculum Project and the Nuffield Science Projects. These were firmly based on philosophical reflections upon the nature of knowledge and, in the case of the Humanities Project, upon the nature of ethical deliberation (see Stenhouse, 1975). But the philosophical critics seem now to have been silenced; the educational thinking behind those great initiatives of the past transformed into something much more mechanical—one dominated by an ideal of research which pays scant attention to what it means to educate someone, as opposed to training or indoctrinating or conditioning them.

The means/end model of educational improvement, reflected in the wholesale adoption of evidence-based policy and practice, is indeed seductive. Improvement requires the setting of targets. Having established those targets (or rather having accepted those targets from others) the school or teacher needs to know the most effective means for attaining them, based on rigorous research. It is within such an essentially philosophical position (though rarely recognized as such) that Slavin (2002), writing within the American context, can confidently talk of 'transforming educational practice and research' and speak approvingly of the many government initiatives which have adopted 'experimental-control comparisons on standards-based measures'. For example, the Bush administration's 'No child left behind' mentions scientifically based research 110 times—'rigorous, systematic and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge ... using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, preferably with random assignments'.

However, the ends are not necessarily separate from, and only contingently related to, the means. They more often than not are embedded within the means. The way in which one analyses a poem is not assessed in terms of the most effective way of attaining goals logically distinct from the reading and the analysis of the poem. The end or purpose shapes the way in which the teacher teaches—it is shown and captured in the very act of teaching. Teaching is a transaction between the teacher and the learner, not the delivery of something to the learner. Stenhouse, in the Schools Council Working Paper No. 2, foreshadowing the Humanities Curriculum Project, speaks of the humanities as the place where the teacher shares his or her humanity with the learner. An educational practice embodies the aims and values; it is not something distinct from them. Indeed, to ask for the aims of such a transaction is to ask for the values which the transaction embodies. There may well be spin-offs from the teaching of Macbeth (the meeting of externally imposed targets), but the educational value lies in the engagement with a valuable text.

I must be careful here. There may be educational questions, the answers to which might well draw upon the kind of means/end evidence described. The problem is that, with a particular, unexamined and impoverished view of education, this is seen to be the model of good educational research and the ideal of evidence based policy

and practice. In reviewing 14–19 education and training, there needs to be a critical look at what constitutes evidence. But before I do that, I wish to examine yet a further concept which permeates the drive to improve standards within this phase, which shapes what constitutes relevant research and evidence and which, as already indicated, affects the underlying concept of education and the professional role of the teacher within it.

For the moment, and to conclude this subsection, let it suffice to say that there is something so distinctive about an ‘educational practice’ that there are logical limits to the relevance of the means/end distinction to the pursuit of educational improvement and to the research which depends upon it.

### *Standards*

That further concept which permeates both educational aims and the notion of teaching in the attainment of those aims, which helps to define what counts as evidence but which is shaped by the new logic of education, is that of ‘standards’. What one means by ‘standards’ affects national comparisons, longitudinal comparisons of performance, and equivalence between qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework—all of which are central to the Review. The difficulty lies in the fact that ‘standards’, however indispensable a concept, is not itself clear. The Review is confronted with statistics as to whether standards are going up or down (an annual debate on the announcement of examination results). But neither is logically conceivable. The rise or fall of standards could be judged only against a further standard by which A Level standards are assessed, and so into an infinite regress.

Rather is one talking about performance improving in relation to, often implicit, standards. Standards are agreed benchmarks, defined in relation to the nature and purpose of an activity. For example, the standards whereby driving competence is assessed at different levels (passing the driving test and then Advanced Motoring certificate) are logically determined by the purpose of driving safely. Change the conditions of driving and you change the standards—the Highway Code is constantly being revised. If one reconceptualizes an activity, standards will be revised, new ones introduced, and old ones rejected. If the major aim of reading is that of digesting and responding to text messages, then standards of achievement (and indeed functional literacy which is to be a major element in the new Qualifications Framework) will differ from where the major aim is seen to be the enjoyment of good literature. It was because of these logical, not empirical problems, that the Assessment of Performance Unit in the 1970s explored but eventually rejected the use of the Rasch model for making longitudinal comparisons.

