Editors
Will Curtis
Stephen Ward
John Sharp
Les Hankin

Education studies

An issues-based approach

Third edition

⑤SAGE | **ⓜ LearningMatters**

Chapter *1*

What is education?

Keira Sewell and Stephen Newman

Introduction

Ask anyone what education means and the answers are likely to be varied. Many primary-aged children might suggest that it helps them to learn, whereas secondary-aged children often think that education helps to get a job. Adults have different views, often based on their own experiences of the education system. Thus the term 'education' is not an easy one to define, often being wrapped up with the ideas of schooling, learning and training. This chapter examines the debates about the nature of education and the possible definitions or meanings of education. It looks at the different ways philosophers have thought about education and it asks you to do some philosophical thinking of your own about the different language-games played by educational thinkers and policy-makers.

Defining education

The notion of education has taxed the minds of philosophers since the times of Plato and Socrates. Despite the multitude of definitions put forward, Matheson and Wells (1999) have argued that we are still no nearer reaching one that is wholly satisfactory. Gregory (2002) has suggested education is concerned with equipping minds to make sense of the physical, social and cultural world, while Peters (1966) has proposed that when we use the term 'education' it brings with it the implication that there is an 'intention to transmit', in a 'morally acceptable' way, something considered worthwhile; such beguiling simplicities having found expression in more recent political rhetoric (Gove, 2011). Yet, can we really equip young minds with the ability to make sense of a world which will look very different in ten or twenty years from now? Who determines what is, and what is not, worthwhile and on what do they base such decisions? What is meant by Peters's phrases 'intention to transmit' and 'morally acceptable'? It is no easier to answer these questions if we take Hirst's (1965) view that liberal education has value for an individual because it fulfils the mind rather than fulfilling vocational or utilitarian needs.

One of the difficulties in defining education lies in the interchangeability of those terms associated with it. Where some may see the term 'schooling' as synonymous with the term 'education', or suggest that the relationship between learning and teaching is causal (e.g. Carr, 2003), Gregory (2002) has indicated that the terms are distinct and that the relationship between the two cannot be assumed. Indeed, it is this distinctiveness that enables individuals to determine their own education on leaving a schooling system that they may believe has failed them.

Pause for thought | what has education done for you?

Draw a timeline from birth to your current age and consider the effects of education on your own development. To what extent have formal and informal systems and processes enabled you to progress? Consider your future and identify your personal needs for education. What contexts will enable you to meet these needs? To what extent might your needs change depending on your age, circumstances and aspirations, and to what extent do you feel the current education system can anticipate and be responsive to your changing needs?

What is education? Schooling, education, learning, training

The argument that the notions of schooling and education are distinct raises the question of whether education can simply be assigned to *product*, or whether it is the *process* of education that is of paramount importance. However, if education is regarded as a process, a further question arises: what should this process entail? There may initially appear to be a strong argument in support of learning playing a fundamental role, particularly if learning is taken to mean the acquisition of knowledge, understanding or skills that were not previously held. Perhaps the starting point for this debate should therefore be learning rather than education; that is, that the type of learning taking place may determine whether we refer to education as training or even schooling.

This regress of questions continues in the notion of training. Becker (1964) described training as focusing on the development of technical abilities that are linked to specific vocations or are generic across the field of employment. Cohen (1982) described it as applying to a specific and limited learning goal. Thus attention turns to the nature of technical abilities, what defines limited learning goals, and whether training promotes a different kind of learning from education.

Papadopoulous (1998) acknowledged the many possible interpretations of the term 'education', arguing that it can be regarded as an all-embracing term, serving a number of different purposes in ways that recognise both product and process. He has suggested that education is variously seen as promoting:

- economic prosperity;
- employment;
- scientific and technological progress;
- cultural vitality in a society increasingly dominated by leisure activities;
- social progress and equality;
- democratic principles;
- individual success.

Pause for thought | the meaning of the term 'education'

What do you think of Papadopoulous's summary of education? Are there any aspects of education you think he has ignored? Is there anything he has included you would wish to exclude? Try ranking his promotions list in order of priority. What has influenced your decisions? Who is education for? Is it primarily for the good of society or for the good of the individual? Think of some of the ways in which the term 'education' is used. Do they share any common features?

