

Making Sense of Mass Education

By Gordon Tait
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Reviewed by: **Ayman Rizk, PhD**

The Author and Book

Tait, the author, has a very interesting background in *Education, Psychology, Sociology, and Physical Education* with teaching-experiences in *Sociology, Philosophy of Education and Education and the Law*. He has written books in *Cultural Studies, Sociology, Criminology, and Philosophy* and his recent research focuses on Applied Philosophy and Behaviour Disorders, the Sociology of Death Investigations and Jurisprudence (Queensland University of Technology, 2013) which lead not only to the richness of his book but also to the depth and uniqueness of his analyses.

The book-title implies the book represents a trial to investigate in-depth the meaning of *Mass Education*, analyze critically the forces affecting it, and provide its readers with intensive comprehensive understanding of Mass Education. Based on his encyclopaedic background, Tait provides very comprehensive and unique analyses of *Mass Education*; while focusing on the Australian context and going for farther conclusions whenever possible. He refers to Australian context for building his arguments, using evidence and giving examples. He explores, in-depth the most relevant issues and prominent arguments, and the different effects of the various social, economic, demographic, and psychological forces on education, schooling and teaching in an interesting way that might have been difficult to other authors missing such a diverse background.

The author uses the term *Mass Education*, which was included in UNESCO's Constitution, though it is rejected by a number of scholars as it implies unpleasing connotations of educational methods which do not pay the

due attention to individuals' differences. According to UNESCO (2000, p27), the term *Fundamental Education* was preferred to refer to "an education that would provide for the acquisition of literacy and other essential skills, knowledge, and values needed for full participation in society".

The book is very unique not only for the very interesting diverse-background of its author nor because his simplicity in conveying thoughts on philosophy, education, psychology and sociology but because it represents a serious and innovative contribution to the field of sociology and philosophy of education. Tait indicates that the intention behind writing his book "has not been simply to produce an updated version of previous books on Australian education, it has been to offer something new altogether, and hopefully, to keep moving the analysis onwards" (p2) with the aim of providing "The best possible tools for making sense of mass education, however, the tools available within sociology and cultural studies are not the only ones on offer" (p 5). The book can be seen as "An attempt to understand education's place within complex and changing society, and supply the conceptual tools for providing non-reductionist accounts of a number of contemporary cultural forms" while relying on traditional Sociology, cultural studies, history, philosophy, ethics and jurisprudence with the aim of realizing analyses that are "stronger, more comprehensive, and more convincing as a result" (p7). It is written intentionally to address a wide range of readers with different levels of knowledge; that is why its chapters are organized with "a progressive layering of complexity and density" (p 275). The author adopts a conversational style and uses inclusive language as much as possible to get his various readers engaged. The book is composed of twelve chapters on issues related to *Mass Education* including: *Social Class, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Governance, Subjectivity, Pre-adulthood, the Media, Popular Culture, Technology, Philosophy, Ethics and the Law* as well as *Truth and Post-Colonialism*. Those chapters are divided at the same time into four different parts which are: *Re-assessing the three pillars: Modern and Postmodern Sociologies of Education, The Foundations of Alternative Approach: Education and Governance, Cultural Contexts of Contemporary Education, and Philosophy and Mass Education*.

In the beginning of his book, Tait criticizes academic researchers who tend to have expertise and develop research-skills and interest in either quantitative or qualitative research-methodologies and consequently find themselves probably in a situation where they oppose the other paradigm. He indicates ironically that *Quantitative Research* is often criticized as "*The mindless assembly of vast columns of numbers, none of which bear any relation to real life of anyone*" whereas *Qualitative Research* is criticized as "*Merely the collected transcriptions of barely interesting chit-chats, none of which bear any relation to proper research data*" (p 15). That criticism implies and prepares the readers to expect that Tait is going to employ the two research-paradigms in developing his book; and that is what really happens. Throughout the book, he uses a mix-method of relying on both quantitative and qualitative paradigms in conducting his analyses, building his arguments, and reaching certain conclusions. The book in general can be seen as a *Comprehensive Methodological Course* through presenting main research methods, their strengths and weaknesses, quantitative and qualitative analyses, developing arguments based on qualitative and quantitative data and consequently reaching certain conclusions while focusing on the issues related to *Mass Education*. Tait adopts a very unique and exciting way of writing his book and keeping his readers highly engaged through raising the *Myths* related to the main different issues at the beginning of each chapter of his book and later he tries to defeat those myths in the light of presenting the related different arguments and his quantitative and qualitative analyses.

For the purpose of this review, the focus is made on four axes across the book: Society, Education, Gender and Race.

