

# INTRODUCTION

Everyone has opinions about mass education. Not only did we all go to school – so we know what it's like from the inside – but also we hear about educational issues and concerns in the news every day. These might include questions such as, should we go back to basics when teaching literacy? Should we reduce funding to state schools that do poorly on standardised testing? Should we teach more about the environment? Our opinions on these specific matters, assuming we have any, tend to be shaped by our more general beliefs about education – schools aren't educating our children properly; our education system seems pretty fair; the modern curriculum is full of trendy rubbish. The problem here is that many of these things we think we know about our system of mass education don't stand up to any kind of close scrutiny; they are often myths, and this book will address the most important of these myths.

This demythologising approach is unusual, but by no means unheard of, within social analysis. One of the greatest of all writers in the field, Peter Berger, suggests in his seminal text *Invitation to Sociology* (1963, 51) that 'debunking' is one of the most crucial elements of the discipline, and that there is 'a logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda' by which people cloak their actions with each other. To put it another way, he proposes that our social world is full of stories we tell ourselves, and it is a sociologist's job to see which ones hold (at least some) water, and which ones don't.

However, not only is debunking/demythologising one of the central responsibilities of the social analyst, it is also an excellent pedagogic approach to the discipline. LeMoyne and Davis (2011) contend that the most effective way of coming to grips with complex social problems is to begin by examining important taken-for-granted cultural beliefs, and from there these beliefs can be systematically questioned – by illustrating the ways in which those beliefs evolved, by unpacking their theoretical domain assumptions, by providing concrete evidence that speaks to these beliefs, and by providing a vocabulary of other ways of seeing the same issues.

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This final element is of particular importance. The intention of this approach is not to simply point at a particular social myth and state: *'This is wrong; the following is correct'*. As will be discussed in this book, truth doesn't work that way. Instead, the intention is simply to point out the flaws, biases and shortcomings in some of our dominant ways of understanding familiar educational issues, and then to propose a range of alternatives that might be a little more convincing, and a little less vulnerable to easy criticism. To paraphrase the logic of the philosopher Karl Popper (1963), *there's no such thing as being absolutely and unequivocally right, but there's a million ways to be completely wrong*.

### Making Sense of Mass Education

One of the many exasperating things about our education system is that it keeps changing: how we think it works, what we think it seeks to accomplish, and what we think its consequences are. It certainly isn't like the study of human anatomy, where a book from the 1920s will still give a pretty accurate account of how the human body works, and what goes where. A book on education from the same era is unlikely to make any mention of many of the issues we now consider to be of importance. Take, for example, *Education and the General Welfare* by Sechrist (1920). With chapters on 'School Attendance' and 'Why Children are Dull', the focus was firmly on the pragmatics of how to make a school function effectively.

By the 1950s, however, new ways of thinking about schools had emerged. Concerns did not necessarily begin and end with educational efficiency, but also sought to address the relationship between schools and society. The influential theorist Parsons, in his book *The Social System* (Parsons 1965), regarded education as a vital component within a complex machine, and this was a machine that needed 'dull children' to do dull work. This wasn't seen as a problem; this was part of the design. Society was a finely tuned instrument, and education helped its cogs turn.

The average book on education soon changed its focus again. *Understanding Schooling* by Henry *et al.* (1988) was far more interested in the relationship between education and social power – as in the myth of our 'meritocratic' education system, and in the way class, gender and race directly correlated with schooling success – than it was on society as a 'finely tuned instrument'. Finely tuned for whom? There was nothing in this book about 'why children are dull', rather the emphasis was on why our system seems to confuse 'dull' with 'disadvantaged'.

What about today? Do any of these approaches to education still have currency? After all, some children probably *are* dull; society *is* complex; and the notion of a genuine 'meritocracy' *is* rather dubious. What kind of approach ought we to take, and what issues should be covered? In the second decade of the twenty-first century,

what should a general book on education look like? Hopefully, it should look rather like this one.

## Changing Contexts of Education

The world serviced by our contemporary education system is very different from the one written about by Sechrist (1920); consequently, the anxieties we now have, about how our schools work – and who gets to benefit – are also very different. Certainly, we are no longer as concerned about education for racial or national efficiency, or for the glory of the British Empire, as we were a hundred years ago. We now have a variety of other concerns, as evidenced by a series of debates about the state and direction of our education system. There are now debates over the conversion of many schools to ‘Academies’, over levels of funding for public education, and the ongoing flight of the middle classes into the private school system. There are concerns over standardisation, and the relentless imperative to collect data and rank schools. Some newspapers continually tell us that our schools have lost their way, and that we should return to traditional educational techniques and philosophies, ones based upon tried and trusted truths of yesterday. There are also worries about the levels of difference – physical, intellectual and even cultural – that schools should be required to accommodate. Should we return to the logic of the special school?

