Cultures wars in education: a war within or on education?

Originally written for The John Macmurray Annual Seminar 5th November 2022

Emily Worters and Charlotte Haines Lyon

Emily is a secondary school teacher and Charlotte is a Senior Lecturer in Education.

There is a culture war between educators who identify as either traditionalists or progressives, which has become increasingly bitter. This war continues to play out with vitriol on Twitter fuelled by key names in education. We make a plea for a more relational way of working to protect education from becoming collateral damage in this war.

The antagonism between adherents of traditional and progressive pedagogies, is a prominent culture war in education which has picked up renewed momentum in the last twelve years. A key aspect which stokes the flames of this culture war is that both sides believe that their approach is promoting the best for students' future prospects and thus effecting social justice. Conversely both sides are convinced that the opposing stance is detrimental to students' education and life chances. There is a refusal to see any credibility in the other side's ideas and practice.

Whilst we, as authors and educators, may lean towards the progressive approach, this article is about our concern regarding the ferocity of the culture war in education. We are particularly concerned that this war is not only detrimental to each side, but moreover, it is damaging education. We look to John Macmurray's thinking about relationships to help suggest a way forward. Firstly, however, we will look at the definitions and background to these two educational theories to gain some insight into the nature of this war.

Many consider John Dewey to be the founder of the progressive approach. In 1896 Dewey set up the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago to cultivate and assess progressive teaching

practices. He was interested in the effects of education on society and the impact it could have on democracy. Progressive pedagogies advocate a facilitative child centred teaching methodology. Progressives value experience and promote the teaching of social and emotional skills as well as critical thinking and problem solving, often through experiential group and project-based work. Arguably, these are the proficiencies which are needed for successful future citizens in a rapidly changing world (Hargreaves, 2002; McDiarmid and Zhao, 2022). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report titled Skills for Social Progress in 2015 which discusses the importance for children of having a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills in order to succeed in modern life, and in 2019 they added a creativity test to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. Yong Zhao and G. Williamson McDiarmid's book Learning for Uncertainty: Teaching Students How to Thrive in a Rapidly Evolving World, published in January this year also considers that these will be important life skills. They express concerns that current education systems worldwide might be failing to deliver 'the experiences and learning opportunities' needed in order to develop 'the innovative, iconoclastic, and generative thinkers and creators' which will be required to create a future society that nurtures 'the minds, bodies, and spirits of everyone' (McDiarmid and Zhao, 2022).

Traditional pedagogy is defined as a teacher-centric delivery of instruction to classes of students who are the receivers of information (Sikandar, 2016)This is the educational methodology which Dewey was questioning in the 1800s. Historical friction between traditional and progressive educators in the UK can be dated back to the 1960s and 70s black papers which denigrate progressive teaching, for example Boyson in 1969 asserted that learning 'needs discipline, not the atmosphere of a Butlin's Holiday camp' (Boyson, in Watson 2021). The reinvigoration of this conflict can be linked to the appointment of Michael Gove as Education secretary in 2010 who introduced traditional leaning education policy changes. Shortly after this, in 2011, the culture war between 'Trads' and 'Progs' on social media emerged (Watson, 2021), The Trads or 'neo-traditionalists' claim to debunk the 'myths' that

teaching should be child centred or experiential by asserting that students are novices who must benefit from instruction from experts, and are therefore not equipped to learn experientially (Christodoulou, 2014). Gove was active in championing teachers who promoted these ideas and supported his policies through their blogs, publications and tweets (Gove, 2011, 2013b). Furthermore he famously stated “I refuse to surrender to The Blob- marxist teachers hell bent on destroying our schools" and then criticised progressive academics, "the network of educational gurus in and around our universities who praised each other’s research, sat on committees that drafted politically correct curricula, drew gifted young teachers away from their vocation and instead directed them towards ideologically driven theory" (Gove, 2013a).

The vitriolic nature of this culture war has been noted in academic (Craske, 2021; Watson, 2021) but is also evident on what is known as “EduTwitter”, the space on the social media forum where discussions and debates about education play out. The passion from each side appears to stem from the common desire to provide the best outcomes for students and a diametric opposition of beliefs about how this is best achieved. Traditionalists such as ResearchEd founder and government behaviour Tsar Tom Bennett, and Katharine Birbalsingh, (the self-proclaimed “strictest headmistress” of the controversial Michaela School) both have large followings on Twitter. They believe that their approach allows people to improve their prospects by delivering a curriculum with a focus on knowledge retention and cultural literacy, a theory based on E.D.Hirsch’s 1980s study which identified a relationship between lower performance and lack of cultural knowledge. However, Progressives such as Paul Dix (2017), Terry Wrigley (2019), and former Labour Education Secretary David Blunkett (Morgan, 2022), tend to agree with the views expressed by Andreas Schleicher, head of education at the OECD. Schleicher expressed concerns that the UK would be held back by this approach of ‘memorisation’ which can ‘hinder effective learning’. He advocates creative skills, and project based and team based learning, which ‘build student agency’, pointing to China and Singapore as countries who have progressed ‘towards much more innovative pedagogy’ (Hazel, 2018).

Some people may feel that the way forward for education lies along a middle road, however, the culture wars make this difficult with an underlying assumption that there is only one acceptable way. The culture wars, as exemplified on EduTwitter, have become increasingly fraught, and antagonistic. Such problematic social relations are, we argue, to the detriment of education, and perhaps it is time to turn to Macmurray.