1. Society

Tait starts his book with discussing the theme of social-class which is seen among the most controversial and sensitive issues with more focus on its relationship with education. It is very significant to start with social-class; a selection which personifies and implies the coherent relationship between society and education and

the high importance he gives to social-class as a gate to explore the rest of the other themes to be presented later in the book; as if it the foundation over which the rest of themes are located.

He presents three different perspectives adopted by three categories of researchers regarding the outcomes that social-class may have on people's lives. The first group of researchers believe that social-class can determine the person's opportunities in life, including his performance at school, employment and even whom they will marry. A second group of researchers see it is too complex to predict such outcomes in the light of social-class. A third group of researchers, mainly from Psychology-based disciplines, highly estimate individuals' ability as the most effective factor of success.

He reviews the relationship between social-class and education in the light of the Critical Theory and the different arguments adopted by a number of pioneer writers; among them: *Althusser (1971)* who argues that *"schooling system acts as a sophisticated filter, both ideologically and practically, one which spits out the working classes at an early stage"*; *Bowels and Gintis (1976)* who conclude that *"schooling system is the main site for the propagation of the false belief that success in our system is based upon your intrinsic merit"*; *Apple (1979)* who argues that *"schools act to maintain the status quo, and to keep power in the hands of the lucky [wealthy] few"*; *Giroux (1983)* who examines all things *"we learn at school without necessarily realizing it. This involves not only the formal curriculum of the three Rs, but the hidden curriculum...after all, not questioning authority is not the only covert lesson that school teaches us....There is ongoing deference to that Authority, in being quiet when the teacher speaks and standing up when they enter the room. There is learning how to be punctual, how to work hard now if we want to succeed in the future, and how to be a good moral citizen"* (p 22-24). Though he criticizes the *Critical Theory* which presents itself as a *"Master Discourse"* and tries to provide an explanation for all social aspects within its explanatory range (p 25), he defeats the assertion that *"schooling success is only about individual ability"* indicating that *"schools do not have to simply provide the rubber stamps, the credentialing, that cements your place within a particular social class"*. He stresses the fact that the nexus between social-class and education is a complex one and educational outcomes cannot be

understood only in the light of the students' social-class, the type of school they have to attend or the amount of money their parents gain.

So, *Meritocracy* cannot be seen as isolated from other socio-economic forces that affect students' academic performance and their learning outcomes in schools, or their future employment opportunities when they go out to society. Meritocracy is not only about working hard in education but it has a lot to do with what assets, supports, or even challenges or hinders students bring with them to schools. A genuine Meritocracy schooling should be supported by more comprehensive social policies and packages supported by the state with the aim of supporting the poorest and most disadvantaged individuals to bring the disparities among individuals in the society to the minimum. In a fair competition, different relevant variables should be neutralized as much as possible. Otherwise, working class-kids will continue to get working-class jobs as Willis (1981) suggests. It is true that inequalities will continue in schooling systems as far as they exist in societies, however, Carnoy and Levin (1985) argue that schools do more than other social institutions in providing equal opportunities regarding participation and rewards.

2. Education

Tait explores the concept of education throughout the book. In chapter 10, he suggests that education is "*neither a simple nor straightforward concept. It has varied across time and between cultures*" (p 215). He argues that education-systems keep and continue changing and they are either the production of eternally changing societies or they are changing agents in their societies from another point of view. He makes a particular reference to the book of *The Social System*, by Parsons (1951) who considers education as a very essential component within a complex machine and sees society as "*a finely tuned instrument, and education helped its cogs turn*" (p1). He emphasizes, also, the importance of another book, *Understanding Schooling*, by Henry et al (1988) which investigates the relationship between education and social power while discussing issues such as meritocracy, and how *class, gender* and *race* are directly correlated to success in schools. Building on *Foucault's* work (1977), Tait argues that major social institutions including schools, prisons,

hospitals and factories share a number of similarities and have similar logic and structure, and develop effective management of individuals according to discipline supporting the idea of schools as *Disciplinary Societies*. In the last chapter of the books, *Truth and Post-Colonialism*, he continues to add more details to the same conception as he suggests schools share a number of common aspects including the subdivision of time, uniforms, *Panopticon* and keeping students under surveillance, and examination. The implications of this understanding, consequently, are very instrumental in imposing the European reference-frameworks and the marginalization of indigenous people. He describes teaching as having different meanings indicating that teachers have not always been the source of knowledge and have not always sat in front of class for leading and instructing students. On the contrary a lot of instruction in the past was done by the elder children; however, very recently, teaching has started to be a profession.

