

**Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain**

**Annual Conference March 2010-01-03**

**Proposal for a Symposium**

**The Need for Philosophy in a Big Research Project: Lessons from the Nuffield Review**

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#### **The Need for Philosophy in a Big Research Project: Lessons from the Nuffield Review**

Philosophy of education needs to be reclaimed for educational research. Increasingly it is seen to be of little relevance - as is reflected in the lack of appointments to university departments of educational studies, in submissions to the Research Assessment Exercise and in the courses in educational research methodology. Indeed, so many educational controversies are seen to be resolvable simply by ever more effective and thorough empirical investigation. As was argued in one prestigious university department, philosophy of education does but confuse the research students, preventing them from getting on with their research.

Yet, in the view of the present writer, philosophical questions (for example, in ethics, epistemology, philosophy of mind and political philosophy) permeate almost every aspect of educational research, policy making and deliberation. The lack of philosophical thinking is apparent in the government's policy statements, in the many educational White Papers and consultation documents, and in the research which addresses the many educational problems which permeate educational practice.

The significance of this is explored through a reflection upon the work undertaken for the Nuffield Review of Education and Training of 14-19 Year-Olds in England and Wales<sup>1</sup>. This £1 million review is the largest in the secondary phase of education and training since the Crowther Report fifty years ago. Such a Review had to be comprehensive, thus embracing the vision of learning which permeates the system, its translation into curriculum, its assessment both for better learning and for accountability, and the reflection of that assessment in an ever more complex and centrally directed system of qualifications.

However, for such a review to be both comprehensive and coherent, there needed to be some overarching set of questions which set parameters to the review, show the interconnectedness of the different areas of investigation, reveal the contradictions implicit (but rarely recognised) in policy and its implementation, and identify the key concepts which shape our thinking and need to be teased out.

The symposium aims to do this, focusing in particular upon:

- the overall educational aims which, too often, remain implicit, which are reflected in a language which 'bewitches the intelligence' and which need constantly to be addressed systematically;

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<sup>1</sup> Pring, R. et al, June 2009, *Education for All: the education and training of 14-19 year olds in England and Wales*, London: Routledge

- the notion of ‘standards’ which, though logically related to aims, are treated as objectively clear though disconnected from any deliberation about educational aims and values;
- the different kinds of ‘learning’, the neglect of whose analysis has resulted, first, in the false dualisms between the ‘academic’ and the ‘vocational’ and between the theoretical and the practical; second, in the neglect of experiential learning; third, in the narrow understanding of assessment which too often impoverishes the quality of learning;
- the different kinds of knowledge and skill, such differences being often conflated in the setting of educational aim or ignored in the construction of the formal curriculum;
- the concept of ‘teaching’ within a broader vision of educational aims and a wider understanding of learning – but also located within a developing and critical tradition in which ‘teaching’ and the role of the teacher are to be seen in relation to our understanding of culture and its transmission.

What the Review endeavoured to do, in its comprehensive account of 14-19 education and training, was to show, first, that these key concepts (aims, standards, learning, knowledge, skills, teaching) provide a logical framework through which educational policy and practice are described, evaluated and promoted, and, second, that so much actual descriptions and evaluations are distorted through the failure to look critically at the unexamined and implicit ways in which these words are put to use. Therefore, both a critique of the educational system and recommendations for future improvement require a careful examination of those concepts and the logical interconnections between them.

In many respects there is little new in that. Such analysis has been the very stuff of the philosophy of education in the last few decades. But rarely has it been conducted in and through the context of a detailed account of the system both as it is and as it planned by policy makers. In some respects, the various contributions to the critique of the Plowden Report in the late 1960s<sup>2</sup> engaged in a similar philosophical exercise, and demonstrated the valuable contribution of philosophical thinking to our unravelling the conceptual complexities underpinning policy and shaping practice. But it was conducted within the examination of a particular text, rather than with a detailed account of the system as a whole and against the background of an examination of the empirical evidence.

That is what the Nuffield Review has tried to do. It is hoped and intended that the symposium will draw out lessons for future attempts to integrate philosophical analysis and critique with educational thinking which increasingly (and to its detriment) finds no place for philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> Peters, R.S., Hirst, P.H., Dearden, R.F., White, J., White, P. *Perspectives on Plowden*, London: RKP