

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

TOMAS BORONSKI AND NASIMA HASSAN



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

CHAPTER 1

SOCIOLOGY AND EDUCATION STUDIES

Chapter Aims

This chapter will examine sociology in the context of education studies and compare the sociological contribution to that of psychology and philosophy. It provides a brief introduction to the role of philosophy as both the mother and father of all modern academic disciplines including the foundation disciplines of education studies. However, it also offers a word of warning about the way such disciplines are used and the need to adopt a cautious and critical approach in our studies as students of education. Finally, there is a brief discussion of how disciplines such as psychology can be enhanced by a recognition of the social context and dimensions of education.

Key words: sociology, psychology, philosophy, educated, education, sociological imagination, disruptive experiment, inductive, deductive, theory formation, evidence, hypothesis, grand theory, middle range theory.

Introduction

This book is about education. More specifically, it examines education from a sociological perspective and provides you with an insight into the ways in which sociology can help us to understand some of the key debates in education today, as well as to challenge some of the things that are taken for granted and often go unquestioned. As students of education you can probably identify a variety of debates and trends in education that currently attract media and academic attention. However, it is just as important to identify those things we are so used to accepting that they go unnoticed or unchallenged but can,

nonetheless, have a significant impact on society. For some critics of the education system there are a variety of generally accepted assumptions which they might question, such as the notion that our elected politicians should decide how our children need to be educated, that children should be tested on a regular basis and labelled with relevant degrees of success or failure, that schools are the best places to 'educate' children, that adults always know what is best for children or that children must acquire certain knowledge to be defined as 'educated'. These are just some of the issues that you, as education studies students, should be thinking about.

Thinking critically, however, does not necessarily mean thinking negatively, but it does mean challenging accepted wisdom and taken-for-granted assumptions that might seem, at first sight, to be unimpeachable. It also means being open-minded about conventional practices and being prepared to discuss them in a reasoned and academic way rather than on the basis of prejudice or merely personal opinion. Many of us find it very difficult and even stressful to do this because it may undermine our most strongly held views. Some social commentators and writers may seem to say things that sound eccentric or completely unacceptable. In the 1960s for example John Holt (1969) suggested that children should be able to choose what they wish to study rather than be told what they must know. In 1970 Ivan Illich (1971), a colleague of Holt's at the Centre for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Mexico, suggested that schools are places that inhibit learning and should be replaced by 'learning webs' and 'skill exchanges', which can be used by all freely and voluntarily. Schools, Illich claims, are places of control and forced learning that merely create social division and inequalities. More recently Richard Dawkins (2006) suggested that religious teaching in some faith schools amounts to 'child abuse'. This is a particularly contentious claim at a time when many faith communities are attempting to set up their own schools and both main parties have been supporting and encouraging faith schools in their schools policies.

Thinking point 1.1

Identify a value, belief or principle you hold very strongly. This might be religious, cultural or a common-sense assumption. Think of some of the challenges or opposing views to it. Is it easy to take these opposing views seriously or to be open-minded about them? Try to reflect on your feelings.

It may be a good idea to read Dawkins (2006) or Illich (1971), or at least discuss what you have read, with others on your course. Study groups are a good way to share ideas and reflect on the meaning and significance of new and challenging subjects.

A sociological imagination

The key question here is what sociology has to offer these debates and controversies? At a very basic level it could be said that such challenges to some of our most strongly held assumptions can act like a ‘disruptive experiment’ (Garfinkel, 1967) forcing us to re-examine the foundations of these beliefs and, perhaps, identifying some of their flaws and weaknesses. At a more academic level it is often said that to appreciate the full potential of sociology we must first develop a *sociological imagination*. This is a term coined by C. Wright Mills (1959), an American sociologist, who claimed that sociology encourages us to take a deeper look at every-day events and aspects of our society, and to make a point of challenging the familiar things we tend to take for granted.

In his introductory text on sociology Giddens (1989) uses the example of a cup of coffee to tease out the ways in which we can imagine a cup of coffee. For example, a cup of coffee is not merely a hot drink, it has a history: coffee is a product of colonial contact and (often unfair) international trade, and it is a legal drug; coffee can bring people together, ‘Let’s meet for a coffee’, ‘I’m having a coffee morning’; or it can denote a lifestyle – coffee table, coffee table book, skinny latte.

Thinking point 1.2

A sociological imagination is a distinct way of thinking but can take some practice. You might like to apply it to aspects of education. Try to focus on concepts such as gender, ethnicity, social norms and social class. Again, you might like to do this in your study group.

