Education in the Age of Uncertainty: An eagle's eye-view

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ABSTRACT *How are we to educate young people of, and for, these times in a way which takes into account the existential and moral dilemmas of our age? We argue that the current education system fails to address the full implications of historical change in relation to ethics and equity. In what follows, we offer some ways of describing and theorising contemporary life in an age of uncertainty. We offer it as a knowledge base from which teachers, principals and policy makers might draw in creating new morally and ethically sound policy discourses. We follow with some new frameworks for helping students to deal with the altered context of moral and political life.*

Introduction

How are we to educate our young to understand and generatively and wisely live through and beyond these times? This big educational and existential question is the subject of this paper, which makes issues of change and ethics central. First, it suggests that in order to answer this question we need to have an incisive understanding of contemporary times, the issues they raise and the problems they generate. It offers a reading of these difficult and confusing times that goes beyond the language of macro and micro economic reform which currently holds education in its sway. It then offers a broad framework that has the potential to assist educators to respond positively to these changes and, more broadly, to assist education to rediscover its moral and political purposes. This is 'an eagle's eye-view' in that the paper takes a long view from above. It does not seek to offer either a data based account of the issues involved or precise prescriptions. Rather it seeks to offer fruitful directions for analysis which after further elaboration might provide a socio-cultural and ethical base rather than a technical formula for future decision-making. Such a view is necessary given that education systems are now so constrained by reductionist notions of performance and by economic rationalism.

While it also draws on the work of other social commentators, the paper draws particularly on the extensive social analyses of British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984, 1991, 1994, 1998) pulling out those matters that are of considerable significance for education. His work assists us to address our key question as it both identifies the deep structures of our times and suggests ways of moving beyond the many political and moral dilemmas that arise from them. A quick caveat is in order though. Giddens has become a key organic (and celebrity) intellectual to the Blair Labour government in the

UK and has been influential in the development of Labour's Third Way policies. Criticisms directed at Blair's policies have often also been directed at Giddens' perspectives—as if the two are indistinguishable. This paper should not be read to imply that we necessarily agree or disagree with the education policies that have emerged in the UK under Blair (see however Bullen *et al.*, in press). Our focus is on Giddens' published views as a sociologist. Their translation into UK or any other current or future policies is a matter for a much more extensive inquiry

Understanding the 'Altered Context of Political Life'

First, let us turn to the big picture. Theories of the contemporary abound. The following quick linguistic grab attests to this and to the key trends and range of foci and concern. There are sets of ideas that converge around 'age' themes and theses—'the age of redefinition', 'the age of rage', ' the age of uncertainty', 'the age of anxiety', 'the age of self-interest' and 'the second media age'. There are those that converge around 'post' themes and theses: 'post-fordism', 'post-nationalism', 'post-industrialism', 'postmodernism', 'post-colonialism', 'post-feminism'. There are those which come together around 'end of' themes and theses: 'the end of nature', 'the end of work', 'the end of society', 'the end of history', 'the end of Reason'. Then, there are those that unite around 'new' themes and theses: 'new times', the 'new work order', the 'new media order'. Other approaches meet through approaches that rename society: 'risk society', 'network society', 'jobless society'. Others centre around renaming capitalism: 'fast capitalism', 'casino capitalism', 'informational capitalism'. Then there are the 'de-' and 're-' themes: 'de-territorialisation', 'de-traditionalisation', 'de-institutionalisation', 'decentring' (e.g. of Europe and/or the West) and 'restructuring', 're-culturing', 're-configuration', and 're-imagining' (e.g. communities). Finally there is the catch all term 'globalisation'.

In policy and media circles the concept 'globalisation' is both ubiquitous and unproblematised. It has become a common description and explanation of and incentive for widespread economic, institutional and cultural change. However, and predictably, in the sociological literature the meaning and adequacy of most of the concepts noted above are explored and contested at length. Giddens has been among the leading theorists.

