

EDUCATION AND POLITICIANS

A possible way out of our mess

We need to attempt to expunge the old fashionedness of today and restore the modernity of the past. The proto-Thatcherite Keith Joseph once told a British professor of education that many of our problems came from John Deweyⁱ. For Dewey (born 1859) education connected to community, to society and no doubt today he would have added the word environment.

Reading *Ecological Public Health: Reshaping the Conditions for Good Health* (2012) Geof Rayner and Tim Langⁱⁱ reminded me to think again about restoring education to an active role in society. So does Stephen Kemmis with his colleaguesⁱⁱⁱ. Instead we concentrate on passing that test, that inspection and, hoping that others do badly, climbing up the league table.

Rayner and Lang make the point that if we are serious about public health we should not treat it in isolation. They even quote C.B. Mcpherson^{iv}. Back in 1983 Kemmis et al made the same point about schools. They are socially critical.

In the UK, especially England, education is now a measurable commodity complete with labels of varying desirability. Try to avoid the label 'sub-standard'. It is as though education has become a thing apart and is seen as a preparation for later life. It actually *is* life. Even the youngest of children interact with others. They are *in* society, not waiting to become members of society.

Has instrumentalism and the need to respond to the latest policy wheeze removed some fun? Has the long-term professional plan become 'getting through till Friday'? And how much encouragement do academics receive to go off piste? Is their professional life now confined to processing the maximum number of students to safeguard their wages while churning out the required numbers of published articles and cobbling together a PhD thesis that can later be divided into a number of points winning articles? That way your institution climbs up the league. Who in future will accidentally discover educational penicillin?

When I was a director in a university my patience sometimes wore thin when I thought about colleagues who seemingly assumed (this was some years ago) that their salaries were secure while they sat and pondered in the library. We needed income though I tried to obtain that by selling the excitement to be gained by exploration and fulfilment. Starting now I would have tried harder to emphasise that students were fellow members of a learning community. That was the intention of a collective masters and doctoral research project that a colleague and I tried to put together. Among the factors making that project problematic was that, like all universities in England with masters and doctoral

programmes for schoolteachers, we underwent an inspection spread across two academic years. That inspection cost universities a lot of money. Every time I opened a cupboard I was prepared for an inspector to fall out.

Just one example of what we once tried

As a schoolteacher I taught for eleven years in an area of very high unemployment. Some of us formed a group to look at how we, as schoolteachers, should respond. This was before the introduction of the National Curriculum and when we could be creative.

One response was to form links with national organisations that shared our concerns. Here the Schools Curriculum Industry Partnership (SCIP) was hugely helpful. It was dissolved years ago but for a while it mingled educators and business people in a supportive network. This was nothing like the official concept of schools preparing young people to meet the needs of industry: needs that were often poorly defined.

Near my school was Commercial Road. It was full of factories employing thousands of people. One by one they closed like a series of candles being snuffed out in sequence and eventually possibly the most iconic of them all closed down, Tate and Lyle's. Founded in Liverpool, sustained there by working class people and in the West Indies by the descendents of slaves (neither acknowledged in any Tate gallery I have visited) its closure meant more than an increase in the unemployed: it had a social psychological impact.

In response local people, with help, established what was then the largest housing co-operative in Western Europe. Attempts were also made to establish co-operative businesses. At that time the new public examination for sixteen year olds was being introduced, the General Certificate for Secondary Education (GCSE). With help from a colleague in an examinations board I designed a GCSE to support the work being done in the community. It meant that young people could step out of the classroom and take part in various committees examining demographic trends and characteristics; and, alongside architects, priests and parents, make decisions on, for example, the number of bedrooms houses would need in the foreseeable future. The GCSE was designed so that coursework and written examinations related closely to this kind of community activity. And while still working in the school I persuaded senior management and staff to change to a largely self-managed institution with specific links to the community.

The failure was not to convince those with their hands on the levers of power that all this was worth encouraging. Almost without noticing young people were gaining the skills, knowledge and understanding normally confined inside what were usually timetabled as 'subjects'. Learning came with motivation. As an advisor in the Liverpool Education Authority working on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies I experienced a strong sense that what we were doing was only ever going to be considered peripheral: not orthodox: not mainstream.

That GCSE was closed down by Central Government and the school was closed down by the Catholic Church that preferred much more conventional and single-sex approaches to education. Although a Catholic school it served an area in which the community was almost entirely Catholic and so was not divisive.

Now I would say that while the need for a creative community approach to education^v is greater than ever there are twin forces at work opposing it. One is that the system has been well and truly fracked and fragmented. It is disconnected from communities. The other is that the urge to measure and label has enforced a less creative approach to learning. Nudging an increasingly dysfunctional system is not enough. As Naomi Klein says in her response to Trump and Trumpism, we need to LEAP^{vi}.

My interpretation of her exhortation is that we cannot wait for those that choose where to place the political fulcrums, decide upon the lengths of the levers and exert the power. They control a system that now seldom works in the public interest. Writing about Standing Rock in her book *NO Is Not Enough, Defeating the New Shock Politics* (2017) Klein emphasises the educational theme of that gathering of disparate people working on a project that to the outside must have seemed to be focussed upon a single issue. The interest in education came about as a natural human desire: an activity both enjoyable and essential to society. Let me repeat: education should not be set apart from society; it has to be integral to it.

Too many politicians have parcelled up education as a commodity to be advertised, weighed, priced and sold. Do that to education and those values come to dominate all other parts of society. So its back to Blair's EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION but this time without the snake oil.

Cliff Jones, 20th. March 2018

i

Dewey wrote a lot and a lot has been written about him but the following might serve as an introduction.

<https://www.thepositiveencourager.global/john-deweys-approach-to-doing-positive-work/>

ii

Ignore the five lines that precede this review. They are a reference to something else. The review has the perspective of an historian.

<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/retrospectives/issues/sophie-a-greenway.pdf>

iii

See v below.

iv

Looking at Macpherson's work today I cannot help asking myself who now reads him? Possessive individualism is evident in our political language and, since the time of Thatcher, scarcely questioned. The following might help to gauge the significance of a socially damaging concept.

<https://understandingsociety.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/possessive-individualism.html>

v

This link is a story but I hope it helps to make the point that schools are not preparation factories but part of society. The final link within the link is a link to the great Kemmis book.

<http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/At50.pdf>

vi

Here is the link to the Canadian initiative closely associated with Naomi Klein but, as she is keen to point out, representative of the work of so many people. I hope my thoughts on education are clear when looking at the link.

<https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/>