Let us push this analysis a little further. Standards are the benchmarks whereby one judges performance within a certain sort of activity. But let us take doing history. What are the standards whereby one judges that one is doing it successfully? It requires systematic analysis of documentary evidence, imaginative construction of events (if you follow Collingwood), empathic appreciation of how historical

characters did or might have behaved, and so on. The standards whereby performance is judged are the public criteria for doing history well. But there is disagreement between philosophers of history as to what the nature of doing history is and thus as to the criteria for successful engagement. That is why there will always be disagreement over the assessment of history scripts. Just as reviewers of books dispute with each other, so will, and must, markers of examination papers. Once there were different examination boards offering different syllabuses which reflected different philosophical understandings of their respective subjects. Standards were not higher and lower in the different syllabuses (what I hope I have shown to be a patent nonsense), but they were different, reflecting important differences in the conception of the subject. But how much more unintelligible (though rarely seen as such) is the idea, built into the qualifications framework, of equivalence between standards in such different activities as General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) Level 2 Hospitality and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Grade C Geography and examination board ASDAN's new Certificate of Personal Effectiveness Level 2. The Review has been asked to make sense of equivalences between activities which in no sense can be considered equivalent.

### *Language of education*

We do not think and only then translate our thoughts into language. That would subscribe to the doctrine of the ghost in the machine. No, in speaking and writing, we are engaged in thinking. Hence, the language we have inherited provides the tools through which we see the world—physically, socially and morally. Change that language and you change how the world is perceived. A different moral vocabulary—let us say, a different list of virtues—will in a significant way change the moral evaluations one makes.

By gradually enlisting the language of the business world—the language of audits and performance indicators, of efficiency gains and investment, of inputs related to outputs, of effectiveness and productivity, of curriculum delivery and of consumers of that which is to be delivered—so our understanding of education is changed. And such a change is reflected in what is signified by learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment. Learning is no longer that struggle to understand, that gradual dawning of understanding, that partial grasp (still to be completed) of the public world of knowledge, but rather the capacity to behave according to the targets set. Assessment, seen in terms of accountability in relation to those targets, is different from the assessment of that learning so described. The curriculum becomes no longer the arena in which the personal world of the learner is confronted with the impersonal world of what has been achieved by others. And the teacher is no longer the mediator of that impersonal world to the personal world of the learner within the interpersonal world of the classroom.

When the erstwhile Dean of New Initiatives at the London Institute of Education, then Director of Standards at the DfES, then Chief Deliverer at No. 10 retired to McKinsey's (whose philosophy is summed up in the words 'What is real can be

measured; what can be measured can be controlled'), then one realized the urgency in any Review of Education and Training to examine critically how the prevailing and unacknowledged language of education transforms what counts as evidence for the Review. Philosophy has to be at the centre, not an embellishment, of the deliberations about 14–19—its claimed successes, the preparedness for the transition from school or college into higher education and employment, the relevance of the curriculum, the meaning and articulation of standards, the enrichment of learning, the standards by which learning is assessed, the selection (explicit and hidden) whereby young persons' lives are determined. Otherwise there is the danger that others' distorted, impoverished and unexamined conceptions of education will shape the Review and determine what is to count as evidence.

### **Evidence based reviewing**

In pursuing, therefore, an understanding of the overall aim of education in order to shape the review, the Review has solicited judgements, views or considered opinions very widely. The quality of those views does not matter. If they exist and are shaping practice, then they deserve serious consideration. (I do hope you see the influence of John Dewey in that statement.) The starting point (those judgements, views or opinions from many sources) is not what matters, but the process of criticism through which one progresses from those starting points. Such views have to be clearly articulated, opened to critical scrutiny, redrafted in the light of such criticism, and challenged by evidence. It requires recognition that yet further experience might well challenge the provisional judgements made. The challenge is to the values which underpin both those views and the criticisms of those views; the challenge is to the validity of evidence called upon to justify the research conclusions feeding into the Review's interim reports; but also the challenge is to the language through which educational and training provision is described and evaluated. However, given the nature of knowledge, those reports must always be seen as provisional and open to revision in the light of further criticism and evidence.