A key aspect of the sociological imagination according to Wright Mills is the interconnectedness between *individual problems* and *public issues*. Individuals experience particular troubles such as poverty, unemployment or educational failure. If an individual becomes unemployed, for example, we may expect them to use their skills and personal qualities to resolve the problem, such as by retraining and attempting to become more employable. However, when such private troubles become widespread and transcend the individual and the local by becoming aspects of the wider society, such as when there is a high level of unemployment, we have an institutional or social problem in that the individual’s personal skills, character and qualities are no longer sufficient to resolve the situation. For Wright Mills sociology provides the insight that enables us to make the connection between the individual’s situation and the

wider social and historical conditions. However, Wright Mills argues that it is often the case that those in power – policy makers, politicians and business leaders – conceal these public issues by presenting them as private problems, suggesting that the problem lies primarily with the inadequacies of the individuals concerned rather than the structures within which these individuals exist and act. This can be seen in terms of the current debates in education such as why certain social groups or classes ‘underperform’. Wright Mills’ position on the role of professionals and policy makers is relevant here also because he suggests that many of those in positions of authority and power tend to focus on the ‘pathological’ traits of those who underachieve, rather than on the way politicians and policy makers organise the education system. The way working class boys are portrayed by politicians provides a good example of this. Responding to an Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) report in 2003 on the ‘underachievement’ of boys, the then School Standards Minister, David Miliband said:

We have to crack the lad culture that stops too many young boys doing well at school. This culture tells boys that it is fine to play around and not work hard. But this harms their chances of doing well, getting their exams and fulfilling their potential.

(David Miliband quoted on the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) website (Department for Education, 2003).)

It could be argued that narrowing the issue of inequalities in educational achievement down to ‘lad culture’ seems to focus too much on the symptoms when much of the evidence shows that class factors and inequalities play a significant role in this process (Ball, 2008; Bolton, 2010; Dorling, 2011; Ipsos MORI, 2010; Jefferis et al., 2002).

A further dimension of the sociological imagination is that it does not merely accept what are often called common-sense beliefs about society; it encourages us to collect *evidence* in order to be able to look for patterns and trends and to be able to support our assertions. Evidence, no matter how convincing, rarely settles any issue because all evidence is subject to interpretation, but it is the basis upon which any credible claims are made. As a general principle sociology is about theory formation using evidence. Such theory formation can be either *inductive*, which involves collecting evidence and building a theory on the basis of this evidence, or *deductive*, developing a theory from which a hypothesis can be developed in order to test the theory against the evidence. Whichever approach is adopted, a logical and methodical procedure is expected and all claims and theories should be supported by the evidence or, at least, assessed and analysed in terms of the data collected. This enables others to check the evidence and any claims made for themselves. Theories are

also believed to enable us to make generalisations about the world or specific aspects of it, which in itself is a worthy aim in terms of helping us to understand the world, and it may have implications for policy making.

The power of theory

A key issue in sociology is what constitutes a theory. Sociology in its classic phase during the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was characterised by attempts to develop *grand theories*. This means that sociology was seen as being able to explain how society works in one single overarching theory. In addition there was the belief that, by using modern scientific methods of research, the ‘truth’ could be ‘discovered’. For example, Marx attempted to develop a theory of history that he believed was able to provide a comprehensive understanding of how society works and changes. Grand theory is also a term first used by Wright Mills (1959) to describe the systems theory of functionalist sociologists of the 1950s, such as Talcott Parsons, who, Wright Mills believes, were more concerned with abstract theorising and the function of systems and structures than with an understanding of the real world. What Wright Mills was identifying was a trend amongst sociologists at the time to develop highly detailed and abstract theories that made little attempt to consider what was really happening in society. More recently, postmodernists such as Lyotard ([1979] 1984) have pointed to the dated nature of grand theories that make great claims to have discovered the ‘truth’ about society. Lyotard suggests that the optimism of modernism, with its pursuit of progress, truth and objectivity, has given way to a postmodern condition characterised by a general decline in people’s faith in science to bring about social progress and to solve the world’s problems. In Chapter 3 we will examine the position of postmodernists on this issue in more detail.

In general, however, the initial optimism that sociology can act as a source of general ‘truths’ about society as a whole has given way to more modest ambitions. As Boudon (1991) suggests:

it is hopeless and quixotic to try to determine the overarching independent variable that would operate in all social processes, or to determine the essential feature of the social structure, or to find out the two, three, or four couples of concepts ... that would be sufficient to analyse all social phenomena. (Boudon, 1991: 519)

Sociologists now tend to adopt a *middle range* approach to theorising (Merton, 1949), which consists of developing a theoretical understanding of a limited range of sociological problems through the examination of the evidence within

specific contexts. The intention is to make connections between these different insights in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of society, rather than making extravagant claims to have discovered the 'answer to the ultimate question of life' (Adams, 1982).

However, even with these more modest ambitions, sociology has the conceptual power and methods to provide insights that common sense or, indeed, other disciplines are not able to provide. An excellent example of this is *labelling theory*, which was developed by Howard Becker (1963) to explain how the preconceptions we have of others can influence their behaviour. What Becker was attempting to challenge was the idea that all criminals and deviants are inherently bad and that deviance is essentially an individual act. Instead, he showed that deviance is as much to do with how situations are defined at a specific time, in particular, the power of certain groups of individuals to define these situations, and how certain groups are more likely to be defined as deviant than others. For example, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, women who campaigned for the vote and for equal rights were seen as abnormal and even as 'unfeminine' and exposed to ridicule as well as criminalisation. The attempt to challenge male patriarchal power and authority was labelled as deviant. These labels can be seen to have effects that are independent of the motivations of the so-called deviant.