In Macmurrayian terms (1991), one might like to think that educators are united in fellowship, a community acting together with common purpose. However, it is more realistic, perhaps, to think of us as a society, united by a common purpose. Different factions thinking that only they are 'educating properly and effectively', arguably, do education a disservice. Macmurray was writing and teaching at a point when the world was beginning to understand the difficulties and complications of plurality, and it is pertinent to revisit him now as we grapple with plural understandings of education. The problem is not easy to solve; we are in a neoliberal world of education, especially in the UK and United States, in which competition is held as key and individuals, and individual factions, are in competition with each other. The winner of the best results (whatever that means) wins. As Connell (2013) argues, for there to be competition, there must be winners and losers. The current culture wars typify this. There seems to be little appetite for us all "being in it together." We have to be in competition. One side has to win and one has to lose. We must prove that our way is the winning way and the other is for losers. It is also important to note that each faction considers that students would be losers if the Other were to win.

Macmurray's (1995:15) proclaimed that "all meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship". Whilst we are not expecting different educationalists to be friends with others, it is an interesting exercise to imagine a world (and Twitterati) that recognises we are all trying our best to make a difference for children, and maybe we have much to learn from each other. Our knowledge about our traditions is only meaningful if it leads to action, but not action in terms of proving we are right at the cost of beating others down, but rather working

together for the sake of education and for the sake of students. Maybe it is a matter of translating friendship as working with one another rather than being in competition or using each other instrumentally as the neoliberal regime would encourage.

Macmurray (1991: 160), is helpful in thinking about our personal relations, pointing to our fear of the Other, and worry that the Other will be “for or against me”. This seems to be at the crux of the culture wars, although maybe it is our worry about whether we are for or against the Other, that is also pervasive. When thinking of human life as a community, and in this context Educators, is it possible to remember that when thinking of someone on the Other side, we “are not talking of an object but of the living of a personal life in common” (Macmurray, 1991: 161)?

We must ask whether it is possible for the sake of education, for educators to:

retain the essential link to democracy, not just as a plural means of forming intentions, agreeing action and holding each other to account, but also as a deliberative, appreciative and creative form of a personal and communal encounter...a shared commitment to a richly conceived, constantly developing search for and enactment of good lives lived in a just and diverse commonality. (Fielding, 2015:38)

Are we able to function as a society, in which educators “co-operate to achieve a purpose which each of them, in his own interest, desires to achieve, and which can only be achieved by co-operation? The relations of its members are functional; each plays his allotted part in the achievement of the common end.” (Macmurray, 1991: 157). Thus, each educator plays their part in education, rather being the sole saviour of all.

However, the ultimate aim, of creating a universal community of educators, goes fundamentally against the neoliberal system that we are in, in which winner takes all. How can we challenge it? It

feels most radical to say ‘actually, I disagree with you about x but let’s talk and listen to each other, let’s reflect on what each other has to say, and each other’s actions, maybe we can all learn something.’

We can’t save the world, but this is a heartfelt plea, to start contemplating the Other and thinking about them in relation. How we think about the Other impacts our own thinking about ourselves and thus impacts our actions. It is essential for ourselves, but also for education, to regain our notion of being in relation with all.

References

CONNELL, R. 2013. The neoliberal cascade and education: an essay on the market agenda and its consequences. Critical Studies in Education, 54(2), pp. 99-112.

CRASKE, J. (2021) ‘Logics, rhetoric and “the blob”: Populist logic in the Conservative reforms to English schooling’, British Educational Research Journal, 47(2), pp. 279–298. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3682.

DIX, P. (2017) When the Adults Change, Everything Changes: Seismic shifts in school behaviour, Camarthen, Independent Thinking Press.

FIELDING, M. 2015. Education as if people matter; John Macmurray, community and the struggle for democracy. In: FIELDING, M. (ed.) Learning to be human: the educational legacy of John Macmurray, London, Routledge.MACMURRAY, J. 1991. Persons in relation, London, Faber and Faber.

GOVE, M. (2011) Michael Gove to the National College, GOV.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-the-national-college (Accessed: 24 June 2022).

GOVE, M. (2013a) I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates 'the new enemies of promise' for opposing his plans, Mail Online. Available at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html (Accessed: 14 June 2022).

GOVE, M. (2013b) Michael Gove speaks about the importance of teaching, GOV.UK. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speaks-about-the-importance-of-teaching (Accessed: 24 June 2022).

HARGREAVES, P.A. (2002) 'Teaching in the Knowledge Society', in. Technology Colleges Trust Vision 2020—Second International Online Conference, p. 14. Available at: https://jotamac.typepad.com/jotamacs_weblog/files/teaching_in_a_knowledge_soc.pdf.

HAZEL, W. (2018) Exclusive: England held back by rote-learning, warns Pisa boss, Tes Magazine. Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/exclusive-england-held-back-rote-learning-warns-pisa-boss (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

McDIARMID, G.W. and ZHAO, Y. (2022) Learning for Uncertainty Teaching Students How to Thrive in a Rapidly Evolving World. Routledge. Available at: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315682884/learning-uncertainty-williamson-mcdiarmid-yong-zhao?s=03 (Accessed: 25 June 2022)

MACMURRAY, J. 1991. Persons in relation, London, Faber and Faber.

MACMURRAY, J. 1995. The self as agent: volume I of the form of the personal, London, Faber and Faber.

SIKANDER, A. (2016) ‘John Dewey and His Philosophy of Education’, Journal of Education and Educational Development, 2, p. 191. Available at: https://doi.org/10.22555/joeed.v2i2.446.

WATSON, S. (2021) ‘New Right 2.0: Teacher populism on social media in England’, British Educational Research Journal, 47(2), pp. 299–315. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3664

WRIGLEY, T. (2018) ‘“Knowledge”, curriculum and social justice’, The Curriculum Journal, 29(1), pp. 4–24. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2017.1370381