

Preface

Some Questions

Progressive education

At the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century, American philosopher John Dewey and many like-minded people experimented with an approach to teaching that came to be known internationally as **progressive education**. It focussed on the child or student as a learner whose interests and previous knowledge needed to be engaged if significant learning was to take place. The progressives put the learner at the heart of teaching and learning and tried many experimental approaches to curriculum, teaching methods and the organisation of schools and classrooms in order to engage children and young people more fully in their development through education.

In the context of mass compulsory education

Progressive education emerged against a background of approaches to education that began from the question of ‘what should we teach?’ rather than ‘how do students learn?’ At that time, **mass compulsory education** was emerging in most countries in the developed West, and great store had been put on deciding what knowledge and skills students should develop to serve the needs of emerging industrial economies and what values they should develop to participate actively in the civic and political life of their nations—new democracies reaching towards universal suffrage (all citizens having the right to vote).

In the first half of the twentieth century, many schools were established along progressive lines. Many school systems included elements of progressive education in the provision of state education, and many teachers tried to embody progressive aspirations in their work. By the middle of the twentieth century, progressive education experiments were being tried in many parts of the world, from Britain and Europe to Japan and Australia.

The decline of progressive education?

And then, around the middle of the twentieth century, progressive education began to wane. Although experimentation continued, new progressive schools were established, and progressive education principles became embedded in some school systems (like the ‘English primary school’ at one time much admired by educationalists in the USA). Some declared progressive principles

to be suspect—aligned, perhaps, with communism. Some thought progressive education was inefficient, wasting valuable teaching time by working at the pace of children rather than teaching them directly what they needed to know to survive and thrive in modern societies. In some places, as mass compulsory education extended from the primary or elementary school to secondary education (mass compulsory secondary education was achieved in Australia about the time of the Second World War), progressive education was more or less ploughed under by the development and elaboration of more complex curricula, increasingly constructed by teams of curriculum development experts to meet the needs of unprecedented numbers of teachers for unprecedented numbers of students in the ‘baby boom’ that followed the Second World War.

By the 1970s, direct hostility to progressive education was emerging in official circles in some parts of the world. For example, some legislators and state education officials believed it to be too child-centred and too little concerned with inculcating national values and the knowledge regarded as necessary for economic development. Others believed that emerging new approaches to curriculum and curriculum development offered better prospects of getting useful knowledge and appropriate values ‘into the heads’ of children and young people.

Had progressive education failed? Had it simply gone out of fashion? Was it replaced by something better? Did it live on, in some mutated form, within the forms of education that replaced it? Did it survive in the work of some teachers ‘against the grain’ of official curricula? Does it still survive in some form? Questions like these invite considered responses from professional educators. They are the kinds of questions that it is reasonable to expect every teacher to be able to answer.

The idea of an ‘educational formation’

Progressive education is just one example of an **educational formation**. There are many others, of varying shapes and sizes—‘laboratory schools’, ‘classroom instruction’, ‘adult education’, ‘workers’ education’, ‘vocational education and training’, ‘the phonetics approach’, ‘the look and say method’, ‘discovery learning’, ‘inquiry learning’, ‘negotiated curriculum’, ‘Montessori schools’, ‘Christian education’, ‘environmental education’, ‘opportunity schools’, ‘special schools’, ‘gifted and talented education’, ‘the pedagogy of the oppressed’, ‘direct instruction’, ‘authentic pedagogy’, ‘productive pedagogy’, ‘online pedagogies’ ... and so the list goes on.

