

Watch your language: The ethical dimension of *educational* research.

Richard Pring, 24th October 2012

Abstract

The philosopher Wittgenstein explained that 'my aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense'. Much of educational research is distorted by the 'bewitchment of intelligence' in the misuse of language. This presentation seeks to demonstrate that – affecting the evidence supposedly supporting educational policy and practice. A significant aspect of that distortion lies in the failure to see the essentially moral purpose of education and thus the ethical dimension of the language which shapes *educational* research.

Introduction: educational research

What is educational research? There are two sorts of answer to this question which I want to consider.

- The first points to the kind of research which helps policy-makers and teachers to decide how best to do their job. For example, should we pursue the policy of creating 'free schools'? (One thinks here of the research conducted by Per Thulberg, Director General of Sweden's National Agency for Education¹) Or, for example, how best might I as a teacher teach these children reading? Such questions about policy and practice might well draw upon research in the social sciences, which may not *in itself* be distinctively *educational* research.
- The second kind of question is the systematic attempt to unravel the meaning of contestable concepts central to educational research – such as what we *mean* by key concepts at the centre of educational thinking. For example, what does it mean to say someone is intelligent? Policy, certainly in England, has segregated children into different ability schools based on measured intelligence. Research

¹ Skolverket Report, 2004, www.skolverket.se

supporting such segregation depended on what we *mean* by intelligence – and that takes us into the realm of philosophy of mind..

I wish however to argue that neither is intrinsically *educational* research. Educational policy makers and teachers might call upon social scientists and philosophers to help them find answers to their questions. Such research may be useful, indeed necessary. But I want to argue that neither is *educational* research in itself. Why *educationally* should we find the psychological research into intelligence interesting? Why should research by social scientists into social class, for example, be *educationally* useful?

The answers lie in what we mean by ‘educational’. In so far as ‘to educate’ is a moral practice, then the research findings of social scientists and the musings of philosophers are educational only in so far as they are integrated into the moral deliberations of policy makers and of teachers. Policy makers need constantly to ask, *What counts as an educated person?* And teachers need constantly to question how their teaching embodies the values associated with a person becoming more educated

I say this as a philosophical argument about educational research. Therefore, it is important to explain what I mean by philosophy, though in no way asserting that this is the only possible understanding.

Doing philosophy

The philosopher Wittgenstein declared his main intention in *Philosophical Investigations* to be ‘to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense²’. And there is a lot of ‘disguised nonsense’ which ‘bewitches the intelligence by the misuse of language’ in educational thinking. Let me give three examples of what I mean.

² Wittgenstein, 1953, 1.464

- The Secretary of State for Education in England is pursuing a policy of creating ‘free schools’ – thanks, we are told, to the highly successful development of these in Sweden. And, of course, to be *free* seems to be obviously a good thing. Who would not want to be free? But reflect a moment. One is never simply free. To borrow the distinction from Isaiah Berlin, one is either ‘free from’ something or ‘free to do’ something. The Free Schools in England are ‘free from’ local responsibility and accountability, but only by being ‘contract to’ the person of the Secretary of State, with minimal parliamentary accountability. It is the intention of the present English Government that all schools should be ‘free’ in that sense – *free from* local control. But that very ‘freedom from’ in fact ‘enslaves’ them to the person of the Secretary of State. England, under the banner of freedom, is creating the most centralised educational system in Western Europe since Germany in the 1930s or indeed Calvin’s Geneva in the 16th century.
- A second example of the confusion created by the misuse of language is this. Much is made in England of the need to raise standards, especially as a result of the OECD’s PISA four-year survey of educational performance across many countries, including Sweden. These surveys demonstrate, so it is claimed, comparative standards between countries, as well as declining or rising standards over time within countries. But what do we mean by ‘standards’ – and what could be meant by such standards going up or down? Standards cannot go up or down – if they were to, it would be by reference to a higher standard by which standards are judged to go up or down – and thus into an infinite regress. Rather is it performance according to agreed standards which go up or down. Standards are the benchmarks against which performance is judged to be good or bad, elegant or crude, intelligent or stupid. But the standards themselves change according to changes in what you think to be important. They logically relate to the purpose of the activity – in our case, to the purpose of education. The meaning of educational standards, which underpin much educational research, depends on the aims of education, and thus on the values which are embodied in such aims.
- A third example of that ‘bewitchment of the intelligence by the use of language’ is this. In recent decades in Britain and the USA, the language of performance