In chapter 7, *The Media*, defined as a “very broad set of concepts, practices, agencies, technologies, and forms of representation” (pp144-145), focusing mainly on news-media, he supports the idea that students should be equipped with a better understanding of the media, as a component of their formal education, indicating that there are a lot of arguments supporting that movement. They all agree that media “is far too important to ignore” (p147), however, they vary in their approaches. He stresses the importance of teaching students how to decode the media to better understand that news is not *equitable* and formulating their opinions though media normally comes with a range of different agendas arguing that “the idea of totally objective news is a myth” (p156).

In chapter 8, *Popular Culture*, Tait refers to opposing and supporting arguments regarding integrating popular culture in education. On one hand, traditionalists believe the use of popular culture in classrooms is completely unacceptable for whatever reason. Other scholars consider education as an extremely serious business with no room for the *triviality* of popular culture. On the other hand, there are views that popular culture represents a way in which teachers can make better connections with their students and get them more involved and engaged in education. Tait even goes far beyond and supports the argument that popular culture is not only a

way of engaging students with the curriculum as *"it is the curriculum"* (p 183). Those who believe that schools should play a more complex role see the essentiality of popular culture in giving students the chance to *"participate more effectively in the fluid and reflexive processes of textual analysis, interpretation, and ultimately enjoyment"* (p 185).

Very interestingly he starts to discuss the relationship between philosophy and education in the last part of the book; traditionally philosophy is introduced in the beginning of books to settle the scene and pave the way for presenting different issues; as if he suggests that philosophy is the overarching umbrella and the comprehensive framework under which all previously raised issues can be interpreted. In that part of the book, he provides a general overview about philosophy, its definition, importance, approaches and implications in the fields of education, schooling and teaching. He discusses and criticizes briefly six philosophical approaches, namely, *Idealism, Realism, Romanticism, Pragmatism, Marxism* and *Post-Modernism*. He stresses two main relevant ideas: The first is related to the relationship between Philosophy and teaching as teaching requires reflection and Philosophy can contribute *systematically and productively*. The second is related to the relationship between philosophy and curriculum where he suggests philosophy has a lot to offer for students' education and that is why it should be given more room in their curriculum.

Tait expresses his full trust in *Philosophy* and stresses its significant importance not only in education but also in our daily life as it *"providesintellectual tools to answer some of the most important questions of life.....It allows us to address those questions in a clear and organized way.....[it] helps us plan for our educational future. Our system of mass schooling has...significant traces of many of the various philosophies that have dominated education at different times, in different places and for different reasons....Philosophy has a lot to offer anyone who takes an interest in it"* (pp 225-226). The last part of the book serves as a brief general course on philosophy and its educational implications.

3. Gender

In chapter 2, *Gender*, a major component in the majority of contemporary books on education, he starts by differentiating between the terms *gender*, defined as “an assessment of social factors: how you dress, how you conduct yourself, the roles you occupy, the identity you adopt” and *Sex*, usually used to describe biological categorization. While exploring the complex relationship between the two terms, he likens them interestingly to a “pair of pigeon” in the sense they are linked and separate at the same time as a specific gender is often associated with a certain sex. He identifies 10 gendered differences through which schools constitute a *Gender Regime* including *Single-Sex Schools, School Ethos, Subject Enrolment, Subject Preferences, Discipline, Time With Teacher, Dress Codes, Access To Resources, Classroom Texts, and Employment of Teachers*. He emphasizes that schools contribute significantly to the reinforcement of gender differences and the social reproduction of gender roles, practices and identities.

Arguing that law in Australia, and probably all over the world, protects and guarantees women's rights and their state of equality and their ability to apply for almost any job they like, however, it does not mean they will get it. In Australian education, he argues that females represent 79% of primary teachers and 56% of secondary teachers, however, only 57% of the leadership positions in primary schools are held by women and 59% of those positions in secondary schools are held by men. He concludes that “*The entire matter of gender and education is a long way from being settled in a satisfactory and equitable manner*” (p37). Tait presents an example from Australia where 60% of law graduates are women, however, only 14% become a partner in a law-firm and only four women are members in the *Australia's High Court* that includes forty-eight judges. So, women do not have equal employment-opportunities compared to men, even within education, which is always been described as a feminist profession, the majority of leaders are still men.

