

Key Debates in education

Ian Davies, Ian Gregory and Nick McGuinn

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Continuum

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Ian Davies, May 2001

Essential Debates in Education: An Introduction

Ian Davies, Ian Gregory and Nick McGuinn

What Is This Book About?

This book is an introductory text that discusses some of the key issues that are significant at the moment for how we *think* about education. It also explores what we currently *do* to help people become better educated.

The purpose of the book is to encourage greater insight into issues that matter. In order to do this, the authors debate some issues and hope that our readers will become involved, as they read, in ongoing arguments. The process of those debates shown in the various chapters should lead to readers developing both greater understanding and a better ability to become involved.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is written for all those who have a serious and sustained interest in education. Everyone is, to use the current jargon, a 'stakeholder' in education. So much of what we do is strongly related to education that indirect involvement in the issues that are debated in this book is total. No-one is unaffected. The government invests hugely in education, arguing that a successful economy depends on it. Personal involvement is also very significant. We have all been educated in one way or another. Many of us continue to be directly involved in educational institutions as teachers and learners. It is easy to argue that we all should know a little more about this vast

educational enterprise that affects our daily lives in many ways. And yet, this book also has a very specific audience. In recent years there has been a very dramatic increase in the number of students in institutions of higher education who are investigating educational issues. This book will be of relevance to graduates but it is specifically targeted at undergraduates who are reading Education. If you are one of those students you should know that you are part of a growing group. There are now over 60 institutions in the UK alone offering undergraduate courses in Education with nearly half of that number offering single honours degree courses in Educational Studies. This book is meant principally for those students. We have reviewed much of the published information to ensure that as far as possible this book will be of direct benefit to you if you are following one of those courses. What is true of the UK is also true of Australia, North America and elsewhere. Programmes geared to a series of modules on core issues in education can be seen worldwide. These universities all encourage a study of these issues in a way that relates very closely to the chapter headings in this book. There is an emphasis on the aims and purposes of education, issues to do with understanding teaching and learning, the importance of understanding the shaping of policy, developing a sense of the range of responsibilities falling to education and so on. It would be too much to claim that this book will help you to understand all the issues that undergraduates studying Education will meet during their academic work but we are, of course, hoping that at least some of the complexities that surround education will become a little less difficult after reading this book.

What Is in the Book?

As well as this introduction, there are five main chapters and a conclusion. The five chapters are themselves divided into three parts: a main statement, a somewhat shorter response to that statement and a series of suggested activities and further reading that should help to develop further your understanding of particular issues. More will be said later in this introduction about the rationale for this structure. At this point it is sufficient to make clear in a general and fairly straightforward manner what the chapters contain. This description of what is contained in the book will also provide an acknowledgement that in our short space we are not promising to cover all perspectives. We do not explore all analytical perspectives (for example, there is no real discussion of vital debates arising from feminism). There is no detailed discussion about all curriculum areas

(for example, mathematics education is not investigated separately). We refer largely to developments within England. We have merely tried to cover some of the areas that we feel are important in a fairly general way.

The main part of the book begins with a fundamental overview of the nature of the aims of education. Chapter 1 (The Aims of Education) sets the scene of much of what follows. If we are serious about our intention to understand and promote debate about education then we should know at least a little about the nature of the central purposes. In this chapter a number of key issues are probed. What really is the value of education? Do we agree about the role of education? Is it something that should focus on better academic thinking or are there other targets and priorities? What is the difference between education and schooling?

In Chapter 2 the meaning of learning is considered. This chapter has obvious importance. If schools are not places where learning takes place then they perhaps cannot be justified. This seemingly simple point does need to be remembered in light of the debates (also represented in this book) about, for example, the political and economic contexts of schooling. Psychological aspects of what is learnt and how it is learnt are at the heart of this chapter. It considers various motivations that might assist learning, referring to the tensions between 'transmissive' (telling) and 'dialogic' approaches (discussing and negotiating); and differences of learning style and what has been called 'multiple intelligences'.

