The contributors to Education Policy: Philosophical Critique believe that education policy stands in need of analysis and discussion. As a result, twelve philosophers of education subject elements of current and recent UK – or sometimes specifically English – educational policy to critique. Areas under analysis include higher education and faith-based education, assessment, the teaching of reading, vocational and civic education, teacher education, the influence of Europe and the idea of the ‘Big Society’.

The authors also examine the nature of policy itself, in a context where politicians frequently cherry pick educational ideas from other countries, and where the voice of the wider public in policy formation is increasingly marginalised. A recurring theme in the book concerns the tendency to regard education as a private benefit rather than a public good. In a context where the language of ‘the market’ has taken central place in discussion of politics and policies the contributors attempt to widen the debate and, in the process, to articulate some richer visions of education than current policies admit. Written in a style that is both forthright and critical, this wide-ranging account of modern education policy offers thought-provoking insights for policy makers and all those interested in how educational policy is made and how it can be evaluated.

Education Policy
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Introduction

RICHARD SMITH

Education as a public activity is inescapably political. There are different and competing views about what constitutes the good life, about human nature, about justice and equality, about what is worth learning and why, and about the purposes of education in relation to these. Accordingly it is entirely proper in a democracy that education policy should be created by the people’s elected representatives in parliament, even if the thought that it would be good to keep politics out of education from time to time holds its attractions.

That thought, however, is made more tempting, in the UK at least, by a number of tendencies, several of which have their counterparts elsewhere in the world. First, a profound cynicism increasingly colours people’s view of politicians and their motives. In the UK this cynicism was fuelled by the recent scandal in which members of parliament of all colours were discovered to have claimed expenses that ranged from the technically illegitimate to the outrageous, giving rise to the suspicion that they had entered politics less in order to serve than, in a phrase commonly used at the time, to ‘fill their boots’. Some mitigation may be urged on account of the complexity of the regulations applying to parliamentary expenses and the readiness with which many Members of Parliament repaid money claimed when they discovered their mistakes, but this was a powerful blow to public willingness to take politicians and policy at face value.

Second, the readiness with which policies have been ‘borrowed’ from other countries—as if school systems from 1990s Sweden could be transferred unproblematically to present-day inner cities of the UK, or mathematics programmes that had proved their worth in Korea would automatically do the same in Devon—has suggested to some that the UK policy-making process is now characterised by a deep unwillingness to listen to advice from within, whether from teachers, researchers or anyone else: as if the entire UK ‘educational establishment’, as it is sometimes described, had been written off as a potential source of professional knowledge and advice. And this ‘policy tourism’ (see Carrie Winstanley, Chapter 2) is encouraged by international evaluations such as PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) which lend themselves to the supposition that features of particular national systems can be imported like foreign cars: as if education policy could require little more than reading off ‘what works’ from various league tables and adopting it without much further thought on the part of those charged with making policy.
Third—and again a tendency not confined to any one political party in the UK—there has been a steady dismantling of the complex checks and balances by which power used to be diffused in education, in favour of concentration of power in the centre. In the case of schools, for example, the power of central government in determining curriculum content and in managing systems of school inspection used to be balanced by, among other bodies, local education authorities, which had their own inspectors and advisers. Recent governments, however, have sponsored the growth of Academy Schools, now numbering nearly half of all secondary schools, which are answerable only to the Secretary of State, and the role of local authorities has been steadily diminished. Where the term ‘policy’ was once naturally taken to include the policies of particularly schools (see John White, Chapter 1) it is thus now more readily applied to government policy, extending to ever more detail. It was famously declared over 60 years ago by a UK Minister of State for Education that ‘Minister knows nowt about curriculum’. In contrast with this principled agnosticism central government now largely determines the content of the curriculum (and sometimes the way in which it is taught: see Andrew Davis, Chapter 5, and Michael Hand, Chapter 4, for different views on some of the implications here); even more than that, individual Ministers are prone to making curriculum recommendations (most recently that primary children should learn ‘times tables’ by heart, and should have the option to study Latin: *Mail Online*, 2012) on the basis of little more than personal taste and instinct.