Giddens (1990) observes that industry, science and technology, and capitalism are the current driving forces of change and of globalisation. However, he stresses that this is only part of a more subtle story wherein three key over-arching processes are at work: the move to a post-traditional social order; the reorganisation of space and time; and the increasing centrality in our lives of what he calls social reflexivity. Let us consider each in turn, noting some of the questions that they raise for education.

The Move to a Post-traditional Social Order

In Giddens' view, we have moved to a 'post-traditional order'. This order is a result of the many challenges to traditional ways of living and is brought about by a range of factors. These include the declining influence of traditional agencies of socialisation (church, family, school) and the rise of other major influences (the media, popular culture). They also include new scientific and technical knowledge and its applications; new social movements and their challenges to convention; the clash of values brought about by the rise of global differences; and the spread of different cultures around the globe.

As Giddens (1994, p. 83) argues, such changes have forced traditions into the open

where they have been 'called to account'. However, the challenge to traditions has created what he calls 'a runaway world of dislocation and uncertainty': a world of 'manufactured uncertainty'. In this world we often have to make decisions about things that once were taken for granted or regarded as simply natural. As he indicates, this often results in calls for a return to particular traditions. Here he makes particular mention of fundamentalism that he says is a defence of tradition based on the tradition it defends. Fundamentalism tends to sentimentalise, romanticise, oversimplify and misrepresent the past. Gender fundamentalism and family fundamentalism are obvious examples.

The Reorganisation of Space and Time

Giddens points out that 'the reorganisation of space and time' has occurred as a result of developments in industry, science, technology, and capitalist markets and the associated rise of 'abstract systems'. The global now helps to shape our everyday worlds and by our everyday acts we help to shape the global. At the same time, we often take 'action at a distance'; many of our social experiences are thus 'disembedded'.

The reorganisation of space and time results in new forms of integration and fragmentation. The former are brought about by global media forms such as film, TV and the Internet, by global money and commodity markets, and by cultural diaspora. But what connects us globally also has the capacity to 'disembed' us locally. We may know more about events overseas than we do about our local communities.

However, and very importantly, Giddens suggests that survival values are also uniting us all. These are most strongly related to the risks associated with the threats of ecological, economic and political disaster. He calls these 'high consequence risks'. We are, he says, driven by a 'heurists of fear' (Giddens, 1994, p. 20); by our collective fear of the threats to its own existence that humanity has created. These have become a basis for new universal values.

The Centrality of Social Reflexivity and the Rise of Reflexively Ordered Societies

According to Giddens (1994), there are no permanent structures of knowledge or meaning. When the knowledge developed about people, institutions or activities is applied to them, it reshapes them in a range of intended and unintended ways. This, in turn, calls into being the need for more knowledge. He calls this process reflexivity, and says it is central to our lives and to the organisation of the societies in which we live. Under the conditions of high modernity this process is intensified.

Reflexively ordered societies are inhabited by people who seek knowledge. However, as Giddens points out, the fact that knowledge is always open to revision creates 'doubt'. In our times, doubt has been exacerbated by the explosion of knowledge and the rising number of experts with differing opinions on the same topic. In the absence of traditional or 'final' sources of authority, we now experience 'radical doubt'. Individuals and institutions regularly have to make multiple complex decisions, with little choice but to rely on abstract and expert systems. Yet, social reflexivity means they experience ongoing doubt. Abstract systems and the doubts and risks that they generate have the potential to destabilise ontological security.

The development of ontological security (Giddens, 1984, p. 50) is essential to survival in these times of uncertainty and redefinition. Ontological security is developed in the early years of childhood and is built upon foundations of trust, predictability and face-to-face associations. Trust, Giddens argues (1984, p. 53), equals confidence with a

definite sense of mutuality about it: 'it involves feeling and being trustworthy and the extension of trust to others'. It is difficult to develop a biographical project without a sense of ontological security and a framework of basic trust. As Cox (1995, p. 11) says succinctly, 'Trust is also a prerequisite for healthy risk taking'.

