

WILL CURTIS

The Philosophy of Education

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- identify the main areas of interest for philosophers of education;
- outline and critically evaluate philosophical perspectives on the nature and purpose of education;
- outline and reflect on philosophical concepts and their value to educational theory and practice;
- apply a philosophical approach to aspects of educational practice.

Introduction

Perhaps more than any other discipline in this book, it is difficult to write an introduction to the philosophy of education without it becoming a ‘potted history’ – a selection of the author’s favourite writers, quotes and ideas presented as a tidy, ordered and complete narrative. After all, the discipline of philosophy has been around for more than 3000 years, and philosophers have been engaging with questions of education, learning and teaching throughout this time and across the world. There is so much that could be talked about and so little space in which to do it.

With this in mind, the following chapter has as its main focus six key themes:

1. Thinking philosophically about education;
2. Philosophy of education – policy and practice;
3. The aims of education;
4. Meeting the needs of society or the individual;
5. Teaching, morality and the cultivation of virtue;  

In focusing on these themes, many of the key issues of interest to philosophers of education are introduced. These include:

- the extent that everyone has a ‘right’ to an education;
- what it means to be an ‘educated’ person;
- whether or not schooling should be compulsory;
- how far the aims and content of education should be universal or should differ between individuals and/or groups;
- the relationship between education and morality, and the extent that it is possible (or indeed desirable) to teach a child to be moral;
- conceptions of teacher and learner and the relationship between the two;
- similarities and differences between education, training and indoctrination;
- the relationship between education and the wider world, especially to working life, adulthood, culture and democracy;
- knowledge as objective reality or social construction;
- similarities and differences between formal schooling and informal learning;
- the role, purpose and content of curriculum and assessment.

A brief history of philosophy

The tradition of ‘western philosophy’ began in Ancient Greece around 2500 years ago. You have probably heard of Plato, his mentor Socrates and his star pupil Aristotle. You may have heard of philosophers like Pyrrho, the sceptic who believed he could know nothing, or Diogenes, the cynic who became entirely disillusioned with the human way of life. Of course, this western tradition of philosophy is only one of a number of philosophies around the world. ‘Eastern’ philosophies pre-date the Ancient Greeks, with many arguing that the Greeks acquired their philosophical interest during their travels eastwards. There are many overlaps and similarities as well as many real divergences between different philosophies around the world. For example, it is worth looking at the writings of al Ghazali, a 5th-century Islamic scholar, to compare his educational philosophy with current western ideas and practices.

Traditional western philosophy tells a compelling yet oversimplistic story of the history of ideas – that the fall of the Roman Empire in AD 476 was followed by 1000 years of darkness, where religion and superstition dominated thought. Scholars at the time were priests who wielded tremendous power. These priestly scholars communicated in Latin, making them disconnected from ‘ordinary’ people. According to this story, in the 15th century the combined forces of the ‘Renaissance’ centring around Italy and humanist ideals from northern Europe led to a celebration of human capacity, individuality, creativity and genius, which freed Europe from these so-called ‘dark ages’. This led swiftly to a scientific revolution (the 17th century), an intellectual
revolution (the 18th-century Enlightenment) and then a social, industrial and political revolution (19th century). It is during these periods of great social, cultural and material upheaval that many of the other disciplines you encounter during this book had their origins. Interestingly, Islamic philosophy tells an almost entirely contrary story – where those 1000 years of darkness are seen as the period of great intellectual development and that these were lost around the time the West was apparently being emancipated.

As the world has seemingly got ‘bigger’ and more complex, the domain of the philosopher has narrowed. During antiquity, philosophers had ambitious, whole-system projects – to tell us the meaning of life, to redesign society, to elucidate an entire theory of knowledge or morality, to prove God’s existence. Philosophers were the scientists, historians, mathematicians, astronomers, sociologists and psychologists – Aristotle is famously claimed to be the last person who knew everything that could be known at the time he lived. Today, knowledge is increasingly compartmentalized into specialist disciplines (and disciplines within disciplines). Generally, modern philosophers have projects that are far more modest than their predecessors. For much of the 20th century, philosophers were preoccupied with language and the meaning of words and other symbols. In the philosophy of education, these projects have meant exploring a particular concept or feature of schooling such as care, well-being, forgiveness, authority or discipline.

Nevertheless, the main branches of philosophical enquiry that existed in Ancient Greece remain today.

- **Moral philosophy** – what makes an action right or wrong?
- **Epistemology or philosophy of knowledge** – what can we know? How do we know it? How certain is knowledge?
- **Political philosophy** – how should we organize society? Who should rule? What is the relationship between the state and the people?
- **Philosophy of mind** – what makes me me!? How can I know your thoughts and how can I express mine to you?
- **Religious philosophy** – does God exist? How should religion be organized? How can different religions exist alongside one another?
- **Aesthetics** – what gives an object beauty? Is it intrinsic to the object or in the eye of the beholder?

As you shall see during this chapter, questions of interest to educational philosophers span each of these branches.

**Key theme 1: thinking philosophically about education**

Unlike all of the other disciplines you encounter in this book, philosophy of education does not depend on empirical evidence. In fact, many philosophers would want to challenge the validity of empirical evidence, claiming that inductive reasoning (using the observation of events to make general rules or predictions) can, at best, tell you what has happened, but not what will happen.
Instead of gathering empirical evidence, educational philosophers ask questions – difficult questions! Thinking about education in a philosophical way is certainly thought-provoking, engaging and challenging. It can also be annoying and frustrating – there is a lack of final ‘right’ answers – because philosophers, as ‘lovers of wisdom’, tend to seek out complexity rather than straightforward answers. Socrates was famously referred to as the ‘Gadfly’, because he buzzed around asking infuriating questions and making people distrust things they previously knew with confidence. Socrates, and philosophers who have followed him, wanted to challenge the perceived truths that people hold to, claiming that when we think we know something we stop thinking about it. Think of all the knowledge humankind believed to be entirely true that has since been proven false – the world is flat and the centre of the universe, draining blood cures the sick, kings and queens are appointed by God, etc. We would be complacent to think that none of these falsehoods remains. So we should continually examine and question the assumptions that underpin our knowledge.