Fourth, such pronouncements may of course actually have other functions than to indicate the direction of policy. When for example Michael Gove, the current Minister for Education, proposed a return to differentiated examinations for 16-year-olds, with the academically able taking traditional and now long-discontinued ‘O’-level style examinations, it was widely reported that this was to be understood less as a firm shift in education policy than as a bid for the support of the Conservative right wing as he positioned himself for a possible attempt to secure the party leadership. He was, it was said, ‘on manoeuvres’ (*Education for Everyone*, 2012). Similar confusions of policy with what might be called political game-playing have been detected in other areas, as when the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, appeared to propose removal of housing benefit from unemployed 25-year-olds, thus offering them little prospect but to live with their parents. This too was construed as an attempt to win favour with his party’s less liberal elements since there was no prospect of the measure being passed into law in the lifetime of the current parliament. Of course both Gove and Cameron may well have been signalling genuine policy initiatives: the interesting point is that ‘going on manoeuvres’ has become so common that even experienced commentators cannot readily distinguish it from policy-making. This does nothing to reassure the wider public that the policy announcements that they hear or read about are based on serious thought, let alone evidence, about education or the wellbeing of the country as a whole.

Fifth, it is sometimes suspected that what passes for policy—here to speak only of education—conceals a different kind of manoeuvring, which is the securing by politicians of lucrative opportunities for themselves and their associates in the
fields in which they might have been supposed to be serving the public good. Examples can be found, again, from both ends of the political spectrum. Michael Barber, whose career includes time as Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards during the Labour premiership of Tony Blair, is at present the Chief Education Advisor to Pearson plc, generally described as the world’s largest learning company and the world’s largest book publisher. His other post-political appointments include head of the global education practice at the management consultancy McKinsey. The serving Minister of State for Education, it has emerged, has met regularly with his ex-employer, Rupert Murdoch (New Statesman, 2011), whose News Corp has an interest in various educational initiatives. In neither case, it must be emphasised, is there any evidence of impropriety, and of course it is natural for an experienced professional to continue working in a field in which he or she is knowledgeable and experienced. It might be wished, nevertheless, that more was done to protect education policy from the darker forces of cynicism, and when government is in the process of legislating to enable ‘for profit’ providers to set up in higher education, or when profit-making schools seem likely to become more than theoretical possibilities (New Statesman, 2012), the need to demonstrate that policy is uncontaminated by any form of opportunism is especially acute.

In The Predator State (2008) James K. Galbraith, writing about moves in the USA to privatise Social Security and to organise Medicare for the benefit of drug companies, takes issue with the familiar neoliberal claim that such initiatives are essentially manifestations of a political policy of rolling back the over-weening state. They are, he insists, rather ‘the systematic abuse of public institutions for private profit or, equivalently, the systematic undermining of public protections for the benefit of private clients’ (p. xix). While we may not have quite reached this state of affairs in the UK, Galbraith’s thesis is a reminder of how easily in a globalised world policies rapidly cross national boundaries. As Sophie Ward (Chapter 9) writes, predation tends to pose as benign, universal common sense, from the pax Romana, violently imposed by Rome on its subject peoples, to the present day. It does this most successfully in our own time of course by speaking the language of ‘the market’, which it has done so relentlessly that this can seem to be the only legitimate language in which to speak about serious matters like politics and policies. It serves, as Galbraith notes, in large part ‘as a device for corralling the opposition, restricting the flow of thought, shrinking the sphere of admissible debate’ (ibid., p. xvii). Political alienation is then bred of the inability to find words for what needs to be said: for the intrinsic value of education, the emancipation of the human spirit, the widening of horizons, the cultivation of generous sensibility, the idea of the university (Staddon and Standish, Chapter 10), vocational education that is genuinely educational (Winch, Chapter 8).

