Education, Social Reforms and Philosophical Development:

Evidence from the past, Principles for the Future

Richard Pring*

This post offers a synopsis of Richard Pring's new book, Purpose of the book, *Education, Social Reform and Philosophical Development: Evidence from the Past, Principles for the Future* (published by Routledge). A review of the book will be published on the PESGB website in the new year.

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Reflecting on the meaning and purpose of an education at the mercy of political changes and innovation, *Education, Social Reform and Philosophical Development* considers the social, historical, religious and cultural contexts that define educational systems, but with special reference to the UK – particularly but not exclusively England and Wales. With a particular focus on how historical contexts shape the nature of education and its relevance to society, it explores the

history of education in relation to social reform, economic relevance and raising standards.

To do this, the book is divided into three parts.

The first part, describes the developing system of education within England and Wales from the 19th century onwards, arising from the growing consciousness of the desirability of (and the social and economic needs for) 'education for all'. These developments reflected important social differences and aspirations; the significance of practical learning (as in apprenticeships); significant debates at the political level over what educational provision (in higher education as well as in schools) was appropriate for people within a hierarchical (but changing) social order; and the need for social reforms sustained by changing educational provision. Those debates at the political level were articulated in several major Reports which embodied not only the social and economic needs of the country, but also (often not explicitly) the philosophical assumptions which underpinned the developing policies and proposals.

The second part, therefore, seeks to make explicit the changing philosophical landscape which underpinned the development of educational provision and practices, reflected in several Royal Commissions in the 19th and 20th centuries. In so doing, the book picks out eight distinctive philosophical influences on what it means to be educated and thus how an educational system should be formed. Such influences reflect distinctive theories of knowledge, ethical bases for conduct, features of a just society, justifications for social reform and the aesthetic dimension to a worthwhile life - thereby constituting what is to count as 'human flourishing' as the aim of education. In so doing, reference is made particularly to the influence of the Utilitarianism of Bentham and of James and John Stewart Mill; of the Idealism of Thomas Carlisle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and T. H. Green in the spirit of Hegel; of the Socialism of Matthew Arnold, William Morris, R H. Tawney and John Ruskin: and more recently of Positivism (so eloquently expressed by A. J. Ayer – and reflected in the emphasis on measurement in many Government documents); of the reaction of the Post-Modernists influenced by Lyotard on the 'post-truth society' and thereby on the validity of educational research, of the Wisdom of the Market under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It is important, too, to see the influence

of the American philosopher John Dewey whose Pragmatism, so influential in American educational thinking, was seen by one English professor (who had chaired a Government Committee on teacher education) asserted 'it is highly plausible to see the egalitarianism which stems from the writings of John Dewey as the proximate cause of our educational decline' - an accusation repeated to this author by a subsequent Minister of Education in the 'Luna Caprese', Oxford.

However, underlying all these debates and differences lies the central philosophical understanding of the concept of truth and the challenge of what is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as the 'post-truth society' – for which there is need to pay tribute to the rise of post-modernism within the literature of educational theory and research.

Finally, therefore, in *the third part* recognition is given to the lessons to be learnt (i) from this historical evolution of the debates on education at its different levels, (ii) from its different organisational manifestations, and then (iii) from the philosophical ideas which permeated that evolution. Those lessons deeply affect the answers to what constitute the *aims of education* in this day and age – the

kind of knowledge (theoretical and practical) to be pursued, the values and virtues to be promoted, and the consequent reforms to a society geared to human flourishing for everyone.

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