Asking questions to explore educational formations

About each one, we can ask searching questions like these:

- (1) What did this educational formation emerge from, in response to what kinds of perceived problems or needs in schools or societies?
- (2) How was this educational formation described, represented and justified—in what discourses? Whose discourses are these, and who, if anyone, is excluded when these discourses are used?
- (3) What knowledge, skills and values did this educational formation aim to produce in students, by what means, and in relation to what cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political issues, structures and practices in society at the time?
- (4) By producing people with these different and particular kinds of knowledge, skills and values, what did this educational formation reproduce over time, from generation to generation, in their society, and what did they aim to transform?
- (5) Whose interests did these forms of reproduction and transformation serve, and whose interests were ignored, neglected or opposed? Which groups were advantaged and which were disadvantaged?
- (6) What were the consequences of this educational formation over time—what people and things in the society were improved and what were disturbed, distorted, damaged or destroyed by the innovation—intentionally or unintentionally, in anticipated or unanticipated ways?
- (7) How was the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political integration of the society, or school systems, or schools, or classrooms changed by the innovation? What kinds of contestation occurred, with what levels of conflict over what kinds of things, in securing this educational formation (and in its later demise, if it had one)? What kinds of ways of thinking and doing and relating to others became institutionalised as new ‘orthodoxies’ to secure the formation (and what other ways caused their demise, if it had one)?

These kinds of questions can be asked about any educational formation or any educational innovation. They are the kinds of questions that open windows *into* education—to see how ways of doing education were formed and developed, and how they evolved and transformed over time, sometimes disappearing altogether. They also open windows *out from* education, to see how educational formations and innovations served or did not serve the interests of the cultures, economies and societies they intended to serve. They help to answer the question ‘To what extent does education *mirror* and to what extent does it *shape* societies?’ (It always does some of both.)

The field of Education Studies

These are the kinds of questions this book invites you to ask and answer. To think about such questions, you will need to know something of the *history of education*, the *sociology of education*, *educational psychology* and the *philosophy of education*. The field of **Education Studies** puts these disparate fields of study together in order to understand how education has been formed, reformed and transformed through history.

Different kinds of theories

This book is thus a book about a particular kind of **educational theory** (a particular approach to theory in Education Studies). Different fields have **different kinds of theories**.

Theories in the natural sciences

Theories in the **natural sciences** often aim to give particular kinds of **explanations** that accurately describe and adequately explain observable physical phenomena. These theories are said to develop and progress by hypothesis testing: making predictions, and discovering whether things do or do not turn out as predicted. In these kinds of theories, prediction and explanation are said to be ‘symmetrical’: if things turn out as predicted, we have further grounds for believing that the theory (on the basis of which we made our prediction) is holding up (strictly speaking, we have grounds for believing that the theory has not yet been shown to be false). In the natural sciences, hypotheses are sometimes tested by conducting experiments (e.g. in physics or chemistry, or in experiments on the yields of different kinds of plant varieties grown under different conditions); sometimes hypotheses are tested only by observation (as in astronomy); and by correlational studies that aim to show how some variables relate to others (as in some kinds of descriptive studies in agricultural science that aim to explore whether, for example, yield correlates positively or negatively with rainfall). Some kinds of educational theories, for example, in some kinds of educational psychology, or some kinds of educational sociology, employ the methods of the natural sciences. Often such theories focus on phenomena like learning (which might be studied experimentally or correlationally) or relationships between (for example) social class or gender and educational achievement.

In the natural sciences, research and theory are often said to have a **technical** aim or interest. They aim to give us techniques to **control** things better—to explain how instruments and machines can be used to navigate a space craft, to cure diseases by using better drugs or to show how a particular teaching technique produces particular outcomes, for example.

Theories in the humanities, or human sciences

In the **humanities** (what in Europe are called the **human sciences**), the role of theory is very different, and people may rarely speak of theory at all. In the humanities, a theory is often an **interpretation** of events (e.g. a text, or a period, or an episode, or a phenomenon in history) or observations (as in a case study of the development of an individual child, or a case study of a classroom or an ethnography of a community). In the humanities, experimental and correlational research is subsidiary to the search for interpretations, if they are used at all—and mostly they are not. Some kinds of educational theories, in the history of education, for example, and in some kinds of educational sociology, are interpretive theories.