There are three types of question philosophers of education (and philosophers more generally) enjoy.

● Divergent questions about what is – though these are usually not surface but underlying: questions like – what is education for? Why are assessments generally based around the unseen, timed exam?

● Normative questions – these are ‘should’ questions that elicit judgements like – what should education be for? How should we organize the curriculum/timetable/classroom?

● Speculative questions – these are theoretical questions that ask ‘what if . . .?’ What could schools be like if we started with a blank slate? How might education be organized in 50 years? What would happen if we replaced human teachers with robots?

One device philosophers make use of to analyse reality is the ‘thought experiment’ – an imaginary episode designed to analyse current states, uncover assumptions, meanings or values. You may have heard of Bishop Berkeley’s famed question of whether a tree that falls on an uninhabited island makes a sound or not. Or Descartes meditation where he imagines that he is being deceived by an all-powerful malignant demon, so that he can determine which knowledge he possesses is utterly irrefutable – this thought experiment gave rise to his celebrated utterance, ‘I think therefore I am’. You might have seen the film The Matrix, which bears a striking resemblance to a thought experiment by the American philosopher Robert Nozick, who considers whether one would plug into a dream machine that could provide you with the whole life experience you would desire. The latter illustrates one of the more popular forms thought experiments might take – the design of utopian or dystopian visions. Perfect and/or terrible images of an entire society or a particular institution can prove highly revealing both as a tool for evaluating current practice and to orientate towards future goals.

An educational utopia might look something like this:

● children and young people designing their own education to suit their individual needs, interests and skills;
happy teachers – with less contact time, more preparation time and smaller group sizes;
- engaging lessons characterized by deep relationships and ‘profound learning’, where pupils and teachers are ‘learning together’ to create knowledge and meaning;
- a ‘learning society’, where learning is inherent and valued throughout life;
- education as whole-community as well as individual enrichment;
- free curriculum – with minimal centralized assessment;
- technology harnessed to reduce inequalities, especially for children with special educational needs.

Whereas an educational dystopia might have the following features:

- bureaucracy – an ‘iron cage’ of paperwork, email and form-filling;
- separate ‘interest’ schools teaching children to distrust the ‘other’;
- massive content curriculum;
- successful schools for the rich, sinking schools for the poor;
- education owned by Sky, Google and Microsoft;
- class sizes topping 100;
- no teachers – all learning is done in front of a computer or with mega-powerful robot-teachers;
- drugs used to sedate the ‘out of control’ mass of youth.

Activity: utopian and dystopian educational futures

Looking at the qualities of utopian and dystopian education futures above, which one do you think we are closer to today? Are we moving in the direction of one more than the other?

Now think about your own educational ideal and nightmare – remember these do not need to be constrained by practicalities.

- What can you learn from your own depictions?
- Can the education system in its current form do anything to move towards your ideal and away from your nightmare?

Key theme 2: philosophy of education – policy and practice

As a discipline, the philosophy of education is more grounded and pragmatic than philosophy itself. Like the sociology and psychology of education, it is an applied
discipline, existing to inform, examine and critique existing educational contexts (Carr 2004). Two important modern philosophers of education, Paul Hirst and Wilfred Carr (2005), disagree about whether philosophy is primarily concerned with theoretical or practical philosophy, but both agree on a core purpose to interrogate and inform educational policy and practice.

Contributions to the philosophy of education derive from three distinct but interrelated sources.

1. Philosophy and philosophers (in a wider sense) add to our understanding of education. While not primarily concerned with education, the ideas of influential philosophers have proved fruitful in the analysis of educational practices and structures. For instance, a great deal of educational philosophy has been provoked by:
   - Michel Foucault’s exploration of power – in particular, that modern societies utilize surveillance to discipline and normalize behaviour;
   - Hannah Arendt’s critique of modernity and her account of public action;
   - Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of moral and knowledge claims, and his analysis of human nature as the ‘will to power’ (the desire to dominate other objects and people);
   - Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analysis of the meaning of words and their uses.

2. Other philosophers have a specific interest in education, often stemming from their own practical experience as educators – for instance, Freire, Dewey and Plato were all teachers. Philosophers in this category might focus solely on education. Others might have broad philosophical interests, but engage in a detailed and systematic manner with education. Theorists in the ‘Key figures’ boxes that follow fit within this second group.

3. Given the applied nature of the discipline, practising professionals make up a key constituent of philosophy of education. This informal source is made up of practitioners who reflect on their work in a philosophical way, asking questions and having conversations about their position in the classroom, the purpose of schooling and the nature of learning.

Of course, if philosophy of education is to be meaningful, these sources must be connected. Oancea and Bridges identify two ways that philosophy of education can impact on practice: the encouragement of ‘democratic conversations’ and ‘practical deliberation’ (2009: 557). ‘Formal’ philosophy of education supports practitioners to reflect on and critique their own practice. It also stimulates open public dialogue about the many aspects of schooling. They cite the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training in England and Wales (see Pring et al. 2009) as a contemporary example of this kind of philosophical policy analysis, based as it was around the question, ‘What is an educated 19 year old in this day and age?’
Activity: the relationship between philosophy of education and policy and practice

It is easy to think that texts written hundreds or even thousands of years ago can have little relevance to educational practices today. After all, schools in the 21st century bear little resemblance to schools of the 1970s, let alone the 450 B.C.s! Yet, educationalists today frequently return to key historical works in the philosophy of education and find resonance with, and stimulus for, current thinking. As Oancea and Bridges put it, such writings have ‘continuing power to illuminate and reinterpret contemporary experience’ (2009: 553). The following rap considers the highly influential American educator and philosopher, John Dewey.

