

**'DISCIPLINES CONTRIBUTING TO EDUCATION'? EDUCATIONAL  
STUDIES AND THE DISCIPLINES**

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In his inaugural lecture as professor of the philosophy of education at the Institute of Education, London, in 1963, Richard Peters insisted that ‘education is not an autonomous discipline, but a field, like politics, where the disciplines of history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology have application’ (Peters 1963/1980, p. 273). This conviction reflected a conscious reaction against what Peters described as the ‘undifferentiated mush’ of educational theory, which in his view had ‘contributed so much to the low standing of the study of education in this country’ (Ibid). The current article will explore some of the approaches that were developed by exponents of each of these four key disciplines, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology, in terms of the characteristic content, interests and methodologies that they involved. It will also trace the attempts that have been made on behalf of the disciplines from the 1970s onwards to maintain a central and distinct role in educational studies, notwithstanding the many challenges to their position that emerged over this period. It will conclude with an assessment of the general significance of such ‘differentiated’ work for the development of educational studies over the past fifty years and in the future.

The developing role of disciplinary perspectives on education has had a vital bearing on the nature of educational studies in Britain over the past fifty years. In particular, it tended to suggest that educational studies should be regarded principally as the application of a range of approaches borrowed from the disciplines, rather than as a

single discipline. The rise of a more unitary notion described as 'educational research' from the 1970s onwards, on the other hand, promoted the view that education was a distinctive and specialised area of study in its own right, and therefore challenged the primacy of the disciplines of philosophy, history, sociology and psychology. For example, Michael Bassey, executive secretary of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), sought to distinguish between educational research, which he defined as 'critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action', and disciplinary research conducted in educational settings, which 'aims critically to inform understandings of phenomena pertinent to the discipline in educational settings' (Bassey 1999, p. 39). On this somewhat rigid distinction, a dependence on the disciplines could be seen not only as unduly theoretical and tenuous in its connections with educational concerns, but as restrictive in holding back the growth of an independent field of inquiry. This article will assess the contrary claims put forward on behalf of disciplinary studies over this period, that a grounding in the disciplines was essential as a means of understanding educational theories and practices.

In some ways, as Peters suggested in his inaugural address of 1963, an especially instructive parallel can be drawn with the field of politics. Here, too, there has been a continuing debate between those who have perceived the field as a single discipline, and those who have emphasised the way in which it borrows from a range of different disciplines (see for example Almond 1991, Goodin and Klingemann 1996). Gamble points out that on the one hand there are proponents of a political science that involves acceptance of a single core of evidence, theories and methods, one that will

refine itself and become cumulative over time. On the other hand, according to Gamble,

The alternative view places the subject before the methodology. The study of politics is eclectic because it draws on different disciplines – philosophy, history, economics, law and sociology. The choice is dictated by what is most appropriate to understand the subject matter. Such a study is necessarily pluralist and fragmented rather than unified around a single methodological or theoretical core (Gamble 2001).

As Gamble also points out, moreover, ‘Ultimately, these are not simply intellectual questions but questions of power...the attempt to define the discipline in such a way that other approaches are excluded, which affects who gets published, who gets appointed and who gets promoted’ (Gamble 2001). The debate over disciplinary studies in education may be addressed in a similar fashion, in terms of a conflict between a pluralist, eclectic outlook conveyed as ‘educational studies’ in which the disciplines are pre-eminent, and a quasi-scientific approach expressed as ‘educational research’ in which the disciplines are relegated to the margins.

Another framework for addressing the issues involved relates to the notion of a ‘discipline’ itself. This may be defined, following King and Brownell (1966, p. 68), not simply as an area of study or of knowledge, but as a community of scholars who share a domain of intellectual inquiry or discourse. This commonly involves a shared heritage and tradition, a specialised language or other system of shared symbols, a set of shared concepts, an infrastructure of books, articles and research reports, a system of communication among the membership, and a means of instruction and initiation. It is therefore concerned with teaching as well as research, and with a specific audience or constituency. It is also a dynamic as opposed to a static group, often a coalition of contested views and priorities (see also for example Goodson 1983 on ‘subject coalitions’). On this general basis, in beginning to trace and assess the

disciplinary studies of education, we may emphasise the nature of the books, articles and reports that have been published in each area. Nevertheless, it is also fundamental to such a study to note the kinds of community that each of the disciplines has generated, especially in the form of societies, journals and conferences. Such institutions have often been the most prominent manifestations of the educational disciplines, as well as the natural home of their adherents. They are the discipline rendered tangible and visible; they represent thought and ideas turned into personal and collegial interaction. They thus make it possible to discuss the history of educational studies not simply in terms of intellectual history, but also as a form of social history.

