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Is 'education' becoming irrelevant in our research?

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Abstract

It is argued in this paper that in a culture of 'performativity' research into 'education' is often avoided. It is observed in many research publications that attention is given to techniques of learning, teaching, management, social equity, identity formation, leadership and delivery of the curriculum, without a justification being offered as to *why* such instrumental approaches should be regarded as being 'educational'. Often research quite unproblematically adopts rational-economic justifications couched in terms of 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness'. Such approaches are however identified as nihilistic and *not* educational (Blake *et al.*, 2000).

In his book *After Virtue* (1984), Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the language of morality is under a state of grave disorder. It is here argued that similarly the language of education is also under threat of becoming 'irrelevant' in a highly technocratic world. Pring (2000) describes the discourse of education as consisting of five concepts: learning; teaching; process; worthwhileness; and personhood. It is proposed here that these latter three in particular are too often being neglected in our research. This paper seeks to examine how these two concepts of 'worthwhileness' and 'personhood' are integral to education, and how researchers may usefully integrate these into their own research practices.

Introduction

According to MacIntyre, the language of morality has been lost. He argues that while we continue to use some terminology specific to morality, these terms remain as only "fragments of a conceptual scheme" for which we have "lost our comprehension" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 2). It is suggested here that such a situation also appears to be evident regarding the language of education. In recent times, for educational research and educational practice, the concept of 'education' is becoming at best marginalised and frequently avoided altogether. Across per-service, in-service and professional development courses that claim to major in education the focus is usually given to techniques, skills, methods, competencies and styles of *doing* to such a degree that it is often difficult to view the discipline other than as an applied science.

Current research into education likewise often focuses narrowly upon more specific issues such as learning, teaching, leadership, management, social equity, identity formation, curriculum design and delivery. It would appear that the significance of such issues for 'education' is self-evident. However, it is contended here that the concept of 'education', just like the conceptual scheme of morality to which MacIntyre refers, is being marginalised to the extent of becoming absent altogether from research that is presumably examining this discipline, due to the almost exclusive emphasis being given to such particular issues as those listed above.

Researching under performativity

A common justification for placing an ever-increasing emphasis upon the technical and instrumental aspects related to learning and skill development is, according to Rumberger (1998), to meet the perceived challenges of globalization and economic utility. Training for job specific attributes are readily grounded in the arena of the competitive globalized market and therefore are a much more popular reform for those held accountable at the political level. Consequently the demands for accountability have fostered a culture of performance objectives that can readily be 'measured' in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. The 'value' - or more

accurately the 'effectiveness' - of university research for example, can be reduced only to its relevance and usefulness "to the national economy" (Cowen, 1996, p. 246).

Lyotard has predicted much of this through his notion of 'performativity'. The implication of this for education is that its own 'relevance' is to be determined by how it specifically fulfils the needs of the social system, which can be essentially reduced to the global economic system (Usher and Edwards, 1994). These 'needs' of society include the 'production' of specialised experts who can "tackle world competition" and the training of skilled personnel necessary to maintain the "internal cohesion" of society (Lyotard, 1984, p. 48). These skilled practitioners are to be valued exclusively for their pragmatic roles rather than for the potential emancipatory influence for society that they were once formerly presumed to have as in their role as the educated elite. In certain contexts, humanity is being valued only in economic terms, either as market labour or as 'human capital'. This tendency can be seen to be occurring to such an extent that "large segments of the population everywhere are becoming irrelevant" (Chauvin, 1998, p. 9).

The key ingredients for surviving in this rapidly changing, highly technological and information rich global market appear to be competitiveness and profitability, both of which determine technological innovation and productive growth (Castells, 1996). Consequently education has been argued to be a "key to future economic prosperity" (Brown *et al.*, 1997, pp. 7-8). A tighter relation between education and work is needed to ensure economic prosperity, but such a close and linear relation may result in the subordination of education to 'performativity'. We have witnessed both education and training occurring concurrently within our schooling systems, although it would now appear that certain educative aspects are becoming marginalised (Margetson, 1997).