A philosophical approach

The remarks thus far have illustrated that there is little, if any, consensus about any one precise meaning of the term 'education'. Not only does the term seem to have many meanings but the search for criteria for the term that are relevant for all the meanings it has also seems fraught with difficulty. It seems far from easy to identify any core attribute that each and every use of the term 'education' must share.

An alternative approach that may be helpful takes as its starting point the reminders provided by Wittgenstein, particularly those provided in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953). Wittgenstein suggested that most terms get their meanings from the contexts – the 'language-games' – in which they are used. He proposed that most words do not have fixed meanings and hence uses; rather, they are like tools in a toolbox and can be used for varied purposes. If someone makes a mistake in their use of a term, then the relevant criteria from the appropriate 'language-game' can be made explicit in an attempt to provide clarification. Thus the judgement of whether a use is appropriate comes from the context in which the word is used.

Instead of considering the term 'education', let us consider the term 'chair' as an apparently more straightforward example. Is there a core or central meaning of that term? Perhaps your instinctive first thoughts lead you to think that there is. But a chair may differ in size, shape or colour; it may have legs, it may have none. A chair may seat one person, or maybe more than one. 'Chair' might be used to mean a professorial post in a university, or a person convening a meeting. Interestingly, however, in spite of this diversity of meanings, there is no apparent confusion when this term is used in our everyday language. This is, in everyday life, far from being a puzzling or surprising fact. This example suggests that the criteria for deciding whether the use of the term 'chair' is appropriate come from the context, rather than from the term 'chair' itself.

The notion that words do not have fixed meanings is closely allied to that which suggests that words can have more than one meaning. Take as a further example the term 'games'. Wittgenstein suggested that the uses of this term form a network where there may be overlaps of meaning between some of the uses, but that there is nothing in common to all of the uses. Wittgenstein also suggested that this network of similarities can be characterised by the phrase 'family resemblances'. The same notion can be taken to represent a series of related 'language-games', each 'consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven'; as before, some of these 'language-games' are closely related, others are not.

Pause for thought | meanings and contexts

The word 'red' (like other ordinary words) takes its meaning from the way in which it is actually used. The use of the word depends not just on an object being described, but also on context. Think, for example, of the differences between the uses of 'red' in the phrases 'red paint', a 'red pillar box', someone with 'red hair' or 'being in the red'. Consider the uses of the term 'white' in 'white coffee', 'white wine', 'white skin' and 'white paint'. Try to make up some phrases of your own using the word 'deep', but where 'deep' has different meanings.

The meanings of 'education'

Having considered some of the examples with which Wittgenstein highlighted the issue of meanings, let us return to consider the implications for attempting to define 'education'. With

these ideas in mind, we can see that if the social context provides the structure for understanding the use of language and meanings then, in asking the question *What is education?*, we may expect a range of diverse answers, depending on the contexts in which the question is asked. We should not expect 'education' to have one fixed meaning; rather we may expect the term to have many meanings, meanings that may change.

Does this mean that we can never define what we mean by education? Not at all. But, according to Wittgenstein, such a definition would be context-specific and probably given for a special purpose. Thus, one interpretation of the term 'education' in *this* context may be to conceptualise education as involving developing expertise in various 'language-games'. At a general level this may be all that can be said; such an interpretation being descriptive rather than prescriptive, and explicitly context-specific. In this sense, to engage in education is indeed to be involved in a social process of meaning-making.

Consider, for example, trainee teachers. The purpose of their training is to prepare them to meet the professional competences expected from someone entering the teaching profession. However, Lang (1995) has argued that we cannot assume a commonality in the individual belief systems of trainees and that teacher education must be reflective, providing opportunities for trainees to examine and explore the values, beliefs and attitudes that underpin their approach to education and identify those factors that may determine how they resolve conflict. Such an approach, it is argued, enables them to move beyond mute acceptance of policy and procedure to a deeper understanding of the philosophies and principles that underpin these and an appreciation of the extent to which their own values and beliefs support or inhibit putting them into practice. Newman (1999) supported this distinction, characterising teacher *training* as a means of developing a beginning teacher's ability merely to follow the rules of a 'language-game', and teacher *education* as a way of developing:

a critical practitioner: someone who is capable of thinking about what they do, justifying and explaining it where appropriate, and adapting their playing and their understandings [of language-games] to varying circumstances.