These debates raise a number of questions, but one is particularly important: how do we approach such dilemmas conceptually? Or to put it another way: is there a single theoretical model that can help us make sense of these problems, or do we have to address them on an issue-by-issue, case-by-case basis? This question has wider implications, not just about understanding specific changes and tensions within the institutions of mass schooling, such as the ones outlined above, but also about how to make sense of contemporary education in the broadest of ways.

Arguably, almost every general work dealing with the sociology and philosophy of education has attempted to answer this question, and this book will add to that tradition. However, this is not intended as just an updated repetition of previous approaches, which have tended to take one of three forms: first, some have taken a single approach, for example Critical Theory as in the book by Henry *et al.* (1988). This is fine if that approach is stated explicitly, right upfront (which it was). Otherwise, the book is in danger of passing off a particular perspective as the singular, unequivocal and uncontested truth of the matter – which isn’t very honest. Second, some books have appeared to take no specific approach at all, in which case they are either kidding themselves, or their readers. All sociological analyses – and for that matter, all histories and all philosophies, in fact, probably all forms of knowledge – come from a particular perspective; the trick is to know what it is, and again, to be honest about it. Finally, others still employ a mishmash of theories,

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either because they don't realise it, because they hope no one will notice it, or because they are trying to be all things for everyone.

This book adopts none of these forms, instead presenting a number of different approaches, which are placed in relation to each other, and which are shown to offer specific kinds of advantages (and disadvantages), to answer questions in particular kinds of ways, and to be useful in addressing given kinds of problems. As such, the intention has not been simply to produce an updated version of previous books on education, it has been to offer something new altogether, and hopefully, to keep moving the analysis onwards.

### Some Problems With Modernist Sociologies

But what exactly is *onwards*? One of the wonderful things about modernism was that we used to be able to answer that question without hesitation; now it's nowhere near as straightforward. If anyone needs reminding, modernity is generally regarded as beginning in the final years of the eighteenth century, at the end of the Enlightenment. Lasting some two hundred years, this was to be an era characterised by the underpinning belief that through the use of reason, it would be possible to solve humanity's problems. With its mantra of truth, objectivity and progress, and under the banner of its greatest exemplar – science – society now was to be free of the superstitions and dogmas that had previously decided our fates; humanity had come of age.

Unfortunately, towards the end of the twentieth century an increasing number of voices pointed to some significant problems with this optimistic narrative. It was suggested that the modernist project had failed, and that we had entered a new era, the era after modernity: that of postmodernity. By rejecting the grand narratives of modernism, postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984b) and Baudrillard (1993) sought to describe a world characterised not by truth and progress, but by many different truths, and by the belief that history is not synonymous with progress, such that all we could really make claim to was 'change'. Other writers, most notably Giddens (1990, 1991), while reluctant to call time on modernity altogether, argued instead that we have simply entered a period of late modernity (an era still largely modernist, but now characterised by continual crisis, and a greater scepticism towards the power of reason). These writers still seek to question the belief that we are making 'progress' in any manageable way.

And therein lies part of the problem with the notion of onwards. Though we aren't necessarily convinced that we are making theoretical progress, in any real sense, certainly approaches to education have largely mirrored the broader move from modernism to postmodernism. Therefore, if 'moving the analysis onwards' means anything, in the context of this book, it means precisely that.

Most books on education revolve around explanatory features characteristic of modernist sociologies – most notably class, gender and race. The idea here is that

these three elements represent objective ‘facts’ about how our society is structured, and its populations ranked and organised. This logic suggests that when we understand how these three social axes work, we will be able to account for their effects and solve the problem. This book will take a somewhat different approach.

## Beyond Modernist Sociologies of Education

This book will begin by addressing these three familiar conceptual axes, but then extend the analysis into a more postmodern interpretation of each of the same generalised notions. For example, when discussing issues of the relationship between schooling and gender, modernist accounts have stressed the role played by patriarchy – the global system of male domination – in the ongoing educational subordination of women. Such second-wave feminist accounts have now been largely replaced by more nuanced, less deterministic explanations of the same generalised area, and those will be discussed here.