management has permeated educational discourse and thereby the language of educational research. The importance attached to ‘raising of standards’ has led to interest by policy makers, and therefore by researchers, into the ‘effective school’ – the school which, if it follows well-researched procedures, will attain the desired results. This in turn has created the ‘science of educational deliverology’ (a centre for which has been established in Washington by Sir Michael Barber, once ‘Director of Delivery’ for the former Prime Minister). The science of deliverology has the tools whereby teachers might ‘deliver the results’, that is, ‘hit the targets’ which politicians have declared to be the mark of the successful school. As a result a new language has arisen which shapes political discourse about educational standards, professional discourse about educational practice, and thereby the discourse about educational research. Thus, there needs to be specification of *measurable targets*, *performance indicators* by which the attainment of targets is judged, *effective delivery* of curriculum by teachers so as to hit the targets. The teachers, as *deliverers of targets*, are regularly *audited* by inspectors to ensure that the targets have been hit and that the *clients* or *consumers* (i.e. the parents and students) have the results they desire. The assumption is that by making public the targets, which have been hit and then translated into school league tables, teachers will strive all the harder to hit the targets so as to compete in the *market* created by *free schools* for parents who can now exercise *choice*. Standards are thereby *driven up*.

These three examples aim to show how language shapes how we think about education, its nature and purposes and thereby how research into education is pursued. That is why it is important philosophical job to ask ‘what do you mean?’ and to subject discourse (in this case educational discourse) to critical scrutiny.

The language of education

I want to contrast the language that has come to shape our understanding of education (and thus of educational research) with a very different way of conceiving things – a way

which brings out the essentially moral nature of educational discourse, and thus of educational practice and of educational research.

But, first, to see the contrast more sharply, one needs to see the ‘logic of action’ which underpins the language of education as that has just been described. According to this, the relation between the *ends* of the action (the targets) and the *means* to achieving these ends is essentially empirical – selecting the means, which can be shown through research to ensure certain targets are hit. Surely, therefore, this is the territory of the social sciences. There is a logical separation of the *means* to attaining the end, target or goal (i.e. the steps taken, in the light of empirical evidence, to get there) and the *end* itself. The teacher ‘delivers’ the curriculum which has been shown to be successful for that purpose – a job which does not require of the teacher any deliberation about the aims of education but only about the competencies needed for successful delivery. The teacher, therefore, becomes a sort of technician, knowledgeable about ‘how’ but not about ‘why’. And therefore there has arisen a ‘science of teaching’ and research programmes to find out what makes a good teacher (think of the £3 million given to Hay McBer to discover what is a good teacher).

This ‘means / end’ understanding of teaching has a long history. Ralph Tyler’s classic account in *The Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* in 1947 influenced generations of researchers and evaluators. E.A. Slavin, in the context of the United States, talked confidently of ‘transforming educational practice and research’ and spoke approvingly of the many Government initiatives which have adopted ‘experimental-control comparisons on standards-based measures’. For example, the Bush administration’s *No Child Left Behind* mentions scientifically based research 110 times – ‘rigorous, systematic and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge ... using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, preferably with random assignments’

However, if one changes the metaphor from that of performance management to one which more accurately reflects what it means for people to think, to deliberate or to engage with other people, then teaching, and thereby educating, is seen very differently –

affecting the nature of educational research. Ends and means are not contingently related. The means embody the ends. The teacher of literature introduces a book or a play because it embodies the educational values (the feelings, the understandings, the sentiments) which are to be internalised and which transform the person. The book or play is part of the educational conversation between the teacher and the learner, and thereby between the learner and the culture we have inherited.