Chapter 3 complements, in some ways, the discussion that took place in Chapter 2. There are further thoughts in Chapter 3 about learning and also teaching, but two new elements appear. Assessment is given major attention. Should we assess children's understanding? Some would argue that assessment is unavoidable in any social situation. If this is right then what should be assessed and how? What are the alternatives: not only to assessment but perhaps to school itself? Do we really have a number of viable different approaches or should we bow to the inevitable and accept a version of schooling that is rather similar to what we already have?

Chapter 4 explores educational policy-making. The great changes to our education system in the last twenty years are considered with a particular focus on legal matters. The increased emphasis on the perceived need for schools to be more accountable is discussed. Identifying the gaps between the ambitions of policy and the emerging reality is a good way of highlighting some very significant matters. Does the state always need to organize education systems? Should

school be compulsory? These questions will seem to some to lead to obvious answers and yet the close focus on policy-making and implementation in this chapter allows for a greater appreciation of the complexities of educational policies in the contemporary world.

Chapter 5 asks, provocatively, questions about the notion of 'education for a better world'. There has always been a tremendously strong assertion made by many that education has the power to transform. At times this change has been limited. Schools, for example, have merely been the buildings through which benefits such as free school meals or health care checks have been channelled. At other times there is something about the substance of what is being taught and learnt that means it is possible for individuals and communities to know themselves better and to be able to make things better for others. Currently citizenship education is very high on the national and international agenda and this relates strongly to some of the issues raised here. Chapter 5 raises arguments and poses questions about the variety of initiatives that characterize education as a social project.

The conclusions to the book are not merely a summary of comments that have been made earlier in the book. Rather, we want to provide a way of allowing readers to think about the meaning of education and how it develops. We provide a series of brief biographies of people who we have referred to as 'great educators'. These people have made, in one way or another, major contributions to the thinking or practice of education. We provide some factual information as historical background and, by so doing, locate them in a particular set of circumstances. We also summarize and comment upon their work to show what made them special. We also provide an overview of the nature of a great educator. If we know who these people are and what they have done, and understand the nature of their contribution then we will have opportunities to make contemporary work on education less free floating than it sometimes appears. Of course we are not claiming that we have identified the list of great educators that everyone would mention. We apologize if your 'favourite' has been omitted. Neither do we suggest that our summaries or interpretations of their work are not open to question. You may find other and better ways of coming to understand education. We definitely do not want to suggest that better education is made by individuals who for the most part are, like most people that we have in our list of 'great educators', white, male and dead. Nor, finally, do we suggest that we will have a very clear and straightforward path to making improvements in our thinking or

practical applications of educational work merely by having a better understanding of a few key individuals. We do, however, suggest that there is some point in knowing what has gone before so that a more informed, reflective and thorough consideration can be developed.

How Should This Book Be Read?

This question needs to be considered very carefully for this is not the sort of book that is written by 'experts' for 'novices'. Of course, we hope that after many years of work in a wide variety of educational institutions we, the authors, have something to offer people who have not had so much experience. We do not think that knowledge is unnecessary, nor do we think that all views have equal value. Some ideas are simply better, and, at times, better expressed, than others. However, the principal aims of this book are to display a debate between the authors and to encourage the readers to enter into this creative conflict. We will not be able to hear you shouting at the pages – cheering or sneering – but we *do* want to provoke responses. The intended main audience (those fairly new to the study and practice of education) and the determination to generate responses from readers has led to the use of a particular style. This style is one that we hope will make the readers feel as if they are part of lively controversial debates about things that matter. We aim to be provocative. Of course, none of the authors has fabricated any of the material. We are not saying things we do not believe. But some of the comments are at times a little overstated for effect and there may be occasions when – for reasons of space, time and the need to make things as accessible as possible – we may have erred into the sort of comment that we may later regret. But that is the nature of debate and we hope that the readers will accept the contributions with this in mind.