Central to the Nuffield Review, therefore, and central to the basing of its tentative conclusions on evidence, is the question of what counts as evidence and of the extent to which we can talk of different degrees of evidence. Too often, in careless talk (especially in the advocacy of evidence based policy or evidence based practice), evidence is equated with proof, but there is little apart from the trivial which can be proved. Evidence can be more or less strong. Evidence is weighed and interpreted. Decisions have to be made on slender evidence, where the alternative course of action is justified on even more slender evidence. We have evidence from the Review that even those who succeed at A Level are ill-prepared for higher education; the evidence is not strong but it is stronger than the evidence to the contrary. But, further, that evidence, once analysed, seems to point to the narrow and indefensible conception of learning which shapes the transition from 14–19 into higher education.

Therefore, the evidence for a policy or practice may be strong but it is rarely conclusive, and, however strong it is, it might be contradicted by yet further

evidence. Indeed, given this state of perpetual uncertainty, the way forward is to articulate as clearly as possible, and to expose to public criticism, the basis of action and to subject it systematically to critical scrutiny. Evidence can be strong or weak, conclusive or provisional. Only those beliefs should be held which have so far withstood such systematic criticism. I shall develop the implications of this later—it goes against the grain of most research-based policy and practice, but philosophically it is, in my view, the only sustainable position.

Furthermore, there has to be a logical relation between evidence and the kind of question asked and the conclusions drawn. Attend to the logic behind the question, and, if you do, you will see that the ‘battle of paradigms’ which grace the pages of research textbooks and methodological chapters in research theses—quantitative versus qualitative, positivist versus interpretive—simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Just as there are logically different kinds of truth-claim, so there are logically different kinds of evidence for those claims. Just as it did not make sense for Gagarin to claim, 50 years ago, that there was no evidence for God’s existence when he peeped out of his sputnik, so it makes no sense to claim that standards have risen on the supposed evidence of an increased proportion of young people achieving five ‘good’ GCSEs. Evidence for higher standards must relate to the nature of the activity (an educational activity) within which standards logically must be defined—the quality of learning, the love of inquiry, the attainment of understanding, the acquisition of key ideas and concepts.

However, just as those who espouse so strongly the rigours of evidence based policy and practice, through the emulation of medical research in terms of large-scale experimental and control groups, need to realize that there are different sorts of evidence determined by the kind of question being asked, so do those who claim to be within a different and hostile ‘paradigm’ need to respect the fact that, in answer to certain pertinent questions, such research approaches might well be appropriate. The so-called paradigm war is possible only where people do not engage philosophically with the logical nature of the questions. But above all, these questions will themselves be determined by the deep-down conceptions of what it means to educate the future generation—questions which although central do not get asked in the shaping of policy or practice—or, if they do, then it is in terms which bear little relationship to what it means to engage educationally with the young generation. That is why the Review is shaped throughout by the question ‘what counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age?’

### **Doing philosophy of education**

Many I know within the world of philosophy of education, will think that my ideas of doing philosophy, implicit in what I have said, are distinctively passé. They themselves belong to a by-gone generation, which remained aloof from the more exciting and politically engaged philosophies of elsewhere. And indeed I admit to having had my formative years when it was held that continental philosophy of any worth stopped in France with Descartes and in Germany with Kant. It was possible

to do an option in Hegelian philosophy—but at King’s College London with Findlay, and it was not advised. Heidegger was a joke, and Sartre was read as a good novelist and a light relief from the rigours of the earlier and later Wittgenstein.