This is an extremely powerful idea which uses a number of conceptual tools that enable us to understand the spiral of deviance. However, rather than claiming that this is a total explanation for deviance in society, labelling theorists suggest that it helps us to understand how certain groups can become criminalised and may embark on a deviant career. Obviously, it cannot explain how extreme pathological behaviour occurs, nor does it purport to be able to do so. Moreover, labelling theorists do not claim to be able to explain how power is acquired and maintained. Nevertheless, the insights that labelling theory provides us in the field of crime and deviance clearly have relevance to the study of education, thus making the kinds of connections Merton was alluding to. For example, you might like to think about how the labels teachers use to define children can have an effect on their behaviour.

Thinking point 1.3

Think back to when you were at school. Were there other children who had particular identities or labels? Can you think of how they might have acquired those labels? Do you think that such labels may have affected the way they saw themselves and the way they acted?

A cautionary note

There is, however, a temptation to become seduced by the insights and revelations of a newly discovered discipline, and to see its novel ways of looking at the world as providing the answer to all of our questions. The reality is that no single discipline can do this. In the case of education, it should be borne in mind that in order to gain a fuller understanding of this subject, we must be able to apply the insights of a wide range of disciplines such as philosophy, psychology and social policy as well as sociology. This is essentially what education studies involves and this is one of its main strengths as it provides a multi-dimensional approach to education that enables us to see issues from a variety of perspectives. For example, a child's progress through the education system is affected by their social circumstances; they may have been born with a certain level of potential but, if this is inhibited by such things as a lack of opportunity and poor health caused by poverty or discrimination, then the child may have difficulties in maximising their potential. In addition, education and welfare policy will also have an impact on the child, and children in similar circumstances (Dorling, 2011; Jefferis et al., 2002; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Indeed, the 'evidence based politics' of Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) takes just such an approach in its application of standardised World Health Organization (WHO) data on health and social progress to understand the effects of income inequality on the population.

Thinking point 1.4

Think of the ways in which a child's educational progress in life might be affected by their social background, the historical and political circumstances they grow up in, as well as the psychological and philosophical ideas that prevail. A great place to start would be to view the Granada Television series *Seven Up* (2014). The series follows the fortunes of 20 children from a variety of social backgrounds born in 1957. You can find this on the following website: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkNibRETzPc.

This clearly makes education studies a very challenging subject as it requires students to develop a strong understanding of a variety of disciplines and to be able to apply them appropriately to educational issues. In particular, you should become familiar with theories of learning (psychology), why governments

choose to adopt particular education policies (political studies, social policy), how the education system has changed (history), how social and cultural factors influence educational attainment (sociology) and the purpose of education (philosophy). We will now examine two of the main foundation subjects of education studies – philosophy and psychology.

The foundation subjects of education studies

Philosophy

Philosophy is the mother and father of all existing academic disciplines; from physics to sociology, all are essentially the offspring of the philosophy of ancient times (generally agreed to have been located in Athens between the fifth century and the first century BCE). There were a number of fundamental questions which the Ancient Greek philosophers raised and which, to this day, remain key questions being addressed by writers, thinkers and academics: What exists? How do we know something exists? What are such things made of? Is there a purpose to life? What is the best way to live our lives? How can we discover truth? Clearly, such questions have links to education and the purpose of education. One of the most famous dialogues on matters relating to education from the classical period is Plato's *Republic* (circ. 380 BCE). A dialogue is a literary form in which the author creates hypothetical conversations between individual characters to explore an issue or a philosophical question. Socrates, for example, features as one of these characters in the *Republic*, which takes the form of conversations about the nature of the ideal society as well as an examination of the linked issues of justice and how education should be organised in such a society. It will probably come as no surprise to us that Plato suggests that philosophers should be the rulers of his ideal society – they should be 'philosopher kings'.

There is a clear link in the *Republic* between Plato's concept of justice, as voiced through Socrates, and his views about who should be educated and the form this education should take. He envisions a state in which justice involves everyone knowing their place and carrying out their roles without question. There are, he believed, clear natural distinctions between human beings; some have the qualities needed for leadership, and it is these 'golden' individuals who should be selected for philosophical training and ultimately they may, if successful in their studies, become 'guardians' or rulers. Through *dialectical debate* they come to see the connections between things and know the essence (forms) of fundamental concepts such as justice and truth. As a result of this training the talented few are expected to attain a condition of total knowledge. For Plato dialectic is the art of philosophical argument by which knowledge is achieved and this is essential for any ruler.

Those who are not chosen to become leaders – the common people such as traders, craftspeople and labourers, and soldiers – would be expected to receive training in their respective occupations. For such ordinary citizens it is the duty of the guardians to lead them to the light of truth. They would not have access to philosophical teaching, nor would they play any part in government but would be subject to the rule of the guardians. You may disagree with Plato's utopia and his definitions of justice; however, his ideas have had a great influence on generations of philosophers who have followed him. So great has been the influence of Plato on philosophy that the eminent twentieth-century philosopher W.N. Whitehead describes European philosophy as a 'series of footnotes' to Plato (Whitehead, 1979: 39). It was the Socratic Plato who stated that the 'unexamined life is not worth living', thereby urging us to think about life as more than just a series of physical experiences. Plato was, in particular, noted for his beliefs that knowledge can only be achieved through reason and that we should not rely on our physical senses alone to find it.

Thinking point 1.5

A good place to start an examination of philosophy is Bertrand Russell's *The History of Western Philosophy* (Russell, 1945). Russell provides a very accessible summary of the *Republic* and other dialogues.

