

This is an extract from a public lecture given by Keith Morrison, in which he indicated that in an open, democratic society, the state should have a duty to protect civil and human rights but not to intrude too greatly into the everyday lives of citizens, for risk of totalitarianism. In particular he is concerned to make the point that the politics of mind-control and too great a degree of educational control sit uncomfortably with a democratic society. How far student teachers will find this applies to the UK situation of a prescribed National Curriculum, reinforced by mandated assessments and inspections, is an interesting topic for reflection.

The open society and education in Macau

It is over 50 years since Karl Popper published the two volumes of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, which presents an analysis of democracy and the challenges that he saw to it. In this paper I want to set out some of the characteristics of the open society and education within it, as envisaged by Popper, and then to set this alongside the situation that obtains in some aspects of education in Macau.

In the open society individuals enjoy freedom, are aware of the dangers of power and illegitimate authority, and value a plurality of values and opinions. For Popper dissent is not only to be tolerated but actively encouraged, not the least because it fits with his view of knowledge and learning as essentially conjectural (incomplete, tentative, provisional, open) and subject to constant refutation (Popper 1963). Dissent and challenge are essential ingredients if freedom, democracy and human development are to thrive. By contrast, for Popper, a closed society is characterised by the domination of a given and uncontested set of values, to which members have to assent, either by force or by consent – hegemony.

Social and political institutions, including schools, Popper argued, need to put their practices to the test of critical scrutiny and debate, and to be judged by the extent to which they promote democracy. The open society, for Popper, is democratic, and practises tolerance, dignity, justice, respect for individual freedoms and differences of view, free speech and, at its foundation, the freedom to judge one's rulers. *Respect* for difference, rather than merely tolerance of it, is central, as we learn from difference and dissent. Humans are fallible, society is fallible, knowledge is fallible, so they must constantly be open to critique, and the development of critique is essential for democracy.

Teachers, Popper suggests, have the task of educating developing minds to think critically and democratically, so that the open society can flourish. Democracy *requires* education, and free speech in a democracy must require its free speakers to have something useful to say. The open society is both an educated and an educative society. Such education bears several hallmarks, it:

- concerns itself with the furtherance of democracy;
- fosters critical judgement in students and teachers;
- requires students and teachers to question and justify what they are doing, saying, believing and valuing;

- respects evidence and argument, even if it refutes currently held positions, i.e. views are open to challenge and change;
- recognises individual fallibility and the tentative, conjectural and refutable nature of knowledge;
- respects others as having equal value in society;
- values and respects diversity and independence of ideas, views and values;
- gives all participants a voice;
- places the greater social good over self-interest.

Education, in this scenario, is not simply schooling in obedience or passivity – ‘specialised training in the art of keeping down its human sheep or its human cattle’ (Popper 1966: 46) – nor is it instrumental as a service activity, e.g. schooling for jobs or for entrance to higher education, but it is to provoke learning, critique, the pursuit of the just, open society and a search for truth. Rather than being indoctrinatory, education is a potentially subversive activity since it develops the ability in students to question, challenge, and demand rational justifications for, educational practices. For Popper critique and the opportunity for critique are fundamentals of the open society.

Bailey (2000: 154) cites the example in the UK of a respected politician who, in his advocacy of democracy, suggests asking powerful people five questions:

- What power have you got?
- Where did you get it?
- In whose interests do you use it?
- To whom are you accountable?
- How can we get rid of you?

The consequences of Popper’s views for education are several. For example, the transmission/delivery/received curriculum is criticised for being at heart authoritarian, and hence illiberal, however benevolent. In this vein the use of textbooks as if they hold unassailable truths and the practices of teachers who do not expose themselves to challenge or critique, are untenable. Transmission teaching, reinforced by tests which simply test the learner’s abilities to reproduce given knowledge, is one-way, from the expert to the ignorant empty vessel, which is not only an impoverished way of regarding sentient humans but a misrepresentation of the uncertainty of knowledge. Education and its associated testing is more than simply checking a student’s failure or success in reproducing given material against given criteria. The criteria themselves have to be open to critical scrutiny, and, where knowledge is tentative and conjectural, assessment leads to learning from errors (refutations from conjectures) rather than public recognition of failure.

Popperian education is more than telling students what to think, indeed, given the fallibility of knowledge, it concerns raising doubts and uncertainties – ‘conjectures and refutations’ (Popper 1963); of course, that pushes education out of the comfort zone of teachers, students, societies and the state. Popper argues that many schools are bastions of patriarchy and illegitimate authority, and that many teachers are pocket dictators in the micro-totalitarian state that is school.