This is not the only way of altering the focus on education, of moving the analysis onwards. There is an alternative tradition of analysis that largely avoids the modern/postmodern dichotomy, one based around Foucault’s work on governance. Rather than concentrating on issues of power and inequality, this paradigm focuses instead upon the techniques and practices by which we are shaped as particular types of individual, and by which we have our conduct regulated. From the early nineteenth century onwards, the school has had a central role to play in producing a disciplined and docile population, in producing the categories of difference necessary to permit effective, targeted social management, and latterly, even providing the primary site for the governance of students’ subjective experience.

This book will not only address the broadest issues within education, it will also attempt to understand education’s place within a complex and changing society, and supply the conceptual tools for providing non-reductionist accounts of a number of contemporary cultural forms. Whether addressing the effects of the news media, or of popular culture, or how digital technologies are reshaping both the classroom and the capacities of the people in them, arguably many previous attempts to describe the relationship between these issues and our education system have relied upon modernist binaries to provide their foundation. This book will not do so.

The overall intention here is to provide the best possible tools for understanding contemporary schooling; however, the tools available within sociology and cultural studies are not the only ones on offer. If we are to understand the ideas that have animated education over the past 2500 years – or, more importantly, if we are to recognise which of these ideas still have currency within contemporary mass education, and how those ideas are operationalised – then the discipline of philosophy is required. Arguably, philosophy’s utility also extends beyond these issues, into

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assessments of schooling, ethics and inclusive education, as well as understanding epistemology and the educational legacy of the United Kingdom's role as a former colonial power.

### The Structure of the Book

This book is organised in a somewhat unusual way, both in the way the chapters are located within four distinct parts (each with a different focus and theoretical alignment), and in terms of the structure of the chapters. All fourteen chapters of the book are organised in the same way: they are based around a number of familiar myths common to popular discourses on the topic in question. For example, Chapter 1 on Social Class is based around three myths: '*The UK is no longer a country characterised by social inequality*', '*Schooling success is only about individual ability*', and '*Social class is all about money*'. In the process of debunking these statements, it is also possible to ascertain what each different approach to understanding mass education can offer us.

Part I is entitled *Re-Assessing the Three Pillars: Modern and Postmodern Sociologies of Education*. This sets out the dominant framework for the study of mass education. The familiar axes of class, race and gender, and the resulting forms of disadvantage that emerge from them, are assessed and, in many ways, found wanting in the light of the broader changes associated with contemporary educational thought. The challenge then becomes to determine how these categories and concerns can now best be utilised.

Chapter 1 – *Social Class* – will address the logic of meritocracy, and examine the viability of oppositional conceptions of social class. It will be concluded that the way forward within educational research lies with more nuanced understandings of social distinctions, based around the notion of habitus, and the specifics of language use. Chapter 2 – *Gender* – will assess the contributions made to educational debates by first- second- and third-wave feminist logics. Remaining inequities within the schooling system will be analysed, as will the role played by education in the formation of gendered identities. This latter concept will be used as a device for reworking the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity', and illustrating the complex ways in which schools shape 'acceptable' boys and girls, both culturally and sexually. Finally, having debunked long-standing, yet persistent, biological arguments concerning race, Chapter 3 – *Race/Ethnicity* – will examine the cultural construction of racial difference, address a number of contemporary perspectives on educational issues, and unpack 'white privilege' theory. The central goal of the chapter is to assess what remains – at a practical level – of a concept that appears to have lost almost all of its intellectual purchase. This chapter will also address the central logic of discrimination, focusing on the notion of 'othering', as well as the rise of cultural discrimination.

Part II is called *The Foundations of an Alternative Approach: Education and Governance*. This part outlines the possibility of an alternative approach to the social analysis of education – based around the work of writers such as Foucault, Hunter and Rose – which can augment, or arguably replace, even the more sophisticated application of modernist sociology outlined in Part I.