(p.159)

Such an approach would seem to be in marked contrast to that which envisages the development of new teachers as one to be best based in school *to help develop … teaching skills and … learn about key teaching methods* (Department for Education, 2012).

As a further example, consider the teacher who needs to manage a bully/victim problem. Training might equip them with the skills to follow school policy and procedure but not to address some of the deep-rooted values and beliefs that affect the way they feel. Education, it is suggested, can explore these feelings and, while not always promoting change, at the very least can raise awareness of the presence of these feelings, of the ways in which they may determine responses, and help to develop the ability to articulate and justify particular actions in a way appropriate to the context (that is, to the 'language-game' being played).

Education for differences

If education has many meanings which vary according to context, then it would be appropriate to consider the notion that education should not be limited to any one definition. Such a decision frees us to consider the range of educational opportunities available to us throughout our lives.

On one level it is likely that all of us will have experienced the traditional contexts of formal education. These contexts are normally long term, extending from primary through to higher education, and include institutions such as schools, colleges and universities. They frequently involve a government-set or institutionally-devised curriculum, and assessments that lead to nationally or internationally accepted awards or qualifications. Such outcomes appear to be valued by all generations, even though younger generations no longer see qualifications as a passport to high level or even stable employment (Aro et al., 2005).

Despite the high esteem in which the outcomes of formal contexts are held, however, for some, these traditional contexts of formal education, far from being neutral in their approach, seek to impose a particular view of knowledge, of language, of relationships and of reasoning on those who attend them (Giroux, 1985). Schools are thus regarded as instruments of social control (Freire, 1972), serving to reinforce the interests of a particular dominant group and to work against the interests of those who are less influential. This perception of traditional contexts of education as authoritarian (Meighan, 2005) perhaps helps to explain the increasing interest in alternative forms of education, such as home tuition, spearheaded by such groups as Education Otherwise. Just how alternative these approaches are is often determined by the curriculum offered and the methods and contexts of delivery. As Webb (1990) has noted, provision at home may vary considerably in terms of motive, method and aims, ranging from delivery of the statutory curriculum through to a much more individually determined learning programme available in a variety of environments including museums, galleries, science centres, field study centres, or even on extended trips around the world. While the first type of provision might appropriately be described as home schooling, the latter types are more likely to be identified as non-formal or informal education.

Even within the traditional contexts of so-called formal education there are examples of different forms of education. Thus, for example, some schools (such as Summerhill, or Forest Schools) may not subscribe to all that others may consider to be the characteristics of formal education and suggest that alternative approaches to delivering a curriculum may be further explored. Similarly, activities such as yoga classes, cookery classes, music lessons and evening classes may take place within the physical confines of a school but may sometimes be characterised as non-formal in their purpose. Other examples could include driving lessons, youth clubs, guide and scout groups, play schemes and holiday camps.

Informal education might be characterised as describing contexts that are neither formal nor non-formal. Examples might include museums, galleries and science centres, which see their function as public education rather than education limited to a specific client group. Both non-formal and informal education can perhaps often be characterised by an emphasis on choice in that they provide opportunities into which learners can opt, and which may sometimes include opportunities for learners to set their own learning outcomes.

Perhaps some contexts that deliver or support the delivery of statutory curricula are best described as 'alternative' forms of formal education. These include Playing for Success, Learning by Achievement, field study centres and themed museum visits. Such contexts often support learning in a way that could not be achieved within the classroom and often rely heavily on the theory that learners learn best when immersed *in situ* where they have access to specific artefacts, experiences and approaches. However, the description of a year-long trip by a family across Europe, designed to provide access to such experiences as learning a new language, exploring a different culture, trying new foods, and so on, as an 'alternative form of formal education' would not seem appropriate. While possibly contributing to the statutory curriculum, such experiences go far beyond it, often resulting in outcomes that are difficult to quantify. Yet it could be argued that the development of additional skills, knowledge and understandings of the whole family could not be achieved in any other way. To also describe

such learning as informal seems unsatisfactory as the objectives of such a trip may be clearly defined and the route planned to specifically achieve these.