Thinking educationally cannot make the rigid distinction between the end of an action and the means of reaching the end. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott spoke of man [sic] as ‘what he learns to become: this is the human condition’³. Of course, one can learn a lot of trivial things, but if they were all that one learnt, then one would become a trivial person. It is through learning what is worthwhile (knowledge and practices of many different kinds) that one learns to live a distinctively human life. Schools, ideally, give access to deeper and wider reflection on the human condition. Education, therefore, for Oakeshott is a ‘conversation between the generations of mankind’ in which the young learner comes to appreciate and participate in what he refers to as the ‘voices’ of science, of poetry, of literature, of history, of philosophy. The metaphor of ‘conversation’ creates different expectations from that of hitting targets. One criterion of a good conversation is that you cannot anticipate the outcome. To do so would not be the nature of serious interactions taking place between two interested people – for example, the teacher and the learner.

There are, therefore, two aspects of this language of education which I wish to emphasise.

First, as Richard Peters argued, the logical characteristic of ‘to educate’ is like that of ‘to reform’⁴. If I talk of reforming someone, then I am assuming that I am changing that person for the better in some respect (for example, no longer a criminal). Similarly, to educate someone (as opposed to mere training or instructing) is to imply that the learner

³ Oakeshott, M., 1962, ‘Voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind’, *Rationalism in Politics*, London: Methuen

⁴ Peters, R.S., 1965, *Ethics and Education*, London: Allen and Unwin, p.25.

is in some way transformed for the better by what he or she has learnt. He or she has, in Oakeshott's sense, come to live a more distinctively human life. At the centre of educational thinking by policy makers or by teachers, therefore, there must be deliberations over what it means to live a more human life. What is it to be and to become more fully a person?

Second, a further aspect of what this means to be educated is that learners are enabled to enter into that 'conversation between the generations' and thereby to understand better the social, physical and moral worlds they have inherited. And the educational engagement is a constant interaction through which those understandings evolve and improve. What one person understands or values may not be exactly what another understands or values. But through that engagement with others and with the wisdom of the past, so are the learners enabled to see things more critically, to engage in the conversations more fully and to advance in understanding. Oakeshott refers to education therefore as an engagement – between learner and teacher, and between learner and what others have written, said and illustrated. And, like all good conversations, there is no way of predicting the conclusions. Standards lie in the quality of the engagement, not in the preconceived and measurable targets to be hit.

To educate, therefore, is essentially evaluative, concerning how people are enabled to realise their humanity - to become more fully persons. It is a process of constant becoming through contact with what others have done or said over the generations. It is to be enabled to exercise judgment on the life worth living and to have nurtured the dispositions to live accordingly.

The concept of person therefore must shape educational policy and practice, and therefore what is distinctively educational research.

Educating persons

We train dogs and horses. We educate persons. To recognise someone as a person is to recognise them, not as objects to be used for others' purposes, but as ends in themselves, worthy of respect. In that sense, the concept of 'person' is more than a descriptive term for a physical object; it is a moral concept expressing the recognition of their own distinctive rights, worthiness for respect, and capacity to have views of their own. They are ends in themselves, not to be treated as means to an end.

This distinction between people as physical objects and people as persons is crucial to our understanding of education and to our criticism of research which, in collapsing the distinction, reduces people to mere objects. That depersonalisation of people is seen in so many ways in current policy backed up by research. Successful learning is equated with what is easily measurable, teaching is reduced to producing the behaviours which will gain the required grades in national tests, priority is given to learners who are borderline between success and failure so that schools can rise in the league table. As a result, lost is the focus on the different ways in which children struggle to learn. Little time is given to the personal exploration of value and meaning through poetry and the arts since such personal exploration does not enter into the specifications for grades. It is as though the learners are seen as objects to be changed for purposes other than what is personally significant or valuable. So easily do the learners become, not ends in themselves, but means to some end other than what is of value to the learner – for example, the place in the schools' league table, the successful attainment of targets laid down by Government, the supply of skilled workers. Here is the 'logic of action' described above – one which equates educational research to being a branch of the social sciences.