The dominance of economic interests over general or 'liberal' educational programmes is already becoming evident according to a recent Australian Council of Educational Research report (Ferrier, 1998). The impact upon our national schooling systems as a result of prioritising the 'needs' of society as Lyotard described, over the needs of individuals to becoming more *fully* human, is likely to be immense, as the whole notion of *education* is not only being compromised but is now under threat due to the ever-increasing demand for *training*.

Here in Australia, the amalgamation of government employment departments with those of education and training, appear to indicate that the enterprise of education is becoming dominated by economic imperatives. This domination is becoming so persuasive in the rational economic wake of Reagan and Thatcher, that it is argued by Lawton and Cowen (2001, p. 17) that "we are now *accustomed* to the discourse that stresses the relationship between education systems and economics [my emphasis]. Blake *et al.* (2000) conclude that there is a "tranquillised acceptance" of the technological approach where "*effectiveness* is rather the most nihilistic value 'lording it under the holiest name'" (Blake *et al.*, 2000, p. 13 & 14, my emphasis). Pring likewise argues "so mesmerized have we become with the importance of 'cost efficiency' and 'effectiveness' that we have failed to see that the very nature of the enterprise to be researched into has been redefined" into something else other than 'education' (Pring, 2000, p. 25). It is argued by Blake *et al.* (2000) that the instrumental rationality so readily adopted in a performance driven environment is in fact a form of nihilism. This is because their justification is to be only found in functionality and as such they are devoid of any values that could be seen to make life more meaningful or worthwhile. They argue that this socially persuasive 'commonsense' view that is associated with the 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' of instrumentality "distracts both individuals and social groups from any informing sense of values" (Blake *et al.*, 2000, p. 41).

The attempted justifications to bleach out certain *value* aspects of education by recent governmental reforms often appear to refer to a need to regard “education as an economic input” (Department of Education, Queensland, 1996, p. 16). Educative notions of individual flourishing, well-being and fulfilment of potential are not readily justified in current pluralistic environments where the demand is upon performativity (Kiziltan *et al.*, 1990, p. 366). What is often overlooked however is that the evaluative aspects of the educative development of persons *do* have value in an economically competitive market and are *not* diametrically opposed or irrelevant to it. Marginalising or ignoring the values intrinsic to a liberal notion of education cannot be afforded, as they *do* have a relevant “place in and contribution to the furthering of the values and value frameworks of modern society” (Bagnall, 1990, p. 46). The development of educated and ethically responsible individuals for example, can be argued to be essential for any civilisation as the very decisions that influence and determine the future of society and the quality of life are essentially moral decisions and are not purely technical or economic (Hughes, 1991, pp. 38-39).

It would appear that if an uncritical adoption of Lyotard's performativity criterion were to be unquestioningly adopted by practitioners and researchers of education, then indeed we may continue to use some of the key terminology of education such as learning, teaching, curriculum and management, but, as with MacIntyre's thesis, we would fail to comprehend education itself. In order to avoid such a loss of comprehension, it is argued to be necessary that educators continue to make a concerted effort in preventing an assumption that 'education' is becoming irrelevant in a highly technocratic and instrumentalist society.

The nature and discourse of education

In this postmodern era, the idea of education is open to greater scrutiny because it has lost its former assumed authority and the societal consensus of the 'good life', which has for so long been used to justify it has also been lost. Any meaning attributed to education has now been problematised to the point that a universal understanding of education can be considered to have all but disappeared (Lawton & Gordon, 2002, p. 228-9; Smeyers, 1995, pp. 109, 113).

