

# UEL Reader in Education Studies

Edited by  
Tomas Boronski  
Nasima Hassan





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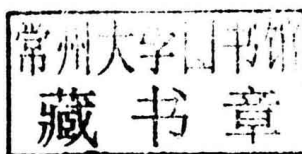
Boronski and Hassé



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# **UEL Reader in Education Studies**





## Editors' Introduction

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# Introduction to Section 1

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## Chapter focus

The opening chapter of Section 1 focuses on the nature of education studies. As well as outlining its key features there will be an emphasis on the **contextual** and **political nature** of the subject. This implies that the student will be expected to develop a knowledge and understanding of the social and political conditions of the society they are studying and their link with historic and current debates in education. This chapter also sets the scene for Section 2 of this reader.

Educational issues are frequently in the headlines in the UK. This is hardly surprising as evidence shows that education is consistently second only to health on the public's list of priorities for government spending (Clery and Lowe, 2010). Although there has been a drop in the level of support from 70 to 59 per cent between 1997 and 2008, according to Clery and Lowe (ibid.) a majority of the public indicates a desire for increased spending on education, and this has been the case since 1983. Education is, therefore, uppermost in the minds of the British public and governments are very mindful of this.

## Activity

Can you identify three issues which are currently the focus of debate in education?

One of the most significant academic reports on primary education in recent years is The Cambridge Primary Review, which was published in late 2009 (Alexander, 2009). The report presents evidence on a number key issues in primary education in England such as the adequacy of the primary curriculum, the age at which children should start school, the testing of primary pupils, children's rights and childhood, child development and children and the wider world, amongst others. The authors of the report have started a national debate on these topics and hold regular meetings and seminars nationwide. Other issues being debated currently include those of multicultural education, the increased funding for faith schools, the promotion of free schools and Academies, the effectiveness of the National Curriculum in preparing young people for the world of work and, of course, the proposed increase in university tuition fees.

In addition, there are regular reports which chart the continuing inequalities between the middle and the working class in terms of educational attainment and university entrance (Connor et al., 2001, Tomlinson, 2005, Ball, 2008, Bolton, 2010), as well as the differential educational achievement in terms of ethnicity and gender (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000, Ball, 2008).

Because of the regular changes of government in the UK there are also frequent reviews of policies and practices which tend to result in new policies which are based on a mixture of political ideology and evidence based research. This can be seen to be happening under the coalition

government formed in 2010 which has been reacting to what it sees as a profligate New Labour administration of 1997–2010 and a need to use the latest evidence to improve educational provision for the various client groups served by the system. A clear example of this is the coalition government's review of the service provided for children with special educational needs:

An Ofsted report has found that the term 'special educational needs' is used too widely. As a result, expensive extra support may be being used to make up for poor parenting and day-to-day teaching. The government has launched its own review of the special educational needs system and is calling on the public to take part. (Directgov, 2010)

As we can see from the above comment there is a concern about 'expensive extra support' which the government believes should be provided by parents as well as ordinary classroom teachers. An emphasis on the role of parents and the desire to reduce public spending are key Conservative policy objectives here.

All this provides some idea of the context of education in Britain at present and it is suggested that any education studies programme should have such contextual issues at its heart. These will be examined in more detail later in the chapter.

### **Activity**

Examine another area for proposed government changes in education policy. Identify the political and evidential bases for such changes.

## **The scope of education studies**

The question of what education studies is has been covered in a number of introductory texts such as Bartlett and Burton (2007), Sharp, Ward and Hankin (2006) and Warren (2009). What seems to be agreed is that education studies approaches 'education' from a number of directions using a variety of disciplines. This makes it a very challenging area of study for it requires a degree of knowledge and understanding of subjects as diverse as developmental psychology, history, philosophy and political science. A frame of mind is required which is able to find the relevant links between such subjects in order to explain and understand issues in education.