Dewey rap

Education is life itself, not just about the wife or the wealth, under stealth, to help societies health, this is what John Dewey felt, me and you is a result of what he dealt, so take his book of a shelf, need to read, heart will melt, if not starve yourself, need to read, heart will melt,

So what was his purpose, for students to be the ‘Spirit Of Service’, the whole education system needed a refurbish, otherwise kids will leave school feeling nervous, continue like a vicious circle or a circuit, so it was put into play and made to work it, education revolutionised so perfect,

The education system, moved and proved progressive education, in relation the system, encouraged and molded, critical thinking and problem solving, offloading passive thinking, upholding active thinking, the link comes from his pens ink, extinct is the old and boring, where you sit there and stare and start snoring, the boredom was unfolding, so Dewey told them, his ideal was golden, so he showed them and got the ball rolling,

For generations and generations, there’s bin a rigid unchanged stipulation, where education was in the need of levitation, army based learning more like a interrogation, different size paddles, a teachers recreation, children would sit there hating, I don’t blame them, what a shame for them education remained in the bin, active intelligence remained a sin, John Dewey changed to win, children engaged entertained as they grin, heads are put together, whatever the weather, much more pleasure, trust formed better, actuality treasured, ideas and character was built and bettered, total reliance on the teacher was severed, it was about adapting not who’s the most clever

By Arjun Sokhi – Education Studies student, De Montfort University (2010)

Create a piece of art (lyrics, short story, drawing, play, storyboard) that reflects how educational philosophy relates to policy and practice today.

Key theme 3: the aims of education

Perhaps the most pressing question for the philosopher of education concerns what education exists for. The answer is dependent on issues that go well beyond the school
gate, relating to wider political, religious, moral and epistemological considerations. Meanings and purposes of education are complex and multi-faceted, highly fluid and dependent on the contexts in which the question is asked, and the personal and political values of the respondent. This section briefly discusses the four most enduring philosophical positions. The first two are traditional teacher-centred ideas; the second two are progressive and learner-centred.

Education as conservation

Arguably the most established and widespread educational aim is to pass on an existing body of knowledge from one generation to the next. Within philosophy of education, there are two schools of thought that adopt such a position. These perceive the aim of education as:

1. transmitting culture (customs, conventions, norms, values, roles, language) from one generation to the next – essentialism;
2. encouraging learners to grasp eternal and universal truths – perennialism.

The first and most traditional position, known as essentialism, holds that the aim of education is the socialization of young people into a shared culture. Education exists to transmit culture, values and knowledge from one generation to the next, thus ensuring the continuation of a common culture. This position is intrinsically conservative, based on a belief in stability, gradual progress and respect for established ideas. Children should leave formal education with a sound grasp of ‘essential’ knowledge and skills in order to contribute to the society they belong to. Popularized by the American philosopher William Bagley (1938), essentialism advocates a disciplined and rigorous approach to study, with the teacher as intellectual and moral role model. As a reaction against the fashionable learner-centred approaches that were popular at the time, Bagley argued that children should be taught respect for authority, tradition and scientific truth. Learning should be hard work, requiring persistence and the guidance of a subject-expert teacher. Building on basic skills, students should acquire a systematic and detailed knowledge of ‘traditional’ disciplines such as maths, science and literature.

The second position, perennialism, is premised on the idea that there is an objective reality and that knowledge of this is within our grasp. While there may be many differences within and between cultures, there are absolute and irrefutable truths. The role of the teacher is to enable learners to grasp everlasting principles that are common to all people, rather than specific and culturally bound skills or ‘facts’. Perennialists seek to support learners in their personal development, through the discovery of truths present in great works of literature, art, philosophy and religion.

Universal and timeless truths might take a number of forms.

- Religious – this earliest form of perennialism was articulated by the renowned scholastic philosopher of the 13th century, St Thomas Aquinas. Still important today, it claims that the aim of education is to support personal development through engagement with spiritual truths.
• **Idealistic** – Plato (2007) famously argued for an eternal world of ideas (the ‘Forms’) that existed beyond the physical world. While the world of experience is changeable and subjective, the world of ideas contains objective moral and epistemological truths.

• **Realist** – from this perspective, the aim of education is to teach young people empirical, scientific and ‘human’ truths. Among the philosophers to put forward this position are Robert Hutchins (1953) and Mortimer Adler (1982). Both argued in favour of a non-specialized liberal education, connecting each generation with the ‘great books’ and teaching what is common to all humanity.

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### Key figure: Plato (428–348 BC)

Plato is often referred to as the ‘father of western philosophy’. As you have already seen, the areas he wrote about have become the traditional branches of philosophy. Plato famously established the Academy – an institution for the study of philosophy that is generally viewed as the first university. Unlike many philosophical texts, Plato’s writings are highly accessible and readable – he uses the dramatic device of dialogue to present and interrogate his ideas. He wrote these dialogues using Socrates as his central character, who debates with (and generally defeats) well-known Athenians of the time. Many argue that Plato’s early dialogues represent the true teachings of Socrates, while his later ones use the character of Socrates to voice his own ideas. The two dialogues that are most concerned with the philosophy of education are:

1. **The Republic** – in which Plato articulates his version of the ideal state and develops the first western account of education;
2. **Meno** – here Plato explores the nature of learning and recollection; the ‘Socratic method’ of teaching is presented, in which the learner is directed to an answer by responding to a series of structured questions.

The education system that Plato outlines is one where the interests of society, and not the individual, are of prime concern. Plato argues that individuals are born with different moral and intellectual capacities, and education shapes us into what we become. So one key purpose of education is to sift out those with the potential to become Guardians – rulers (‘philosopher-kings’) or auxiliaries (who help the rulers). Potential rulers are to be educated differently from ‘ordinary’ people. Through dialogue and questioning, teachers lead students away from ignorance and to an understanding of objective reality – a realm of ideas that exists beyond the surface impressions of the material world.