Conceived in these terms, the general argument of this article is that the history of disciplinary studies in education over the past half-century should not be read in simple terms as one of a rise to prominence followed by a fall from grace. There is a subtly different story to be told than of a straightforward 'rise and fall', first about the establishment of the disciplines in educational studies over the first half of the period, and then about their consolidation, survival and adaptation in a rapidly changing educational and political context.

### **Establishing the disciplines, 1952-77**

The educational disciplines became established in Britain in two principal ways during the first quarter-century of our period. In one sense, they were established separately, as distinct and discrete disciplinary communities, each with their own endeavours and priorities, and each with their own bases in research and teaching. To

be more accurate, it was the disciplines of philosophy and history that were especially prominent in their development in the 1950s and 1960s, since psychology was already a dominant influence before the 1950s, and sociology was less clearly formed as a distinct community until the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, in broad terms these ‘four disciplines’ all staked a claim to be the key to understanding educational theory and practice during this time. They all involved specialisation in a particular mode of analysis, demanded a specific form of expertise, and claimed their own unique inheritance of a tradition of knowledge and values. Equally, they were dedicated to following the intellectual currents of their ‘parent’ disciplines practised broadly across the universities, often to the extent of being subordinated to them. At various times there were other specialisms that emerged to make similar claims, such as comparative education and the economics of education, but it was these four disciplines in particular that became entrenched in tangible and institutional form.

In another sense, the disciplines were established together, as complementary approaches to the study of education. It was the combination of their different forms of expertise that was taken to be the most effective means of addressing the problems and processes of education. The disciplines thereby signalled a pluralist vision of educational studies that sought to draw on a wide range of human knowledge and experience. This vision was especially evident in educational discourse from the creation of the British Journal of Educational Studies (BJES), in 1952, until the launching of the self-styled ‘Great Debate’ on education by the Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in October 1976.

The BJES originated from a conference held on 19 December 1951, attended by professors of education and directors of institutes of education from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The aim of the conference was to discuss the ‘problems raised by the growth of educational research’ over the previous few decades (BJES 1952, p. 67). As was noted in the first issue of the BJES, ‘It is generally felt that British studies in the various fields of education – philosophical, historical, social, psychological and pedagogic – need to be better organised and better known.’ (BJES 1952, p. 67). This rationale, rooted in an awareness of the separate disciplines of study, underlay the formation of new institutions designed to further the cause of educational studies. To this end, the Standing Conference on Studies in Education was formed, chaired by Professor W.R. Niblett of the University of Leeds, and with Professor J.W. Tibble of University College, Leicester, as its first secretary. There were 74 members of the Standing Conference, 55 representing English institutions, 11 Scottish, 5 Welsh, one from Northern Ireland, and two from elsewhere (BJES 1952, pp. 191-2). The Journal itself, to be edited by A.C.F. Beales of Kings College, London, was conceived as a means of communicating new research in a range of areas. It was suggested that since psychology was already well catered for in the journals of the British Psychological Society, the BJES would be mainly concerned with other aspects of the study of education. On the other hand, it would not be ‘narrowly specialist’, but was ‘concerned to serve the needs and interests of everyone concerned with education whom the implications of specialized research affect’. Its ‘broad objects’ would be ‘to explain the significance of new thought, to provide philosophical discussion at a high level, and to deepen existing interest in the purposes and problems of current educational policy’ (BJES 1952, p. 67). These

objects were to be approached through specialised study rooted in the separate disciplines.

