Rehumanising Education Policies

R. Scott Webster

Abstract Government policies regarding education have sought to gain greater control of teachers and student experiences, especially since the early 1970s (Schostack and Goodson in *Democracy, education and research.* Routledge, 2020) often through various appeals to quality or scientific management (Apple in *Ideology and Curriculum.* RoutledgeFalmer, 2004). As part of this endeavour, their policies have focussed upon the activities of learning and teaching rather than upon education. It is argued in this chapter that education offers quite a different discourse compared with teaching and learning. This is because education specifically refers to humans as social beings and their moral growth in a political context. The discourse that deals specifically with learning and teaching tends to be apolitical, value-neutral and technical, promoting an input/output orientation where teaching is the input and learning outcomes are the output. It is argued in this chapter that in order to ensure educational policies promote education, they ought to be re-humanised by encouraging all participants in educational activities to pursue their own philosophical aims of personhood which embrace moral and spiritual ideals.

1 Politics of Learning

Education policies, developed by both national governments and international organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD, have been promoting the activities of 'learning' and 'teaching' as being essentially technical in nature, while marginalising the concept of 'education'. Biesta (2017, p. 30) argues that this privileging of 'learning' and 'teaching' over 'education' is due to what he refers to as the 'politics of learning' which reduces 'learners' and 'learning' to the service of the political agenda, such as addressing issues of the economy and employment primarily through accountability and performativity. Indeed Biesta (2017, p. 22) even suggests that the concepts of both 'teaching' and 'learning' have become so hegemonic in policy literature that they are often assumed to be a singular term '*teachingandlearning*'. It is

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important to recognise that while there are overlaps, 'teaching' and 'learning' differ significantly to 'education'. This concern is also asserted by Apple (2004, p. 104) who explains that the policies which adopt such a focus 'move in a direction quite the opposite from moral and political considerations. Instead spheres of decision making are perceived as *technical problems*'.

Clearly not all learning or teaching can be considered as educative. For example, training, indoctrination and even brain-washing rely upon teaching and learning as apparently education does too. However, education refers to ideals of human flourishing associated with living a good life and is often characterised by appeals to emancipation, broadening and growth, whereas the other processes such as training and indoctrination, refer to a specialisation, narrowing or even an oppressive form of conditioning involving conformity (Biesta, 2010; Peters, 1966). Therefore, if education is to be possible in our societies, policymakers should discriminate between education and indoctrination so that the sorts of learning and teaching which are promoted might be valuable and appropriate for education. This can be achieved by focussing on a well-developed understanding of *education* which is primarily based upon aspirations for personhood within a politically desirable context such as democracy. That is, education policies ought to promote the sorts of persons which young humans ought to become in order to be able to participate in democratic life (Delors, 1998; Guttmann, 1999; Schostack & Goodson, 2020).

2 Social Efficiency Ideology

When education policies become dominated with 'teaching' and 'learning' rather than with 'education', they can be understood as promoting social efficiency ideology (Magrini, 2014; Webster & Ryan, 2019), sometimes referred to as scientific management (Apple, 2004). This ideology promotes depoliticised understandings of learning and teaching as if they are only technical activities which constitute the main input and output factors in schooling. Its history goes back to the process-product research conducted through the behaviouristic psychology of Thorndike, as he sought to offer policymakers 'scientific' evidence upon which good teaching methods could be identified (Lagemann, 2000). As such, this ideological approach is attractive for managers and bureaucrats who value control and accountability while pursuing efficiencies.

Policymakers who draw upon social efficiency ideology often assert that their policies do not emerge from political or ideological perspectives but are instead based upon evidence-based research, best practices and even science. For example, under the Bush administration the *No Child Left Behind* document makes claims to a body of evidence which is scientifically based, 110 times. Hammersley (2004, p. 134) argues that what appears to be politically neutral and 'hard' evidence is often used rhetorically to 'discredit opposition' because evidence is asserted as being of a 'scientific' nature, thereby portraying that policies are founded upon 'proof' (Pring, 2004a). Therefore the policies ought to be accepted as incontestable.

However, Whitty (2016, p. 46) claims that 'so-called "evidence-informed" policy is not what university-based researchers would recognise as research'. Indeed, as academics, Hodkinson and Smith (2004, p. 157) report 'there are few "safe" scientific truths about learning that have been currently produced'. Referencing teacher education in England as an example, Whitty (2016, p. 32) contends that 'there is much to suggest that the Conservative led Coalition Government's policy on teacher education was ideologically driven rather than informed by evidence about the quality of training'. He therefore concludes that policymakers tend to cherry-pick only the evidence which substantiates their own ideological position, rather than harbour any genuine interest in the more rigorous sorts of research which pertain to education. This is partly demonstrated in the reference materials listed in policies which substantially use other government departments' reports and publications rather than academic sources.