Some Responses of Education to the 'Altered Context of Political Life'

Education systems are now firmly inscribed within the processes and ideologies of 'globalisation'. In most Western countries they have been de- and re-traditionalised to ensure that they are directed towards national capacity building within 'global competitive markets'. But this is not to say that they have responded positively to the post-traditional order and the various forces behind it, unless such forces are seen to accord with national competitiveness, as is the case of new scientific and technical knowledge and applications. As we have argued elsewhere, many questions arise about how adequately school systems have understood and responded to new social movements, global cultural diversity and the power of media/popular/consumer culture in students' lives (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 2000; Kenway & Kelly, 2000). Indeed, the paradox is increasingly recognised that schools have adopted a form of educational fundamentalism with regard to such issues. In a world of 'manufactured uncertainty' they have tended to resort to traditional approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

The main exceptions here include some systems' enthusiastic embrace of information and communications technologies (ICTs). In this instance we see some willingness to engage the time/space challenges that such technologies pose for traditionally place-based and time-constrained schooling. But how willing are school systems to address the socio-cultural implications of the disembedding processes involved or to explore the roles that schools may play in new forms of integration and fragmentation? Further, while some school systems may encourage teachers to be concerned with 'students at risk', they pay scant attention to the 'high consequence risks' associated with threats of ecological, economic and political disaster or, indeed, to what form such attention might take.

Knowledge is the cornerstone of education but knowledge about knowledge is not—at least, not in school education in contemporary globalised circumstances. With regard to knowledge it seems that school systems are more intent on manufacturing certainty than reflexivity. Such a fundamentalist approach to education encourages students to rely on abstract and expert systems but not to understand the reflexive processes involved. Indeed, such an approach not only leaves students poorly equipped to live in a reflexively ordered society but also potentially contributes to their ontological insecurity and lack of trust in education.

Problems Associated with the Altered Context of Political Life

Clearly the altered context of political life has both benefits and problems. Many of the problems are associated with what Giddens refers to as the problem of over-expansion and 'productivism'. Productivism is:

> an ethos where work is autonomous and where the mechanisms of economic development substitute for personal growth and for the goal of living a happy life in harmony with others and with nature. (Giddens, 1994, p. 247)

Further, Singer, a moral philosopher, describes the way 'the pursuit of self-interest

(understood largely in terms of material wealth)' and 'the ideology of growth' (1993, p. 49) have become a guiding imperative at many levels in Western societies. Explaining the 'paradox of hedonism', Singer (1993, p. 20) shows how consumption is mistakenly equated with fulfilment and how little relationship there actually is between wealth and happiness, growth and a sense of plenty.

Many of the existential and moral dilemmas that arise as a result of the changes noted above are 'sequestered away' and become part of the institutionally and individually repressed (Giddens, 1991, pp. 184–185). This process of moral sequestration, driven by the focus on production and performance, gives individuals a spurious sense of control.

The rise of productivism and the loss of tradition are associated with the growth of individualism, as Beck (1992) has clearly demonstrated. Along with manufactured uncertainty, high consequence risk and the paradox of hedonism, they are also associated with emotional disquiet, personal meaningless, existential isolation and loss of the moral resources needed to live a full life. There is now a generalised sense of anxiety. Even at the height of individual achievement and material accumulation, people are increasingly asking 'how satisfying is it to live this life?' (for further discussion, see Mackay, 1993). Such feelings are understandable given that we are at the frontier of massive socio-cultural and geopolitical change, but Mackay asks 'Are we coping as well as we might?' (1993, p. 200). An obvious question here is 'How can education help us to cope better?'

Schools are increasingly caught up in modes of productivism, concentrating on producing human at the expense of social capital and bracketing out the moral, equity and ethical issues that do not appear to fit. Yet, as we now see through examples of systemic under-achievement and alienation, youth suicide and outbreaks of violence, the repressed returns in unfortunate ways. As these examples indicate, it is not good enough that education is reduced to the barren lexicon of economics—with a little equity and welfare on the side. Education must move away from 'the false certainty of consensus' that such language both suggests and seeks to effect. Education only flourishes in an environment that stimulates 'new ideas, dissident views, debates and critics in the context of mutual respect and trust' (Cox, 1995, pp. 11–12). Further, in education we require robust concepts that recognise our rich roles and responsibilities, treat our students as 'fully human', help us to enact and support socially just change and which enhance us as professionals. This demands a new policy discourse.