There is much in Plato’s account to be commended and much that resonates with education today. For Plato, education is universal and meritocratic. Every citizen is educated and educational success or failure is the determinant of one’s position in society – the initial stage provides basic literacy and identifies those children with the potential to become Guardians. Plato argues that educational undertakings ought to
tally with a person’s strengths at different stages of life; put simply, learners should be active when young and engage in abstract reasoning when they are old.

There are other aspects of Plato’s education that might seem somewhat sinister and at odds with our contemporary way of thinking – it is certainly a very conservative model of education aimed at upholding the status quo. For instance, since Plato views children as easily corrupted, and since the good of society is paramount, he argues for a curriculum that is to be strictly controlled and censored: children should not experience any form of artistic expression that might lead them astray. Perhaps most alarmingly, Plato advocates removing children from their parents to be educated by Guardians, as well as indoctrination in the form of a ‘noble lie’ (see below).

To read key extracts from The Republic, the whole of Meno and an excellent commentary on Plato’s contribution to the philosophy of education by Robert Brumbaugh, see Cahn (2009).

Progressive educations: education for change

So this first group of aims focuses on the transmission of a body of knowledge (whether universal or culturally specific). One might argue that the aim of education is to foster particular qualities in the learner – rather than teaching children what to think, education might primarily be concerned with teaching children how to think. John Dewey, who argued for an education with the aim of cultivating young people who are self-confident and engaged, most famously articulated this position. Dewey viewed education as central to a healthy and continually advancing society. By developing the skills and qualities of active citizens, schools should create young people able to participate fully in a democratic life.

Key figure: John Dewey (1859–1952)

The American philosopher, John Dewey, is arguably the most influential 20th-century educationalist. His most important educational works include:

- The School and Society (1899);
- Democracy and Education (1916/1997);
- How We Think (1933);
- Experience and Education (1938).

Dewey’s view of education developed out of his philosophical pragmatism. According to pragmatism, ‘truth’ is defined by what is useful at a particular point of time – an instrument used by people to solve problems and to make sense of current situations. As contexts change, truth changes. Philosophers should not be interested in pretentious, abstract questions, but in practical and everyday living. Knowledge is
Dewey is the most prominent of a number of writers and practitioners who advocate ‘progressive’ education. While progressive educational philosophers differ from one another in many ways, they share a number of common characteristics. While knowledge-based aims tend to prioritize the content of curriculum and the teacher (who possesses expertise), progressive theories prioritize the learner. Learning is experiential, experimental and active – based on dialogue, questioning, problem solving and discovery. Knowledge is seen as tentative, open to exploration, contestation and critique. Based in real-life experiences and activities, learners can contribute to its development. There is an emphasis on the growth of personal qualities such as self-esteem, confidence and communication, all seen as encouraging learners to think and act for themselves.

In 1896, while Head of Department for Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy at the University of Chicago, Dewey established the legendary Laboratory School. The school had two main experimental aims – ‘to exhibit, test, verify and criticize theoretical statements and principles’ (Mayhew and Edwards 2007) and to allow learners to approach their studies in an active and investigational manner. In one of his most quoted passages, Dewey (2008: 29) defines the school as:

... an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.

Dewey was especially concerned with the cultivation of democratic community, whereby citizens actively question and participate in a social life rich with communication and experimentation. He perceived schooling as central to this aim, as an environment in which appropriate skills and attitudes can be experienced and fostered. He viewed learning as social and interactive: requiring experience, interaction and reflection on the part of the student. Teachers are partners, rather than instructors, in the learning process so that students can take ownership of their own experiences.

While Dewey clearly disliked traditional, authoritarian approaches to education, he was also critical of much ‘progressive’ education for being too unstructured, free and child-centred. He viewed the experiences of learners as fundamental, but he argued that learning activities needed to be purposeful and guided rather than entirely free.

To find out more about Dewey’s educational philosophy, you should read:

- *The Child and the Curriculum* – to view Dewey’s criticisms of traditional and child-centred approaches;
- *My Pedagogic Creed* – in which Dewey outlines his own philosophy of education.

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In the later stages of the 20th century, a more radical form of progressivism emerged – sometimes referred to as ‘reconstructionism’. Based on the work of Paulo Freire, and developing into the theory and practice of critical pedagogy, it pronounced the aim of education as to instil in young people the awareness of injustice in the world and the desire and capacity to transform it. Education must raise critical consciousness – an awareness of social issues and the development of skills to be able to transform the world. Critical of more Deweyian forms of progressivism for being apolitical, critical pedagogy argues that teachers are moral agents who simply cannot be neutral. In a fundamentally oppressive world, they either support the status quo (and therefore the oppressors who are gaining from current conditions) or fight for change (and side with the oppressed) (see Apple 2009). By encouraging learners to confront injustice, to challenge dominant ideas and to develop visions of a better future, education has the capacity to be transformational – on both individual and system-wide levels.

Key figure: Paulo Freire (1921–97)

Perhaps the most influential educationalist of the late 20th century is Paulo Freire, who grew up in poverty in Recife, Brazil. His experiences taught him to view education as simultaneously the source of, and solution to, social injustice and oppression. He spent his life as an educator, developing literacy programmes for adults in deprived communities, and developing truly democratic, empowering and grassroots educational theory and practice. He wrote a number of important texts, the most notable being Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970/1996). Among his other major contributions were Education for Critical Consciousness (1973/2005), Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1994) and Pedagogy of Indignation (2004).

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire critiques practices he terms ‘banking education’. This traditional form of education is based on very unequal roles, with the teacher as active, powerful and knowledgeable and the learner as passive recipient of the teacher’s knowledge. For Freire, classroom relations and communications are inauthentic and artificial – the teacher possesses all legitimate knowledge and the learner none. This ‘jug and mug’ version of education reduces learners to receptacles: effectively to memorize and store the information transmitted to them. ‘Banking’ pedagogy creates dependent, uncritical, ignorant and passive members of society: they are unable to conceive of alternatives to existing inequalities and oppressions. In doing so, Freire argued, it perpetuates a social system that is fundamentally unequal and unfair.

