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# THE ACHIEVEMENT OF EDUCATION

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AN EXAMINATION OF KEY CONCEPTS  
IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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John H. Chambers

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An Examination of Key Concepts  
in Educational Practice

**John H. Chambers**

Tasmanian College of Advanced Education

1817



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*For Alan Chambers,  
my first philosopher*

# Preface

In analyzing key educational concepts, I have tried to provide something written in an uncomplicated manner, which will be of direct and practical use to student teachers, teachers, and school administrators in their work with children. The book derives from ten years as a classroom teacher in elementary and high schools, and ten years of teaching educational theory in a variety of colleges in several English-speaking countries.

In many places I criticize as directly as possible the conceptual and practical fads and fashions of schooling that have had such a debilitating effect on the *educational* practice of teachers. This approach may be too succinct for some tastes, but if readers wish to see finer details of argument and counterargument, they may refer to the admirable work of such writers as Peters, Hirst, Scheffler, Soltis, Dearden, and others.

Any “observer of the American educational scene today must note the chaos of irresponsibility, the inefficiency, the fads, the vested interests, and the confusions that exist in various degrees and

various levels" (Lucas, 1969, p. 3). This statement was made over a decade ago, but still applies, I fear. That it still applies may be attributed to the fact that for too many years now educational theory has been dominated by empirical studies. It is my thesis that this emphasis is misguided and that the important issues are equally philosophical. Approaches such as that of psychology have a crucial place, but come in on the back of philosophy. Psychology's job is to help make known the empirical aspects of the issues that philosophy demarcates and clarifies. Similarly, sociology can tell the teacher and administrator about the social context in which the teaching and learning occur, and history can give some indication of the evolution of pedagogical ideas. But, again, these studies have significance because they shed light on the areas that have been philosophically explicated.

The material of the book is arranged in the following way. Initially, the fundamental distinction between philosophical and other issues is considered and the extreme importance of philosophy in talk about schooling is indicated. A case for a special interpretation of *education* is then made and contrasted with other sorts of activities such as training and indoctrination; I also look at what I believe to be the key pedagogical feature of learning. In Chapter 3 an attempt is made to deal with several crucial concepts that bear upon any curriculum that is to achieve education in the sense outlined in this book, such concepts as *interests*, *growth*, *needs*, and so on. I then consider issues of social control in schools, keeping in mind the parameters that have already been provided in terms of education and the curriculum, analyzing, therefore, such concepts as *freedom* and *discipline* and arguing for the importance of schools themselves.

Though the content is aimed particularly at students taking classes in foundations of education and philosophy of education (and all of the prepublication reviews have commented upon the book's readability) it should be of use also to classroom teachers, administrators, and supervisors.

The final page of each section lists key statements, which together provide a summary of the argument in the section.

Earlier versions of some of the material of this book have appeared in the following journals: Section 3.3 as "If Art is Knowledge, Then . . ." in *The Australian Journal of Education*, 23, no. 3 (October 1979): 283-294; Section 3.4 as "Is Curriculum Integration like Miscegenation?" in *The Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 2, no. 1 (July 1977): 28-39; Section 4.4D as "Children's Right to Childhood" in *The Spectator*, April 28, 1973; Section 4.5 as "Delusions of Deschooling" in *Unicorn*, 6, no. 2 (May 1980): 126-135. I am grateful

to the editors of those publications for allowing me to adapt the content of these articles.

My colleagues Dr. John Norris and Dr. Geoffrey Haward, and my sisters Mrs. Joy Chambers Grundy and Mrs. Coral Chambers Garner of the University of Queensland (who also compiled the Index) made helpful suggestions at various stages in the development of the manuscript, and I should like particularly to thank Professor Arnold Rothstein of the City University of New York for his perceptive comments. Several anonymous external readers for Harper & Row also made points that have been incorporated. None of these persons is however responsible for any personal opinions I may express.

J.H.C.