An earlier Special Issue of this Journal (2008) titled Evidence-based Education Policy: What Evidence? What Basis? Whose Policy? examined the many different ways in which educational research can lead to or affect policy. The demand that such policy should be evidence-based seems now to be more muted than in recent years, perhaps as a result of increasing disenchantment with the usefulness for
policy of educational research itself. Education policy still stands in need of analysis and discussion, however, and this is the theme of this book. Our contributors, being philosophers, attempt—to borrow words from Galbraith (above)—to keep open the flow of thought and widen the sphere of admissible debate.

REFERENCES


1

The Role of Policy in Philosophy of Education: An Argument and an Illustration

JOHN WHITE

Most of this chapter is a critique of a recent piece of British government policy-making: The Framework for the National Curriculum: A Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review (DfE, December 2011). But to set this in historical context, I begin with a discussion of the role of philosophy of education in UK policy-making since the 1960s.

I

This essay is a contribution to a Special Issue of the Journal of Philosophy of Education (JOPE) on educational policy. That there is such a Special Issue may well not seem remarkable, no more remarkable than the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain’s creation of the policy-orientated Impact series in 1999. The last three Special Issues have been on a range of subjects: methods of philosophising about education, the ethics of teaching, philosophy for children. Educational policy may seem to be a topic on all fours with these: that is, no more than a specialised interest that some, but not others, in our community share.

1960–1985

In earlier decades, the idea that educational policy could be a minority interest within our field would have made far less sense. To see this, we have to go back to the 1960s. My account is about the UK, but may have resonance in other countries. The pioneering work of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst took place against a government-led upgrading and expansion of teacher education after the Robbins Report of 1963 and the election of a Labour government in 1964 committed to comprehensive schooling. Part of the thinking was that teachers in training should have wider and deeper intellectual horizons. The very term ‘teacher training’ was transmuted into ‘teacher education’. The Bachelor of Education degree was introduced as a step towards an all-graduate profession.
It was widely agreed that teachers, at both pre-service and in-service levels, needed the broader horizons on their work that the disciplines of education provided. Philosophy of education was prominent among these. PGCE students at the London Institute of Education had weekly lectures in the major disciplines, including our own, each lecture followed by a seminar. Those who wanted to go further could also take an option course in the subject. Similar work was taking place in the new BEd courses in teacher education colleges.

All this activity required staffing. Not only did new teachers need inducting into our discipline: so did college lecturers already in post, as well as new lecturers plucked out of school teaching to cope with the great expansion of the workforce. Newly created part- or full-time in-service courses in philosophy of education, at Diploma, MA, or MPhil/PhD level, acted as conversion courses for these groups, as well as providing for teachers already in post, who became caught up in the intellectual excitement of the time. In addition to making abundant money available for this work, the Labour government, concerned about a shortage of BEd lecturers, asked Peters to run a tailor-made, one-year, full-time Diploma in Philosophy of Education—and funded the Institute to do so.

I have gone into these details to throw light on the early links between philosophy of education and policy. Those involved in the subject at every level—as student-teachers, serving teachers, college lecturers, teachers of college lecturers—were instruments of policy. All were aware of the transformation in education that was taking place and most, perhaps, saw themselves as willing participants in it. The idea that policy might be a minority interest within the field would have made scant sense at that time.

This is also true for a related reason. So far, I have been talking about government policies. But the scope of these was not so extensive as it is today. In particular, pre-1988 governments were not responsible for the content of the school curriculum. Decision-making about aims and curricula was left to schools themselves. Each had its own policy on this. This had weaknesses as well as strengths, but I am not concerned here to attack or defend this autonomy. My only point is that from the mid-1960s philosophy of education had abundant opportunities to influence policy decisions simply through its plethora of courses in teacher education at every level, as well as via their content. Many students were or became senior teachers, headteachers and inspectors, and face-to-face influence apart, there was the huge impact—on local authorities, the inspectorate and the civil service, as well as schools and teacher education institutions—that Peters, Hirst, Dearden and others had through their writings.