By contrast, education describes not a neutral process that is instrumental to something extrinsic to that process (for example, improved employment opportunities). It is an initiation into a way of life which is judged to be intrinsically worthwhile. It is so judged because that way of life is part and parcel of what is meant to be a person and to become one more fully. That is why at the heart of education are the essentially moral questions about what it means to be and to grow as a person. That in turn entails that ethical considerations and judgements are at the centre of educational discourse, determining

what counts as *educational*. What, one might ask, counts as an educated person? As with all moral questions, one cannot expect unanimity. Different people and societies will reach different conclusions. But such differences should not preclude critical examination of the often unexamined value assumptions underpinning educational practice, and thus educational research.

That critical examination requires reflection on what it means to be and to grow as a person:

- knowledge and understanding in their different forms (Oakeshott's different voices which make up the conversation between the generations);
- practical capabilities as shown in the physical control of environment through crafts and technologies;
- moral seriousness with which each explores the life worth living and big issues which confront society, such as environmental destruction and ethnic conflict;
- living in community –for no one is an island.

Explaining human activity: linking the social science to educational thinking

If, then, educational thinking is essentially moral (that is, concerned with what counts as personal development), then is it quite separate from the concerns and interests of the social sciences?

Educational policy and professional practice are ultimately about getting people to learn what is deemed to be of value. To educate is to develop the capacity to think, to value, to reason, to appreciate. These are states of mind, mental capacities, distinctively human qualities.

Such a mental form of life is logically different from a purely physical form of life which is the object of the physical sciences and subject to causal explanations. In many respects the social sciences from Comte onwards followed the example of the physical sciences,

and sought to provide causal understandings of persons' behaviour and of societies. Obvious example of the former was the work of behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner. More recently one has seen the importance attached to the large scale and carefully matched experimental and control groups, in which a particular intervention within the experimental group (all else being held equal) would demonstrate its causal significance – a key to educational improvement. And there are excellent examples of the success engendered by such interventions – the effectiveness of 'Reading Recovery' and the phonological training of children with reading problems. However, such explanations have their limitations, because of the limitations of such a narrow concept of causality where human situation are concerned. Let me explain

Can there be a 'science of man' – the question raised by the once prominent logical positivist, A.J. Ayer?⁵

Explaining a person's behaviour requires reference to intentions, motives, prior understandings through which interventions are interpreted. I can observe the hand raised in the same way that I can observe tables and chairs. But I cannot observe the intentions that would explain whether this is a signal, a bit of stretching, or a request to speak. And even if I knew the meaning as that is explained by the intention, I would not necessarily know the motive – whether to be polite, or to create disruption, or to indicate disapproval. Explaining human action requires reference to intention and motivations, not to causes.

Furthermore, these intentions can be understood only within the context of social rules, often implicit, through which that particular hand movement is to be understood. Raising the hand, say, is a socially understood way of seeking attention. One needs to know the social rules through which social intercourse is enabled to happen. And these social rules will change from social group to social group, from society to society. To explain human action (and to engage therefore educationally with the learners) requires not only insight into their intentions and motives but also into the social rules through which they interpret others' words and gestures.

⁵ Ayer, A.J., 1969, 'Man as a subject for science', in *Metaphysics and Common Sense*, London: Macmillan

Education – the pursuit of what is seen to be valuable in terms of understanding, practising, appreciating, moralising and socialising – is necessarily an engagement between minds, not a set of interventions to cause preconceived behavioural outcomes.

But caution is required. In one sense, each individual is unique. My thoughts and intentions are mine, not yours, unique to me, the product of different backgrounds and interactions over time, through which I see the world and interpret what others say and do. That is why policy makers wrongly assume that their detailed interventions will produce the results which they envisaged and hoped for. What is clear to them, the policy makers, is not necessarily clear to the teachers or interpreted in the way intended.