You might like to read this section and discuss with your study group Plato's ideas about the ideal society, justice and the nature of knowledge. Why should we be concerned about such issues at all?

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), like his teacher Plato, was also concerned with asking fundamental questions about life as well as with finding the causes of all things and the links between them. Such an ambitious aim has been taken up by other philosophers over the past two millennia. However, with the huge growth in our knowledge about the world, both natural and social, philosophy began to branch out into fields such as theology, natural philosophy and political philosophy, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, ethics, logic and epistemology (theories of knowledge). Philosophers began to specialise and this eventually led to the establishment of separate disciplines as we know them today – physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, economics and sociology. Each has its own discrete body of knowledge and particular methods of investigation. With the separation of these disciplines from their parent discipline, philosophy was left to develop its own identity and fields of study.

A philosophy of education

The philosophy of education was one such branch of philosophy, which has continued to exercise the minds of philosophers ever since Plato's time, with questions such as how to define education, the purpose of education and how it should be delivered, figuring prominently over the years. However, if we were to enquire as to what constitutes the philosophy of education, we would be faced with a variety of answers. This is because there is no consensus amongst those who practice in this field as to what its subject matter should be, what its aims are and the methods that it should adopt (Carr, 2005). This is problematic for a discipline that aspires to be taken seriously but which tends to be recognised more for its divisions and disputes than its positive achievements. There are some practitioners who see the role of the philosophy of education as one of analysing and explaining the meanings of basic concepts in education: What is education? What is the difference between education and training? What is an educated person? Known variously as analytic philosophy (AP), ordinary language philosophy and linguistic philosophy, this branch of philosophy, which gained popularity in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s represented itself as being made up of second order practitioners concerned primarily with elucidating, defining and clarifying basic concepts for others who are able then to use such concepts to develop first order theories. Such first order accounts are likely to involve moral or political judgements about such things as the purpose of education or the fairness of the system. Philosophers in the AP tradition have made a specific commitment to avoid such tendentious positions and to be purely analytic (Hirst, 1965, 1974; Peters, 1966, 1973).

Nevertheless, what soon became clear is that AP is no more objective or value-free than any other discipline. Indeed, much of the work of AP has been criticised as being an ideologically biased philosophical tradition that supports and justifies the existing social order. Although analytic philosophers claim to be objective and value-free in their analysis of education, it has been suggested by some critics (McLaughlin, 2000) that AP is merely a source of justification for the prevailing education system of post-war Britain that has resulted in significant class inequalities in attainment and continuation rates into higher education. For example, what analytic philosophers such as Dearden et al. (1972) have claimed is that education is the transmission of fundamentally worthwhile activities as taught by the curriculum. The worthwhile activities Dearden et al. referred to was essentially the academic grammar school curriculum of the time (Carr, 2005). However, the evidence being collected during the 1960s and 1970s suggested that the liberal

education system that analytic philosophers were advocating was, in fact, mainly being accessed by a minority of middle class and upper class pupils, and was being denied to most of the rest of the population, which tended to end up in secondary modern or technical high schools where the curricula were far less academic and few pupils progressed to university (Ministry of Education, 1954).

Tomlinson (2005) provides an excellent summary of the evidence collected during the three decades since the Second World War after the establishment of an education system in the UK which was supposed to be meritocratic, but which was turning out to be one characterised by a wastage of talent (Ministry of Education, 1959). Such patterns were already clearly discernible from the 1950s when, under the Tripartite System of education, evidence from government reports such as the Early Leaving Report (Ministry of Education, 1954) showed that working class pupils (Socio Economic Classes 4 and 5 of the Registrar General's scale) gained only half the number of grammar school places as might be expected in terms of their representation in the population. It seemed that the education system in Britain was far from being the fair and meritocratic system it was supposed to be.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a term first used by the social philosopher Michael Young in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870–2033* (1958), to describe a hypothetical society in which people are allocated to positions in terms of merit, which Young defines as ability (or intelligence as measured by such things as IQ tests), plus effort. Young was speculating about what was believed to be happening in Britain as a result of the policy of free education introduced after the Second World War. It was supposed to give equal opportunity to all members of society who could achieve their full potential, and bring an end to the pre-war system in which only the middle and upper classes had access to secondary and higher education, and hence all the best jobs. However, the evidence showed that this was not happening and that the class inequalities that characterised the pre-war period were merely being replicated under the new system. Analytic philosophers seemed to show little awareness of these historical and socially contingent factors in their analyses of education and as a consequence began to lack credibility. Their approach effectively amounted to an attempt to analyse education without taking account of the realities and context in which the education system was located.

Reading suggestion

You might read *The Rise of the Meritocracy* to examine Young's ideas as well as the problems he suggests might arise in such a meritocratic society.

Post-analytic philosophy of education

By the 1980s and 1990s analytic philosophers were starting to reflect on their position and there was an acceptance of the criticisms as well as an attempt by some to reconfigure AP to take account of these weaknesses in their approach (Carr, 2005). McLaughlin (2000) describes this second or 'later' phase of AP as a much broader approach to philosophy of education together with a consideration of educational practice, education policy and the wider social and political context of education. Others, such as Rorty (1979), developed what has come to be known as post-analytic philosophy of education. This focuses on providing a critique of modern philosophy and a challenge to its claim to be able to provide general principles and truths, something philosophers had long hoped to find. As we have seen, philosophers since ancient times have placed their faith in the ability of the philosophical method to reveal ultimate truths such as the meaning of life or what is the best way to live and organise our lives. Rorty proposes a more modest role for the philosophy of education as one of edification and pragmatism derived from the work of the American philosopher John Dewey. For Rorty, truth is essentially that which works in practice.