The contents of the first issue in the initial volume of the BJES vividly reflect these disciplinary aims. It included detailed studies based in philosophy, history and sociology. The author of the first article in the inaugural issue of the Journal, most fittingly, was Louis Arnaud Reid, who held the chair in the philosophy of education at the Institute of Education, University of London, which had been established in 1947. The establishment of this chair was itself a significant development in the disciplinary study of education. Chairs had already been established at the Institute of Education in educational psychology, history of education, and comparative education, and under G.B. Jeffrey as director of the Institute separate chairs in the philosophy of education and in sociology of education were also created. Reid was himself a widely respected philosopher who had published work on ethics, the philosophy of religion, and aesthetics (Hirst 1998, p. 3). In his BJES article, entitled 'Education and the map of knowledge', Reid engaged in a scholarly discussion of the nature of knowledge, albeit with little reference to education. In the final paragraph of the paper, he confessed that he would not attempt to work out the implications of the tangled complex of knowledge for lifelong education, but insisted nevertheless that 'our view of the "size" of knowledge will affect much, perhaps all, of what we do and think in education' (Reid 1952, p. 16). A further notable characteristic of his paper was that it included no references at all, despite drawing on ideas and direct quotations from a wide range of sources including Basil Willey, Bertrand Russell, and Wordsworth. Other quotations are given without any clear attribution. The implication is that even the most esoteric sources will already be well known to readers, and therefore require



no elaboration. While discussing very broad issues, therefore, the paper is addressed principally to a smaller disciplinary community.

The second paper included in the first issue of the BJES was a specialised historical survey of the origins of mechanics' institutes by Thomas Kelly, director of extra-mural studies at the University of Liverpool. According to Kelly, the origins of the mechanics' institute movement had continuing significance because although they generally failed in their principal objective to provide manual workers with instruction in scientific principles, they were influential among a broader range of social groups, and 'in its disintegration it laid the foundations of our modern system of technical education and, in no small degree, of our public library system' (Kelly 1952, p. 17). Thus Kelly's concern was to rescue the heritage of contemporary education from its prevailing obscurity. His paper investigated the underlying social factors in the spread of the institutes, their local manifestations, and the contribution of the pioneers of the movement such as John Anderson and George Birkbeck. Again, then, there was both a general and a particular intent involved in the publication of this paper. In general, it sought to help establish a historical foundation for the continuing work of educators, not only in schools but also in many other kinds of educational institution. At the same time, it asserted a role for detailed analysis of historical documents in the understanding of education, based in the study of published and unpublished primary source material.

A further contribution to this first issue of the BJES, by W.A.C. Stewart, professor of education at the University College of North Staffordshire, was a study of the role of Karl Mannheim in the sociology of education. Mannheim had been appointed to the

newly created Chair in the sociology of education at the Institute of Education, London, in 1946, but died the following year. Stewart set out to explain the nature of Mannheim's thought as it was expressed in his published work, and the significance of his approach for the development of the sociology of education. Stewart emphasised Mannheim's concern to understand education in terms of 'sociological analysis of what is being and ought to be done now in a democratic society at a stage of crisis in its existence' (Stewart 1952, p. 107). Furthermore, according to Stewart, Mannheim's notion of the study of education of education was one of a social science that involved 'a synoptic study for pursuing which data could be collected and collated from many different fields' (Stewart 1952, p. 112). To these ends, Stewart proposed,

Just as the Modern Greats School at Oxford had to work out the content and relationship of the studies involved, so too Education, from the sociological point of view, would have to show how aspects of history, philosophy, anthropology, economics, political theory, aesthetics and pedagogy could be brought into some synthesis, or, in another fashionable word, could form some discipline (Stewart 1952, p. 112).

Stewart's paper therefore culminated in a celebration of the role of the disciplines in the study of education, a role in which sociology would play a leading part. Nor, surely, was it an accident that Stewart enlisted Karl Mannheim to this cause. Mannheim's published work established a disciplinary heritage, an inspiration and source for continued sociological work. In the same way, his briefly attained position at the Institute of Education signalled the success of the sociology of education in establishing itself at the highest levels. Mannheim was henceforward revered as a totemic figure, a symbol for those who related to sociology not only as a key approach to the study of education, but as the basis for a disciplinary community in its own right.

Over the following decade, the disciplinary approach was successfully established as the dominant mode of educational study, forming the basis of a range of new research and also of teaching in many institutions of higher education around the United Kingdom. History and philosophy were the most active of the disciplines, and thus established an opposite pole based in the humanities to the quasi-scientific approach that was already established in educational psychology. W.H.G. Armytage, professor of education at the University of Sheffield, went so far as to suggest in his inaugural address that university education departments should be a unique focus for the reconciliation of the arts and sciences; as a historian himself, he was at pains to add that such a synoptic study was most effectively achieved through the study of history (Armytage 1954/1980). A decade later, another leading historian, Brian Simon, also perceived a new purpose for university schools of education in the cultivation of the disciplines, partly for their separate contributions but also for what they could achieve collectively. According to Simon,

Disciplines, as they come into being and develop, do not merely lay claim to territory and fence it around. Each may cultivate a particular field in a particular way, but there remains an essential interdependence, and as all continue to develop these interrelationships become more complex (Simon 1966/1980, p. 90).