In an age when policy-making was far more widely dispersed than now across the system, much of the work published was written with policy in mind. The word ‘policy’ scarcely came up in this connection: it is more that philosophers of education took it as a large part of their job to help schools and their staff to gain a clearer and better-grounded understanding of what they should be about. Since schools were responsible for their own aims, curricula and teaching arrangements, it is not surprising that much of this early work in our subject was in these areas. It is against this background that we should view, for example, Peters’
writings on the nature of education and on moral education; Hirst’s account of a curriculum based on ‘the forms of knowledge’; Dearden’s critique of the ‘child-centred’ theories then rife in the preparation of primary school teachers, and his alternative vision of good primary practice; Elliott’s essays on aesthetic dimensions of education; as well as critiques of intelligence testing, arguments for civic education, discussions of classroom discipline and concept-learning, and much else besides.

Influencing practice was not the only motive. The reality was, as always, complex. Richard Peters, in particular, had other things in mind, although their bearing on his practical ‘mission’ perhaps seemed clearer to him then than it has seemed to many subsequently. He had come from general philosophy and was eager to establish philosophy of education as a respectable branch of philosophy, on a par with such areas as philosophy of religion or philosophy of law, revolving, like these, around its own field-specific concepts. In his case, these were concepts like education itself, teaching, learning, indoctrination, socialisation. ¹

I am not writing about a ‘golden age’. There were many downsides as well as many upsides of our activities in this period. My key point is that it was then taken for granted that philosophy of education was by and large concerned with helping schools to improve their practices. One exception has to do with philosophical problems about learning emerging within general philosophy itself, not least from Wittgenstein’s interest in language learning in Philosophical Investigations. David Hamlyn (1978) was a notable contributor to this kind of philosophy of education, beginning a tradition that has been brought into our new century by general philosophers like Michael Luntley.

As well as their writings with and for teachers, earlier philosophers of education were also sometimes involved in policy-related work as we would understand this term today, that is, to do with matters of national significance. A notable example is found in Peters’ and Dearden’s critiques of the Plowden Report on primary education in Peters, 1969.

1985 Onwards

Things were very different in our field by the mid-1980s. Two factors stand out. The first is an understandable recoil in the late 1970s against the heavily theory-laden pre-service courses in teacher education, notably the one-year PGCE. It was widely felt that whatever role there was for philosophy of education, as well as other educational disciplines, at in-service level, a short course like the PGCE should have more practical priorities. As a result, philosophical lectures and seminars became rare events, although students were still sometimes exposed to philosophical ideas when philosophy of education staff participated in school-focused discussions about such things as mixed-ability teaching or multi-cultural classrooms.

This notwithstanding, until 1985 philosophy of education retained its links to the world of school practice and policy through its still thriving in-service Diploma, MA and MPhil/PhD courses. But—and this brings me to the second factor—in that year the Thatcher government abolished what had been called ‘the Pool’. This
consisted in central government funds given to all teachers on in-service courses to cover their fees. Henceforward, teachers had to rely on their own money—or rare outside funding—so as to study our subject. Numbers plummeted. Staff were thinned out. The future looked black.

Prospects brightened in the 1990s with the new emphasis on research productivity in universities. Philosophers of education still in post found that they could now earn much of their keep by writing books and journal articles. Our own journal, like others in the field, coped with the spate of criteria-attaining pieces now flowing its way by increasing its number of issues per year, in *JOPE*’s case from two, to three, and then four.