Policies which focus on learning and teaching rather than on education, can therefore be understood to be primarily driven by the 'politics of learning'. This is exercised by governing elites because learning and teaching lend themselves more readily to what Schostack and Goodson (2020, p. 28) refer to as an 'econocracy' where 'everything is measurable'. This is in contrast to education which by its very nature is not easily measurable (Stolz & Webster, 2020). Blake et al. (2000) identify that such an ideological approach is in fact nihilistic because it denies the possibility of valuing life and educative growth in terms which do not conform to economic efficiency. Indeed the ideals of efficiency and effectiveness are rather empty in terms of value and worthwhileness, because they can only reference themselves in terms of any 'good'. That is, things are considered 'good' only if they are efficient and effective. To address such concerns policymakers must go beyond social efficiency ideology to engage with what it might mean to *be* living a good life as educated people?

3 The Ontological Impact

The *being* or ontology of students, is affected by the types of experiences they undergo while learning, whether such learning experiences are educative, non-educative (e.g. training) or mis-educative (e.g. indoctrination). According to Pring (2004a, p. 206), '[t]o educate is to develop the capacity to think, to value, to understand, to reason, to appreciate' which must necessarily involve 'intentions, motives and thoughts'. Therefore, the knowledge which is learned is not an 'objective' commodity deposited into the heads of students, but is acquired through experiences which have some effect on their *being* including attitudes, interests and desires. This connection between learning and the *being* or character of students has been pointed out with dire warnings by both Dewey and Freire. For example, Dewey (2008a, p. 29) claims that '[p]erhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he [sic] is studying at the time. Collateral learning is the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more

important'. Consequently, he was critical of learning experiences in the traditional manner, which, while resulting in the acquisition of knowledge, nevertheless tended to cause students to become passive, docile, scatterbrained and to lose their sense of inquisitiveness and curiosity about the subject or even with life in general.

Similarly, Freire (2000) through his banking concept, warned against students developing passive characters by adopting an oppressed consciousness by simply accepting the notion that inert, official knowledge is to be 'banked' or deposited into their minds. He used the term 'dehumanisation' to describe the loss of individual intentionality, interest and purpose, as students surrender themselves to authoritative curricula and systems. What both of these educators warned against was the sorts of learning experiences which lead to the loss of an interested and curious spirit of inquiry. Dewey (2008a, p. 11) describes such learning experiences as 'miseducative' to remind us that while 'all genuine education comes about through experience [this] does not mean that all [learning] experiences are genuinely or equally educative'. This is why it is vitally important for policies to focus on 'education' rather than on only efficiency or effective learning.

Acknowledging the inescapable ontological impact that learning experiences have, Peters (1966) offers two main criteria for determining whether these can be understood as offering educational value or not. The first criterion involves students developing an understanding of *why*, and the second involves them coming to *care* about such things. This coming to care reflects a desirable ontological impact of educative learning. That is, through educative learning 'a person cares about and is interested in what is worthwhile as well as being knowledgeable about and in command of such things' (Peters, 1966, p. 37). This ontological aspect is argued by Barnett, like Dewey before him, to be more important for education than the acquisition of knowledge. This is because he argues that under any ideological approach, there is always a certain 'ontological commitment' which prioritises ontology over epistemology such that it 'provides the frame' for both what content is valued, how it is to be acquired and how this ought to affect the student as a person (Barnett, 2003, p. 55; 2007, p. 70).

Ontological impacts have some recognition in the literature of UNESCO. The preamble to Faure's (1972, p. xix) *Learning to Be*, begins with the aspiration that 'for all of those who want to make the world… a better place… *education* is a capital, universal subject' [my emphasis]. The overall aim of education in this document, written to guide educational policies worldwide, is to promote 'the art of living, loving and working' (Faure, 1972, p. 66) for all people so that they can come to embody the aspirational ideals which are necessary for living well together as a global community. Attempts to separate the various aspects of students into dimensions such as the intellectual, physical, aesthetic, spiritual, etc., for the purposes of specific 'learning' is considered in this report to be a 'mutilation' of personhood. Hence their call to 'learn to *be*' is framed within a philosophical understanding that education involves a holistic conception of humans. The philosophical élan in this publication has carried over to the Delors (1998) report to UNESCO titled *Learning: The Treasure Within* as represented by the fourth pillar of learning—learning to be. This presents an understanding of human persons in a holistic and socially connected manner.

