Education as a Moral Practice

RICHARD PRING
University of Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT  The interest in moral education has focused largely on the teaching of morality or on nurturing moral qualities and virtues or on the “moral atmosphere” of the school; but little, comparatively speaking, has been written about education itself as essentially a moral practice. Failure, in this respect, has damaging results. First, the practice of education goes adrift from its moral roots — and serves particular ends such as economic well-being or citizenship as conceived by those in power. Secondly, the programmes of moral or personal and social education are isolated from the moral context in which they make sense. These issues are addressed in the lecture.

1. Introduction

It is 23 years since Lawrence Kohlberg addressed a conference at Leicester University. It had a profound influence on many who attended the conference, and upon me in particular. The work of Kohlberg and his colleagues brought together a rigorous research agenda with a carefully thought-out philosophical position within the area of moral development. Furthermore, it saw the close connection between the individual efforts of teachers (carefully informed by a research-based pedagogy) and the wider social context and ethos of the school. Hence, the research on, and the practice within, the “Just Community School”. In an age where these connections are too frequently missing—where teachers are blamed for educational failings as though the moral climate of school or system have no relevance or where “effectiveness” is pursued in the absence of educational ideals or moral purposes—it is refreshing to recall an age when philosophy, psychology and sociology were brought together in an “interdisciplinary colloquium” which the AME so conscientiously tries to promote.

Of course, the Kohlberg enterprise has not been without its critics, but I take that as a compliment rather than as cause for rejection. Knowledge and understanding grow through criticism. What was articulated then (the stages of moral development, the identification of the “logic” to the moral thinking which characterised the deliberations of young people at different ages, the painstaking attempts to find measurable indicators, the analysis of such key concepts as “fairness” and “universalisable principles”, the location of moral development within a mainstream...
philosophical tradition, the interlinking of rational deliberation with dispositions to appropriate action, the need to embody the values of individual morality into the morality of the school) remain the touchstones of further theorising, research and practical development. All knowledge is provisional, but it is a sign of the strength of the foundation studies that they need constantly to be returned to for further inspiration.

It is within that spirit, therefore, that I write this lecture. The main theme is this. The aims and practice of moral education, as inspired by Kohlberg and his colleagues, should not be confined to a section of the curriculum—as though but one of the fragments which makes up the total mosaic. Rather are such aims and practice central to what I would regard as an “educational practice”. Indeed, I shall argue that education itself is a moral practice, part of the “humane studies” or humanities rather than the social sciences. Ideally the “practice” should be in the hands of moral educators (who themselves should manifest the signs of moral development) rather than in the hands of managers, trainers, or “deliverers” of a curriculum. The fact that increasingly (as I shall illustrate) the language of education is one of managing, training and delivering serves to emphasise the urgency of my thesis.

The danger of not recognising this is twofold.

First, the actual practice of education (the rituals of daily schooling, the assemblies and classes, the rules and regulations, the purposes served, the sponsorships sought, the acceptance of outside pressures and instructions) becomes detached from a moral perspective. There remains no driving and unifying ideal, no coherent set of values from which to engage morally and critically with the powerful agencies which seek to use “education” for their own material or political ends.

Secondly, and closely connected with the point above, one drives a clear logical distinction between the ends of education and the means of achieving those ends. This is illustrated amply in so much literature about, and research into, the “effective school”. Severing educational from moral discourse results in a theory of effectiveness which ignores the question “Effective for what?” But moral activities require no justification beyond themselves. “Justice” may be adopted or carefully engineered, as the most effective way of winning support, but it no longer is (though no doubt resembling) the virtue of justice. “Educational practice” brings together a wide range of activities which embody the values and the moral aims which they are intended to promote. The ends, as it were, are inseparable from the means of attaining them. The enhancement of “rationality” as a distinctively human quality (or of justice and fairness) is embodied in the very procedures and subject matter of teaching.