In developing this interdependence or ‘fruitful cooperation’, in which ‘no one lays down the laws but everyone rubs off corners’ (p. 91), Simon suggested that the disciplines would come to have different concerns in their application to education than they did in their natural habitats. For example, history and philosophy should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, but should join together in the common cause of addressing the problems of education. This in turn would involve ‘a conscious cultivation of interrelations and at all levels’, akin to the historical process through

which ‘an Anglo-Saxon country, invaded in turn by Danes and Normans, triumphantly emerged from the process as English’ (p. 91).

The challenge of establishing disciplines that would be both distinctive in their approaches yet also interdependent in their contributions to educational studies yielded fruit in the 1960s and early 1970s in a number of tangible ways. Their interdependence was fostered in a number of published works intended for students of education, and also in the rise of the new area of curriculum studies. At the same time, stimulated by a rapid expansion in initial teacher education and the teaching opportunities that this presented, separate and distinct disciplinary communities became consolidated. This process was marked by the creation of new journals, conferences and associations dedicated to the promotion of teaching and research in these specific domains.

Probably the best known published work of the period to promote a disciplinary approach to educational studies was The Study of Education, edited by the former secretary of the Standing Conference, J.W. Tibble. It was produced as an introduction to an ambitious venture entitled the Students Library of Education, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul. Tibble’s edited collection was intended to explore the nature of education as a subject of study, and the nature of its contributory disciplines. (Tibble 1966). The Students Library of Education itself was an imposing monument to disciplinary studies. The editorial board, chaired by Tibble, was composed of representatives of the four disciplines: Ben Morris of the University of Bristol for psychology, Richard Peters of the Institute of Education in London for philosophy, Brian Simon for history, and William Taylor of the University of Bristol for

sociology. It was intended that the Library should consist of a series of basic books, each of 25,000 to 30,000 words in length, and available for students in paperbacked editions. Some, as Tibble noted, would illustrate the separate contributions of the different disciplines to the study of education, while others would deal with a major educational topic in an interdisciplinary way, 'showing the contributions which different forms of thought can make to it' (Tibble 1966, p. vii). The early contributions to the series, moreover, were categorised for ease of reference into disciplinary sections. Works by Armytage, Bernbaum, Eaglesham, Lawson and Seaborne, for example, were included in the historical section; Dearden, Peters and Wilson contributed books in the philosophy section; Pidgeon and Yates, Richardson and Beard produced works for the psychology section; while Eggleston, Bantock and Hoyle each produced books for the sociology section.

Tibble repeated his winning formula with a further edited collection introducing the study of education based on the disciplines, specifically addressed to intending teachers (Tibble 1971a). He was confident as to the value of this chosen approach in terms of understanding education, and insisted:

It is clear that 'education' is a field subject, not a basic discipline; there is no distinctively 'educational' way of thinking; in studying education one is using psychological or historical or sociological or philosophical ways of thinking to throw light on some problem in the field of human learning (Tibble 1971b, p. 16).

In this volume, D.G. Watts, senior counsellor at the Open University, was responsible for a survey of educational psychology, while Anne Dufton of Ulster College, Belfast, reviewed the sociology of education, Malcolm Seaborne of the University of Leicester explored the history of education, and R.F. Dearden of the Institute of Education discussed the philosophy of education. Each of these papers again emphasised the

distinctive values and traditions of the specific discipline being treated, no less than the complementary nature of their collective contribution to the study of education.

This dominant set of assumptions was strengthened further in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the rise of 'curriculum studies' as an approach to educational studies. This area was stimulated by the development of curriculum initiatives and especially the activities of the new Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations, which were expected to transform the character of the school curriculum. Curriculum studies was a means of evaluating the success of these new initiatives and of understanding them in their broader context. The Journal of Curriculum Studies, first published in 1968, was concerned with issues such as 'How does the curriculum change? What is the nature of curriculum evaluation? How is the curriculum related to teaching and what kind of statements give an inner consistency to discussion about the curriculum?' (Journal of Curriculum Studies, 1969).