So Freire offers an alternative pedagogy – termed ‘liberatory’ or ‘problem-posing’ education. At the heart of this pedagogy is dialogue – open, authentic and trusting communication between learners and teachers. For Freire, thinking happens actively in conversations based around problem solving, not in listening and memorizing. He argues against a strict demarcation between teachers and students, in favour of ‘teacher-students’ and ‘student-teachers’: as ‘critical co-investigators’, teachers and...
students have joint responsibility for the construction of knowledge and meaning. In this pedagogy, knowledge is not an abstract entity possessed by the teacher; it develops from learners’ experiences and is relevant to their lives. And, most importantly, it is the source of ‘conscientization’ – enabling people to think critically about the world and to develop the confidence and capacities to transform it. For Freire, then, education is not about the acquisition of decontextualized facts; it is a process of ‘mutual humanization’, in which people learn to care for one another and seek to make the world a better, more equal and less oppressive place.

To find out more about Freire and his influence on ‘critical pedagogy’ you should read:

- his seminal work – *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*;

**Activity: assessing competing aims of education**

You have encountered four philosophical positions in this theme – that education aims to teach objective truths, to transmit culture, to create active citizens, or to transform the world.

- How do you think each position would criticize the others? Fill in the following table, considering how the position at the top would view the one on the side.

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After completing the table, consider the following questions.

- How far does each position prioritize the needs of society or the individual?
- What are the main similarities and differences between each position?
- Which one do you favour most/least? Why?
- Which one(s) most closely resemble education in its current form?
Key theme 4: meeting the needs of society or the individual

Related to the aims of education, philosophers question the extent that education should have as its prime intent the needs of society as a whole or those of the individuals that constitute it. There are broadly two schools of thought here.

There is a strong tradition within educational thought that elevates the needs of society above the interests of the individual. Plato suggested education should promote a ‘noble lie’ (2007: sections 414–17); that once education has sifted those with greater talents from those with lesser, it ought to propagate a myth. By claiming that educators can identify children who are born with golden, silver and bronze souls, Plato argues society as a whole benefits. Citizens feel happy with their place in society because they believe those above and below them in the social order are essentially unlike them. One might argue a reverse myth is perpetuated today: that the education system gives the impression of meritocracy when, in reality, we know that the class, gender and ethnicity one is born into is a marked indicator of educational success or failure.

The lie Plato outlines sounds a lot like indoctrination to the modern ear. Yet many would argue education retains societal priorities: to educate children and young people with the appropriate skills to enable them to contribute effectively in society (broadly) and for the world of work (narrowly). You have already seen that Dewey argued in favour of a more instrumental educational purpose, though he viewed the teaching of these skills and characteristics as equally advantageous to the individual. More narrowly, since the beginning of state education, theorists and politicians have argued for an education that produces effective and efficient workers. And this instrumentalism has become increasingly narrow in recent years – arguably the prime purpose of education today is the furthering of economic interests. Resembling Functionalist sociology, education’s economic purposes are two-fold. First, to sift children, who possess different skills and abilities – or ‘merits’ – into appropriate employment. Second, to foster in them the kinds of qualities that make effective, efficient and profitable workers – these might be the kinds of qualities fostered in the formal curriculum, such as numeracy and literacy. It might be qualities instilled in children through the ‘hidden curriculum’ – dispositions like respect for authority, punctuality, obedience or the capacity to cope with a mundane and repetitive environment. Moreover, this has led to educational structures increasingly mirroring the characteristics of the world of work: an education ‘production line’ – prioritizing standards, more-for-less efficiency and an emphasis on measurable performance indicators.

The ascendency of educational structures based on such philosophies has spawned a number of radical alternatives. One of the key figures is Ivan Illich (1973), who articulated a vision for a ‘de-schooled’ society: free from the constraints of formal schooling and professional authority, where children learn what they want, when and where they want. Other prominent figures include John Holt (1990) and later John Taylor Gatto (2002). Both agreed that formal schooling had harmful emotional, social and intellectual impacts on children – teaching them to fear failure and to turn against their natural and impulsive love of learning.

Theorists like Holt and Gatto found child-centred educational philosophies more attractive. Their thinking was influenced by Rousseau’s novel *Emile*, which outlined an approach to education that placed the interests and well-being of the child at its heart.
From a child-centred perspective, children are not the miniature adults that schooling tends to depict them as. Each child is unique, fundamentally good but easily corrupted. Schooling should start from the interests and needs of the child, not those of society. It should equip children with the character to resist the excesses and difficulties of the adult world. Child-centred education was taken forward and put into practice during the 19th century by Pestalozzi and Froebel, among others, the latter originating the ‘kindergarten’ model (see Doddington and Hilton 2007 for a brief history).

Key figure: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

Rousseau was born in Geneva and lived in Paris, the centre of the so-called 18th-century ‘Enlightenment’ during which time intellectuals advocated the use of reason and scientific enquiry – to combat ignorance, as the source of authority, and as a tool for building a better world. Rousseau was acquainted with many of the key figures of this movement and contributed towards Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* – a collection of writings that represented the thoughts of the Enlightenment. But Rousseau was not typical of Enlightenment thinkers. His work is regarded as straddling Enlightenment and Romantic movements, because of its interest in the capacities of both reason and emotion in human development. Rousseau’s romantic inclinations are most forcefully illustrated in the opening line of his most famous work, *The Social Contract* of 1762: ‘Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains’ (1968: 47). Individuals are trapped or imprisoned by the artificial institutions and conventions of society (wealth and poverty, family, etiquette, schools, etc.). In another of his influential treatises in political philosophy, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* from 1755, Rousseau examines how inequality is created by society, and how this inequality leads to envy and unnatural desires – an unhealthy shift in individual mindset from ‘*amour de soi*’ (natural self-love) to ‘*amour propre*’ (pride).