The challenge of postmodernism

For 2000 years a dominant theme in philosophy had been the desire to discover foundational knowledge. Foundationalism argues that certain beliefs act as the basis for other beliefs and do not depend on any other prior assumptions or justifications. Such knowledge, it is suggested, provides the foundations for 'truth'. So, the intention of analytic philosophy has been the identification of second order concepts on which to build first order theories in an attempt to create a true understanding of the world. The ideas of Rorty are very much in line with the more sceptical and challenging approaches to philosophy gaining ground during the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, the

postmodern turn with its rejection of all truth claims and its critique of the modernist promises of progress and liberation through rational science. What post-analytic and postmodern philosophy were doing therefore was challenging the age-old mission of philosophy to discover the truth and certainty. Other philosophers of education have a more radical agenda and see their role as one of providing the means of bringing about social change through education.

Critical pedagogy

Pedagogy relates to the study of the aims and processes of education. In the relationship between teacher and learner there is a belief that some kind of exchange should occur, for example, skills or knowledge. Pedagogy attempts to examine this process in which, traditionally, the teacher gives and the learner receives such skills or knowledge. Critical pedagogy has its intellectual roots in critical theory, which is associated with the work of the Frankfurt School of Social Research. It is concerned with issues relating to the socialisation that takes place through family, school and the media. Each society has a dominant world view or ideology and it is from this point that critical pedagogy starts. In particular, it focuses on how, and in whose interest, knowledge is produced and passed on by schools and educators. Critical pedagogy is driven by the aims of critical theory, which are to investigate the role of social institutions such as schools and the practices that take place within them, with the intention of challenging the imposition of dominant ideologies and structures. Critical pedagogy, however, focuses primarily on the ways education can be employed to challenge the inequalities existing in the educational system. It examines issues of empowerment, and seeks more equitable and liberating educational experiences for those without a voice. The assumption is that a society that excludes groups from economic and political participation or that renders certain groups powerless is not just an unfair society but also an illogical society which needs to be changed. McLaren (2003) claims that critical pedagogy involves an examination of the relationships in schools, the way knowledge is produced and how schools are organised with the intention of altering them in the interest of the oppressed. The aim is effectively the transformation of society. This somewhat controversial role that is proposed for the philosophy of education is not necessarily shared by other philosophers, but the questions and claims made by critical pedagogy are certainly worthy of discussion and debate (see Chapter 4).

Thinking point 1.6

Think about the British education system: Are there oppressive power relations and inequalities?

The ambiguous status of philosophy

As we can see, the philosophy of education is a discipline with a variety of approaches and often incommensurable philosophical traditions (Carr, 2005). In addition, it has a very ambiguous status in the eyes of politicians and policy makers as well as philosophers themselves. Philosophy's potential value and relevance have been recognised since the ancients. Plato suggests that knowledge, as opposed to skills, can only come through the study of philosophy. It is a discipline that leads the ruler to the right decisions and to the greater good. Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* writes of the condition of 'man' as one of being in chains and that only philosophy can liberate him. However, for many, including Plato and Aristotle, philosophy should only be taught to the few.

The teaching of philosophy to a minority of the elite is a tradition that has been continued into the modern age in Britain, where platonic principles were adopted by the upper classes in the nineteenth century, and that, some might argue, persists to the present day. There developed a strong ideology supporting rule by a 'golden' elite over the masses and the maintenance of a highly disciplined and patriotic military caste. At the height of the British Empire in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century a gentleman who had aspirations to become a member of the ruling elite by becoming a Member of Parliament (MP), or of joining the civil service, generally attended the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge first and studied philosophy rather than a vocational course. Practical subjects such as engineering were generally looked down upon. Teaching philosophy to the masses, or indeed anything that might cause them to reflect on their condition was strongly resisted. The emergence of radical social theories such as Marxism in the nineteenth century was even more of a reason for the ruling elite in Britain to be wary of the potential dangers of philosophy. Ideas such as 'universal suffrage', 'equality' and, of course, the agitation for socialist revolution caused great fear, especially as there were attempts to bring about socialist revolutionary change across the channel in France in 1871 during the short-lived Paris Commune, in the German states in 1848 and in Russia in 1905 and in 1917.

Eurocentric ideas

In July 2007 the then French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, addressed the students and staff at the University of Dakar in the former French colony of Senegal. In his speech Sarkozy spoke of the ‘tragedy of Africa’ (Purtschert, 2010: 1039) by which he meant the assumption amongst many politicians and academics that the relative lack of ‘progress’ in Africa in terms of her culture and economy was the result of something essentially African. Sarkozy stated that Africa has not yet ‘entered into history’ (Purtschert, 2010: 1039); she has not yet moved from a state of natural consciousness in which nature dominates her thought, to one where reflective thinking prevails. The President was actually parroting the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and the somewhat ethnocentric ideas contained in his *Philosophy of History* ([1824] 2001) in which nature is said to represent an unchanging system of beliefs and values that hold back progress. To be part of history, a society or culture needs to move from a natural consciousness to one based on spirit. Spirit represents the process of reflection on human ideas that leads to a restless desire for self-knowledge.