What happened after the mid-1980s to the field’s involvement in policy? The decimation of in-service teaching cut our day-to-day connections with the world of school policy-making almost to zero. This world shrunk, in any case, after 1988, when the arrival of the highly prescriptive National Curriculum began to move policy-making upwards from school to central government level, with teachers increasingly becoming implementers of decisions made elsewhere rather than policy-makers in their own right.

Some philosophers of education, not least those used to working in a policy-relevant way, continued their involvement as best they could. The new, post-1988, regime of state-controlled curricula, testing and assessment, accountability and school effectiveness, provided them with plenty of material for philosophical critique, as did the tighter control of universities by the state. Since the main type of policy on which they could now comment was *national* policy, one unexpected consequence was that policy-making circles at national level began to take more notice of our work than they had probably ever done, even in the 1960s.

With more money available to schools to use for their own purposes after 1988 under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) regime, there was still some room for school policy-making, but within the more stringent system of control just described. Many schools were attracted by agencies offering courses and consultancy on such things as brain-based learning, learning styles, multiple intelligences and philosophy for children. These raised all kinds of philosophical questions and provided another source of work in the policy area.

Given these developments at national and school levels, the field was now wide open for these philosophers of education to pursue their policy-related interests along a gamut stretching from newspaper articles at the one end; through essays on topical subjects in journals and outlets like *Impact*; to work on core philosophical topics in the background to policy—on knowledge and understanding (in relation to curriculum and assessment), personal well-being and morality (aims of education, PSHE, religious education), democracy and civic virtues (Citizenship), aspects of philosophy of mind (Gifted and Talented programmes, SEAL—Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, multiple intelligences), equality (the erosion of the comprehensive system).

Not all philosophers of education, by any means, were drawn towards policy. Most, perhaps, not least among those who took up the subject after 1980, when the policy relevance of our work was less and less taken for granted, had other...
interests. It is indeed over this period that the idea, mentioned earlier, has taken root that policy involvement is a minority activity among us.

A major factor in this has been the internationalisation of our subject, promoted not least by the companies that produce our journals in their desire to expand their markets globally, and fuelled by the extra revenues gained from those same companies that have enabled scholars across the world to have regular meetings with each other. Again, this is not the place to debate all the pros and cons of this development of the last two decades. My interest here is only in its impact on policy involvement. Policies are proposed ways forward for organisations. This chapter so far has been about the policies of UK governments and of educational institutions. The government and school systems of particular jurisdictions may well diverge widely from those of other countries in the problems they face and proposals for overcoming them. The greater the pressure to publish work of trans-national interest, the less room there is likely to be for policy-related work, except where this relates to internationally shared experience. One such area concerns the policies of the global publishing organisations that market our work through journals like this one. I have not yet seen any discussion of these from the standpoint of philosophy of education, although recent interest in ethical issues around open-access publishing may well spark off policy-related work in this field.

A survivor from the 1960s, habituated to working in a policy-relevant environment, I find it hard to understand what philosophy of education could otherwise be like, and am not attracted by the inward-looking tendencies of much recent work in the field. I look forward to the day when teachers are given more time and resources for their own professional education, as well as more freedom and power to help shape what their schools offer. Philosophy of education will then, at last, resume its former role.

II

As an example of contemporary policy critique, I turn to a discussion of The Framework for the National Curriculum: A Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review (DfE, 2011).

Although at the time of writing (May 2012) the Coalition has still not indicated its policy on the National Curriculum, the stance it is likely to take seems clear. Everything that ministers Gove and Gibb have said on the topic since before the general election of 2010 has been about the virtues of a traditional grammar-school curriculum.

Their recent English Baccalaureate proposals for a 16+ qualification are not about the National Curriculum as such, but will certainly, if carried through, influence the content of secondary schooling. They, too, have put traditional fare first. Like the London University Matriculation regulations of 1858, they demand English, mathematics and science, as well as a foreign language (to which the earlier version added Latin and Greek). The main difference between the two awards is that in 1858 history and geography were both compulsory, whereas now they are alternatives.