

Paul Hirst (1927-2020)

Paul Hirst, who died peacefully on October 25 2020 at the age of 92, was one of the most eminent figures in teacher education from the 1960s until after the end of the century. He was jointly responsible with Richard Peters for the massive expansion of philosophy of education in Britain in the wake of the Robbins Report in 1963 with its call for an all-graduate teaching profession.

Over many decades Hirst became well-known in teacher education circles across the globe especially for his 1965 essay 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge'. This helped to shape ideas on the curriculum at national as well as school level, as in the Munn report of 1977 on the secondary curriculum in Scotland, and in the 1980 HMI report *A View of the Curriculum*. By the late 1980s, however, he had radically changed his view that disciplines of knowledge are central to education and come to see it as an induction into desirable social practices and their associated personal qualities, with intellectual achievements now subordinate to these.

Hirst's theoretical interests were matched by a delight in teaching, whether lecturing to large audiences or working with smaller groups. It was partly this passion that led him to do lengthy stints of teaching abroad – in countries like Canada, Malawi, Taiwan, New Zealand and Australia. These often led him to forge close and lasting links with his hosts and their students.

Paul Heywood Hirst was born in Huddersfield in 1927, the second child of parents belonging to a strict sub-group of the Plymouth Brethren called the Glanton Brethren. His upbringing was austere in the extreme: authoritarian, emotionless, short on play, isolated from out-of-school contact with those outside the sect. Intellectual study and music were, however, permitted windows into other worlds. His flair for science and mathematics when a student at the local grammar school earned him a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1945 to study mathematics. Here he made up for the narrowness of his own background by reading widely in literature, history and especially philosophy.

He then taught mathematics in schools, first at William Hulme's School, Manchester, and then for six years at Eastbourne College. In 1954 he became a lecturer in education at Oxford University, working with graduates training to teach mathematics. He was also able to deepen his study of analytic philosophy then in full flower at that university, and incorporate it in his teaching of educational theory. He moved in 1959 to a lectureship in philosophy of education at the University of London Institute of Education, where after 1962 he began his collaboration with Richard Peters. In 1964 they co-founded the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, of which Paul Hirst later became Chairman and then President. Still in his thirties, in 1965 he became Professor of Education at King's College, London.

His adherence to the Glanton Brethren and to religious belief more generally had meanwhile faded. All his early philosophical work was intended to set school

learning on a thoroughly rational footing. This was evident in his *The Logic of Education* (1970), co-written with Peters; as well as in *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (1974), and *Moral Education in a Secular Society* (1975), about an education in morality based on reason rather than faith.

It is hard for most of us to imagine ourselves as cut off from the world as Paul Hirst was in his childhood. Reacting against this as an adult, he took enormous pleasure in quite ordinary experiences like seaside holidays and trips to the zoo. He loved his successive Jaguars, visits to the Opera, the antique furniture he chose for his Brighton flat overlooking the sea. A slight man, he was always elegantly dressed in dark suit and colourful tie. He was delightful in company, charming, attentive, now pursuing some intellectual line of thought into all its ramifications, now collapsing in childlike giggles at a funny remark or piece of gossip. His spiritedness and lifelong concern for the well-being of those close to him earned him many lifelong friends, both men and women. Yet for all his sociability he led a remarkably private life outside professional circles.

In 1971 his gift for administration as well as scholarship led to his becoming Professor of Education and Head of the Department of Education at Cambridge University, where he established the study of education on a firm academic and professional basis. He played a large role in the inclusion of Education within the Tripos system, and in Homerton College's becoming part of the university. He also took part in the administration of the university as a member of its General Board of the Faculties. On the national plane, he served on the Council for National Academic Awards and also as Chairman of the University Council for the Education of Teachers. He was a member of the Swann Committee on the education of children from ethnic minority groups that reported in 1985. After retiring in 1988, he re-established his close association with philosophy of education at the Institute of Education in London as Visiting Professorial Fellow.

Few who knew Paul Hirst only in his thirties and later would have discerned anything in him of the devout, narrow-horizoned, inhibited boy and young man of his own self-description. He was, as already suggested, a sociable, generous, humorous, kind, open-minded person with wide intellectual and artistic interests, especially in music. An exceptional and caring teacher as well as a needle-sharp contributor to discussions in the field, he tended to evoke contradictory emotions in students about to read seminar papers – as they both looked forward to and were also apprehensive about the incisive, though always constructive, comments they knew he would be bound to make. He was unmarried.

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Sources

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