History for Hegel was driven by the dialectical process involving the conflict of ideas. Such conflicts result in a resolution (synthesis) leading to a new way of thinking. The ultimate direction of history he believed is towards truth. However, because Africa has not made the transition to spirit, Hegel claimed that the African consciousness was inherently natural and therefore likely to limit her progress.

Now we do not need to enter the debate about the merits of Hegel’s philosophy, but clearly the views of one of the most respected western philosophers of the nineteenth century have had a great influence on the ideas and values of western civilisation. There is no doubt that his position was at the very least Eurocentric and at worst highly racist, but the legacy of Hegel is one of negativity regarding western attitudes towards African culture and civilisation, which clearly manifests itself in Sarkozy’s speech. It could be said that contemporary views of Africa and African culture are still greatly influenced by Hegel’s racist assumptions, which placed Black African people at the bottom of human development and evolution. As a consequence the achievements of African civilisation are often ignored or even denied.

When the first major European investigation was carried out on the ruined city of Great Zimbabwe by the German scientist Carl Mauch in 1871, he refused to accept that it was the work of Africans, instead claiming it must have been the product of the white settlers. We now know that it was part of the Bantu/Shona civilisation of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. A similar view is evident with regard to African philosophy. Upon examining

western academic tradition one would be hard pressed to find any reference to African philosophy unless it involved a specialised course in African culture. A cursory examination of some of the most popular education studies textbooks in the UK reveals little, if any, coverage of non-western or African philosophy (Bartlett and Burton, 2012; Blake et al., 2008; Sharp et al., 2009; Walkup, 2011; Warren, 2009). This is a strange anomaly given that the academy is supposed to be inclusive and open minded. In addition, given that we live in a multicultural society, the philosophical contributions of non-western philosophers are conspicuous by their absence in all but the most specialist centres of learning.

Verharen (2002) takes issue with the general assumption that philosophy was invented by the Ancient Greeks. He points out that all cultures have an intellectual tradition that includes philosophy – the love of wisdom – even if they do not use such explicit language. He goes on to argue that although he concurs with the aims of the ancients in relation to the purpose of philosophy in providing foundational knowledge – that is basic principles of truth that can be used to make connections between things to create an understanding of the whole – he does not agree with the approach of the ancients and modern educators to limit the study of philosophy to certain groups. A further claim which Verharen makes is that the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Nubia may have had a significant influence on the Ancient Greeks. If this is the case there is all the more reason for western philosophy to examine African philosophy and its influence on contemporary western thought. In addition, for Verharen, philosophy should be available to all, including children, who should be able to learn how to think critically and philosophically as soon as possible. It is rare in the UK as well as the USA for children below the age of 16 to be taught philosophy; it is not part of the National Curriculum in England and Wales. There are many justifications for this, including the claims by Plato and Aristotle that children lack the maturity to deal with complex philosophical questions. To this we may add the belief that teaching philosophy to children adds no clear benefit to the economy and is therefore a waste of time. However, one of the most telling reasons for their objection is that philosophy is potentially dangerous: knowledge is power. If we arm young people with the skills of the philosopher they may become too challenging to those in authority. Verharen suggests that such an approach has impoverished our education systems, claiming that ‘public schools reinforce a slave mentality by refusing to include philosophy in their curricula’ (Verharen, 2002: 304). Although he was referring primarily to the teaching of philosophy to Black school children in the USA, his ideas could just as well be applied to all children.

Reading suggestion

The debate about teaching philosophy to children is examined in Verharen (2002) as well as in Bleazby (2005) and Dawid (2006). They provide a useful starting point for students covering this issue in their course. (For references see the reference list at the end of this chapter.)

Psychology

Once again, we need look no further than the ancients such as Plato and Aristotle to find some of the first speculations about the workings of the mind; how we think and how we learn. However, while Aristotle located thought and emotion primarily in the heart, Plato identified the brain as the locus of such processes. He was one of the first *rationalists*, who suggested that although the brain is the centre of thinking, reflection, understanding and knowledge, we cannot rely on our senses alone for these processes. He stated that knowledge can only be acquired through the intellect, as opposed to through the human senses. Aristotle, on the other hand was an early empiricist who put more emphasis on the role of the senses; stating that knowledge of the world comes to us through our senses. These debates on the nature of the human mind and learning have continued ever since, and psychology emerged as a sub-discipline of philosophy, eventually becoming a highly respected academic discipline as well as professional practice in its own right, developing scientific theories of the mind and the brain based on experimental and analytic methods.

A word of caution

It is important to provide some words of caution about disciplines such as psychology, which potentially offer great practical and sometimes deceptively simple solutions to complex human problems. It is easy to be seduced by an elegant theory, often backed up by seemingly persuasive evidence, which purports to be able to explain the functioning of the mind or the measurement of human ability, the nature of our personality or the source of human language development. Students and even psychologists often take a theory that they have learnt or developed and apply it uncritically to specific situations. Psychology is a speculative discipline and it should be treated as such. Evidence needs to

be examined and treated critically, yet we often accept certain psychological ideas as given, or accepted wisdom if not the truth.