On the other hand one must be careful of the ‘uniqueness fallacy’. Each person and each society is unique in some respect but not in others. I am unique in terms of my exact history, but not unique in terms of my having shared that history to some extent with other people in my social group. And that social group shares basic human needs with other social groups – the need for food, affection, community. As Peter Winch argued in *The Idea of a Social Science*, we can come to understand from the inside how other societies work and how other people within those societies interpret (generally speaking) the interactions with others. No two languages translate exactly. But there is sufficient proximation to exactness, *given the human form of life that we share*, for the outsider to enter into the way of thinking of the other.⁶

Hence, generalisations can be made but they are inevitably tentative, provisional, open to interpretation, not necessarily applicable to all individuals, some of whom might come from very different backgrounds with very different ways of seeing the social and moral worlds. That is why there can be no direct transmission of the conclusions of general statements to the particular case. The teacher always needs to exercise judgement as to whether the general conclusion applies to this particular learner.

⁶ Winch, P., 1958, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, London: Routledge

None the less, that deliberation recognises indirectly the validity of generalised conclusions drawn from social science research. The contrast between uniqueness of each individual, on the one hand, and the large-scale explanations of individual or society behaviour, on the other hand, is a false dualism. The reconciliation lies in the deliberations by the decision maker (what Aristotle referred to as *praxis*) – whether that decision-maker be the policy maker or the teacher. Moreover, entering into such deliberations or *praxis*, though not necessarily explicitly, are the educational aims and values argued for above.

Teachers as educational researchers

Many of the great philosophers have had something interesting to say about teaching and teachers – Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Rousseau, Dewey, Wittgenstein and, of course, Oakeshott. Each offers insight into the ways in which ‘teaching’ has been (and could be) conceived, given quite different philosophical presuppositions about the nature of knowledge, about what is worth learning, about the centrality of experience, and, above all, about what it means to be human – and to become more so. They see a moral dimension to what it means to be a teacher.

From different social and philosophical perspectives, what it means to teach partakes in a wider understanding of what it means to help young people to flourish as human beings, to provide access to cultures which shape that humanity, and to engage in what is judged to be worth learning,

To understand teaching within this broader ethical and social context provides the basis for challenging how policy makers often conceive of teachers – as did such ‘radical reformers’ as Ivan Illich, Carl Rogers and John Dewey. Teaching for Dewey lay in the transformation of the experiences which the young learners brought from their families and communities, in the provision of further enriching experiences and in critical reflection upon them. So understood, the educational journey is helped by, for example, the ‘teacher’ introducing at appropriate moments those aspects of the inherited ‘wisdom

of the race' (Oakeshott's 'voices in the conversation of mankind') which may help transform those experiences.

This is most important in thinking about what is distinctively educational research. We have seen, on the one hand, how engaging thoughtfully in education requires addressing the aims of education (*What counts as an educated person in this day and age?*) - essentially moral considerations. We have seen, too, how policy makers and teachers need to take into account what social scientists may say through the various forms of empirical research which bear upon the attempts to answer that question in this context and with these learners.

But reconciling and integrating these different considerations requires systematic and critical deliberation. Such critical and systematic deliberation is at the heart of educational research, and for that reason the teacher has to be seen as a researcher in the following sense.

The teacher is trying to realize in practice certain educational goals. Those goals embody the educational values he or she is committed to. The reflective teacher will constantly try to articulate those goals in the context of his or her practice. And, no doubt in the light of what others say, what the teachers see to be of educational value for the learners in his or her care will evolve through criticism. Furthermore, in implementing those educational aims, the deliberations of the reflective teacher will take into account what researchers (especially the social scientists) have said – not slavishly because, as I argued above, what is generally applicable may not be so for these children in this situation. For example, generalisations about the benefits of the phonic approach to the teaching of reading would not apply to children with glue-ear!

