

Brian Hall  
Former Teacher in  
charge of Commercial  
Studies, Southway  
School

'Education is notoriously difficult to define,' read the first line of a Memorandum to staff issued to me on the first day of my first full time teaching appointment. Not surprisingly, education and the 'education experience' will mean different things to different people.

It is convenient to define education as being the formal transmission of culture, a specific aspect of the broader and lifelong experience of socialisation. Being a formal procedure (marred often in time and space!) education is carried out in specialist institutions with people referred to as teachers, lecturers, tutors, instructors, etc. who carry out the task of the successful transmission of this culture. They are paid mostly by salary and in most cases receive a fairly lengthy period of training. Such people are called - or call themselves - professionals. Additionally, education as an organised service requires the input of non-teaching personnel for administration, catering, cleaning, etc.

So far anyone who has managed to stay with this will think the git writing it has a gift for explaining the obvious - he may have studied for a B.A. in "The Obvious". However, some equally obvious things follow ... in the form of a few pertinent questions on this theme in the Human Relationship series. Whose culture are we talking about? Who set it up? Who approves of what is to be taught; how, when, where and to whom? To what end or ends is/are the educators and educated directing their efforts? Doesn't it sometimes seem odd that many of us would prefer to be doing something else rather than being at school, at work, etc.?

Now, the links between education and power are looming like boulders down a cave. It has been written that keeping politics out of education is like keeping the liquid out of water. How far does the education system mirror or shape the power system in this country? Who makes the fucking rules? Who raised eyebrows at the foregoing bad language?

It may well be that most of us are too busy in the day to day urgency of carrying out the tasks, administration and other activities in response to the needs of pupils, parents and 'the system' to spend much time worrying about ideals. One aspect of professionalism is the constant initial awareness and ability/-willingness to continue research in the general accumulation of a body of theory (couched in discreet terminology to separate professionals from plebs). Yet less is being spent on inservice courses!

It isn't surprising that many teachers find it difficult or unimportant to locate their beliefs, activities, purpose and behaviour at work in a broader social schema. The possibilities of objective critical thought retreat behind a tirade of anecdote, bearing the streak of cynicism and frustration, symptomatic of the dysfunction between ends, means and ideals.

Though the practitioners of pedagogy don't generally have a particularly close relationship with either capital or labour the expected idealistic attitude is often missing. By what criteria were or weren't they doing their job? Who defined what their job should entail?

In the '50s and '60s there were so many surveys into educational success and failure that it became an industry in itself. In most cases success and failure were explained as largely determined by things outside school like home background, neighbourhood, friends and peers, parents' interests and aspirations, position in the family, etc. Then a less positivistic approach gained some credibility in the early '70s when consideration was given to how people, particularly kids, perceive the world and the classroom around them. This was often referred to as the interpretist approach and was used usually in connection with deviance. In this time one would be reflecting on deschooling, freeing children from the repressive environment of school. Often teachers find 'school visits' more successful than anticipated and a difficult class suddenly 'comes good'. Yet if deschooling became the norm how many (and how soon) would demand the return of 'the ordered society' of a school? What became clear was the point that peoples' perceptions of what counted for knowledge and reality would vary and the alienative process of education was a function of an ideological hegemony in Britain (and other Western cultures) whereby the culture of the dominant group became the culture of the society. The education system would then be seen to be subservient to the economic system, which Marx and others latterly considered the overriding force in power relationships in capitalist Britain. The education system is inherently conservative and such changes as are made may only be a palliative to any disgruntlement amongst the deprived and underprivileged - who, trapped by a 'vicious circle of poverty', with a 'restricted' language code, without a voice in Parliament or agenda setting, and hampered by 'false consciousness' are hardly likely to offer a challenge to the decision makers. And the silent majority? ... Well, power is most effective as ideology. - Ideological hegemony again, the ability to indicate to and obtain compliance from the masses that what is in their interests, really isn't. And for the educators who might ask the awkward questions and articulate discontent? ... cut their funds off!