Other approaches, such as e-learning, provide opportunities to access information in a place other than the classroom, thus providing access to the curriculum for a range of learners at different times. Technologies, such as the internet, may also enable learners to access learning contexts that may otherwise be impossible; for example, viewing the Antarctic via a webcam at Davis Station. Access to the World Wide Web also opens up a wealth of opportunities for individualised informal learning that allows learners to determine their own interests and outcomes (Rowlinson, 2012). Some uses of such resources, we may wish to argue, are educational; others not. Such arguments may depend on our view of education and the purpose it serves, and on the contexts in which those arguments take place. Playing on a computer game, for example, may develop children's ICT skills but not all may wish to describe such an activity as educational. Other uses of the internet by some children may be even more controversial. (See Chapter 18.)

The past two decades have seen the rapid growth of a new generation of enterprises such as the Eden Project (in Cornwall), the Jorvik Viking Centre (in York), Magna (in Rotherham), Dynamic Earth (in Edinburgh), Eureka! (in Halifax) and Odyssey (in Belfast). These can be characterised by their clear objectives (often related to collective citizenship and the promotion of change), the utilisation of a resource base (physically impressive, exciting and incapable of being replicated in schools), the adoption of an interactive approach, and an ability to respond to a wide range of clients. In exploring the distinct nature of these enterprises, Peacock (2005) suggests the term 'peri-formal' as a means of identifying their unique contribution to education which neither formal nor informal contexts can achieve.

Research box

how do different users employ interactive resources?

Much has been made of the interactive, hands-on nature of activities in constructivist, child-centred learning within schools and this debate has informed the ongoing development of museum education. However, the extent to which such an approach can develop conceptual knowledge and understanding is a matter for debate; museums and other 'peri-formal' providers recognise that different users engage with resources in different ways. One example of this was demonstrated by research carried out by Fernández and Benlloch (2000) in Spain, who looked at participant use of the travelling interactive display '*Ver para no creer*' ('seeing, not believing'). The focus of their research was the collection of quantitative behavioural data relating to the duration of visit, duration of group conversations and reading behaviour. Their results indicated that different users interact with the exhibit in markedly different ways. Lone users approach the exhibit calmly, reading the information at appropriate points to enable them to make sense of their interactions. Groups of adults have a much more light-hearted approach, with one of the group members usually dominating the interaction while others in the group read the display panel and observe their actions. Children in groups normally commence interaction without reading the display panels while the adults in their group attempt to guide their actions in order to help them manipulate the exhibit rather than explaining the concepts underpinning it. Conversations are brief and limited to 'doing' rather than 'understanding'. Once the exhibit has been experienced they move on. Learners therefore appear to take what they want at that moment from the activity offered, suggesting that less formal contexts for education not only have to address the needs of a broader range of learners, but that they also may have difficulties in ensuring learning is both 'hands-on' and 'brains-on'.

Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (2003) discussed the notion of flexitime education that allows learners to spend part of their time in a formal education context, such as a school, and part elsewhere. Such an initiative enables learners to take advantage of the range of learning contexts available, including e-learning. In the United States, there is increasing interest in the development of independent study programmes, designed to meet the needs of individual learners, and in the development of learning systems that have as a central premise the notion that learning can take place anywhere and can be directed by the learners themselves. Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford have recognised the benefits of these approaches. They also pointed out that the notion of flexitime is not readily accepted. While current legislation allows a child to be educated at home or at school, permission for each flexitime arrangement requires separate negotiation. It could be argued that legislation in the UK inhibits the development of flexible approaches such as these. Perhaps some of the responsibility lies with the legislation laid down in the Education Reform Act 1988, which devolves funding to schools based on numbers of pupils in school, the 'bums on seats' approach. As a consequence, schools may be unwilling to formalise a flexitime arrangement or maintain places for pupils on extended trips, no matter how educational such arrangements may be. The extent to which schools may use visits to other educational environments to support curriculum delivery is also influenced by the need to fund such visits, either through the limited budget available or by relying on voluntary contributions from parents or carers. While many museums (e.g. the Natural History Museum in London) have removed or reduced entry prices for educational parties, the cost of transport to and from such venues may preclude schools from making full use of the opportunities they offer.