As a thought experiment, I would like to set Popper's views into a Macau context. The situation reported in Macau is that several factors combine to render education and schooling problematical when judged against Popper's views. There is a widespread phenomenon in teaching and learning in Macau schools:

- Class sizes are large and exert a serious restraining force on the curriculum and pedagogy;
- The curriculum is heavily facts-driven, with an emphasis on the acquisition and repetition of superficial knowledge;
- Curricula are over-full, leading to 'spoon-feeding' of students;
- Pedagogy is largely didactic, with little variation in teaching styles;
- Teachers rely heavily on textbooks, rote learning, exercises and memorisation;
- A culture of compliance exists in which teachers enact a received curriculum and, in turn, exact compliance from students;
- Learning is passive and receptive;
- Tests are the main and often the sole stimulants and motivators for student learning, and exert a significant effect on the contents of the curriculum;
- Teachers acquiesce about changing current testing and teaching practices;
- Failure is built in by the constant regime of testing and examinations;
- The curriculum is characterised by teacher-centred teaching rather than student-centred learning.

These factors reinforce each other and are part of a hermetically sealed, circular, closed system which is difficult to break, and closed systems, as complexity theory reminds us, are prone to entropy – to run down – which is antithetical to an open, developing society. Simply changing one factor may have limited impact, as the other factors present in Macau exert a strong constraint to keep the closed situation as it currently is. For example, one has to ask why so many comparatively new, undergraduate and postgraduate teachers seem to have so little impact on change in Macau. The closed situation in Macau is the consequence of several other local circumstances that inhibit change, for example:

- 1 The very high proportion of private providers of education in Macau (over 93 per cent of the overall education system), coupled with a 'market mentality' of education, places several schools in competition with each other. Secondary schools must be seen to be gaining the most number of university places; they must be seen to have the greatest proportions of Form 5 and Form 6 graduation in comparison to their competitors. If schools' results are poor in these respects then they lose enrolments. This exerts a significant constraint on change to the traditionalism found in many Macau schools, as it is traditionalism that has produced their putative success.
- 2 Schools are regarded largely as academic preparation, servicing institutions; students who are not academically strong are either not accepted into, or are excluded or expelled from many schools in an effort to keep the profile of those schools strong, e.g. in the eyes of parents. School exclusions and expulsions are significant problems in Macau.

- 3 Parental pressure on schools is considerable. In a market mentality schools whose self-declared results are low lose prestige and students. Indeed deliberate grade inflation/manipulation/adjustment is not unknown in some Macau secondary schools, and this is easy to operate because a public, standardised assessment and examination system does not operate in Macau. Schools simply *declare* that their students have graduated. Many parents in Macau value a traditional, facts-driven, testing-driven, homework-driven education, reinforced by didactic pedagogy and, indeed, they are prepared to pay considerable sums of money in the burgeoning industry of private lessons to buttress up this system, using private lessons to follow-up on poor teaching in the schools.
- 4 Many teachers are under considerable pressure from parents, senior teachers, principals and colleagues *not* to change the system. In an environment in which most teachers are on yearly contracts, coupled with a widespread command-and-control mentality of senior managers and principals in Macau schools (and principals in this largely private education system control contract renewal), disagreeing with a principal or senior teacher can lead to the non-renewal of contracts, so teachers remain silent and obedient, regardless of what they feel.
- 5 Macau's education system witnessed inertia for many years. Since the handover of Macau from Portugal to China in 1999 the Education Department has attempted to make some interventions in its schools (just over 6 per cent of the total of schools), but, in the face of such a large private sector, it is comparatively powerless to intervene. There are structural, systemic problems in Macau, such as class size, a finite education budget (e.g. for capital building costs and teachers' salaries if class sizes are to reduce), and limited space for school building. Many schools in Macau are large (up to 8,000 students, with very many between 2,000–4,000 students), and their size militates against change. Further, if only one school changes its policies and practices to improve then it still leaves the other schools untouched; the only school to risk falling rolls will be the one that has changed. Other schools will simply be parasitic on that school.
- 6 Macau is a developing state. The government-declared imperative is for modernisation and development. Perhaps like other developing countries, Macau's situation has to deal with priorities in order. *First* is the provision of universal education, and Macau does not have *de facto* universal free education (regardless of the *de jure* access to free education) as so many parents rely on private school provision, for which they pay fees. Free education only exists if choice between private and public education is realistic. *Second* is the provision of the necessary infrastructure of support and administration of education, and Macau does not have several important tiers of educational support infrastructures, e.g. fully developed initial teacher education for all areas of schooling and in-service provision, local co-ordination, inspection, advisory, examination, and other services (e.g. psychological services and social services). *Third* is the provision of adequate expertise in its teachers, in terms of subject knowledge, school curricula, pedagogy, assessment, psychology of learning etc., and Macau still employs teachers with no formal teacher training. *Fourth* is the provision of a locally relevant curriculum, and Macau still relies on curricula and resources from outside Macau, which are not entirely relevant to Macau. *Fifth*

Macau's education practices are burdened with paperwork, the effects of which are to render teachers unable to lift their heads higher than their immediate circumstances – it is survival rather than development. *Sixth*, Macau's education system is largely regarded as a service industry for employment and higher education, i.e. to serve an economically modernising agenda for Macau. Liberal humanism is relegated to leisure time pursuits.