Yet it is argued by Pring that with regards to research it is important “to attend to the ‘logic of the discourse’ of that which is researched into – in this case, ‘education’” (Pring, 2000, p. 11). If education is to be understood as a distinct discipline with its own discourse, it needs to be sufficiently differentiated from the other concepts that have tended to obscure and even replace it, such as learning, teaching, schooling, training and curriculum. While Pring acknowledges that the meaning of the term 'education' is contestable, he does offer five general characteristics as being inherent to the concept. These include: learning; teaching; process; worthwhileness and personhood (Pring, 2000, pp. 13-24). It is considered here that the latter three characteristics are being neglected in much of our research. Research tends to be focussed frequently on the key aspects of teaching and learning, but as with MacIntyre's thesis, there appears to be a lack of comprehension regarding the educative nature of these individual aspects. An exploration of Pring's latter three characteristics of process, worthwhileness and personhood now follows in order to review how integral they are for much of the research that is conducted in the discipline of education.

Process

Education is not equated with *all* types of 'learning' or 'teaching' but provides criteria by which these activities may be determined to be educational or not. Education lies beyond these activities themselves providing standards by which they can be determined to be valuable and worthwhile. Education therefore has to do with *particular* kinds of learning and teaching.

According to Pring, the process by which learning is attained must involve a “distinctively human mode of acquiring the understandings... there is an attempt to make sense, a process on enquiry, a questioning of solutions... Hence education is generally understood to exclude ‘indoctrination’ or ‘conditioning’” (Pring, 2000, p. 15).

Education is not to be equated with ‘training’ in the sense that some *specific* outcome is to be developed which is valued *only* for its extrinsic utility. Dewey (1985, p. 16) argued that ‘training’ has more to do with outer action and that ‘education’ refers more to the mental and emotional dispositions of behaviour - although he accepts that the distinction between the two is not as clear as this. Education is also not to be equated with ‘indoctrination’ and the two are often contrasted with each other. Some educationalists have argued that indoctrination refers to the *intent* of the indoctrinator. This can be referred to as the *task* (Neiman, 1989), but is a weak descriptor because it does not omit the activity of unintentional indoctrination. Referring to possible unintentional indoctrination that can occur within an open society, Rodger (1982, p. 31) claims that students “may, however, have been *conditioned* and thus effectively prevented from *feeling the importance* of a whole range of questions, and therefore of acting upon them”. As a consequence of this lack of sensitivity, Robinson (1977, p. 146) concludes, “that an essential element of growth can hardly begin”. So an unintentional outcome - be it an ‘indoctrination’ or ‘condition’, may not necessarily involve the imposition of a doctrine, but may foster a lack of awareness of other important issues not directly engaged with.

To conclude then, for a process of learning to be considered as educational, it must involve more than just skills development or training. The mental and emotional dispositions of learners, including their intentions, are to be engaged. In order for a process of learning to be educational, it must promote thoughtful responses and critical awareness amongst learners. Processes that foster a lack of critical awareness may, according to the previous arguments by Rodger and Robinson, be considered as indoctrinatory.

Worthwhileness

Education is more than just processes (eg. experimentation) and products (eg. the skill of critical thinking). For R. S. Peters education includes the setting of criteria or standards that are worthwhile. He argues that what makes humankind unique is the mind and that through education the mind becomes more ‘valuable’ in that through educative development there should be a “change for the better” (R. S. Peters, 1965, p. 91). He argues that becoming educated in a worthwhile manner implies “(a) caring about what is worth-while and (b) being brought to care about it and to possess the relevant knowledge or skill in a way that involves at least a minimum of understanding and voluntariness” (R.S. Peters, 1965, p. 97). His criterion of being ‘worthwhile’ “depends upon its contribution to the development of persons that permit them to live well.

Peters has been criticised for overemphasising such a cognitive and theoretical approach to the ‘mind’ and to the educated ‘man’ rather than ‘person’, but Mays (1970) and Fitzgibbons (1975) question the public traditions and the ‘correctness’ used by Peters as criteria to help analyse the concept of education. Not only is his approach to the concept of education seen to be emphasising ‘theoretical’ cognition at the expense of its evaluative nature (Clark, 1976), but it also appears to rely on a rather unambiguous “modernistic belief in the autonomy of ethics” (Blake *et al.*, 1998, p. 28).