These concerns are at the heart of Rousseau’s educational philosophy. In his novel *Emile* (1762), arguably the most important book on education since Plato’s *Republic*, Rousseau tells of the one-on-one education of Emile. Like his earlier writing, he starts with the premise that children are naturally good – again he has a provocative opening line – ‘God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil’ (2007: 11). This is very different from the dominant perspective of the time (and one that remains today) that children need to be socialized or ‘civilized’ into appropriate or ‘good’ behaviour through schooling. In the debate between the so-called *dionysian* (evil and dangerous – prominent in the Christian doctrine of original sin) and *apollo-nian* (natural innocence and goodness) conception of the child, Rousseau clearly sides with the *apollo-nian* (see Jenks 2005). Put simply, character flaws and poor behaviour are a result of society and not of nature.

For Rousseau, therefore, one of the prime functions of education is the protection of the child’s natural state. Childhood is distinctive from adulthood, so the child should be educated away from the corrupting influences of society. Emile is educated in
nature – he should be happy and free in this setting. His learning is directed by his own natural inclinations – he is not told what to do or how to behave. Rather, his own interests and developing capacities motivate him. He learns from experience, sensation and example – not from lecture or instruction, and especially not from moralizing, which Rousseau claims is likely to prove counterproductive. Most importantly, the central pedagogic approach is that of discovery learning.

Rousseau argues that educational activity is dependent on the natural physical, emotional and intellectual stage a child has reached. He asks the kinds of questions that have become typical of 20th-century psychologists – what are children like? How are they different from adults? How do they develop? His answers to these questions led him to propose separate and distinct stages of education:

- up to 12 – freedom, play, nature, developing senses;
- ages 12–15 – speedy physical development, learning to read, but only read one book (Robinson Crusoe – as a guide of self-sufficiency), developing reason;
- ages 15–20 – becoming an adult, gradually entering community life, exploring morality, religion and philosophy.

In Emile, Rousseau articulates child-centred educational philosophy – with the needs and interests of the child at the centre of learning activities. It is noteworthy, however, that Rousseau does not grant this child-centred education to Emile’s life partner, Sophie – and this has proved a source of heavy and ongoing criticism of his educational writing.

To find out more about Rousseau’s educational philosophy you should read:

- Rousseau’s novel, Emile;
- a clear outline of Rousseau’s contribution, in Flanagan (2006).

In the UK, A.S. Neill is the most celebrated child-centred educationalist. Neill, who was also influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, believed social ills were the result of unhappy childhoods. Unhappiness is perpetuated as teachers impose their own neuroses and repression onto the children they are charged with. Neill disliked the strict disciplinary nature of schooling, favouring instead ‘the discipline that interest draws’ (1968: 16): that children learn when they want to, not when they are made to. Neill viewed the purpose of education as the fostering of happy and free individuals. He put this child-centred philosophy into practice, creating Summerhill school in 1921; the school successfully continues today in Leiston, Suffolk (Neill 1970).

Activity: exploring alternative schooling

There are a large number of schools worldwide that draw from progressive or child-centred educational philosophies like the ones you have encountered in the previous two sections. Among them are:
Montessori schools;
Steiner Waldorf schools;
Summerhill school in Leiston, Suffolk;
Sands School in Ashburton, Devon;
Reggio Emilia schools;
Sudbury schools.

Find out about one of the above. Try to identify school practices as well as the philosophies that underpin them. What are the similarities and differences with the education you had? Would you want to send your children to the school you researched – why?

Key theme 5: teaching, morality and the cultivation of virtue

For much of the 20th century, formal education prioritized intellectual mastery over moral development. More recently, a focus on standards, efficiency, ‘performativity’ (the production of measurable and continually improving outcomes) and ‘technicism’ (the acquisition of specific skills) has largely removed moral language from educational discourses. On the whole, philosophers abhor such trends, believing that the role of philosophy of education should be ‘to develop richer more humane and, in the end, more educational conceptions of education’ (Smith 2005: 206). Nel Noddings, an important advocate for teaching children about care, is highly critical of a school system for the head that ignores the heart. She argues in favour of an education that ‘encourage(s) the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people’ (Noddings 2005: xxvi).

Activity: moral dilemmas for the teacher

Teachers are continually faced with moral decisions. Consider the following situations. In each case, think about what you would do and how you would reach your decision.

- One of your pupils has poor personal hygiene. Do you tell her?
- A pupil asks for an extension for his homework. Do you give him one?
- Two students submit identical essays. It is clear that one of them has copied, but you cannot be sure which one. What do you do?
- You really fancy one of your students. They feel the same way. Do you have a relationship with him/her? Does your answer depend on factors such as age, sex, other contexts? Why?
- You have strong views on a particular issue. Should you express this view in class or should you always try to remain impartial? What if a pupil directly invites your perspective?
- A student makes a comment that is likely to offend other members of the class. How do you react?
- A student invites you to join their social networking group. How far do you engage with your students outside formal class settings?
So what might ‘moral education’ look like? There are at least three approaches:

1. instructing children towards specific moral rules;
2. teaching children to think morally in different situations;
3. developing in children the qualities of a ‘good’ person.

The first approach posits that moral rules exist and are teachable. These might be abstract or concrete, universal truths or specific to a particular time and place. Most commonly, these derive from religious doctrine – for example, the Ten Commandments of Christianity or the Five Precepts (Pancasila) of Buddhism. But such rules might also be obtained through reason: whereby moral rules are constituted by the motivation or effect of action. The 18th-century Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative – that one should always act in a manner that could be universalized rationally – is an example of the former. The utilitarian rule – always act in a manner that will maximize happiness and minimize suffering – is an example of the latter. Moral education involves transmitting these rules to learners, so that they know, understand and enact them.

