

Review of: "Tackling Tradition in Education"

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Reviewer Comments: In this article, Sage (2023) sets the ambitious task of opening the question of tradition [history and culture] in contemporary education and exploring this question by taking a whirlwind historical overview of changing trends in the field of education for more than 4,000 years.

The question is timely and of vital importance as we study human development and change [the purpose of educational research] in a highly complex scientific and technological world. A world where there is a growing disparity in terms of income, resources, wellbeing, health and injustice (Mooney Simmie, 2023 a,b, 2022). I agree with the question, and the necessity to debate the nature of knowledge, who we think we are as humans at a time when UNESCO is calling for a new social contract in education (UNESCO, 2021).

Here I will offer a counter-argument to Sage's (2023) framing of the problem as a straightforward dichotomy between traditional education and progressive education in order to widen the problem beyond a dualistic approach and to reveal some taken-for-granted assumptions. I introduce the role of culture and history in education and then reconsider points of tension in this regard. My aim is to take some points raised in Sage's (2023) study and offer an affirmative critique that can open this social science problem in a more expansive way and set the scene for further research and deeper consideration.

The Times We Live In

We live in a deeply utilitarian time in western democracies, there is concern that democracy is under threat from a post-truth world with growing fascist movements, the planet itself is 'on fire', in serious difficulty from climate change. At the same time, scientific advances progress daily bringing new knowledge about health, wellbeing and even about how we learn (Macrine & Fugate 2022). Scientists working without borders have found an effective vaccine for keeping the coronavirus at bay. Governments in democratic countries, in Europe and elsewhere using a vast number of interventions, managed to support whole populations of their people working from home while keeping economies alive during conditions of lockdown. Now that we have emerged from the pandemic, the same democratic dividend is far less in evidence. In the last decade, there is an unprecedented rise in the gap in income and supports between rich and poor. Sage (2023) reveals that two thirds of the people in the world without access to literacy are women and girls.

The education policy imperative of our time should be about how we might work in new ways, individually and collaboratively to consume less and to share more for human flourishing, for the common good of humanity and for sustainability of the planet (Fraser, 2010). We need to move from a mind-set of scarcity to sufficiency. Instead, the global

education reform movement has set its sights on developing a metricised system of constant comparison between countries calling for new modes of Darwinian strength, a new ideal of competitive individual, student, teacher and institution (Edling & Mooney Simmie, 2020). This reform ensemble mandates a tight focus on a portfolio lifestyle of self-regulation, adaptive expertise and performativity, working body and soul in risk-managed ways for the primacy of the economy rather than for the primacy of ethics (Ball, 2021; Lynch & Crean, 2019; Mooney Simmie & Moles, 2020; Mooney Simmie, Moles & O'Grady, 2019).

The Place of Tradition and History in Education

As an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field, education and teaching have normally supported the reproduction of culture and heritage [and the status quo of power and privilege] and, at the very same time, education always needs to make space for new transformative possibilities to emerge. The purposes of education are therefore multiple and always live in tension and contradiction. To be educated does not mean to strip people of their culture, signs, language, religion and symbols and to colonise, neutralise and domesticate, or does it? (Freire, 1970/2020; Mooney Simmie, 2023 a,b). It is this reconstructive view of the field of education as a living organic and holistic system that shapes the work of the educator as a co-inquirer in boundary crossing partnerships and assures the democratic assignment/responsibility for a diverse, peaceful and just society (Mooney Simmie & Edling, 2019). A democratic responsibility that is a shared responsibility between the school, state and society despite imperatives today positioning the teacher on a pedestal as the most important, and apparently the only factor, in student wellbeing and achievement. A reconstructivist worldview is different in terms of ontology, epistemology and axiology from essentialist, progressive or perennialist worldviews (Mooney Simmie, 2021 a,b; Mooney Simmie & Edling, 2019).

This necessary productive tension, between culture, heritage, tradition, the present and the future, is what Biesta (2013) called the 'beautiful risk' embedded in the field of education. This productive tension inbuilt in the field, and in the living contradictions of teachers' work practices, does not need to be resolved and it is vital that it is not resolved. Discursive spaces in education, at every level, and in every aspect of the field as a social science, hold in play the heart-work and care relations embedded in educative practices and prevent the field becoming standardised to atomised listings of codes, standards and competences. While I assert that improving standards in education is important, and we clearly need teachers who are highly skilled and competent, if we lose this sweet balance point then it is highly questionable if we can call what remains 'education' anymore. Holding an expansive view of this vast field, allows important questions to flourish in relation to the personal, philosophical, pedagogical, the political and the planet. An emancipatory view of education as a cultural endeavour of transformative possibility (Mooney Simmie, 2021a) holds in play WB Yeats' view of teaching as the lighting of a fire of curiosity and imagination rather than the filling of a pail. Questions that have been deeply considered in the last century, in the hierarchical field of knowers that is the field of education, by philosophers, theorists, historians and sociologists of education such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Lee Shulman, and Elliott Eisner.