Curriculum studies as an area was deeply imbued with a disciplinary outlook, reflected for example in the ideas of John F. Kerr, professor of education at the University of Leicester. In his inaugural lecture, 'The problem of curriculum reform', presented in January 1967, Kerr sought to encourage broader attention to issues of curriculum change. He was confident (unduly so in retrospect) as to the prospects of the new curriculum initiatives: 'At the practical and organisational levels, the new curricula promise to revolutionise English education.' (Kerr 1968a, p. 15). Nevertheless, he was concerned that those involved in such initiatives were basing their decisions principally upon experience and personal judgements, and called for more research and evaluation in order to build into the process a more coherent

theoretical framework. Kerr argued that philosophy, psychology, sociology and history, in cooperation with each other, could make a major contribution towards this end. He also proposed that practising educationists should be able to consult specialists in the disciplines for advice about particular problems 'in the same way as the medical profession calls upon physiologists, biochemists, bacteriologists and so on' (Kerr 1968a, p. 36). This view suggested the promotion of a closer affinity between 'practice' in the training and everyday work of teachers, and the 'theory' embodied in the disciplines.

Kerr pursued this theme further through a series of public lectures arranged during spring 1967 at the University of Leicester. These were intended to draw attention to the contribution that the separate disciplines might make to curriculum planning and development. The lectures dealt respectively with the contribution of philosophy to the study of the curriculum (by Paul Hirst of King's College, London), the contribution of history (by Kenneth Charlton of the University of Birmingham), the contribution of psychology (by Philip Taylor of the University of Birmingham), and the contribution of sociology (by Frank Musgrove of the University of Bradford). In published form (Kerr 1968b), this set of essays is markedly similar in its organisation to Tibble's edited collections. Hirst's paper emphasised the ways in which philosophy of education could have a beneficial influence on 'what goes on in the classroom', although he noted that further 'hard analytical work' was needed for this to be achieved properly or fully (Hirst 1968, p. 61). He acknowledged that it would be difficult for most teachers and educationists to understand philosophical issues, but concluded rather condescendingly, *de haut en bas*, 'I hope I have succeeded in making you just a little more aware than you were of the distinctive and important role

philosophers have to play in this matter' (Hirst 1968, p. 61). Hirst thus made an explicit distinction between two types of audience: members of the disciplinary community of the philosophy of education, and teachers and educationists in general. Charlton's paper on the contribution of history also emphasised distinctive disciplinary claims, first in terms of the structural disciplines of historical investigation, and second in terms of drawing on the content of history, 'not to provide particular and concrete answers or solutions to current problems, but to make us aware of the possibility of change, of the complexity of change, and of the carry over of the past into our present situation and future aspirations' (Charlton 1968, p. 77). Similarly, Taylor pointed out that psychological theories and constructs could be useful for studying the curriculum, but should still be regarded as belonging to psychology, rather than to education (Taylor 1968, p. 92). Musgrove, for his part, was at pains to show that the evaluation of curricula from the point of view of social objectives should be guided by 'sophisticated sociological theory' (Musgrove 1968, p. 109). Each of these contributions, then, was anxious to avow its theoretical base in the parent discipline at the same time that it asserted its practical relevance to education.

The role of curriculum studies in sustaining the disciplines was carried further by Denis Lawton of the Institute of Education in London. As he noted in his inaugural lecture, delivered in 1978, the Institute of Education established a Department of Curriculum Studies in 1972 partly because it was felt that 'curriculum, perhaps even more than other educational issues, needed to be studied simultaneously from the viewpoints of several educational disciplines' (Lawton 1978/1980, p. 306). In his own work, Lawton was highly effective in channelling a combination of these



disciplinary viewpoints towards the study of the curriculum. For example, Lawton's first major work, published in 1973, set out the contribution of philosophical, sociological, psychological, and historical issues in defining the curriculum as a 'selection from the culture of a society' (Lawton 1973, p. 9), in a way that was designed to be helpful for teachers.

Lawrence Stenhouse, director of the Schools Council Humanities Curriculum Project and then of the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia, expressed similar concerns. According to Stenhouse, the teaching of education as an undifferentiated field had been 'largely supplanted' by the teaching of constituent disciplines, especially in his view philosophy, psychology and sociology. This change, he argued, had increased the 'rigour' and the 'intellectual tone' of education courses, but had done little for 'their relevance to the problem of improving the practice of teaching'. He proposed the further development of curriculum studies as a means of building on the disciplines to foster a close study of curriculum and teaching that would be relevant to practice in the schools (Stenhouse 1975, p. vii).