Nevertheless, some of the characteristics identified by Peters regarding education and of the educated person are still considered to be valuable (Blake *et al.*, 200, p. 41; Lawton & Gordon, 2002, p. 196). In his book ‘*Ethics and Education*’ (1967), Peters outlines his Transcendental

Argument that offers some useful lines of thinking about what learning activities and what characteristics of the person are to be considered as 'worthwhile' and therefore educational. His argument is grounded in his serious question that asks 'What ought I to do?' or 'How ought I to live?'. The responses given will certainly change for each context of the 'world' that persons are to live well 'in', but the question itself remains. For example, rather than aiming simply to develop the cognitive abilities of the 'mind', it is here argued that the task of education is largely to focus on the *beliefs* of individuals - the ways in which they understand the world. Peters's whole argument thus becomes tenuous if his serious question fails to be asked by someone. Nevertheless, we must look beyond Peters to appreciate that his question simply reflects an age-old concern that has been central to education. According to Lawton and Cowen (2001, p. 17), "defining how to live wisely in the world (and not how to live well off [in] it) has been the oldest educational question". The nature of the educational enterprise, as argued for here, is considered to be worthwhile if it encourages the critical and creative exercise of individual intentionality for the purpose of allowing one to take a responsible stand for the way one holds beliefs about oneself and the world (Young, 1992, p. 8).

Personhood

The concept of an 'educated person' has been used to refer to educating a *whole* person and is contrasted with a uni-dimensional approach such as purely knowledge acquisition or cognitive development of the mind. Buber (2002, p. 123) argued, "Education worthy of the name is essentially education of character", of "always the person as a whole...that is, as a unique spiritual-physical form". The enterprise of educating a person depends upon having a worthwhile notion of personhood.

Plato's educated subject has a holistic and harmonious aspect, where the learner's 'true' nature, being understood as virtuous, needs to be 'led out' through education. So through Plato's Socrates, knowledge and virtue are assumed to be part of a person's nature. The concept of holistic education has thus traditionally dealt with a broader notion than knowledge acquisition or development of the intellect only - ethical development also being essential. A holistic approach has to do with the *whole* person in the sense that he or she is multidimensional, and the purpose of education therefore "is to assist in the formation of *better people*" (Bosacki & Ota, 2000, p. 217, my emphasis). Such a purpose conceives education as broadening more than just cognitive abilities.

Richard Pring offers a description of wholeness with regards to the person, which, while including reference to the mind, indicates many other aspects. He describes the educated person as follows -

First, one characteristic of being a person is the capacity to think, to reflect, to make sense of one's experience, to engage critically with the received values, beliefs and assumptions that one is confronted with - the development, in other words of the *powers of the mind*...

A second characteristic of being a person is the capacity to recognise *others* as persons - as centres of consciousness and reason like oneself...

Third, it is characteristic of being a person that one acts *intentionally*, deliberately, and thus can be held responsible for what one does...

Finally, what is distinctive of personhood is the consciousness not only of others as persons but of *oneself* - a sense of one's own unity as a person, one's own value and dignity, one's own capacity to think through a problem, to persevere when things get tough, to establish a platform of values and beliefs whereby one can exercise some control over one's own destiny. (Pring, 1988, quoted by Best, 1996, p. 4)

So while the abilities of the mind appear to be the predominant aspects that have relevance for education, there are other important elements to being a person that need to be developed through education, such as a moral disposition towards others, the responsible exercising of freedom and experiencing an autonomy that allows one to know oneself and how to live a meaningful life for oneself and for others. Surely these attributes are of utmost value in a globalized context as they form the basis from which decisions regarding actions and interactions are made.