The book has been constructed around a framework that will allow for debate. It has been written by a team of three people who argue against each other. Each chapter begins with a main statement by one author. The single author responsible for the main statement in a chapter uses, generally, specialist knowledge that the other two authors do not have. Nevertheless, one of the remaining two authors has supplied an individual response to each of the main statements. The responses are meant to highlight key issues and our differences. Each chapter finishes with a list of key questions, suggestions for further reading and activities. These activities are largely based on an awareness of the issues that the respondents felt it was important to

pursue. So, for example, Ian Gregory, drawing on his work as a philosopher of education, has written Chapter 1 on educational aims; Ian Davies wrote the response to that chapter; Ian Gregory then wrote a series of activities and supplied some suggestions for further reading.

To be able to make some sort of sense of what our arguments mean, it will probably be useful if the reader knows a little about our backgrounds and main ideas. Of course, we do not want the reader to think that there is a necessary causal link between experience and the formation of particular opinions. We also should admit that we do not perceive huge ideological differences between ourselves. We are in many ways rather similar people who work together and get along very well with each other. And yet, it is in these circumstances that real debate can occur. We did not want to write a book that contained chapters written by people who have, supposedly, diametrically opposed views. Television interviewers are surely wrong when they manage debates as some sort of gladiatorial conflict in which the whole point of the exercise is to score points rather than to develop a meaningful exploration of difficult and important issues. The bulk of serious debate about education today is not, whatever the tabloid press might suggest, between violently opposed extremists. Rather, the nuances and subtleties of arguments need to be examined and this is best illustrated by listening to debates involving people who hold much in common. It is only in this way that we can get beyond rather meaningless generalities or slanging matches where there is no common ground. But the common ground between us contains significant breaks. We do not feel that we are merely broadcasting petty disputes. We wish to avoid (in Freud's telling phrase) the 'narcissism of small differences' and get to the heart of matters. We are all in favour of a good educational system that works well for all those involved, but what does that really mean? We need to encourage readers to see the differences that really emerge when well-meaning people try to argue for better ideas and practice in education.

We hope that the following details about the authors' professional experiences and views supply a limited context for the chapters that follow and make our debates easier to follow. It is probably best in these circumstances to avoid too much pseudo psychoanalytical navel-gazing. The wailings of the 'me generation' have been heard enough already. We do not want too much sentiment. And yet, perhaps a little background information (in the authors' own words) will allow the reader to cast a critical eye over the statements and

responses we make in this book. In short, the reader should know where we are 'coming from'.

The Authors

Ian Davies: I have worked at the University of York since 1989. Prior to that I was a teacher in comprehensive schools in England for ten years. I have longstanding interests in history education and citizenship education. The roots of these interests are hard to identify. I passed the '11-plus' and went to a boys' state grammar school in Liverpool. (The '11-plus' was the main way in which young people, at age 11, were sorted into schools that were supposed to suit their aptitudes and abilities. Failure in the, rather unreliable, examination would normally lead to entry to a secondary modern school which was supposed in theory to be of equal status.) Today, issues to do with social class and education are rather neglected but, at least at that time (the 1960s), I suppose my background is what used to be described as 'working class'. A very good teacher (Maurice Devereux) inspired me to become interested in history. I think I always had strong interests in politics. Liverpool has always seemed a very politicized city and debates at home within the family sharpened my interests. I became an undergraduate at York in the 1970s just at the time when ideas to do with political education were being developed. My career ambitions had been either social work or teaching. I eventually followed the route of so many people from my background and decided that I wanted to work with young people who were in mainstream schools. My initial teacher education course included a placement at the Abraham Moss Community School in Manchester. At the time (the late 1970s) Abraham Moss was a very high-profile institution which saw its role not only as a school but also as a body that could stimulate and work together with local and other communities. I went on to teach mainly history in comprehensive schools in Grimsby and Andover and to being involved in the shift from providing a fact-based narrative to the 'new history' that more explicitly stimulated skills-based learning. Throughout my teaching career I was taking deliberate decisions not to work in grammar or private schools. I am sure that I displayed plenty of naïve youthful idealism but I do feel privileged to have worked with some excellent teachers and do feel very positive indeed about the work that goes on in schools. When I moved to work at the University of York in 1989, from a role as head of humanities, it was in some ways prompted by a desire to keep in touch with schools and teaching rather than to move towards the next 'obvious'