The second approach involves cultivating in learners the facility to think independently about moral situations. Rather than passive adherence to a conventional rule, learners acquire the capacity to reflect on and critically engage with established moral ideas. In the 1960s, the American psychologist and philosopher, Lawrence Kohlberg, developed a highly influential theory of moral development that illustrates the distinctiveness of this second approach. Kohlberg (1984) argued that children pass through different moral stages – from ‘pre-conventional’, through ‘conventional’, to ‘post-conventional’ morality. Until they reach the ‘post-conventional’ stage, children simply ‘follow the rules’. But when they reach this third stage, children become able to engage critically with socially accepted rules. Kohlberg believed that children acquire the ability to evaluate conventional moral rules by using universal moral principles like ‘justice’, ‘human rights’ or Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ (see above) to develop their own self-chosen and reasoned principles. Encountering moral situations, recognizing the complexity of moral decision making, and conversing with one another, children learn to deliberate morally and develop ‘moral reasoning’ or ‘intelligence’.

The third approach was originated by Aristotle and applied in modern society by Alasdair MacIntyre (see MacIntyre and Dunne 2002) and David Carr (1991). Rather than focusing on moral beliefs or situations, this approach stresses the importance of individual moral character – the living of a moral or ‘virtuous’ life. Education, both in its formal sense and as a lifelong pursuit, involves the cultivation of virtues – through engagement with positive role models (including teachers) and the practice that makes being virtuous habitual. Importantly, virtues might be intellectual as well as moral, and traditionally include generosity, forgiveness, tolerance, perseverance and integrity. Claxton (2008) suggests the ‘big 8’ virtues for the 21st century are:

1. curiosity;
2. courage;
3. exploration;
4. experimentation;
5. imagination;
6. discipline;
7. sociability;
8. thoughtfulness.

There are strong arguments in favour of each approach. The key point is that education should have a strong moral component. Highly ‘educated’ individuals have been responsible for numerous atrocities. Teaching people to think about the impact of their action – on one another and on the social and natural worlds – should be at the heart of any education system.

Key theme 6: philosophy of education in the 21st century

The final theme of the chapter considers some central concerns for the philosopher of education within contemporary culture. Recent changes in the way social life is organized – especially in terms of globalization, digitization, cultural fragmentation and uncertainty – impact considerably on educational meanings, purposes and practices. As Oancea and Bridges argue, philosophy of education plays a key role in mapping and shaping this changing educational landscape:

National and international debates about the aims of education and the principles which should govern educational practice, the scope of the curriculum, education for citizenship, faith schools, parents’ and children’s rights, education in a multi-racial/culturally diverse society, the role of the university in a mass higher education system – all rest on essentially philosophical considerations, as well as empirical data. (2009: 554)

While there are many areas of contention for the philosopher of education today, four important areas are discussed below.

Learning and cultural pluralism

Numerous social commentators have argued that the last 30 years or so have witnessed a radical restructuring of culture and society – sometimes termed late or post-modernity. Previous systems of order and structure have been replaced by plurality, fragmentation and increasing senses of unpredictability and uncertainty. Claims we used to make with certainty are open to contestation today. As Usher points out, ‘knowledge is multiple, based on multiple realities and the multiplicity of experience. It is neither canonical or hierarchical’ (2009: 173). We live among individuals and groups who hold to a wide variety of truths, defined by an immense breadth of experience and beholden to the many competing sources of knowledge each has access to. Today, the western world might be characterized by concepts such as fast-paced, consumerist, multicultural, globalized, free and individualistic.
Such changes transform education. Recent years have seen the emergence of an educational marketplace, with parents 'shopping around' for the 'best' educational experience for their children. There has been a shift in power relations, with children and parents gaining and teachers losing out. Private companies have thrived by providing 'more for less' services, in such diverse fields as catering, building or supplying teachers. There has been a rapid growth in the number of schools intended for particular or sectional interest groups, for example faith or specialist schools. Perhaps most significantly, as Usher (2009: 171) puts it, the 'boundaries defining “acceptable” learning are breaking down' resulting in a 'multiplicity of sites of learning'. The scope of learning has widened to include:

- a huge increase in the numbers continuing into further and higher education onto a far wider range of courses;
- greater opportunities for less ‘traditional’ forms of learning, such as home schooling, distance, online and ‘lifelong’ learning;
- learning outside formal settings, through non-formal organizations offering training and experiences;
- opportunities for informal learning opened up by new media technologies.

While many embrace such changes – seeing truly ‘democratic’ opportunities arising out of the breakdown of unequal and divisive social orders – others are wary of them, fearing the potential for conflict caused by people entrenching into their interest groups and a collapse in authority resulting in relativism and the chaos of an ‘anything goes’ mentality. Either way, educational theorists and practitioners need to be engaged and responsive – either to make full use of new possibilities that open up, or as the best protection against the excesses and conflicts of this rapidly changing world. Indicative of the latter perspective, Vokey (2006: xix) starkly claims, ‘only a radical change of heart and mind effected through transformative education will enable us to respond adequately to the social, political, economic, environmental, moral and/or spiritual crises’.

The changing nature of curriculum

As society changes, so do requirements for the content and delivery of our children’s learning. As a result, the last few years have seen a number of reviews of each stage of the curriculum – early years, primary, 14–19, higher education – asking philosophical questions about the changing nature and role of curriculum in and for the 21st century.

Changes in society result in an assortment of new philosophical questions regarding curriculum, including:

- What constitutes a ‘good’ citizen in the 21st century, and how might appropriate qualities be taught and learned?
- What might religious education look like in a society with a plurality of religions and increasing secularization?
How far should schools representing particular sectional interests have the freedom to develop their own curricula?

Can a National Curriculum encompass all the interests and needs of its citizens?

Among the most significant of social and cultural changes to impact on curriculum is the emergence and proliferation of new technologies. Technological advances bring with them numerous curriculum opportunities – to enable children to discover independently, to learn at a distance, to communicate and collaborate with other children around the world. But technological advances also bring new risks – access to inappropriate or dangerous material, increased potential for plagiarism, a more sedentary and solitary lifestyle. Futurelab undertook a philosophical exploration of educational futures in the contexts of this changing social and technological landscape (Facer 2009): *Beyond Current Horizons* suggested that the 21st century required curricula built around formal and informal learning networks.