A useful place to start is the University of East London's website:

From primary education, through secondary to higher and adult education, this programme investigates contemporary educational issues in lively and exciting ways. Exploring issues such as political ideologies and their influence on education policy, faith schools and the philosophy of education, you will gain an insight into current debates in education. The programme will also give you practical experience of education with visits to a variety of educational settings and visits from external speakers built into the programme. (<http://www.uel.ac.uk/programmes/education/undergraduate/summary/educationstudies.html>, no date)

From the website it is possible to compile a list of areas and aspects covered by Education Studies:

1. How education relates to the economy
2. How it has been shaped historically
3. The influence of social position on educational attainment
4. How education helps form identities
5. What are the main philosophical questions relating to education?

6. How we learn
7. In what way does education link to other areas of life such as childhood, social policy, culture, information and communication technology?

## How education relates to the economy

There has long been a debate about the purpose of education and it is one which relates to the claims by some that education should serve the needs of the economy. A key point in this debate is the speech given by the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October 1976 when he argued that the education system in England and Wales was not meeting the needs of a changing and increasingly complex economy. In other words, he was asserting that the curriculum should be geared more towards teaching the skills and knowledge needed for economic progress and competitiveness (Letch, 2001). This is an issue which is also currently dominating the political agenda. In 2009, for example, the Labour government's Green Paper, *Higher Ambitions* (2009, p.2) emphasised the need for universities to be more involved in wealth creation:

In a knowledge economy, universities are the most important mechanism we have for generating and preserving, disseminating, and transforming knowledge into wider social and economic benefits.

Although the Green Paper talks about ensuring everyone reaches their full potential in the interest of social justice, the main thrust of the document is to increase Britain's economic competitiveness in the global economy by investing in 'human capital', i.e. each individual's economic potential. Education policy today is, in effect, dominated by an *economic agenda*. The coalition government has also been carrying out a review of the National Curriculum and higher education funding with a view to promoting the subjects which are believed to have a direct benefit to the economy – science, maths and engineering – and to providing less support for humanities and arts subjects. The comprehensive spending review by the Chancellor, George Osborne, at the end of 2010 imposed cuts on the universities' teaching budgets of 70 per cent. However, these cuts were aimed primarily at the arts, social sciences and humanities, with the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) being protected from such economies.

Linked to this is the belief that in a post industrial economy (Bell, 1973) such as Britain, where traditional manufacturing and engineering have been in decline for decades, a new type of economy based on knowledge is seen as the way forward. In a knowledge economy (Ball, 2008) an invisible and weightless asset – knowledge – is traded in the form of knowledgeable and highly skilled individuals who are able to create new forms of wealth through innovation and a trade in technical expertise. All this, of course, raises basic philosophical questions about the purpose of education and what values and priorities should dominate the curriculum, as well as the potential effects of increased tuition fees on the so-called meritocratic society that the Coalition government claims it is trying to promote (Williams, 2011).

## How it has been shaped historically?

Knowledge of the historical development of the education system in England is essential to an understanding the education system today and this would include issues such as the role of Church and state, the emergence of a welfare state and the influence of past policies and initiatives on the current education system. It seems reasonable to assume that an understanding of the past is useful in terms of learning from research and experience, yet *The Cambridge Primary Review* of 2009, which starts with a chapter on 'Policies and legacies' as a way of contextualising the English primary system of education, shows that things are not quite so simple and straightforward:

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)

What seems to emerge from such a historical analysis, according to Alexander, is that the past is very rarely properly understood and is subject to political and ideological interpretation. Politicians are constantly driven by the 'new idea' when in fact, he asserts, we already know a good deal about what constitutes good practice from past experience and research.

### **The influence of social position on educational attainment – education and life chances**

There are some sociologists, psychologists and educationalists who argue that levels of educational attainment are the result primarily of individual ability (intelligence) and effort, (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Saunders, 1996). What writers such as these suggest is that children from working class homes are not as successful at all levels of education, when compared to children from the middle and upper-class, because they are on average less intelligent. A similar argument is used by Herrnstein and Murray to explain the under-achievement of African Americans. In a recent examination of the British evidence Saunders (2010) suggests that it is a myth to describe Britain as a closed society, claiming that the evidence confirms what he had suspected; the key elements influencing a person's class position are talent and effort.