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# Chapter 1

## Philosophy

### A. Questions of Meaning and Justification

Philosophy is a special sort of thinking; it is *clarificatory*. In philosophy we are trying to become clearer about concepts, about meanings that escape our notice, about various assumptions we may be making without being aware of them, about principles and points of view, about why a particular principle or point of view is acceptable or unacceptable, about reasons why, about arguments for and against a position. Taken together, these clarificatory activities help a person to construct an internally consistent and systematic world view that affects what he does.

It is sometimes said that the activity of philosophical thinking can be encapsulated in the two questions—What do you mean? and How do you know?—and the attempts of people to answer these questions. In short, philosophy is concerned with *meaning* and *justification*.

In the search for answers to such questions, philosophy raises further questions, proposes possible answers, develops the implications of the answers, finds the implications suspect in some way,

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rephrases the questions, reformulates the answers, and so on in a continual cycle. Philosophy cannot take any statement or claim or viewpoint at face value. So philosophers ask such questions as (1) What do you mean?<sup>2</sup>—that is, What is really meant by this? How is this to be interpreted? What type of thing are you talking about? What are you assuming or taking for granted? and (2) How do you know?—that is, what evidence can you produce in favor of your view? What ideas do you have to support you? In what way can this view be justified? How does this view compare with other views? How can you make this part of your argument consistent with the other?

And in philosophy the question is as important as the answer, for philosophy is the only form of knowledge in which no unquestioned assumptions are allowable. As Scriven puts it,

In philosophy we lift ourselves up by our bootstraps: we begin with problems which we think of, state, and discuss in ordinary language, but we eventually reach a better understanding of the very concepts used in the original question, an understanding which may even lead us to improve or abandon them. We develop our instinct for the sense of words just as a physician develops his instinct for the significance of symptoms. . . . That we sometimes change or abandon our starting language is no reason for thinking that we should, or even that we could, always do so. That philosophy is much concerned with the messy meanings of the terms of ordinary language is just a sign that it is concerned with the complex problems of a life which that language was tailored to describe (1966, p. 6).

I have been talking about philosophy in general, but all these points apply also to philosophy of education, for philosophy of education is merely one branch of general philosophy, the branch that is concerned with meaning and justification in pedagogical<sup>1</sup> theory and discussion, and with developing a self-consistent pedagogical world view based upon this.

In asking the question, What do you mean?<sup>2</sup> we are asking what is called a *conceptual question*, a question about just what is involved in a particular concept. This book deals with such concepts as “education,” “integration,” “rights,” and so on, all concepts that feature importantly in pedagogical debate, and that when considered as a unity, provide us with a complex and interrelated viewpoint on schooling.

A moment's reflection will show us that people's concepts and

<sup>1</sup>The term, *pedagogical* rather than *educational* is used deliberately. Pedagogical issues are those that are concerned with teaching and learning. Many issues of teaching and learning are also educational, but not all are, as is shown in the first part of Chapter 2.

arguments are often confused in various ways. This is true in general, and particularly true, I believe, in thought about education and schooling. Because concepts and arguments are so crucial to our thinking, confused concepts and arguments will cause us to think in confused or crooked ways. Such crooked thinking will lead us often into crooked action—that is, we shall be approaching our daily problems in the wrong way—and such mistaken action will often occur in school life.



Now let me provide a short example of What do you mean? and How do you know? questions, or, *What?* and *Why?* questions.

Suppose a schoolteacher in his Christmas holiday begins to think about the curriculum he teaches and the methods he uses. Suppose that he asks himself the interrelated questions, Should I teach history? Why should I teach it? And if I should, what is the best method to use?

It may seem that at least the last question is straightforward. All the teacher needs to do is to test whether teaching machines, or

television, or chalk and talk, or rote learning, or some other method or combination of methods gets the best results, and although as a matter of fact this may be complicated, the problem is in principle clear enough.

