

# What's Happening to Education?

FIVE LESSONS FROM  
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

SIMON BURNHAM and NICKY PHILLIPS

SOLENT PSYCHOLOGY

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## PREFACE

Educational psychologists earn their living by answering questions. They are invariably requests for help, made by people who have problems that need solutions. The questions range very widely from the carefully worded and formally prepared to the short, pithy and spontaneous; from specific concerns about skills or behaviour to broader issues about research, identity, education policy and wellbeing. In this book we answer some of the questions that we are most frequently asked by the people we work with: parents and carers, children and young people, teachers, headteachers, teaching assistants, adult clients, students, and other education, health and care professionals.

Between us, we have worked for a total of over 40 years as practitioner psychologists. In that time, we estimate we have met and worked with 8,000 children and 10,000 parents, carers and adult clients. We have had 18,000 problem-solving and progress-review discussions with teachers, teaching assistants and other professionals in schools, preschools and colleges; carried out 6,000 lesson observations; made 2,000 home visits; and taught and given presentations to 10,000 students, participants in training courses and delegates at conferences. It is in these contexts that the questions that make up the core of this book have been asked, by people with a reasonable expectation that we might know the answers and be able to help them. We have grouped them under five chapter headings here, from which the book gets its subtitle, because some thematic analysis suggested to us patterns embedded in both the questions and the answers.

The title of the book itself is not a question we are often asked directly, but we think it's a good summary of the book's contents. The title should be

read as a neutral question; it is not a cry of fashionable despair. In the many years that we have been regular visitors to a wide range of schools and other settings the quality of the experience offered to children in the 'average' classroom has remained on an upward trajectory – this is a rising tide that is certainly lifting all boats. It has been a long time since either of us has seen a pupil leave a lesson in a mainstream secondary school by opening a window and climbing down a drainpipe, or indeed since we have been offered wine when we've joined a senior managers' staff meeting. None of our school visits now begins with a hunt because no one can find the child we are due to meet, and we no longer start any of our assessments of children in primary schools by helping to coax them down from the roof. It's in the nature of our work that we are often witnesses to some of the most extraordinary and difficult situations schools deal with, and we regularly see excellent practice but the challenges schools face are of course considerable and never-ending, which is what this book is mainly about.

The range of the questions we address is an indication of other peoples' curiosity and the complexity of education as a topic, which conceals under a relatively mild-mannered label a lively and restless mix of politics, history, philosophy, science, sociology and psychology, that rules almost nothing out and practically everything in. This is the context in which we work. We have written our answers in the conversational language that we use in our work, so when we say 'we', we are sometimes referring only to ourselves and sometimes making a more general observation about the society or group in which we live and work; the context should make this clear. When we say 'you', we are addressing the reader and for clarity's sake we have written our responses as if you had asked the questions, as indeed you may have in some cases. Although a book gives us the opportunity to provide somewhat longer and more detailed answers, we have tried to write as if we were taking part in a discussion, not delivering a lecture. This has been easier with some answers than with others, but to preserve the conversational tone we have avoided references to specific research or the use of footnotes in the main chapters and kept this material, as well as sources for further reading and exploration, in the corresponding Notes section for each chapter. In other words, we haven't set out to write a textbook and we've prioritised the needs of readers who ask questions because they want to get things done. In fact we hope that giving some prominence to practice-based evidence will ensure that our views are more interesting and useful than they would have been if we had merely repeated some of the received wisdom and well-thumbed literature in the areas we cover. We don't expect our answers to be construed as definitive – they are *contributions* to debates about complex issues – but they are honest ones based on our experience as well as our knowledge of the relevant research.

Young psychologists are taught to always be mindful that *everything happens*



*in a context* – that they must be aware of the interacting factors surrounding the particular ‘thing’, invariably a person or a group, that they are interested in. This is in many respects a common sense approach – a person being threatened will behave differently to one being welcomed – but identifying which factors in the environment might be having the greatest influence on a person’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour is self-evidently not always a straightforward matter. We’ve therefore given this perspective a chapter of its own, and we start the book with an introduction in which we identify and discuss some of the contextual factors that we believe have to be acknowledged and understood if the questions we are asked and the answers we provide are to make sense.

The first of these factors uses a borrowed term that has been in the social science literature for some time – the notion that some social problems are ‘wicked’ ones: stubborn, slippery and divisive issues that are highly resistant to consensus definitions and solutions. Politics thrives under these conditions and science seeks to eliminate them. Social science is an attempt to establish facts under the kinds of circumstances that are least likely to provide them, and much of our work as educational psychologists requires us to join people in their efforts to find solutions to wicked problems. Dyslexia and intelligence testing are both wicked problems, and we address both in different parts of the book.

We also identify what we call ‘disruptive’ trends in some aspects of ordinary, contemporary social life, and here we have deliberately appropriated a familiar word sometimes used to describe children and young people and instead applied it to the circumstances in which they live. The trends we discuss are natural shifts in norms and behaviours that all social groups experience over time, and we identify some of them as disruptive here only because we have seen them effect quite rapid changes in behaviours and relationships in education settings and in families. Change is invariably disruptive even if the direction of that change is broadly welcomed, and we argue here that these trends are both the causes and consequences of reasonable attempts to balance the freedoms and entitlements of individuals with the requirements of the groups within which they live, learn and work. We assume this to be an iterative, never-ending task and much of what we have written throughout this book is simply a report on the current progress, as we see it, of this balancing act in education and family settings.

Finally in our introductory chapter, we provide a brief overview of the profession of educational psychology to underscore the manner in which it has grown and changed in a pragmatic fashion in response to the questions its practitioners have typically been asked and the problems it has been asked to solve.

We hope what we’ve written will be of value to readers who consult or wish to consult educational psychologists, as many of the issues they raise are

included here. Those who simply wish to find out more about the profession should find something of value in the questions as well as the answers we provide. We also hope that readers who are interested in education but not in educational psychology will be persuaded by our arguments that it has something interesting and useful to say on a range of issues that go beyond what is usually seen as its core constituency.