But I wish to assert the importance of that tradition—one which saw that, beneath the surface of our ordinary descriptions and evaluations of the world, lay unacknowledged problems of meaning which only systematic attention to the language we use can make clear. It is fascinating in the Review how unphilosophic, in this sense, both policy-makers and practitioners are. The division of courses between the academic and the vocational is treated as self-evident (and is presently shaping post-16 qualifications), but does not stand up to the most superficial analysis. ‘Skill’ has become the generic term for knowledge, understanding, mental capacity, practical competency, and interpersonal sensitivity, thereby blurring important distinctions between these different modes of interacting with the world of things and people. The criteria for successful learning bear little relationship to the logical structure of the subject matter learnt. Partnership is trumpeted as the way to success without reflection upon the characteristics of different kinds of partnership. Citizenship becomes a further subject as though the humanities at their best were not a preparation for the understanding central to the responsibilities of being a citizen. Enterprise is announced as the new virtue but without being related to the wider moral discourse of which it has become part. And ‘education’ has been identified with training and thus the most appropriate means to attain a given ‘product’—no longer that introduction to what Oakeshott (1962) described as the different voices (of science, of history, of philosophy, of poetry) which make up the conversation between the generations of mankind.

However, such conceptual clarification is not the private concern of a special breed of people called philosophers. It is what you do when you want to get beneath the surface, as it were, of what people mean when their language shapes policy and practice. It is to be aware of how one is so easily deceived by language, for it is language which shapes our consciousness—failing to make distinctions where distinctions would be appropriate (for example, between practical and vocational learning), or making distinctions the simplicity of which does not stand up to scrutiny (for example, between qualitative and quantitative paradigms of research), or reducing different modes of inquiry and of evidence to some single model (for example, in prioritizing the method of experimental/control groups), or rejecting research which is seen to be contaminated by so-called positivism.

But in engaging in such clarification, one is pushed down into the perennial problems which have traditionally been the province of philosophy—the foundations of our moral values which do or should underpin our attempts to help young people to become more fully human, the relationship of observed behaviour to our understanding of children’s minds, the basis of our claims to know and to understand, the relation and responsibility of individuals and their institutions to the wider society and community. Failure to think at this level, locked as it were in the impoverished metaphors which govern our language and thought, leads to the trite—as when the Minister says that the aim of education is to ensure every young person

realizes his or her potential. That failure leads to observation techniques in research which fail to observe the persons rather than their behaviours. That failure ensures that policy will feel secure in evidence which has not received the critical scrutiny which is logically appropriate. And that failure will lead to the uncritical acceptance of so-called educational institutions which simply meet the demands for individual positional good.

That is why the Nuffield Review has not been content to accept the evidence on face value. It has had to ask deeper questions about the aims of education, within which such evidence acquires or does not acquire significance. It is concerned not simply with the facts and figures on participation, but with the broader educational value of participation. The significance of the much cherished work-based learning requires a closer look at the kind of learning which takes place and its broader educational value.

I share with Dewey (to whom, I believe, I can now refer because removed from the Index of Forbidden Books, though not yet with the imprimatur of the Secretary of State) that philosophy, and in particular the philosophy of education must turn away from the problems of philosophers as such (too often disengaged from the general public and talking only amongst themselves) in order 'to use the skills of philosophy [as I have outlined them] in analysing the problems of men'. For Dewey, there is an intrinsic link between doing philosophy and thinking about education, in that the beginning of philosophical thinking lies in trying to think coherently about human experience. Change the metaphor from that of business planning to that of Oakeshott's (1962) 'conversation' or that of Dewey's 'organic growth', then evidence is viewed through a different lens and the future scenario to which the Review is working becomes something different.

## Notes

1. 'Educational Review' Annual Lecture, 11 October 2006.
2. The Nuffield Review is an independent review, funded by the Nuffield Foundation from 2003 to 2009, of every aspect of 14–19 education and training in England and Wales: educational aims, quality of learning, curriculum, assessment, institutional provision, qualifications, and progression into employment and higher education. Richard Pring is the Lead Director.

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