Psychologists and geneticists have been involved in a variety of controversial debates and policies that highlight this point. A good example is the role of psychologists in the discredited theory of eugenics, which was a pseudo-scientific discipline devoted to the 'improvement' of the human race through the selective breeding of people with so-called desirable characteristics and of the 'control' of those with 'undesirable' traits. We can see an example of these ideas put into practice in Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, but it was also a popular discipline amongst policy makers in the USA and Britain for a time. In the USA two psychologists named Terman and Yerks were involved in advising the American government in the early twentieth century on how to control the number of individuals of 'inferior races' entering the USA. At the time there was a huge demand for labour in a burgeoning American economy and the fear was raised by some policy makers that uncontrolled immigration to the USA from all parts of the globe would weaken the nation in the long run due to the 'measured' inferior genetic quality of certain groups that included Poles, Russians and southern Europeans (Kamin, 1977). Despite the fact that eugenics has been discredited as a serious academic discipline, not least because of its association with the atrocities of the Nazi era, there is still a certain amount of academic activity that is sympathetic to the eugenics cause (see Chapter 5). A substantial number of eminent scientists and writers still subscribe to the view that we are not all the same – that some groups are less intelligent than others. James Watson who, together with his colleague Francis Crick, mapped the structure of DNA in the 1950s, is an advocate of 'positive eugenics', which involves, amongst other things, a policy of encouraging 'intelligent' people to have more children. The intelligent people Watson referred to did not include Black people about whom, it is alleged, Watson has some particularly offensive views (see Dorling, 2011: 68).

In the USA we also find support for such essentially racist attitudes. Herrnstein and Murray (1994) spoke of the new cognitive classes who reach the top of society due to their ability rather than because of any social advantage they may have had. The authors of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and the Class Structure* suggest that a similar argument applies to the reasons why Black pupils in the USA perform less well in school and in social mobility generally. Psychologists, therefore, have been closely associated with the measurement of ability and intelligence, and in the sorting of individuals and groups into hierarchies. We can see within these psychological theories the influence of elitist educational philosophers such as Plato, where some groups are seen as superior to others and this is used as the justification for the creation of a hierarchical educational system.

There are, however, other philosophical positions that inform psychological theories and research on ability and intelligence, such as those which make the

assumption that there are, in principle, no limits to what children can achieve. In practice, however, many children's abilities and talents are not effectively developed due to their social and physical environment (Dorling, 2011). Clearly we are not all the same, but many children are simply unable to develop to their full potential due to their basic needs not being met. A child who constantly goes to school hungry will not be able to develop or to study effectively and make progress (Campbell and Butler, 2012). Such experiences can also have long-term consequences for children's life chances. Maslow (1970) identifies a hierarchy of needs arguing that deficiency needs, such as the need for food and security, must be met before higher level needs such as intellectual achievement and, ultimately, self-actualisation can be effectively pursued. As we can see, there is much more to a child's education and development than innate ability. We will return to this issue later in Chapters 5 and 8.

The importance of the social

Moreover, we need to bear in mind the importance of the social environment in which children are born, live and develop. No psychological theory or research can be credible unless it includes these factors; children are social beings and the evidence collected by psychologists such as Vygotsky demonstrates this clearly. Vygotsky was one of the first psychologists to recognise the importance of the way cognitive development in children takes place through the medium of the child's culture (Vygotsky, 1978). Indeed, cultural factors including the values and language of a particular culture are believed to influence the nature and pace of cognitive development of children. If a society places high priority on particular cognitive skills or abilities, then the children in that society are likely to develop such skills sooner than they do in other societies where there is less emphasis on them (Woolfolk, 2013).

Despite these debates in which the role of psychologists has often been highly controversial, psychology has managed to establish its reputation in the field of education and now plays a key role in explaining how children learn and the cognitive processes involved in learning. Alexander (2009) in the very comprehensive *Cambridge Primary Review*, which presents a review of the main international and national research on the primary curriculum by psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, historians and policy experts over the past 50 years, identifies some of the key areas in which psychology has made important contributions:

- The role of play in children's development
- The age at which children should start school
- Effective teaching methods

In addition, educational psychologists occupy an important professional role in most education authorities advising and supporting head teachers, teachers and educational support workers in their day-to-day activities in schools.

Lessons from history

It would be reasonable to assume that education policy makers and experts have learnt a great deal from the mistakes of the past and from the accumulated knowledge of decades of research but, as with most politically charged issues, education is rarely left to the experts and some educationalists are quite scathing of the way governments have responded to the evidence gathered over the years:

The lessons of past attempts at reform have not been learned. The lessons of past research and development have been treated as irrelevant not because they are genuinely inapplicable but merely because they are more than a few months old, or maybe because they challenge the preferred political agenda. (Alexander, 2009: 38)

So, we already know a good deal about what works and what constitutes good practice in education, however, politicians of whatever persuasion are usually driven by their own political ideologies and the next new idea, as well as the next election. What we actually get tends to be a compromise based on government priorities and limited by budgetary targets rather than pedagogically sound principles. In the following chapters these issues will be pursued in more detail.