Some New Frameworks for Education?

A powerful education for contemporary times would help students to deal with the problems associated with the altered context of political life. It would help them to: distinguish between productivity and productivism, individualism and personal growth and self-discovery; understand the reflexive order of things, the sources of doubt, uncertainty and risk; to recognise the effects of these processes on their relationships, bodies and psyches. In short, it would assist them to deal with the existential and moral dilemmas of these times. It would see its role as building trust and ontological security, social as well as human capital. But what overarching frameworks are available to assist educators to turn such lists of concerns into policy.

Singer (1993, p. 235) explains the political project of living "an ethical life". Cox (1995) seeks to rebuild social capital Her orienting vocabulary includes the following terms: trust, reciprocity, mutuality, co-operation, time, social fabric and social capital. However, it is Giddens (1994, pp. 7–21) who best articulates a new framework which he

calls 'utopian realism', a politics of hope grounded in a strong sense of what is possible. Through this framework he also seeks to go beyond the constraining categories of Left and Right and to refurbish emancipatory doctrines. This framework invokes notions of autonomy, responsibility, solidarity and dialogue. Let us consider this in a little more detail and, when appropriate, in relation to the views of Cox and Singer.

Repair Damaged Solidarities

The 'disembedding' caused by changed relations of space and time, the post-traditional order of work and family, and the rise of individualism have all led to what Giddens calls 'damaged solidarities' in need of repair. Other writers agree and point to the importance of family, neighbourhood, friendship, work and leisure networks for the development of a sense of control over one's life and a sense of self-worth. It is Cox's view that rethinking the ways in which we use time is a crucial ingredient of such rebuilding work; that we need time to participate in family life, and in communal and social activities. Similarly, Singer argues that selfishness is not a given human state. There is nothing natural about the Western notion of an inevitable conflict between the individual and the group. He goes on to show how the ethical life of co-operation, helping relationships, fulfilling moral and community obligations can have collective *and* individual benefit and can lead to a happy and fulfilling life. All three writers also agree that this involves rebuilding trust.

Giddens (1994, pp. 93–95) takes this point further to argue that it entails 'active trust'. But how, he asks, is active trust to be generated in the context of 'manufactured uncertainty'? He contends that trust has to be actively produced and negotiated. It is contingent not guaranteed. It does not depend on pre-given alignments and is unlikely to arise under conditions of deference. It is most likely to arise in the context of generative politics.

Generative Politics

Cox (1995, p. 81) argues that:

> The absence of certainty puts the onus on us, as citizens, to debate collectively so we make the best decisions, and take responsibility for the society we want to live in.

Generative politics involve generating the conditions in which people can determine their own outcomes and build active trust 'from below', according and building autonomy, allocating resources that can be put towards building autonomy and genuinely decentralising political power (Giddens, 1994, p. 93). However, this does not mean that it abandons the notion of the public. This sort of politics involves a 'defense of the public domain but not in terms of the old opposition between the state and the market or in terms of neoliberal individualism' (Giddens, 1994, p. 15). It 'links the state to the reflexive mobilisation of the people'. Giddens argues that this is the best way available to us today to address problems of poverty and social exclusion (1998).

Cox (1995, pp. 17–19) develops a similar line of argument. She argues against the current fad for competition policies that, as result of the self-interest they produce, actually undermine trust, social capital and thus productivity. Her view is that human beings create a great deal through co-operating; that 'spending time together, working

co-operatively and enjoying others' company creates social capital'. She advocates the formation of democratic, egalitarian, communitarian and informal networks and similarly, civic minded community groups. She says that 'when we become part of public life we become more human' (Cox, 1995, p. 53).