Nevertheless, while the disciplines were continuing to establish their complementary claims in relation to the general study of education, they were also entrenching their separate disciplinary identities. This was reflected especially in the philosophy of education and in the history of education in terms of collegial activities that led to the formation of new journals and societies in these areas. In 1965, the philosophy of education consolidated an avowedly analytical approach, derived especially from the so-called 'London school' led by Hirst and Peters, through the creation of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. This soon generated its own

published proceedings, which in turn became the Journal of Philosophy of Education. Meanwhile, the history of education was represented formally through the establishment of the History of Education Society in 1967, leading again to regular newsletters and conferences as distinguishing marks of the disciplinary community. A new journal, the Journal of Educational Administration and History, was formed in 1968, based at the University of Leeds. The new Society established its own journal, entitled simply History of Education, from 1972. In common with philosophers of education, historians of education tended in the main to style themselves according to current trends in their parent discipline. It was notable that the leading social historian Asa Briggs was invited to contribute the first article in History of Education, and the paramount intention was evident from his very first sentence which ran thus: ‘The study of the history of education is best considered as part of the wider study of the history of society, social history with the politics, economics and, it is necessary to add, the religion put in’ (Briggs 1972, p. 160; see also Richardson 1999 for a detailed discussion of the formation of the History of Education Society, and McCulloch and Richardson 2000 on long-term trends in the history of education).

By the mid-1970s, then, the disciplines were well established, both in terms of their general rationale for contributing to the study of education as a whole, and also increasingly as clearly defined and discrete disciplinary communities in their own right. They aligned themselves closely in a theoretical sense to a ‘mainstream’ disciplinary culture. Nevertheless they were concerned to assert and foster their relevance to practical issues in teaching and curriculum, with particular success in the emergence of curriculum studies.

### **Survival of the disciplines, 1977-2002**

If the disciplines became established in the period 1952-77, it has become commonplace to emphasise their decline since that time. Simon, for example, notes that their 'hegemony' was 'certainly broken in the fields of teaching, research and published scholarly studies' (Simon 1994, p. 144). From the Great Debate onwards, education came under increasing scrutiny to be more accountable to current social and economic demands, leading to a growing emphasis on 'practical' approaches at the expense of 'theory'. This general trend was reflected both in courses in education, for teacher training and continuing professional development, and in research. At the same time, 'educational research' was increasingly advanced as a unitary and autonomous kind of study in its own right. In 1974, the British Educational Research Association was founded as a major initiative to unite educationalists of all backgrounds around a common cause, and a single organisation. BERA's flagship journal the British Educational Research Journal, founded in the same year, pursued the goal of forging a single body of knowledge from the disparate traditions that had hitherto held sway.

In these circumstances, it is perhaps remarkable that the disciplines survived at all. Yet survive they did, not only with their claims for a general contribution to education but also as discrete disciplinary communities. Indeed, although contemporary pressures undermined their overall standing, they became entrenched still further in their separate disciplinary bases as a result of external challenge. Further disciplinary

activity leading to conferences and new journals was also evident in this period, now stemming especially from the sociology of education.

The continuing strength of the disciplines in educational studies was evidenced, appropriately enough, in the thirtieth anniversary issue of the BJES, published in 1982. This included separate papers on all four of the major disciplines, alongside a personal account of the past three decades by Alan Blyth of the University of Liverpool, and other contributions on educational administration, comparative education, the economics of education, and changes in the education systems of England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. The editorial of this anniversary issue celebrated the importance of the various disciplines and defended specialisation, but it also expressed unease that ‘uncoordinated digging at the chalkface’ (BJES 1982, p. 6) might achieve little, and that too few specialists were able or willing to generalise. Blyth’s contribution was also significant for its observation that over the past three decades, studies in education had evolved from being a series of responses to problems, to becoming a predominantly autonomous study (Blyth 1982).

A further edited collection published the following year (Hirst 1983a) also expressed continuity in terms of the cultivation of the disciplines, now dignified by the title of ‘foundation disciplines’. Edited by Paul Hirst, the format of this volume was highly reminiscent of Tibble’s earlier influential collections. Hirst himself introduced the collection with an essay on educational theory that signalled some retreat from the abrasive confidence that he had shown on behalf of the disciplines during the 1960s. In particular, he now suggested that although educational theory drew upon the

disciplines in order to develop rational principles for educational practice, the disciplines in themselves did not constitute principles for practice. He continued:

The disciplines cannot tackle any given practical questions as such for each tackles questions which are peculiar to itself, those that can be raised only within its own distinctive conceptual apparatus. Psychologists, sociologists or philosophers faced with any matter of practical policy on, say, the grouping of pupils in schools or the use of punishment, can legitimately comment only on different psychological, sociological or philosophical issues that may be at stake (Hirst 1983b, p. 6).

