

EDITORIAL: Devaluing the Individual

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1. Devaluing the Individual

1.1 Introduction

Welcome to this special issue of Prism on *Values in Education*. The theme of values is greatly significant for the world of education but there are many facets that can be unpicked. The theme for this issue, then, is intentionally broad and encourages diverse perspectives on values, as well as various explorations of the wider interpretations of the base word 'value.' Indeed, this editorial positions values from the perspectives of those marginalised by their educational experiences, thus focussing on the devaluing of the individual. I shall give an overview of what is contained in this issue a little later but for now I would like to discuss the societal implications of having a system that discards the values of those who do not adhere to the established norms.

1.2 Disaffection with learning

Compulsory education in England has long been identified as problematic for some young people. For instance, Duncan (2013, p. 29) suggests that schools can be 'particularly oppressive institutions that create the conditions that make their children the unhappiest amongst the industrialized nations, generating precisely the disaffection with schooling that they then criticize and punish.' Indeed, the literature is replete with studies on disengagement, disaffection and other concepts and behaviours that represent resistance to

the apparent structural impositions of our education system in England (Allan and Duckworth, 2018; Allan, 2015; Hall and Raffo, 2004; Kinder et al., 1999; Lumby, 2012). Whilst compulsory schooling provides much fulfilment for the majority (Keys, 2006), the corollary of such a system is the creation of cultural norms, whereupon those who *fail* to conform or fit in are castigated and alienated, and often allocated to alternative learning programmes to address their *recalcitrance* as schools adopt a default position of righteousness (Harber, 2008).

Some control is arguably necessary, of course, as schools help to establish parameters that replicate society, which is full of restrictions (although the inverse is also often evident where socio-political circumstances dictate the behaviours of individuals in school), but this becomes problematic when it impinges on individual values. A lack of fulfilment with the education system can lead to disaffection and it is usually at the point in which this becomes active disengagement that it is identified. Disaffection may be ‘characterised as a rejection of the values and cultures of dominant institutions’ (Ferguson, 2004, p. 292); however, this is only half the picture because those ‘dominant institutions’ also often reject the values of individuals who do not exhibit an allegiance to their establishment and its rules. As such, schools are representative of the larger problem, wherein education is heavily led through a top-down implementation process. In this way, it is government policy that mostly informs, or at least significantly influences, practice. Thus, whilst there is an element of ‘resistance’ or ‘autonomy’ evident at the grassroots level, policy appeasement is purported to be a necessity.

The national curriculum is designed to inform schools of the values that are deemed necessary for transmission. However, such a system can favour certain individuals – for example, many middle-class students – as its aim is often the reproduction of human constructs such as capital and class. As such, ‘agents adjust their expectations with regard to the capital they are likely to attain in terms of the ‘practical’ limitations imposed upon them by their place in the field’ (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2014, p. 23). For many, this process of enculturation results in casualties – those who become marginalised by both society and the education system (Allan, 2016) – and attempts to restore this power differential can be seen in students’ so-called *recalcitrance*, subsequently resulting in teachers aiming to restore conformity by *getting the buggers to behave* (to borrow a phrase from Sue Cowley).

1.3 What price value?

According to Parks and Guay (2009, p. 676), 'values are ordered by importance, such that one will tend to act according to the more important value when two values are in conflict'. As such, if a student values peer relationships more than educational accomplishments then they will be inclined to make those relationships work, even if this is to the detriment of their education. Peer relationships are prioritised because they present opportunities for community networking and, subsequently, the acquisition of social capital. The perceived failure of the school can then generate dissatisfaction and frustration, resulting in disaffection with learning, where *learning*, *education*, and *schooling* are all conceptualised interchangeably.

Some students who become disaffected with learning will regain their control through disengaging from the system, but this is often temporary and usually leads to poor outcomes, such as a lack of education and progression opportunities and probable NEET (not in education, employment or training) status, where disempowerment returns:

Default societal position 1, Non-conforming and disruptive kid 0.

What is valued is an education system that enables academic progression – GCSE, A level, degree and so on – and the reproduction of sociocultural values that carry capital, whereupon the symbolic domination of those students who exhibit the inability to compete results in the reproduction of their oppression (Bourdieu and Passerson, 2000).

1.4 Setting the bar

As a result of such reproduction, the linear educational route identified above has become the 'gold standard' and other forms of learning, such as vocational or technical, have become victim to elitist thinking and the reaffirmation of what constitutes cultural capital. Thus, whilst attempts to establish parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning have been myriad, progress remains incredibly slow. Indeed, many students who become disaffected are often shoehorned onto vocational learning programmes and whilst there are many success stories (Allan, 2014; Hall and Raffo, 2004), it is perhaps the original intention, as Deuchar and Graham (2012, pp. 4-5) point out, that needs to be challenged:

Popular discourse about these students is that they come from families that do not value education and who do not know how to discipline their children, that these students are too dangerous to have in schools and, through their disruption of others and disrespect for authority, have effectively denied themselves the right to an education.