But it is not as simple as that, for there are prior questions of meaning to be asked. First, what is meant by the word *teach*? Do we mean that someone is trying to bring about learning? Many people will agree that this is correct, that an activity can count as teaching only if one is trying to get oneself or another person to learn as a result of the activity. Suppose this is agreed upon, so that if history has been taught, then there has been an attempt to get some history learned by the pupils or students; isn't there still a second prior question concerned with the meaning of the phrase "teach *history*?" And surely the answer to this question will be tied to the *concept* of "history" as a subject or discipline—that is, it will be concerned with what we mean when we talk about the subject we call history.

In other words, before we can begin to test methods of teaching and learning history, there is the prior question of what counts as historical knowledge and ability, what it is to learn *history*. For just what it is that is to be learned may change entirely the nature of the situation (see Chapter 2.3). Is to learn history to know dates? Is it to gain the ability to gather evidence and to put it together to make a case? Is it to make an imaginative leap by which the pupil or student puts himself in the place of historical persons—Pericles or Queen Victoria or General MacArthur—and by thinking through what he would have done in similar circumstances, comes to an understanding of the motives and thoughts of such persons? Is it to be able to trace chronological developments? How do we decide upon the nature of the subject, history? The only way to decide is to look at the things done by historians; they, if anyone has, have learned and mastered the subject. In other words, it is necessary to examine carefully the books and articles and lectures of former and practicing historians to see what is involved in their historical writing<sup>2</sup> and *to think as clearly as possible about this content* of history.

So the first of the teacher's questions, Should I teach history? cannot sensibly be answered before the *concept* of "history" as a subject is examined. The teacher has to decide what it is he is teach-

<sup>2</sup>This suggestion may appear to be begging the question, because it seems that a person must already know what the discipline of history is if he is to pick history books to examine. However, in order to select history books, a person does not need a detailed understanding of the subject, all he requires is some surface familiarity with its features. By the time someone has become a teacher, he has sufficient knowledge to contrast history and other subjects. What he often does not have is a sufficiently detailed concept.



ing before he can rationally decide whether to teach it, and why and how. The conceptual or meaning issues are crucial for all the questions that the teacher has to ask himself. Answers to the *Why?* question (e.g. suggestions that history is generally educational, that its study is necessary for a person to have a proper understanding of himself and of his place in the world, and so on) can only be sensibly considered when the teacher has a clear concept of the subject, “history.” Although this justificatory type of question has to wait for some answer to the meaning question, justificatory questions are equally important to meaning questions in philosophy of education.

Thus, we can ask both conceptual questions and justificatory questions, but the answers to such questions will not be separate. It is indeed interesting to notice how the two sorts of answers are linked, how often the activity of getting clear about a concept helps us to see the justification or lack of justification for the claim or point of view. For instance, when I analyze the concept of “indoctrination” in the next chapter, such issues as intention and content are considered. But it cannot be shown what indoctrinatory intention and content consist of without implicitly showing that the pursuit of such intention and the propagation of such content are morally unjustifiable.

## B. Conceptual Questions and Other Sorts of Questions

Once the issues of meaning and justification have been clarified, then the teacher’s second question, What is the best method to use to teach history? can be approached. At this point a fundamental philosophical distinction is raised. So far, I have been discussing issues that can be decided one way or another merely by looking at the concepts themselves, and by *thinking* things through as clearly and carefully as possible. But with this question about the best methods to use, we seem to have a rather different sort of question. It is not a conceptual or meaning type of question; it is not a matter of producing a sound and logical argument. It is the sort of question that has to be answered by *doing* something in the world rather than thinking. It is a question about the actual physical facts of the matter, and the final answer to such a question must be decided by experimenting or testing— that is, by going and seeing.<sup>3</sup> This sort of question is called an *empirical* question.

<sup>3</sup>As suggested later (Chapter 2.3) some of the knowledge about methods can be ascertained by thinking carefully about the content to be taught, for to some extent method must follow content. This is not, however, to deny the importance of the fundamental distinction being drawn here between *thinking* questions and *doing* questions.