Power, classroom relations and voice

Since Dewey, considerable interest in the discipline has been paid to the relationship between democracy and education – both in the ways that education might produce citizens capable of participation and autonomous decision-making and in terms of democratic classroom relations. The work of the modern German philosopher and sociologist, Jurgen Habermas, on ‘ideal speech’ has proved particularly influential: Habermas (1991) argued for conditions whereby participants attempt to reach consensus through open dialogue. In such conditions, all participants should have equal opportunities to contribute, unconstrained by power, role, status or authority. Participation depends on ‘communicative competence’ – the capacity to talk and listen effectively.

Emphasis on dialogue, communication and democratic relations is central to constructivism, a theory of learning and teaching that has become very important today. Constructivism claims that real learning takes place in communication, where learners construct knowledge and meaning in conversations with one another. This makes the voice of the learner central to educational activity – highlighting the capacity to articulate one’s viewpoints effectively, to discuss openly and effectively, to be heard and to have those views taken seriously and acted upon. In the UK, the most prominent advocates of pupil/student voice have been Jean Ruddock and Michael Fielding (2006), who suggest three ‘big issues’ that impact on effective voice strategies:

1. *power relations between teachers and pupils* – the extent that a perception of equity exists between all participants;
2. *commitment to authenticity* – how far strategies are engaged with genuinely, are meaningful and result in action;
3. *principle of inclusiveness* – the extent that less articulate and conspicuous voices are heard.
Teaching philosophy in schools

Should philosophy be part of the curriculum? And if so, at what stage of education should children encounter it? What areas of philosophy are appropriate? And what should the curriculum look like – should it be a distinct and explicit subject area, or embedded within subjects that children already study? Such questions are of considerable interest to philosophers of education today. Recent curriculum changes have given philosophy a more prominent (but implicit) role, for instance through the study of Citizenship, and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE).

Some, drawing on a tradition beginning with Plato, argue that learning about philosophy at too young an age can turn children off it for life. Others argue that children should start philosophizing at an early age. For instance, Haynes (2008: 2) makes a compelling case for primary school teachers stimulating ‘thinking that expresses both collaboration and independence of mind and spirit in situations where critical, democratic values are being actively promoted’. Accordingly, children do not necessarily need to encounter great philosophical works, but will benefit from learning to think philosophically – and this depends as much on classroom activities and relations as it does on the content that is taught. Hand and Winstanley’s (2009) recent book brings together many influential contemporary philosophers of education to discuss such issues. It provides a detailed and engaging account, considering among other things how teachers promote critical thinking, and how controversial issues and children’s literature can be ideal sources for philosophical thinking.

Key figures: contemporary philosophy of education

The most influential 20th-century British philosopher of education is Richard Peters, who established an analytical tradition in the UK at the Institute of Education, University of London, in the 1960s alongside another key figure, Paul Hirst. Analytical philosophy involves assessing language, concepts and arguments. It involves analysing the meaning of education and what distinguishes it from indoctrination, instruction, initiation and reform. Peters’ liberal approach, which perceives education as leading to the achievement of rational autonomy, is being further developed today in the work of prominent figures like John and Patricia White. Routledge reprinted a 24-volume set of distinguished texts in 2009 – International Library of the Philosophy of Education – which contains key texts by each of these authors. Paul Standish, the current Head of the Philosophy section at the Institute of Education, works in the areas of democracy and citizenship, and considers the relationships and tensions between analytical and continental philosophies.

Evidence of the link between philosophy and policy can be found in the work of Mary Warnock and Richard Pring. Warnock’s definitions of special educational needs, learning difficulties, ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘statementing’ have informed practice for
more than 40 years. Richard Pring was Lead Director of the Nuffield Review of 14–19 education and training. He has written about the relationship between philosophy and education, and values and vocationalism in education, as well as leading discussions on the ethics of educational research (Pring 2005).

To find out more about current philosophy of education in the UK, you should read *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Philosophy of Education* (Carr 2005) and *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Barrow and Woods 2006).


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### Activity: an education for the 21st century

Think about the following questions.

- What do you consider to be the main priorities for schools and teachers in the 21st century?
- What knowledge, skills and personal qualities should young people possess when they leave formal education?
- What changes would you make to the organization of schooling in the UK so as to maximize opportunities to develop these skills and qualities?
- What place should philosophy occupy in the curriculum of the 21st century?

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### Conclusion

There is a contention among some today that philosophy of education has rather lost its way (see Standish 2006 for an outline and critique of this viewpoint). The 1980s’ Thatcher government did much to diminish the place of educational disciplines within teacher training – as part of a broader move to denigrate and deprofessionalize the teacher – so that philosophy of education has little presence on training courses today. The discipline itself can appear somewhat imprecise and disorderly, lacking the points of focus and distinguishable perspectives of the others you encounter during this book. Instead, ‘there remains a distinct sense that philosophy of education is what those who write it and teach it say it is’ (Chambliss 2009: 251). But this ‘messiness’ gives the discipline its potency – there is an ‘adventurousness in the form of openness to ideas and radical approaches’ (Phillips 2008: 3) that makes it distinctive from the other disciplines. Philosophy of education is *what good teachers do* as part of their daily lives: informed by historical and contemporary ideas, they think critically and reflectively about their professional practices and the purpose and scope of educational activity.
Further research

- To what extent, if at all, should teachers confront social and political issues in the classroom?
- To what extent can and should education teach young people to become moral?
- Evaluate the claim that there is no such thing as absolute knowledge and therefore no need for education.

Key readings

Books


Journals

Educational Philosophy and Theory – journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia.


Studies in Philosophy and Education – offers an international perspective.

Websites

www.philosophy-of-education.org/ – homepage to Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, with links to its journals, its booklet IMPACT and its magazine Questa, as well as links to other useful resources.

www.vusst.hr/ENCYCLOPAEDIA/doku.php – Encyclopaedia of Philosophy of Education – with lots of up-to-date essays in the field of educational philosophy.

References