Such individuals are often perceived to be non-academic or, more directly, of lesser intelligence. Phrases such as, 'He's good with his hands' perpetuate this perception (along with ridiculous notions such as *kinaesthetic learning style*) and many are reassured with the resultant misconception that these are 'naughty' kids because they cannot cope with the heavy academic demands.

In reality, the reasons for disaffection and disengagement are many and situations are highly detailed because individuals are not robots but lead complex (and often complicated) lives. Some students have difficulty conforming due to the disparity between what they value and the compulsory expectations of school, resulting in multiple values that are misaligned. Consequently, the school is perceived to be in conflict with the students' social experiences. This is one reason why some off-site learning environments are rated so highly. For many, such environments that align with students' values, and connect with their milieu, can impact positively on disaffection (Allan and Duckworth 2018). Thus, values are an important consideration for the inclusion of students whose cultural capital differs to that of the education system, such as the favouring of the social capital available in the community. Indeed, it is not unusual for students to experience cognitive dissonance, where they are given the message that education will lead to financial success and societal status yet prestige in the community from 'non-conforming friends' holds greater appeal. In this way, there is often a trade-off of cultural capital for social capital. To add to this, a major component of this dissonance is that the very professionals promoting this message are often highly devalued by society and metaphorically crushed in their profession.

1.5 Conclusion

In sum, I would reject the suggestion that schools *never* provide fun and interesting environments in which to learn, or that they *always* fail to develop independent thinkers and autonomous learners; rather, the values we see connected to the compulsory schooling system can result in tension for those whose values are not aligned with such structural practices and who resist the compulsion to adapt their values.

Although there are valid concerns with the current education system in England, on balance it needs to be noted that it does provide a valuable experience for the majority of children and young people (Keys, 2006). Many students see the merit of learning, and even embrace a system that can provide life- and career-progressing opportunities. Indeed, as Graham et al. (2015, p. 237) inform us, even the so-called “ignorant yobs’ value education and know what it is for [and] have aspirations for a secure, productive and fulfilled life’. However, no system is infallible, so I end this argument with the words of Carlo Raffo who sums up the need to value the individual:

Schools need to be more reflective about how the wider socio-cultural lifeworlds of young people, and particularly the various networks that make up those lifeworlds, impact on the individual agency of young people. By understanding how and why informal practical knowledge, value introjections and social relations develop for young people and how these then enable levels of social capital to be enhanced, schools may be better placed to develop curricula and support systems, including careers, that really meet their needs as opposed to attempting to re-engage them in standardised mainstream provision which rarely reflects fully the socio-cultural diversity of these young people (Raffo 2003, p. 85).

2. In this issue

The potentially subversive effects of consumerism in higher education forms the focus for our first article, with **Craig Hammond** drawing on the work of Roland Barthes and Guy Debord to problematise current pedagogical values and strategies. **David Woof** explores some of the value-laden difficulties of designing and delivering a curriculum for design and technology. In particular, he discusses the values and attributes of this subject from the perspectives of

experienced practitioners in the field, identifying dissonance in the curricular positioning of the subject within the national curriculum. **Alison Hardy**'s article examines the potentially multiple values associated with school subjects. In this, she proposes a framework for exploring and defining the value of a school subject. The attribution of individual values is captured and analysed through the utilisation of this framework, resulting in the generation of subject beneficiaries. As a subject, design and technology is valued in terms of its financial return for society, measured through specific progression opportunities such as employment.

An interesting think piece from **Graham Hallett** discusses teachers' values and the ascribed value of teachers, where initial teacher education is seen to attempt to standardise performance yet fail in acknowledging the wider remit of individual developments and personal values. The implications for this can be seen in the perception of some students as *economic units*, whose performance outcomes become mere measurable contributions to the financial status of the country.

We also have two book reviews in this issue. The first, by **Paul Reynolds**, discusses *Interdisciplinarity and Wellbeing: A Critical Realist General Theory of Interdisciplinarity* by Bhaskar, Danermark and Price. This book builds on Bhaskar's lectures and applies an interdisciplinary approach to health and well-being as a means of extending criticality and analysis. Our final book review sees **David Hayes** tackle *Criminology* by Case et al., a textbook aimed at students of criminology. This book guides the reader through the student experience and provides a user-friendly approach to studying in this area.

I hope that you enjoy reading this issue and that you find it inspirational for your own work and/or thinking. For those of you who feel compelled to debate with or against any of these articles, there will be opportunities in future issues of Prism for you to contribute.

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