Unfortunately, their emphasis upon 'learning' rather than upon 'education' has made it difficult to retain the ontological focus in other more nationally based policies.

Clearly 'learning' has been reduced to measurable outcomes while 'education' focusses upon both processes and end purposes *together*. Such end purposes pertain to aspirational ideals for a good life and for public living in general. While learning and teaching can be relevant for desirable endeavours (e.g. education) and undesirable ones (e.g. indoctrination) because they are only processes without intrinsic end purposes, education has end purposes which are inherently moral and political. These centre on what it means to be human and what it means to live a good life with others. Policies which promote education must have clear aspirational aims pertaining to what sorts of persons students ought to become. This shall be the focus on the following section.

4 Rehumanising Policy

Education policies ought to clearly emphasise ontological aims over and above epistemological ones. That is, in order for policies to be recognised as offering *educational* guidance, they ought to emphasise what it means to *be* educated humans above the skills, capabilities and qualifications which graduates may *have*. This is not considered to be an 'add on' to educational endeavours but rather is contended that emphasising ontology or character is central to education. Dewey (1977, p. 267) has argued that 'the ultimate purpose of *all* education is character-forming' [my emphasis] although the development of knowledge and employment-related skills still have importance. This requires a holistic understanding of human persons and, in particular, educated human persons.

One way that policymakers can address this is through Pring's (2004b, p. 37) 'moral seriousness' which is 'a matter of *seriousness* in thinking about what is worth living for…' Reflecting the second criterion of education as advanced by Peters which is coming to *care*, Pring (2004b, p. 87) argues that it is the actual *interests* of the students 'which ought to be educated'. Accentuating these interests more existentially perhaps, is Biesta who argues that students' desires ought to be educated. This entails people giving serious consideration as to 'whether what we desire is actually desirable?' (Biesta, 2017, p.16). By drawing upon Levinas, Biesta (2017, p. 49) claims that the desires which we ought to be moved by, which are simultaneously individual and social goods, are not selfish or 'egological'.

Collectively, interests, desires and care, can be understood as our *will* (Barnett, 2007; Frankl, 1988), *erōs* (Alexander, 2013; Garrison, 2010) or *passion*, which all pertain to personal identity. For example, Garrison (2010, p. xiii) considers that 'we become what we love. Our destiny is in our desires' and therefore 'the education of *erōs*' ought to be 'the supreme aim of education'. Similarly, Alexander (2013, p. 394) claims that '[h]uman existence… is driven by a desire, an Eros, to experience life with a sense of meaning and value' and when 'Eros engages culture as education… it transforms into care… Eros become *agapē*'. He continues to explore how both *erōs*

and *agapē* are united together in love which is wholehearted, devoted and single-minded, so that through education, people, as social beings, might flourish together with the environment in a passionate care towards all that we know. Through such an education, people become more caring and loving in their way-of-being or character.

Policymakers ought to make clear the sort of character which ought to be pursued through their policies. The ultimate aim of education is to enable each individual to flourish as a member of a social group, coming to understand one's place in the world, desiring to participate in the world to promote the 'good' for oneself and the social and environmental 'public good'. Such growth of personhood does not only consist in cognitive understanding but also includes a holistic appreciation, care committed moral conviction which involves a desire to do 'good'.

This conviction and passionate desire is described by various educators such as Dewey, Garrison and Barnett, as pertaining to one's spirit—not in a reified sense of possessing an essence but rather the manner of how we are *moved*. One's spirit is the 'moving force' or energy within one's *being*, providing purpose and direction to one's life and a 'why' for being moral (Webster, 2009). People conduct themselves according to what they desire, and when considered morally it is not just their actions which are considered but also their *being*. Dewey (2008b, p. 274) describes moral deliberation 'as making a difference in the *self*, as determining what one will *be*'. This kind of deliberation does not just involve enhancing logic and rationality but it relates directly to character which Dewey describes as being integrated via a spiritual attitude.

5 Conclusion

It has been argued in this chapter that educational policies ought to focus upon education rather than only on teaching and learning. This is because teaching and learning lend themselves too readily to the ideology of social efficiency which can actually encourage activities to work in directions quite different to education, such as towards training or indoctrination. In order to promote education, it is argued that policies ought to be rehumanised by encouraging philosophical aims of personhood to be pursued, which embrace moral, political and spiritual ideals. This will assist all readers of such policies to remain cognisant as to the aspirational ideals for the betterment of humanity and which help to make life worth living.

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