

Perspectives from Time and Place

Three writers to think about

In 1997 when Tony Blair formed his first government he was asked to identify his priorities. He replied that they were *Education, Education, Education*. His chief of staff gave him that phrase. He ought to have said, *Society, Society, Society*.

Education is not an activity to be treated in isolation so I want to look at some of the significance of three writers that any politician with views on education ought to read but won't.

When the Battle of the Little Bighorn was fought and Custer's 7th Cavalry annihilated John Dewey was already seventeen. He died in 1952. He wrote too much for me to choose a single work but his belief that education is key to community and democracy is a notion that we need to be reminded of.

At a conference in Bulgaria in the summer of 2013 educators from across the EU and Turkey were asked to identify the main change to their work over the last ten years. The message I took from the responses was that decision making about curriculum and assessment had become more centralised, resources reduced and targets made tougher. It seems that the main job of teachers today is to prepare their students for measurement: not quite the same as education. Mention of being told by politicians to catch up with Finland brought nods throughout the room. But Finland does Dewey. The rest of us have consigned him to the dustbin of history.

In Australia in 1983 Stephen Kemmis, working with others, produced *Orientations to Curriculum and Transition: Towards the Socially Critical School*. The authors argue that schools can do better than simply prepare young people for a world of work or for life as individuals: that they need to realise that schools are not simply preparers for society but are actually participants in society and that this has implications for how they approach what they do.

I used that book for many years both in the UK and in Israel working with educators across many cultural, political, ethnic and religious differences. For me it helps to show us that there are other perspectives: that there is a valid and valuable educational language somewhat different from the language of a quality assured pursuit of targets.

Supposing, however, a state feels the need to reinforce a national historical narrative by controlling school textbooks so that they propagandise official versions of history and suppress legitimate other narratives. This is what Nurit Peled-Elhanen meticulously examines in her analysis of Israeli school textbooks.

Published in 2012 *Palestine in Israeli School Textbooks, ideology and propaganda in education* confronts an issue that is not confined to Israel. It is

the issue of establishing an official national narrative that suppresses the narratives of others. Except that, unless it is revealed, there can be no issue. To be dehumanised and devalued is to be dismissed from discussion. If you are one of the 'others' your maps, your place names, your customs and your celebrated events are not allowed into the classroom. Perhaps I should draw attention to the work of another author: George Orwell's *1984* in which the Ministry of Truth can change the result of 2+2 to any figure that suits government at any given time.

If education can still claim the Latin words for growth and leading out as etymological ancestors then two concepts have to be considered. The first is fulfilment. We should argue about what that means, although we can be pretty sure that in discussion the concept will manage to slip, slide and wriggle about. The second concept is fairness because to alter the degrees of fairness in education must have an effect upon fulfilment. If society is unfair then so will be education and the fulfilment of some, no matter how defined, will come at the expense of others.

Whatever the depth of fulfilment achieved or the conditions of fairness in which that fulfilment is attempted education remains, for me, a social activity. As we learn our history and geography and science and whatever we also learn to interact socially. How inclusive do we want that interaction to be? *Education, Education, Education* really is *Society, Society, Society*.

To obtain a copy of the Kemmis book search for ED 295339 Kemmispdf

To read a review of the Peled-Elhanen book go to

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

To read masses of material produced by John Dewey simply blow the cobwebs off lots of shelves in university libraries. His work should still be there. Look behind *Instruction to Deliver* by Michael Barber. It is probably blocking access to Dewey.

Cliff Jones February 2014