- 7 Teacher education in Macau is of mixed quality. At the time of writing there is no formal requirement for secondary school teachers to have received any formal initial teacher training, and many secondary schools employ untrained teachers, most, though not all of who hold a subject degree. Steps have been taken to address this situation by the Education Department in Macau in terms of seeking to require all teachers to have received initial teacher education, but the sole public provider of secondary teacher education in Macau currently does not run initial teacher education courses for all school subjects, so any requirement for total initial teacher education is unenforceable. Coupled with a quite aggressive localisation policy for the workforce, the effects of which are to prevent high quality expatriate teachers from coming to Macau schools and therefore to recruit into Macau's schools teachers who, themselves, have come up through the existing Macau system as students and so may not have been exposed to alternative ways of thinking about education, and it is not difficult to see that reproduction of questionable quality is almost unavoidable.
- 8 Though the localisation policy exists strongly, nevertheless many teachers (e.g. of English) in Macau are Filipino and Filipina, and their residency in Macau depends on their employment contract, so they will not challenge a system that keeps them in work and enables them to support their families in the Philippines.
- 9 The Confucian ethic of respect for one's seniors, and acceptance of, and compliance with their decisions is deep-seated in Macau. The consequences of this are that seniors' views are either to be accepted by teachers or teachers should leave the school, i.e. by self-selection or termination of contract.
- 10 The Confucian ethic of respect for seniority and compliance couples with respect for family's wishes such that students not only have little right to question teachers, but, if they fail to do well in school, this is a matter of family disgrace, so there is considerable pressure to achieve. Student motivation is largely extrinsic, often far-removed from learner-centred engagement with the curriculum, and maybe currently holds little sway in teachers' decision-making. Learned helplessness is strong, as spoon-feeding is the order of the day for teaching in many subjects in the curriculum.
- 11 Entrance requirements for higher education in Macau are frequently low. If students can enter the local university so easily then the pressure for high academic achievement is reduced.
- 12 Schools in Macau are still very largely dominated by 'producer capture' (schools and teachers operating in their own interests rather than in the interests of their consumers) and very limited public accountability. Though schools are sensitive to parental pressure for facts-driven, didactic methodologies, they still largely

dictate to parents the schools' aims, curricula, methodology, assessment, management, decision-making and activities,. Parents are actively discouraged from coming into school; if they complain or question then a frequent school response is an invitation to take their child to another school. Parents' voices and views are not listened to, not heard, or not raised. In the Macau situation, in which schools can choose students rather than *vice versa*, and where student places in many secondary schools are limited, producer capture is powerful.

The effect of these factors is to reinforce a closed system of education, which is challengeable but largely unchallenged in Macau. There are very many pressures on teachers in Macau *not* to question the system. If one couples this with the Chinese characteristic of respect for seniority and the rights of seniors to direct the juniors (and I am not seeking to stereotype here), it is not difficult to provide an explanation for the inertia and questionable practice that may exist in Macau.

Within schools, a widely reported phenomenon is of a compliance culture for teachers and students. Not only are many secondary schools highly hierarchical, but also non-senior members of staff are expected neither to take policy decisions nor to challenge them. Many school principals operate a command-and-control mentality, however benevolent. There appears to be a lack of will amongst many senior staff for changes (and senior managers are the decision-makers), be this because of parental pressure, the significance of keeping face in public and in private within schools (and the Chinese culture of face-gaining, face-giving, face-saving, face-losing and face-keeping is very powerful in Macau), the press for university entrance success, or for other reasons. The implication here is that teachers' apparent acquiescence is a deeply conditioned and daily-reinforced response to their work situation.

The culture of not losing face, coupled with a strong culture of compliance, impact significantly on students, e.g. they are not used to 'having a voice' in a culture which tells them that their role is to listen, receive, conform, and be passive and obedient.

It appears that many of the characteristics of Popper's open society are not being addressed in schools in Macau, and Macau is not preparing its school students for membership of an open society. Popper's challenge is unsettling, for it requires educators in Macau to break with the culture of compliance (which too easily leads to complacency), and passive obedience at all levels; compliance and democracy are uncomfortable bedfellows. Teachers, textbooks, managers, students, all are fallible. If the open society is to be realised then a totalitarian, closed educational regime must be broken; critique and debate have to be cultivated in schools, and at all levels. Education is marked by an opening of minds, not their closure, active engagement, not passive reproduction, transformation not transmission. Closed minds are no preparation for an open society.

References

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