step of being embroiled in the administrative demands of being a deputy head. My work with teachers and those who are working to gain qualified teacher status is hugely rewarding. That said, I do at times feel some doubts about my present position within a selective higher education system that is some way removed from the 'chalk face'. A deeply felt desire to educate people about contemporary society is still what I like to think I am 'about'. I would also like to think that I help people to think about (and perhaps do something about) how to make society a little better. Thus, education for me has always been a social project. Its purpose is not necessarily or principally to do with personal growth or individual cognitive acceleration. It is more about a desire to study society, think critically and to provide an education that helps people develop their potential to improve things. As such, education has for me a strong utilitarian function. To state my position in a simplistic way, I see education as being less about individuals achieving 'glittering prizes' and more about raising standards appropriately to allow for the possibility of societal improvement. The arguments over the nature of the preferred outcome is, for me, the key debate in education. But that debate does, I believe, have certain parameters. While there must be space for individual professional creativity – this is what good teaching (indeed, a good society) is all about – it is necessary for agreements to be reached about what all should have access and entitlements to. As such, commitment to broad principles such as equality are important. The extent to which particular strategies can be seen as necessary is problematic and can only be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless I do think that policies such as the National Curriculum, for example, can, if approached in certain ways, provide very positive ways forward.

Ian Gregory: I think I enjoyed a good education. I went to a good Catholic primary school; I transferred to a very good Catholic grammar school in the south of England, being one of those lucky ones who passed the 11-plus. Someone like myself acts as a justification for those who clamour for the return of something very like the 11-plus nowadays or who resist its abolition in those areas where it still exists. I was a young child from a relatively deprived background with ability who the 11-plus picked out as someone deserving of an appropriate education. Without a mechanism like the 11-plus, I might have sunk without trace if the only kind of education on offer was non-selective (so the story goes).

I subsequently went to university in London and Oxford where I

studied philosophy. At a later stage in my life while working at the University of York I studied for a law degree part time at the University of Hull. Apart from a brief period working in a library and sundry part-time jobs such as greenkeeping, cutting the grass for the local council and working in the cold store of an ice cream factory, I have spent my life working in universities. My academic specialities are, unsurprisingly, philosophy and law. And overwhelmingly I have plied those trades in departments of education.

Those are the bare bones of my intellectual history. My philosophical education was in the very heyday of linguistic philosophy. I think of philosophy as analytical, as essentially a critical and clarificatory activity. This tradition of philosophizing is the scourge of obscurity, dogmatism and slippery argument. It insists upon the careful use of language, it lays bare the presuppositions of arguments, it explores their implications, and it vets them for coherence and consistency. We should always be on our guard against the intellectually shoddy. So why apply philosophy to the concerns of education? Education is one of the great human enterprises – perhaps the greatest. What could be more important? It is, however, one of those areas (rather like the domain of party politics) where the quality of debate is characteristically feeble, where in the drive to carry conviction confused language and argument seeks to bypass our critical faculties. Too much educational discourse is, as R. S. Peters puts it, ‘undifferentiated mush’. It is my distaste for such mush that persuades me that thinking critically and clearly about educational matters is of the most profound importance. Critical debate about such matters must be kept alive, especially so it seems to me at the present time, where central government exhibits such a displeasing certainty as to the way forward for the nation’s schools.