4. Race

Chapter 3, *Race and Ethnicity*, starts with presenting the relevant terminology including: *Othering, Ethnocentrism, Prejudice, Stereotyping, Scapegoating, Discrimination, Race, Ethnicity and Racism*. Tait

differentiates among three forms of discrimination: *Individual Discrimination*, a person-to-person discrimination that can be overt or covert, *Institutional Discrimination* and *Cultural Discrimination* suggesting the latter two are more dominant though they are more difficult to detect. He returns to discuss discrimination more deeply in chapter 11, on *Ethics and Law*, indicating that "one significant area of law that ties directly to ethics is that of discrimination" (p 230).

He argues that education systems discriminate against particular ethnic minorities borrowing the example of Macdougall (2008) who suggests that young African immigrants are encouraged to join apprenticeship programs rather than apply for a university. He supports the argument that educational outcomes are affected by race and ethnicity indicating that "The game appears to be stacked in favour of those from higher social classes, so too does the game favour those from Anglo-Celtic ethnic backgrounds" with great emphasis on the role of hidden curriculums contributing to "perpetuating mono-cultural values and practices, which in turn significantly benefits those from that culture" (p 69). Tait's arguments are going in the same direction with the works of Dei (1997) who concludes that Black students may get different educational advice from that given to White students as well as different forms of *Veiled Racism* that might increase the Black students' feelings of alienation, consequently, to their drop-out.

Indicating that in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland, immigrant students perform above the OECD average, however, he implies that such general statements should be looked at carefully stressing that immigrant-students to Australia do not perform equally. The top 25% of immigrant-students perform better than the top 25% of student born in Australia whereas the bottom 25% of immigrant-students perform worse compared to their peers born in Australia. He makes a very clear distinction between two main immigrant-categories: Voluntary immigrants and refugees. On one hand, voluntary-immigrants normally include high-status and highly-educated immigrants from Chinese, Greek and Jewish backgrounds. On the other hand, refugees who struggle in their education and life as they come normally from conflict zones; after probably

living in refugee-camps for years without any formal education. Besides, a lot of them experienced horrifying events that will continue to have negative impacts on their personalities and lives.

While he suggests that indigenous students still suffer in Australian education-system and they drop out in large numbers from grade 10 onwards, he opposes the argument that it is their fault and problem, *Deficit Model of Educational Failure* as it is not fair to blame those who fail and let them shoulder the failure responsibilities and consequences; suggesting that case as a good example of *Blaming the Victim*. He likens the problem of indigenous children to that of working-class children suggesting to review carefully their life-styles, language, and ways of learning to get a better understanding of the whole situation and find strategies to face their problems. In chapter 7, the Media, Tait returns with more analyses related to the issue of race through arguing how media becomes steadily instrumental in constituting a collective opinion against immigrants suggesting that Australian media depicts immigrants as a direct threat who are widely represented as "*Welfare bludgers, as queue jumpers, as potential terrorists, as disease carriers, and as liars*" (p 162) indicating that "*Boat People*" becomes a synonym for "*disease-carrying, bomb-carrying and queue-jumping*" (p163). He suggests that more than 80% of students from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds have experienced racist abuse which leads to main two serious consequences: The first they feel they are not part of school-community; and the second, more serious, they lose totally the desire to go to school. While Tait in that example focuses on the Australian context, unfortunately, that situation can probably be seen in other countries representing potential destinations for immigrants.

The book is very essential and instrumental in presenting, explaining and stressing that education cannot be understood in isolation from its context and surroundings and how it continuously and effectively affects and be affected by a lot of significant forces including economic, social, political, cultural as well as other forces through a dynamic process of mutual and eternal interaction. So, the book helps its readers see and understand the very comprehensive image of education, its complex ties with other forces and disciplines and

ultimately develop their own understanding of education and how it continuously changes in the light of those interaction processes.

Conclusion

Making Sense of Mass Education is a book that really worth-reading as it presents a wide range of issues through adopting very interesting and exciting ways of writing and presenting while addressing a variety of different categories of readers whose levels of knowledge and experience vary widely.

The book can be described accurately and efficiently in its author's words as "*a summary of the current state of play within Australian and global theories of education. It is a resource book for those interested in assessing the weight of different conceptual approaches to mass schooling. It is an analysis of various issues within contemporary society, as they relate to education; it is a gentle critique of reductionist analyses of our schooling institutions and their outcomes; and it is a call for us not to forget the value of philosophy within the broader play of the social sciences*" (p 275). It is a highly-recommended book for everyone who are interested in building or enhancing their knowledge in education, its philosophy, sociology, culture, media and more other relevant issues. It is really a remarkable source of knowledge that focuses on introducing the terminology and presents historical development and analyses of the different raised issues whenever possible. Tait's book travels with its readers far beyond *Making Sense of Mass Education*.

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