The other contributions to the volume provided a review of how the different disciplines had developed in their content and methods over the previous twenty years. Each of these noted a struggle to adapt to changing and threatening conditions, but they were also able to detect promising signs of survival. Thus Richard Peters, examining the philosophy of education, noted the onset of ‘a period of consolidation – some would say a struggle for survival’ (Peters 1983, p. 35), but observed nevertheless that the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain now had over 500 members, while the Journal of Philosophy of Education sold over 1,000 copies per issue. He was critical of what he saw as the piecemeal, ad hoc approach of much philosophy of education, and hoped for the emergence of a fresh standpoint from which to explore uncharted areas of education, but remained confident that there would be further work and new challenges to overcome in the future.

Brian Simon, reevaluating the history of education, adopted a similar position. He emphasised the continuing importance of the work of the History of Education Society and of its journal, and insisted upon the unique contribution of the history of education towards an understanding of education: ‘The drive to historical investigation is the drive to understanding. Not all need such an understanding, but I suggest that all those professionally engaged in education do.’ (Simon 1983, p. 65).

Simon was also able to map out a number of areas in which historians of education could bring significant insights to bear. John Nisbet of the University of Aberdeen, on behalf of educational psychology, acknowledged evidence that this disciplinary area had been in retreat for the past twenty years, but remained convinced that ‘rumours of the death of educational psychology are premature, and that in recent times psychology has made significant advances which offer a promise of a basis for a theory of education, at least in its cognitive aspects’ (Nisbet 1983, p. 85). Similarly, Brian Davies of Chelsea College, University of London accepted that the sociology of education had suffered from new pressures, especially what he called ‘the constricting pressure upon theory, pressed into the service of practice’ (Davies 1983, p. 105). On the other hand, he too could point to a continuing and broadening agenda for further study, made more urgent by a renewed awareness of the social and political conditions within which education operated.

In the case of sociology of education, indeed, there were particular grounds for a vigorous assertion of relevance. In the 1970s and 1980s, new institutional forms arose that were specifically related to sociology of education as a disciplinary community. In some respects these originated from a self-styled ‘new’ sociology of education that put emphasis on the social basis of ‘what counts as knowledge’ in schools and particular societies; the manifesto of this approach was a collection of papers edited by Michael Young under the heading Knowledge And Control (Young 1971). A renewed awareness of the need to relate to the problems experienced by schools and teachers was also an underlying dimension of the strengthening role of sociology of education during the 1970s, with the aim of providing sociological perspectives ‘to give as full a diagnosis of the problems of teaching as possible

alongside the current insights of psychology, history and philosophy' (Meighan 1973, p. 173). This was strongly influenced by Marxist perspectives on what was often characterised as a crisis of schooling in the broader context of industrial and economic decline, social dislocation, and political turbulence, culminating in 1979 in the election of a Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. A new Open University course, 'School and Society' (followed by 'Schooling and Society'), reflected a general concern to apply the sociology of education to the needs of teachers in training and in the classroom (Barton and Walker 1978, p. 275). This led in turn to a debate over how to develop a radical reappraisal of education and schooling, 'be it in terms of changing the system, of raising the consciousness of teachers or of attempting to show education as reflecting and contributing to the contradictions of the social, political and economic order' (Barton and Walker 1978, p. 280).

One major forum for the development of this debate was the Westhill Sociology of Education conference, held annually at Westhill College, Birmingham. The inaugural conference was held in January 1978 'in order to examine the prevailing condition of the subject in the light of its application to issues relating to schooling and classrooms' (Barton and Meighan 1978a, p. 1). It was intended to use the device of a regular conference to raise and discuss ideas, present current research, and establish contacts; in other words, to develop an informal network that would become a disciplinary community. The papers presented at the 1978 conference were revised and published as an edited collection around the theme of 'Sociological interpretations of schooling and classrooms: a reappraisal' (Barton and Meighan 1978b). This was the first of many such collaborative works to be published over the

following decade as outcomes of the Westhill Conference (see for example Barton and Meighan 1979, Barton, Meighan and Walker 1980, Barton and Ball 1981, Barton and Walker 1983, Walker and Barton 1983). These conferences were significant in terms of providing an organisational focus and a regular meeting place for sociologists of education in the absence of a formal society. Meanwhile, another set of workshops held on a regular basis at Whitelands College in London began to develop a closely related discussion around qualitative methodology in education which was again dominated by sociological concerns (for example Burgess 1984, Burgess 1985).