Chapter 4 – *Governance* – details the historical circumstances that gave rise to the phenomenon of mass schooling. Working as a history of the present, the intention here is to explain not only how the familiar, central features of modern educational institutions came about – timetables, record-keeping, surveillance – but also how these came to constitute fundamental foundations of our broader society. This chapter will also address the importance of various forms of liberalism in shaping the logic of the modern school. Chapter 5 – *Subjectivity* – will extend the analysis beyond the ‘objective’ regulation of schools described in Chapter 4, to the governance of the ‘subjective’ experiences of students. It will be argued here that the rise of psychology in schools has resulted in the steady pathologisation of student behaviour, and that rather than simply uncovering and explaining student differences, the discipline of psychology is now instrumental in their production and distribution. That is, using examples such as the rise of ADHD, it can be shown that students are increasingly regulated via ‘categories of abnormality’. Chapter 6 – *Pre-Adulthood* – examines the rise of the persona of the child, and its most recent variant, youth. As a rebuttal to naturalist understandings of children, this chapter will seek to explain constructs such as the child and youth, not as simple stages of life, but rather as the products of various forms of governance, constructed in a range of different sites, and by a multiplicity of practices of self-making. Chapter 7 – *Big Data* – explores the effects of the giant data sets now available to businesses, social planners and educators. It is argued that this ‘tsunami of printed numbers’ will have significant effects upon a number of areas within our education system, not least within the context of standardised testing, such as the SATs.

Part III is called *Cultural Contexts of Contemporary Education*. Theoretical foundations and interpretations of education aside, it is important to locate modern mass schooling within some important cultural, political and technical contexts. This part will raise questions about the relationship between school knowledge and popular culture, the effects of public discourse on educational debates, the rise and rise of digital technologies within the classroom, and the effects of globalisation on British education.

Chapter 8 – *The Media* – examines the way in which educational debates, perceptions, and policies are shaped by public discourse. While arguing against simplistic understandings of the hegemonic power of the mass media, the focus will fall upon a nuanced account of the frequent moral panics associated with issues such as ‘asylum seekers’ and the teaching of literacy, as well as the recurrent scapegoating of teachers for their ‘failure’ in various aspects of broader social governance. Chapter 9 – *Popular Culture* – attempts to go beyond the neo-Leavisite view

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that popular culture has nothing of value to offer the modern classroom, while at the same time recognising that organising content around the simple maintenance of student interest is an insufficient rationale for a valid education. At which point, the question becomes a philosophical one: what constitutes a valid education? Chapter 10 – *Technology* – attempts to avoid the speculation and crystal-ball gazing common to writing on the subject. It will be argued here that the issue is not whether digital technologies constitute a bright new dawn of virtually limitless educational possibility, nor whether they simply represent new possibilities of student disadvantage and professional redundancy. Rather, the central issue should be more about the role teachers will have to play in articulating the distinction between information and knowledge. Chapter 11 – *Globalisation* – examines the different ways this concept can be understood, and the types of knowledge that seek to explain it. It also addresses the various ways in which the different practices and processes of globalisation have reshaped our education system. Finally, this chapter examines the link between globalisation and our environment.

Part IV – *Philosophy and Mass Education* – examines some of the many ways that philosophy can help us better understand our schooling system. That is, philosophy is not just some abstract university knowledge system doomed to fail the most basic tests of utility. The mass school is a site of great ethical and epistemological complexity, and philosophy can help us make sense of it in ways that other disciplines can't.

Chapter 12 – *Philosophy* – argues the importance of philosophy as a subject in the school curriculum, not just in terms of clarity of thought, but also for improving student sensitivity to social and ethical issues. In addition, it allows us to better understand why our education system has taken its current form, and it provides a vocabulary of ways for teachers to organise their own professional practice. Chapter 13 – *Ethics, Disability and the Law* – sets out to unpack the relationship between ethics, education and school exclusion. The chapter addresses the three great normative systems of Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism and Kantian Ethics, and in particular the institutional pressures to adopt Consequentialist ethical decision-making practices, particularly when deciding who belongs, and who does not belong, within a mainstream classroom. Chapter 14 – *Truth and Postcolonialism* – will examine the ways in which particular sets of truth become prioritised within the curriculum, and how different forces shape not only what counts as knowledge, but also how that knowledge is approached, organised and deployed. It will also address the issue of our past as a colonial power, and the effect this still has, not only on our own curriculum, but also on other countries around the globe.

In summary, and in keeping with all good social analysis, this book will attempt to address the central myths and domain assumptions surrounding the institutions of mass education. After all, the meritocratic belief that schooling is a fair race – there to be won by the best and brightest – is as prevalent now as it was at the beginning of

the last century. This book will also provide a contemporary assessment of some of the ideas that have traditionally dominated education research, asking: to what extent do notions such as 'social class', 'childhood' and 'hegemonic masculinity' still have purchase within current debates, and do any viable conceptual alternatives exist? Finally, this book will seek to blur some of the disciplinary boundaries within the field of education. It will draw not only upon traditional sociology, but also cultural studies, history, philosophy, ethics and jurisprudence – and hopefully, the resulting analyses will be the stronger, more comprehensive and more convincing as a result.