In pursuing this thesis, I divide the paper into four sections:

1. I shall start with two examples of teaching.
2. I shall then bring out from these two examples the moral characteristics of the activity of teaching.
3. The significance of this is then illustrated through the current impoverishment of the concept of teaching, and through the interest now being shown in citizenship education.

4. Finally, by way of conclusion, I shall point to the need to preserve “teaching as a moral practice”.

2. Two Examples of Teaching

In the ancient synagogue of Prague, now a museum to the victims of the Holocaust, there are some remarkable examples of poetry and of paintings of children aged 10–16, very few of whom were to survive. The children had been deported to Terezina, a garrison town about 50 kilometres from Prague. The conditions were appalling, and there was a daily coming and going of prisoners—to destinations which could only be guessed at.

A teacher, Fiedl Brandejs, somehow managed to keep these children together in a makeshift schoolroom. She was a brilliant art teacher and she insisted upon high standards of technique, perspective, use of colour even within these conditions. Art, as anything else, had its standards, and these had to be as rigidly applied. Activities, after all, are characterised by the standards of truth, correctness, validity, appropriateness without which there would be no struggle to improve, no searching for the most precise account, no refinement of one's feelings as they are embodied in one's best endeavours.

These children saw what the adults did not see—butterflies outside the window, rainbows in the sky, green fields beyond the gates, merry-go-rounds on which children played, dinner tables for family and friends, autumn leaves blown by the wind. On the other hand, their poetry gave a different picture—fear, sadness, unbelief at the inhumanity of their conditions.

The Butterfly

The last, the very last,
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.
Perhaps if the sun’s tears would sing
against a white stone ...

Such, such a yellow
Is carried lightly “way up high”.
It went away I’m sure because it wished
to kiss the world goodbye.

For seven weeks I’ve lived in here,
Penned up inside this ghetto
But I have found my people here.
The dandelions call to me
And the white chestnut candles in the court.
Only I never saw another butterfly.
That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don’t live in here,
In the ghetto.

Pavel Friedmann, b. 7.1.21; d. 29.9.44

None the less, the human spirit in one sense grew, not as a result of their poetry and painting, but through and in it. The arts were, to use Susan Langer’s phrase, “embodied meaning”. That embodiment of meaning, that struggle to make sense, was made possible by an inspired teacher. But in one sense that teacher was not seeing herself to be doing anything exceptional. She was, through the arts, enabling those young people to make sense, to refine their feelings, to embody the human emotions of hope and sadness, love and fear. She remained an educator to the end. However, we must note one key feature of this educational task, namely, the transaction that took place between each of those children and herself who, as it were, matched the particular situation of the young people (their feelings and aspirations) to those cultural resources which she, the teacher, was able to make accessible. In the absence of language, one cannot make sense, and the arts are a kind of language which makes that possible (see Frankova & Povolná, 1993).

The second example is as follows. In England in the early 1970s, the school leaving age was raised from 15 to 16 years. Great was the anxiety among teachers and the community. Reluctant learners, disillusioned adolescents, alienated young people would hardly welcome yet more of what they had clearly failed at. One proposed solution was the provision of vocational courses—learning the skills of plumbing and decorating would (it was thought) be seen to be more relevant to their future and thus more motivating.

It was, however, the vision of Lawrence Stenhouse and, indeed, of a very fine civil servant, Derek Morrell that, properly taught, the humanities and the arts were as relevant to such young people, and could be perceived as such by them, as any vocational studies. The concerns of young people, as they seriously reflect and argue about the present and future are the very stuff of literature, drama, history and the arts—the use of violence, the prevalence of injustice and poverty, the relations between the sexes, the imposition of authority, the prevalence of racism, the fear of war, the consequences of jealousy or revenge or ambition, the pursuit of nationalism. Furthermore, the complex values which permeate the discussion and understanding of such issues divide society. There is little consensus. It is a test of the maturity of a society or a social group that they can address such issues openly, with passion certainly but with a respect for those who have different views.