However, other sociologists are likely to look for explanations which would come under the heading of *life chances*. Whilst not denying that intelligence and effort play an important parts in an individual's performance at school, some sociologists tend to examine the social, cultural, economic and environmental conditions in which *social groups* live, and whether these support or inhibit their potential for 'success'. As far back as 1963 Douglas has shown that class, together with levels of parental interest, are the main factors influencing educational achievement.

*Life chances* is a term introduced by Max Weber (1864–1920) (Gerth and Mills, 1946) to refer to the chances individuals in a particular *social class* or *status group* have of *achieving socially desirable goals* and of *avoiding socially undesirable outcomes*. Ownership of property and wealth, parents' occupational background (social class), and access to power (status, gender, 'race'/ethnicity, occupation) are believed to be the main determinants of life chances. A good example of recent longitudinal research which shows the influence of class on life chances is by Jefferis et al. (2002). 11,000 pupils born in 1958 were studied in detail in terms of a variety of factors. By age seven those children who had experienced poverty in their childhood had fallen behind the more affluent children in school tests. This gap in educational attainment between the higher and lower social classes widened with age.

Connor et al. (2001) found that less than one in five young people from the lowest social class go on to higher education. Despite New Labour's (1997–2010) policy on wider participation in higher education, some of the latest official evidence (Bolton, 2010) shows that the relative chance of a child from the working class going to university compared to a child from the middle class has changed little since the 1950s. Evidence collected for the Sutton Trust by Ipsos MORI in 2010 on, amongst other issues, the reasons young people choose to or not to go to university, found that the higher the tuition fees are set the less 'likely' or 'fairly likely' (Ipsos MORI, 2010:7) was a sample of 11–16 year olds to go to university. Moreover, the drop was proportionately larger for pupils from poorer backgrounds. The essential point being made here is that there are key *social, economic, cultural* as well as *environmental* factors which enhance or inhibit our natural, physical and intellectual potential; they influence the opportunities we



encounter in life, how we deal with these opportunities and the general directions we take in life. Gender, class and ethnicity all play key parts in this process.

## How education helps form identities

This is an aspect of education which relates to a number of dimensions concerning identity formation and the self-concept of individuals and social groups. Within the school, for example, we need to be aware of the issue of *labelling* pupils and the potential this may have for a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. The American sociologist Charles Cooley (1902) argued that the way we see ourselves is a reflection of how other people react to us, particularly *significant others* such as parents, friends and teachers. Moreover, some of these people are able to label us in particular ways (both positively and negatively) because they have the power to do so. Becker (1963) describes how certain labels can affect individuals and become their *master status*, i.e. the way particular labels can override all other labels. For example, a pupil labelled by a teacher as a 'trouble maker' or as 'low ability' can come to dominate the way they are treated by others. In other words, all other behaviour will be seen in the context of this label. Once the label is established it is difficult to shed and the individual may eventually see themselves in terms of the label.

Labels can also have racial, gender and class associations, often based on cultural stereotypes, but it is important to point out that labels are not necessarily accepted by individuals; they can be *negotiated* or rejected by those so labelled. For example, Mac an Ghaill (1992) found, in an ethnographic study of 25 African Caribbean and Asian students, that some of the girls organised themselves in such a way as to help each other academically in a clear attempt to challenge the negative labels attached to black pupils.

However, labels can have a clear impact on an individual's *self-concept*, particularly if the individual is in a weak position, such as being a child, or lacks a supportive network such as a family or friendship group. As Becker (1963) has shown, it is sometimes very difficult to resist the labels given to us. Pupils' self-concepts will be strongly influenced by the way teachers label them – 'bright', 'dull' or 'problem pupil' – and pupils may come to see themselves in terms of the label and act according to expectations. Coard (1971) claims that this is what happens to African Caribbean children in Britain, in that they are more likely to be labelled as pupils with special needs or as trouble makers, leading to their lower levels of achievement and higher levels of social exclusion. This theory, known as the *self-fulfilling prophecy*, has been illustrated in a famous study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968).