All that applies to the 'reflective teacher'. That is not quite the same as the teacher as researcher – but a pre-cursor to it. What turns reflection into research is

- the attempt to clarify explicitly and as precisely as possible the aims of educating these learners – the knowledge and practical capabilities that are valued, the

- issues of social concern that impact upon them, the sense of personal worth which each is striving to acquire in a class or series of classes;
- second, the gathering of evidence which would support the claim that such aims have been implemented – or not, in which case new approaches have to be found, tested and refined in the light of further experience. Part of that ‘refining’ would be the openness to criticism of others – other teachers and the feedback from the learners.

The essence of the research, therefore, is the clarity of the *thesis* (the aim, the claim being made), the evidence which is relevant to challenging that claim, and the openness to critical scrutiny of the relevance of the evidence provided.

For this to happen, teachers within or across schools need to become supportive communities of researchers. Knowledge grows through criticism and so one needs to create the sort of communities where criticism can flourish – where the ‘thesis’ can be tested, hopefully survive, or (where that is not the case) be refined. This is so important because the natural human instinct is to avoid criticism and to avoid exposure to any evidence which makes one question what one believes to work

The Oxford University Internship Scheme for the training of teachers was based on this principle. Each school had 10 or more trainee teachers. There was a close link between the subject teacher in the school and the curriculum tutor in the university. At the same time, there were weekly seminars in each school conducted by the school’s professional tutor in partnership with the university ‘general course tutor’ – on issues which were of deep professional concern (managing behaviour, assessment policy, and so on). To these sessions trainee teachers would bring their experience, the university tutor would bring a wider research perspective, the teacher would bring the craft knowledge arising from wide experience. All took part in the research based deliberations.

Ethical dimensions of doing research

The essence of my argument is that the focus of education is the development of persons, and hence the ethical considerations about what it means to be and to grow as a person. But such a focus implies, too, the need to treat the learners as persons – that is, with their own potential for independent thinking and questioning, with their own aspirations for a fully human life and for self-respect. To what extent, do curriculum and pedagogy reflect those values? To what extent are the educational aims embodied and shown in the act of teaching?

But these ethical considerations apply also to the values implicit in the research process itself. It is prime importance of what the philosopher John Macmurray referred to as the ‘form of the personal’ which guides the reflections and the consequent research of the teacher – or of the social scientist feeding information and data into the research.

For three years I chaired Oxford University’s ethics committee for non-medical and non-science research proposals. It is from such ethical considerations that we developed the protocols, case by case, for guiding research procedures. One can spell out the guiding principles in very general terms:

- respecting the confidence of the persons who are the subjects of the research (for example, in obtaining consent for the reporting of what is said);
- checking conclusions with those who provided the data;
- subjecting to criticism the interpretation of and comments on the data;
- enabling those people, who were the objects of the research, to comment on the findings in the final report – there may be an alternative interpretation;
- using others to replicate the research and to identify differences in conclusion.

But those are but general protocols. Is, for example, consent sufficient where the person researched may not be fully aware of the consequences of the research to himself and to others? Particular problems occurred in research proposals coming from anthropologists, but these were no different in kind from those coming from those researching children in classrooms – or indeed teachers whose jobs may be on the line if what they say is made public.

Such complexities and sensitivities of classroom research contexts have to be reconciled with another principle, namely, ‘the right to know’ on the part of parents, the community, the school authorities. How does one reconcile the right to openness with the right to confidentiality in particular cases? Anonymity of school or persons may be the solution in particular cases. On the other hand, the significance of the research may require openness for the discerning reader to identify person or institution responsible for what has happened.

Again weighing the balance between anonymity, on the one hand, and openness, on the other, in the light of the importance of the issues being researched, is yet another matter of moral deliberation. Each case will be somewhat different from the other, whilst still subject to the moral principles of respect for persons, on the one hand, and yet, on the other, accepting the right of the community to know the truth. That, after all, is the purpose of doing research.

Conclusion

Constantly ask ‘What counts as an educated person (e.g. an 18 year old) – what are the kinds of knowledge and understanding, the practical capabilities, the personal qualities and dispositions, the sense of community that make them fully human?’

Beware of the language of ‘performance management’ which undermines these moral considerations at the heart of education.

Create the communities of enquiry within which these questions might be pursued systematically and critically.