Education, then, involves the flourishing of personal *well-being*, which includes having *desires* 'improved' to become more worthwhile by being informed and ethically guided. It would appear that the epistemological emphasis for informing *and* the ethical presuppositions are reflected together in Aristotle's statement "human excellence is of two kinds, Intellectual *and* Moral" (Chase, 1911, p. 26, my emphasis). Human well-being is understood to flourish through education if *both* of these aspects are fostered, along with the a element of meaning-making which includes one's place and purpose in the world, which can be used to contextualise the other two. An education that aims to enhance a learner's well-being, increasing his or her ability to live well in a particular 'world', must necessarily carefully take into consideration the nature of the 'world' in which the learner has presence.

However, in recent times the individual person has been argued to be fragmented (Bauman, 1995; Lyotard, 1991) and contingent upon various traditions and discourses that lie external to him or her (Bagnall, 1995, p. 82). The notion of the educated person has been problematised because of this as it is seen to imply that an aspect of personhood can be 'finished' in some 'unitary whole'. As a consequence, reference to the idea of a holistic person can "invite attack and derision" (Erricker *et al.*, 1997, p. 17). Fragmentation is argued by some to have replaced the ideal of holism (McLaughlin, 1996, p. 11), thereby suggesting that the meaning-making subject has disappeared altogether (Sarup, 1993, p. 181). The agency and autonomy of the subject are brought into question because 'meaning' is established through social norms rather than through individual, authentic creativity.

Løvlie (1992, p. 121) argues that the disappearance of the holistic individual with agency, referred to often as the 'subject', "stabs at the very heart" of the ideal of personal autonomy as an educational goal. The subject is no longer considered to be the originator of meaning or even intentions, and so the notion of an educated person that is disciplined into ways of critical meaning-making is problematised and the project of education itself is threatened (Smeyers, 1995, p. 115). However, the claims of fragmentation and the disappearance of the subject do not necessarily incapacitate educators by announcing an end to education, but they do encourage the recognition of aims of education that are more modest (Standish, 1995, pp. 127, 133). The role of the subject, and hence the educated person, does not need to disappear altogether. Kearney (1987) warns that educators should be wary of slipping from a healthy scepticism to denying the creative human subject any role whatever in the shaping of meaning. The previous metanarratives of education, that included the holistic notion of the educated person, now need to be critiqued rather than eliminated (M. Peters, 1995, p. 395).

Researching Education

In order to study the discipline of education with its evaluative nature, Blake *et al.* (2000) suggest that it is important to engage with personal narratives. For researchers this means engaging with the intentionality of those persons we are researching. This is regarded by R. S. Peters (1970, p. 285) to be more important than actions or behaviours. Researchers cannot settle for 'observable facts' as demonstrated via the behaviours of individuals in order to make sense of their meanings. The intentionality of agents being researched must be engaged with in

order to better make sense of what is observed (Searle, 1983, p. 28). Pring (2000, p. 111) adds that "there is no 'meta-narrative' or rationality" that can be appealed to in order to explain the meaning of acts. Adopting an instrumental or scientific paradigm in educational research is therefore limited simply because persons, with their intentions and reasons, do not readily lend themselves as appropriate objects for a scientific study.

It is argued here that there may be great value for researchers of education asking Peters's serious question to those being studied and those responsible for producing the policies and literature being examined. By engaging with personal narratives, with the intentions that persons have regarding the worthwhileness of activities and their notions of personhood that are to be pursued, the evaluative nature of education will be made prominent. Such an approach would challenge any unquestioning acceptance of 'effective' and 'efficient' criteria that are all too often accepted as 'givens' in a culture of performativity and yet have little value for the enterprise of education itself.

If research into education adopts instrumental approaches as encouraged by the performativity criterion, it will in effect promote a form of nihilism because as mentioned earlier, there is no justification of value available beyond itself. In order to avoid such a loss of value and therefore the loss of 'education' itself, it is argued here that researchers need to be consciously addressing the nature and discourse of education itself. This involves engaging with the personal narratives and intentions that practitioners and policy-makers have regarding the worthwhileness of activities and the notions of personhood and how these are understood to promote the educative enterprise of learning how to live well.

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