In the humanities, theories are often said to have a **practical** interest or aim. This means that they aim to help us as we think about what to do in practical situations. They aim to help us become more wise. Their interest is not in how to control situations in the world, but in how to **understand** them.

Theories in the behavioural and social sciences

In the **behavioural and social sciences**, theories are sometimes of the kind developed in the natural sciences and sometimes of the kind developed in the humanities.

Critical theory in the humanities and the social and educational sciences

In the humanities and social sciences, however, another kind of theory may also be found: **critical social science** or **critical educational science**. These kinds of theory aim to produce critiques of the ways things were or are at a particular place, and a particular time in history. The **critique** that critical social or educational science generates is 'critical' in the sense that it aims to describe, interpret, explore and reveal whether the ways people think about things are irrational (unreasonable); whether the ways people do things are unproductive or unsustainable; and whether the ways people relate to each other are unjust or likely to cause suffering or harm.

These kinds of social and educational sciences are thus said to have a **critical** interest or aim. They aim to help us discover whether things are other than we would like them to be, and whether we might therefore be able to use the critiques they produce to help us to **transform** the world, to make the ways we think about things more reasonable, to make the ways we do things more productive and sustainable, and to make the ways people relate to each other more just and caring.

This book aims to lay out the conceptual apparatus for a critical educational science—a critical form of Education Studies.

Reproduction theory, practice theory and a theory of education

In this book, we set out a conceptual apparatus for thinking about questions like the seven questions listed earlier. It aims to help us think about educational formations like progressive education, or online education, using resources drawn from various sources in educational psychology, sociology, history and philosophy, in an integrated way. After introducing some ideas about the history of education, we outline a version of what is sometimes called **reproduction theory**. It aims to show that the reproduction and transformation *of* education, and of individuals and societies *through* education, are achieved through educational **practice**—through the speech and action and social connectedness of people (teachers, students, parents, administrators, legislators, employers, workers and many others) in interaction with one another, directly and indirectly. Later, we extend this theory by introducing a particular kind of **practice theory** that describes what a social or educational practice is, what it is made of and how different practices relate to one another in the world. Finally, we embed this practice theory within our particular **theory of education**.

Becoming an educator

By developing these ideas, this book aims to show that by *your* practice as a teacher, you will be contributing—knowingly or unknowingly—to trends and forces in education and in society, locally and in the vast world beyond your particular classroom or school or training organisation. Through *your practices*, you are part of the means by which cultures, discourses, societies, economies and environments will be made and unmade, built or destroyed, reproduced or transformed, for better or for worse. The book thus aims to help you to become an **educator**—something more than a **teacher**. It aims to help you *know what you are doing* in relation to the wider trends and tendencies in the culture and society of which you are part, in the interests of the students you teach and in the interests of the society on whose behalf you are a teacher. It aims to make you more aware about, and more sensitive to, the best interests of each one of your students, and, at the same time, the best interests of the whole society and world of which you are part. Whose interests will *you* serve, to the advantage and disadvantage of which other people and groups in your particular town or city, in your nation, in *our* world?

In these senses, then, this book aims to help you begin to know what you are doing, not just as a teacher but as an educator, not only in the **technical** sense of what knowledge, skills and values you can help to ‘produce’ in your

students by teaching them, but in the wider **practical** sense of what good (and harm) you will or might do (and what it is morally right and appropriate for you to do) as a teacher and as an educator, and in the **critical** sense of understanding that what you do has consequences for good and ill that will reach far beyond your classroom in your students' lives, their families, their communities, their society and *our* world, *our* **history**. It aims to show that, as a teacher, your job is making history and histories—the history of the future that will be made by the people you teach. It may seem to you that you are just one person, that what you do is to play just one small part in the making of our future, but you do and will play a part, and it may be—it will be—in some way crucial not just for the students you teach, but for everyone whose lives they affect, rippling out of the classroom and into the way your students will live *their* lives.

Understanding Education

History, Politics and Practice

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2018, XIII, 164 p. 12 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-981-10-6432-6