References

- Adams, D. (1982) *Life, the Universe and Everything*. London: Pan Books.
- Alexander, R. (ed.) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. London: Routledge.
- Ball, S. (2008) *The Education Debate*. London: Policy Press.
- Bartlett, S. and Burton, D. (2012) *An Introduction to Education Studies* (third edition). London: Paul Chapman.
- Becker, H. (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Blake, N., Smeyers, P., Smith, R. and Standish, P. (2008) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bleazby, J. (2005) 'Reconstruction in philosophy for children', Inter-disciplinary.net Second Global Conference, 14 July. Available at: www.inter-disciplinary.net/at-the-interface/

- education/creative-engagements-thinking-with-children/project-archives/2nd/#hide (accessed 7 January 2015).
- Bolton, P. (2010) 'Higher education and social class'. Available at: www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN00620.pdf (accessed 25 Jan 2015).
- Boudon, R. (1991) 'What middle-range theories are', *Contemporary Sociology*, 20(4): 519–22.
- Campbell, D. and Butler, P. (2012) 'Exclusive: Half of teachers forced to feed pupils going hungry at home', *The Guardian*. Available at: www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jun/19/breadline-britain-hungry-schoolchildren-breakfast (accessed 7 January 2015).
- Carr, W. (2005) *The Routledge Falmer Reader in Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Dawid, J. (2006) 'Communities of enquiry with younger children', LT Scotland Early Years and Citizenship Conference, July. Available at: www.docstoc.com/docs/26387812/Communities-of-Enquiry---Early-Years-Conference-notes (accessed 7 January 2015).
- Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dearden, R.F., Hirst, P.H. and Peters, R.S. (eds) (1972) *Education and the Development of Reason*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Department for Education (2003) 'We can crack "lad culture" – Miliband', Wired-Gov. Available at: www.wiredgov.net/wg/wgnews1.nsf/54e6de9e0c383719802572b9005141ed/d7e92417cfb856de802572ab004b802d?OpenDocument (accessed 14th June 2014).
- Dorling, D. (2011) *Injustice: Why Social Inequalities Persist*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Giddens, A. (1989) *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. [1824] (2001) *Philosophy of History* (with prefaces by Charles Hegel and the translator, J. Sibree, MA). Ontario: Batoche Books.
- Herrnstein, R. and Murray, C. (1994) *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and the Class Structure*. New York: Free Press.
- Hirst, P.H. (1965) 'Liberal education and the nature of knowledge', in R.D. Archambault (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis and Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hirst, P.H. (1974) *Knowledge and the Curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Holt, J. (1969) *How Children Fail*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Illich, I. (1971) *Deschooling Society*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.
- Ipsos MORI (2010) 'Young People Omnibus 2010 (Wave16): A research study among 11–16 year olds on behalf of the Sutton Trust January to April 2010'. London: The Sutton Trust.
- Jefferis, B., Power, C. and Hertzman, C. (2002) 'Birth weight, childhood socio-economic environment, and cognitive development in the 1958 British birth cohort study', *British Medical Journal*, 325(7359): 305.
- Kamin, L.J. (1977) *The Science and Politics of IQ*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Lyotard, J.-F. [1979] (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Tr. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- McLaren, P. (2003) 'The path of dissent', *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(2): 141–9.
- McLaughlin, T. (2000) 'Philosophy and educational policy: possibilities, tensions and tasks', *Journal of Education Policy*, 15(4): 441–57.

- Maslow, A.H. (1970) *Motivation and Personality* (second edition). New York: Harper and Row.
- Merton, R. [1949] (2007) 'On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range', in C. Calhoun, G. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff and I. Virk (eds), *Classical Sociological Theory* (second edition). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ministry of Education (1954) 'Early Leaving Report. Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)'. London: HMSO.
- Ministry of Education (1959) 'Fifteen to Eighteen. Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) (The Crowther Report)'. London: HMSO.
- Peters, R.S. (1966) *Ethics and Education*. London: Allan and Unwin.
- Peters, R.S. (ed.) (1973) *Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plato (2007) [circ. 380 BCE] *The Republic*. Penguin Classics (second edition). Tr. Desmond Lee with an Introduction by Melissa Lane. London: Penguin.
- Purtschert, P. (2010) 'On the limit of spirit: Hegel's racism revisited', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 36(9): 1039–51.
- Rorty, R. (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Russell, B. (1945) *The History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Seven Up (1964) (2014) YouTube video, added by Trev Gibb [Online]. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkNibRETzPc (accessed 24th Jan 2015).
- Sharp, J., Ward, S. and Hankin, L. (eds) (2009) *Education Studies: An Issues Based Approach* (second edition). Exeter: Learning Matters Publication.
- Tomlinson, S. (2005) *Education in a Post Welfare Society*. London: Routledge.
- Verharen, C.C. (2002) 'Philosophy's role in Afrocentric education', *Journal of Black Studies*, 32(3): 295–321.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walkup, V. (ed.) (2011) *Exploring Education Studies*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Warren, S. (ed.) (2009) *An Introduction to Education Studies*. London: Continuum.
- Whitehead, R.N. (1979) *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Penguin.
- Woolfolk, A. (2013) *Educational Psychology* (twelfth edition). London: Pearson.
- Wright Mills, C. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870–2033: An Essay in Education and Equality*. London: Thames and Hudson.