Crucial questions, that have not gone away but need new thinking and a diversity of research approaches, and have deep relevance in democratic societies today in Europe and elsewhere. Critical questions about the nature of knowledge and ways of knowing, our personhood (reflexive) and the public interest values for a good life and just society, human

becoming and its associated immeasurable aesthetics (Mooney Simmie, 2023 a,b). Biesta (2002) reminds us that the concept of *Bildung* [used in Germany speaking countries for hundreds of years] asserts that education aspires to nurture an inner (soul) life as well as seeking to live well in the social and material world. It is an aspiration that resonates with different faith-based, religious and spiritual communities, and includes a majority of the 7 billion people on the planet. In the complex field of education, where science matters, there needs to be room for multiple ways of seeing, whether that is from the perspective of philosophy, theology, anthropology, culture, religion and/or the arts.

This understanding of complexity in the vast field of education, with its rich and diverse approaches to research strategies and approaches, is anathema to a Human Capital Theory [HCT] view of education, positioning the human and their behaviours for a limited performance that can be well-defined, stage managed and measured. Tan (2014) explains how HCT re-positions the human being, and processes of human development and change for the primacy of the economy, while other important purposes of education, located in wider moral, social and political questions, are considered to be secondary and subordinate. Drawing from a HCT mind-set, the purpose of education gets expressed as a bespoke portfolio of lifelong learning, so that markets can enter new spaces, re-working the former aim of quickly finding the pipeline of high expertise needed for the world of work. In a HCT mind-set, failure is (re)framed as an issue of the individual, the incompetent teacher, the bad school, for a self-improvement model that needs to be continually re-worked. The institution, positioned as a high-performing learning organisation assures the constant flow of 'human capital' for successful competitive economies and has little or no interest in any interruption that might come from new thinking and philosophical inquiry in relation to the long list of pressing problems in relation to a rapidly changing view of humanity and planet.

Sage (2023) makes a number of statements throughout the article that appear to suggest a HCT positioning of education coupled with an elitist liberal democracy [a virtuous elite] as the preferred governance arrangement. Statements such as 'Personal and practical attributes are what employers value most and note are lacking in employees' (p.2). 'To raise performance, learner 'needs' must precede society 'wants' (p.12); 'studying for a first degree, a lecturer asserted that a benevolent autocracy was the only government that worked' (p.15); and 'acceptance is 2-way and 21stC illiterates are ones who cannot learn, unlearn and reflect for adaptability to survive' (p.16).

At the very same time, Sage (2023) asserts that 'a reductionist view limits understanding and promotes naïve analyses of complex problems' (p.14) and that 'tradition and culture is dynamic, with group understandings and boundaries renegotiated and redefined for current needs' (p.14).

Over 4,000 Years of Education

Sage (2023) provides a glimpse into more than 4,000 years in the history of education. There are a number of take-home messages here besides the constantly changing nature of the field in response to seismic change in politics and the economy. The multiple purposes of education are in view and stretch back thousands of years with the involvement of the churches and monasteries, for the development of an inner (soul) life as well as for living ethically and well in a social and material world. Education was in different ways throughout the millennia inextricably linked to ethics, philosophy, theology,

history, arts and more recently to the natural sciences, and the applied sciences. For more than 3,900 years, the focus on formal education with its emphasis on access to theoretical and disciplinary knowledge was however mostly concerned with the education of elite men and boys. The education of women and girls was for success in the private sphere, for homemaking, motherhood and transmission of culture.

While a narrative of the trivium and quadrivium runs throughout Sage's (2023) review, this is no glorious past in relation to engaging young people with their ethical project of becoming, how to think for themselves, how to access higher order knowledge [analysis, evaluation, synthesis] and to infuse this ever-changing canon of knowledge with moral and social consciousness. Sage (2023) appears to intimate that tradition and culture shows 'a backwards mentality' (p.4), with the contemporary 21st Century vision as an uncritical good. In this review, I argue that this dualism is far too simplistic.

The education system is multifaceted and multiple level, and while new concepts of inclusion pay attention to first-order intersectional issues, such as social class, gender and race, often the use of reductionist frameworks act as a smokescreen for conformity.

Where to From Here?

In this article, Sage (2023) has started an important thread of conversation in relation to the big questions about tackling tradition and history and supposedly the valuable lessons we need to learn from history and her(story) in narratives of the long and distant, and more recent, past. Contemporary policy actors and influencers in the field, such as the World Bank, OECD and UNESCO, appear to suggest that now is an opportune time to open questions in relation to the purposes of education for critical and affirmative scrutiny.

We need to claim the field of education as a distinct discipline in its own right, and be able to justify why education is different from what Sage (2023) calls the 'accuracy rate' and exactness needed to be an airline pilot, a dentist or a doctor (p.3). The stakes are exceedingly high, not only for the individual, schools, the state and wider society but for the future of humanity, the environment and the planet.

If the current policy push to provide expedient solutions through relying solely on new models of mathematical modelling proceeds, as Selwyn and Gašević (2020) appear to suggest, then we run the risk of education reduced to a state-centred data-driven system of performance management. The field of education will have decidedly lost its soul, its capacities to keep open crucially important questions, how best to infuse a moral and social consciousness with the ever-changing canon of knowledge for personal flourishing AND for the greater good of humanity and the planet.

The lessons from history, suggest we must remain deeply sceptical of expedient and universal solutions. We need to interrogate our reflexive positioning as education researchers as well as the framing and representation of social science problems in contemporary education. How can we assure epistemic justice in relation to who has access to theory and higher order knowledge, and re-fashion a new activist imaginary for how we might learn, through education and otherwise, to be and to live together in ways that are life enhancing for all and in harmony with care of the planet.

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