A further aspect of education and identity formation in Britain today is the debate concerning multicultural education and the question of 'Britishness'. Most societies are concerned with the need to cultivate a sense of common identity and loyalty to nation. These are developed and sustained through rituals and ceremonies that according to Durkheim (1975) create a *collective consciousness* which is essential if a society is to function effectively and harmoniously. In schools we can see this process in the singing of the national anthem or in swearing allegiance to the flag which is common in many countries. The problem in Britain today, however, is how to create a sense of common identity in an increasingly ethnically and religiously diverse society. Until the early 2000s there was what could be described as a political consensus regarding race relations in Britain in which it was generally accepted by most mainstream political parties that a multicultural approach was the most appropriate way forward.

Multiculturalism is based on the principle of respect for and recognition of the differences that migrant or ethnic groups bring to a host society. The latter is expected also to enact legislation and policies to ensure that the cultures and traditions of the newcomers are treated as of equal value to those of the host culture. Respecting difference is a key aspect of multiculturalism which,



though viewed with suspicion by the Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s (Tomlinson, 2005), was viewed more sympathetically by New Labour. When New Labour came to power in 1997, it commissioned the Macpherson Report (1999) in to the murder of Stephen Lawrence, which identified *institutional racism* as a problem in organisations such as the Metropolitan Police as well as schools. Macpherson made seventy recommendations, a number of which related to education. This was followed up by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), which placed an obligation on all public authorities to prevent racial discrimination and to actively promote racial equality. Nevertheless, according to Ball (2008) much of Labour’s response to issues of racism and equality has been based on reactions to specific crises rather than clear policy approaches. Ball identifies five ‘moments of crisis’ (Ball, 2008: 168) which highlighted major problems and issues in ‘race’ relations prompting government action. These are the Rampton Report (1981) on the underachievement of African Caribbean children in schools, the Swann Report (1985) on the challenge of providing a fair and inclusive education in a multicultural Britain, the Burnage Report (1988) on the racially motivated murder of Ahmed Ullah in the playground of Burnage School in 1986, the Macpherson Report (1999) on the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence and the Cantle Report (2001) on the riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001.

However, the riots in the north of England in 2001 and the terrorist bombings in London in 2005, as well as a new concern for the ‘white working class’ began to shift the debate (Sharpe et al., 2007). The emergence of Critical Race Theory (CRT), an influential ideology originating in America, has motivated UK based ‘whiteness studies’ (Preston, 2007) incorporating ideas of power and privilege as experienced by white people. This is a contemporary dimension of an ever changing discourse on Britishness and identity construction.

Multiculturalism has taken much of the blame for these events and problems. Moreover, with influential figures such as Trevor Phillips of the (then) Commission for Racial Equality speaking out against multiculturalism, it is likely to be a policy, if not on the retreat, then at least halted. This was as good as confirmed by the Prime Minister, Mr Cameron, when in February 2011 he asserted that multiculturalism is to blame for the radicalising of some young Muslim men. He claims that this has happened because by emphasising the diversity of cultures in Britain there has been a drift away from traditional British values, which he identifies as sexual equality, democracy and social integration (Helm et al., 2011). The education secretary, Michael Gove, has begun to act on this by carrying out a review of the history curriculum which is likely to result in an increased emphasis on ideas of ‘Great British achievements’:

The Tories want our children to be proud of Britain’s imperial past. When the right-wing colonial historian Niall Ferguson told the Hay Festival last weekend that he would like to revise the school history curriculum to include “the rise of western domination of the world” as the “big story” of the past 500 years, the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, leapt to his feet to praise Ferguson’s “exciting” ideas – and offer him the job. (*New Statesman*, 2010)

So, with the new coalition government we can expect less emphasis on multiculturalism and a historical narrative from the perspective of those whose countries were colonised by Britain, and more on Britain’s ‘glorious’ historical past.

**Activity**

Examine David Cameron’s list of British values – sexual equality, democracy and social integration. To what extent can they be said to be traditional? To what extent do they actually exist in Britain?