My other great interest is education law. In the last twenty years this area has burgeoned. It is no longer the dormant area of law of the previous 40 years subsequent to 1944 (the date when the Butler Education Act became law – see the appendix for details). Education law is the barometer and expression of government policy in the key area of education. I find myself deeply unsympathetic to the thrust of government policies of the last twenty years, whether those of the Conservatives or more latterly the Labour Party. There have, of course, been intellectual influences that have shaped my outlook – the deschoolers and the children rights movement in particular spring to mind. But it has been the experience of my own children’s schooling that has influenced me more than anything else. All

comparison between their education and my own was to the detriment of my own schooling. They went to the local primary school and the local rural comprehensive. I was continually struck by the self-confidence they exhibited in their writings, the opportunities they enjoyed to take responsibility for their own learning, the humane nature of teacher–pupil relationships, their much greater enjoyment of schooling than I ever knew. All of this I saw at first hand as a governor of the secondary school. They have all thrived academically because of the confidence their schooling inspired in them.

By contrast the sheer dullness of my own education, however ‘good’, was made palpable to me. It is a source of immense pleasure to me that my children finished their schooling before the dead hand of the National Curriculum (provided for in the Education Reform Act of 1988), and everything that came in its wake, was implemented fully. I fear for the future of schooling as the tentacles of the state spread to every nook and cranny of school life. The humane impulses that flowed through the schooling system in the sixties and seventies are in danger of being swept away. That a liberal society has allowed government the degree of control it presently enjoys over the nation’s schooling is deeply depressing and to be deplored.

Nick McGuinn: From the day when I was dragged, protesting, out of the nursery sandpit and into the reception classroom of my primary school, education has played a major part in my life. I have been on the receiving-end of many different teaching styles since then: some of them inspirational, some not so impressive. I have been enthralled by a skilful sixth-form teacher’s ability to explicate Shakespeare’s *King Lear* line by line, and I have quaked with fear as a maths teacher has threatened a beating if I failed to answer a mental arithmetic question.

It was a Jesuit priest who famously said, ‘Give me the child till the age of seven, and I will give you the man.’ I passed into the care of this particular Catholic order when I was double that recommended age. Whether this meant it was too late for the fathers to make their mark on me, I can’t say. I remember a great deal of preaching about hell-fire; but I remember, too, much emphasis upon concepts of responsibility and community.

Perhaps this links to the particular period – the sixties and early seventies – when I attended school and university. This was a time when belief in the transformational power of education – even

education for its own sake – ran strong. I still remain deeply impressed by the fact that I lived through a period when taxpayers were prepared to finance students like myself to study English Literature – in my case the novels of George Eliot – to higher degree level without any expectation of repayment. If it did me good, the thinking seemed to be, it might somehow do the community good as well.

I think this was a fruitful approach. Many young people of my generation left university with a strong feeling that they needed to give something back to society. Instead of looking for lucrative jobs in advertising and the media – which are now, I understand, the preferred options of many English graduates – we turned to the ‘caring’ professions like teaching. So I completed my years at Oxford with a postgraduate certificate in education. It was an interesting time to enter the profession. The Labour Government of the day had recently committed itself to the comprehensive school. The Bullock Report (developed in the 1970s) on the teaching of English had reinvigorated English teaching. The establishment I joined as a newly qualified teacher in 1977 seemed to be right at the heart of things. It was a newly formed comprehensive, based on the amalgamation of three schools: a primary, a secondary modern and a grammar. It contained 2000 pupils of widely different aspirations, backgrounds and abilities, with all the challenges and underlying tensions that might imply.

What motivated young English teachers like myself in those days? A desire to share our love of literature, yes; but we also wanted to help each of our pupils find their own personal voice, to negotiate their sense of being in the world, through the medium of language. And now that I am in danger of sounding pretentious, I may as well go further and suggest that we also believed, deeply, in the idea that increasingly fragmented communities could be brought together through the medium of the shared cultural experience. In this respect drama – so lacking from my own education – proved a revelation to me. I was amazed to see how dramatic techniques could change the power relationship of teacher and learner, conferring the ‘mantle of the expert’ upon the latter and helping often hesitant and unconfident young people find a voice and a purpose within the safety of the fictional drama space.

Much of our pedagogical approach was grounded in a philosophy of English teaching which reached back through the years via Bullock, F. R. Leavis (literary critic active 1930s to 1970s) and the Newbolt Report of 1921 into the teaching of English, to Matthew