It seems probable that developments in the use of information and communication technology will facilitate online and virtual access to many such resources, thus helping to widen participation and extend access to these facilities. Good use is already being made of this in education programmes for children in the Australian outback, and Meighan (2000) reported on the success of 'cyber schools' in Canada. If Gregory's (2002) view of education is accepted, an education that hopes to enable learners to make sense of the physical, social and cultural world must at least keep pace with the changes in that world, and many would see change as both necessary and inevitable. However, while it would seem obvious that educational institutions will need to make full use of funding strategies, educational policies and technological initiatives in order to initiate change, it is important to remember that education is deeply embedded in national culture (Wood, 2004). Attempts at educational change will need to reflect this and, as a consequence, approaches used in one country may not necessarily be transferable to another. Despite the increase in home education in countries such as the United States, the UK, Australia and Canada, for example, this approach is still rare in the Netherlands (Bluk, 2004), perhaps because parental expectations demand that education takes place in schools.

Summary and conclusions

It is evident that strategic thinking that goes well beyond current educational policy will be required to make best use of the educational opportunities available to us in the UK. At present, government funding is used mainly to support formal educational environments, such as schools, leaving other providers, such as the 'peri-formal', to rely on grants, funding by industry, or the National Lottery.

Given that the term 'education' has a variety of meanings and that education can take place in many contexts, those who seek to open up the opportunities afforded by adopting more

(Continued)

(Continued)

flexible and context-specific descriptions of education will need to be able to argue their case, to be able to play the various 'language-games' of policy-makers, funding agencies, opinion-shapers, educators and others. Traditional views of education may then be replaced by a recognition that a diversity of approaches is possible, where the criteria of education will vary depending on the context, and where explanation, persuasion and justification have an accepted and expected place.

References

Aro, M, Rinne, R, Lahti, K and Olkinuora, E (2005) Education or learning on the job? Generational differences of opinions in Finland. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24(6): 459–74.

Becker, GS (1964) *Human Capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education*. New York: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Bluk, H (2004) Performance in home schooling: an argument against compulsory schooling in the Netherlands. *International Review of Education*, 50(1): 39–52.

Carr, D (2003) *Making Sense of Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Cohen, B (1982) *Means and Ends in Education*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Department for Education (2012) 'Get into teaching'. Available at **www.education.gov.uk/get-into-teaching/teacher-training-options.aspx** (accessed 13 April 2013).

Fernández, G and Benlloch, M (2000) Interactive exhibits: how visitors respond. *Museum International*, 52(4): 53–9.

Freire, P (1972) Education: domestication or liberation? reprinted in Lister, I (1974) *Deschooling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Giroux, HA (1985) Introduction, in Freire, P, *The Politics of Education: culture, power and liberation*. London: Bergin and Garvey.

Gove, M (2011) 'Michael Gove to Cambridge University'. Available at **www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/speeches/a00200373/michael-gove-to-cambridge-university** (accessed 13 April 2013).

Gregory, I (2002) The aims of education, in Davies, I, Gregory, I and McGuinn, N (eds) *Key Debates in Education*. London: Continuum.

Hirst, PH (1965) Liberal education and the nature of knowledge, in Archambault, RD (ed) *Philosophical Analysis and Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Lang, P (1995) Preparing teachers for pastoral care and personal and social education: to train or educate? *Pastoral Care*, 13(4): 18–23.

Matheson, D and Wells, P (1999) What is education?, in Matheson, D and Grosvenor, I (eds) *An Introduction to the Study of Education*. London: David Fulton.

Meighan, R (2000) *Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press.

Meighan, R (2005) *Comparing Learning Systems: the good, the bad, the ugly, and the counterproductive*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press.

Meighan, R and Siraj-Blatchford, I (2003) *A Sociology of Educating*. London: Continuum.

Newman, S (1999) *Philosophy and Teacher Education: a reinterpretation of Donald A. Schön's epistemology of reflective practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Papadopoulous, G (1998) Learning for the twenty-first century: issues, in Delors, J (Chair) *Education for the twenty-first century: issues and prospects. Contributions to the work of the*

   International Commission on Education for the twenty-first century. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

Peacock, A (2005) The emergence and characteristics of peri-formal education, Paper presented at the seminar on non-formal education, King's College, London, June 2005.

Peters, RS (1966) *Ethics and Education*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Rowlinson, J (2012) The Internet and Children: Access and Usage. Available at **www.safekids. co.uk/childreninternetaccessusage.html** (accessed 13 April 2013).

Webb, J (1990) *Children Learning at Home*. Lewes: Falmer Press.

Wittgenstein, L (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wood, K (2004) International perspectives: the USA and the Pacific Rim, in Ward, S (ed) *Education Studies: a student's guide*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.