The Democratisation of Democracy

The 'democratisation of democracy' is about the reordering of personal and social relationships away from embedded and arbitrary power relations and towards the mobilisation of trust through dialogue. It has implications for public democracy, for it prepares people well for their citizenship obligations and responsibilities and contributes to the potential spread of forms of democracy. It may lead to the formation of self-help groups and of social movements that both provide public spaces for open dialogue and for oppositional work on state and other agencies to contest official definitions of things and to effect change. This contributes to dialogic rather than just representative democracy. Further, according to Giddens:

> Social movements play a significant role in radical politics not just because of what they try to achieve but because they dramatise what might otherwise go largely unnoticed. (Giddens, 1994, p. 250)

Refurbishing the Welfare State

Refurbishing the welfare state involves maintaining its role as a distributor of public goods (libraries, galleries, sporting grounds etc.), essential services, and social services such as health and education to which all its citizens have an entitlement. It means maintaining its role as a regulator of certain obligations of citizenship with a view to contributing to social harmony and cohesion. It also involves maintaining its roles as a mediator of the powerful and of issues of public concern (such as domestic violence) and as a redistributor of certain levels of resources to disadvantaged groups. As Cox (1995, p. 47) says, the welfare state is a 'democratised centralised power that gives out-groups their best chances of ensuring their needs are not ignored'.

Such a view challenges the current minimalist notion of the welfare state as just a provider of a safety net of last resort. As Cox argues, there are many problems associated with such a notion, not the least being a resentment on the part of the better off who question the rights of welfare recipients and develop an unwillingness to fulfil their citizenship obligations to the less fortunate. She argues that social services are essential to a sense of belonging to society. Their loss makes us all the poorer.

Clearly then, refurbishing the welfare state does not mean maintaining the welfare state in its current marketised form with its move to treat us as clients rather than citizens. Neither does it mean a return to its heavily bureaucratised form. It involves a new settlement—a somewhat different view of welfare; one which is empowering not dispensing. Cox argues for the development of the companionable state, saying governments have a responsibility for building the social cohesion and harmony that is central to our civic life. For Cox (1995, p. 53) then, refurbishing the welfare state means using the states' resources for the development of 'cultures of civic concern' and 'resources for social capital formation'. For Giddens it involves 'positive welfare', reconstructing social solidarities and helping to mobilise the forms of politics noted above.

And Education?

Currently schools are not well placed to work on this agenda. They are increasingly caught up in marketised and corporatised institutional management and bureaucratised curriculum. Neither contributes to educational harmony and cohesion. Indeed, both have a negative impact on schools' and systems' capacities to develop social capital and create the conditions for generative politics. Further, both encourage schools to adopt traditional authority relations with young people. Such relations undermine the possibility of building active trust and democratised democracy. Trust and risk have many sides but too often our school systems fail to consider their implications.

A public education system with a commitment to generative politics, repairing damaged solidarities and democratising democracy is essential to refurbishing the welfare state. Schools have the potential to be important sites for repairing damaged solidarities. They can do this by encouraging the reflexive mobilisation of citizenship obligations and responsibilities; habitual involvement in public life; and by developing the 'resources for social capital formation' and 'cultures of civic concern' and courage. But if they are to connect with the young people of today they will have to begin by building active trust. They have to recognise that security, trust and a sense of hope and possibility are the building blocks of social capital in schools.

In a post-traditional society, schools cannot assume that this will happen automatically. In these uncertain times, students need to feel secure; they need the chance to learn trust, mutuality and productive risk taking. A key issue thus becomes 'How do schools instil such self/other trust in students, especially in those who historically have particular reason to distrust teachers and schools?' This points to the necessity that education mediate power relations and help to redistribute resources and respect to disadvantaged groups. If schools work at rebuilding security and trust and developing and valuing processes of mutuality, reciprocity and collegiality and, thus, the preconditions of worthwhile risk taking, schools will be well prepared to encourage diversity and debate and to advance new ideas and practices. Enriched staff and curriculum are the cornerstones of living an ethical life in education.

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