Another product of this disciplinary activity was a new journal, the British Journal of Sociology of Education (BJSE), launched in 1980 and edited by Len Barton. This was envisaged explicitly as ‘a forum for the consolidation and development of debate’ (BJSE 1980, p. 3), which would ‘try to initiate themes and discussions and ventilate controversies, all to the benefit of the discipline’ (BJSE 1980, p. 4). The editorial board of the new Journal included representatives of a range of theoretical perspectives and methods. In terms of the readership, meanwhile, the Journal hoped to ‘consider the needs of both education and sociologists [sic]’, since although the needs of these two interests might not always diverge, ‘it would be foolish to pretend that they are always identical’ (BJSE 1980, p. 5). Thus, in common with the British Journal of Educational Studies and with other disciplinary-based journals in education, there were to be basically two audiences: a disciplinary priesthood and a broader educational laity. At the same time, the Journal saw no contradiction in defining as its cardinal objective ‘to contribute to a better understanding of schools and education systems’ (BJSE 1980, p. 5). Another journal, International Studies in



Sociology of Education, was launched in 1991, again emerging from the Westhill network which had now relocated to the University of Sheffield.

No separate association or society was formed for sociologists of education, which in itself was significant. Although a disciplinary community had emerged, it remained a loose and informal affiliation with disparate interests that resisted a more formal structure. Nevertheless, activities around the sociology of education in the 1980s and 1990s reflected continued support for disciplinary endeavour in educational studies. Like the other 'foundation disciplines', the sociology of education was able to survive and adapt in rapidly changing conditions alongside the growing presence of BERA, and it was more effective than the other disciplines in influencing the developing field of educational research as a whole (see for example McCulloch 2000, Demaine 2001).

By the turn of the century, significant new challenges were emerging to the unrivalled status of the so-called 'foundation disciplines'. One major American symposium published in 2000, for example, emphasised, 'among the many disciplines influencing the study of education', those of anthropology, pedagogy, linguistics, psychology, and sociology (Stewart and Brizella 2000, p. 22). History and philosophy, so prominent in the 1960s, were not included in this list. Nevertheless, there were signs that the four disciplines of history, philosophy, psychology and sociology retained a particular appeal. BERA for example welcomed new members with the message that it represented a 'broad church', with 'psychologists, sociologists, historians and philosophers among the discipline-minded members and a strong contingent of educationists with special interests in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, or management and taking either a theoretical, or evaluative or action-research

perspective on education' (Bassey 2000). Here was at least a grudging endorsement of the continued role of the foundation disciplines associated with 'educational studies', in the context of 'educational research'. Another indication was the set of criteria expressed in the Research Assessment Exercise of 2001 for Education as a unit of assessment, which included 'Disciplines contributing to education: History, psychology, philosophy, sociology and other disciplines of education' (RAE 1999, paragraph 3.59.4.d).

## **Conclusions**

Over the past fifty years, the disciplines, separately and together, have made a significant contribution to the study of education. Throughout this period, they have stimulated a pluralist approach to the study of education, one that has drawn opportunistically from the humanities and social sciences to seek to understand and address the changing problems of education. In this respect, exponents of educational studies have been akin to those of political studies as a loose coalition of disparate factions, as opposed to a single homogeneous group. In many cases, disciplinary based studies were aligned more clearly to the parent discipline than to the study of education, and they could often be remote from educational practice. A core disciplinary audience, attuned to particular issues and codes, tended to be given precedence over a general educational audience that was seeking applications to broader problems. Against this, links between theory and practice did not go entirely unremarked. Interesting and significant attempts were made to establish useful connections between them, especially through combining the insights of the disciplines, for example in curriculum studies and the Students Library of Education.

Having successfully established themselves and survived in difficult conditions, they remain as entrenched communities of knowledge. Undaunted, if not unscathed, the disciplines continue in the twenty-first century to represent central pillars of educational studies and research.

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