The Humanities Curriculum Project sought to offer the means whereby the humanities, the arts and the social studies might provide the resources and the evidence upon which the young people might explore those matters of deep personal concern on which, however, there was often disagreement between them and their parents, friends and acquaintances. The essence of the curriculum lay in this exploration, seeking answers even when there were not certain conclusions, and testing out those tentative conclusions against evidence (see Stenhouse, 1975).
The classroom, therefore, was the arena in which the teachers were able to share their common humanity with the pupils and their common uncertainty in the face of significant and personal problems. Hence, the teacher's main task was to mediate to the young people the products of what others had said and achieved through the humanities, social studies and the arts—the different "voices in the conversation of mankind". Crucial to such mediation was the carefully structured discussion of issues in which differences of opinion would be respected, minority views protected, rationality promoted and discussants helped to defend their arguments in the light of evidence.

Central to the justification of the humanities and the arts is their relevance to the young people's understanding of their humanity and in particular of the values through which that humanity is defined. That understanding leads to a recognition of the way in which values permeate not only the provisional conclusions reached but also the procedures through which they are always open to scrutiny, criticism and further development.

In these two examples the teacher was helping the young people to make sense, to develop a serious and authentic response to the real, sometimes threatening and practical situations in which they found themselves. This "making sense" is not something which can be "imparted"; it requires deliberation, reflection, reconciliation of conflicting views, solutions to value conflicts. Nor is it the preserve of the academically able, for I am not talking of anything esoteric. The humanities, not skills training or vocational courses, are in this respect central to the education of all young people as they are deliberating seriously about decisions and issues which concern them deeply.

3. Teaching as a Moral Practice

To teach is to engage intentionally in those activities which bring about learning. Thus, I can teach by example, by instruction, by explaining, by structuring experience, by writing a suitable text. All sorts of activities can count as teaching. What they have in common is (a) the intention that learning occurs, (b) some connection between what the teacher says and does and that which the student is intended to learn, and (c) some connection between what the teacher says and does and the mental state of the learner. Thus, a person could not be said to be teaching if the lecture on nuclear physics made no connection with the level of understanding of the young audience or if the content of the lecture made no logical connection with the intended learning outcomes.

However, this is a rather dessicated definition of a "teaching act". Teachers are members of a profession. As such they have been initiated into a social practice with its own principles of conduct and values. These are frequently implicit, but they embody a commitment to helping young people to learn those things which are judged to be worthwhile. Of course, views differ on what is worthwhile, or what sort of books or activities are more worthwhile than others. Teaching, then, reflects the very moral divisions of the wider society—and teachers, in making choices about the
content of learning or about the ways of promoting learning, are inevitably caught up in the moral debate.

Although the social activity of teaching inevitably reflects the moral divisions within society, that activity is concerned with the learning of those concepts, ideas, principles, understandings which enables the young person to make sense of the world. There may be many other worthwhile things to do in life; but the values that teaching is centrally concerned with are those of understanding or making intelligible the experiences one has and of making accessible yet further understanding and experiences.

Such “making sense” has, of course, many dimensions—those of the physical world made intelligible through the basic concepts of science, those of the social world, those of the aesthetic world and those of the moral—the values and ideals through which certain actions and styles of life are evaluated and seen to be worthwhile.

Such valuing would take seriously the understandings, perceptions, valuing of others—whether through literature, drama, history, theology and so on. These are embedded within the traditions we have inherited, constantly refined through criticism and new experiences. The profession of teaching is the custodian of such traditions—not in a clear or inert sense (not as archivists or librarians), but in the sense of critical engagement. The teacher, in helping the learner to make sense, both respects what is inherited and at the same time helps the learner to engage critically with such a tradition.

Jacob Neusmer in his book *Conservative, American and Jewish* (1993) expresses admirably the essential nature of those moral traditions and the custodial role of educators in relation to them.

Civilization hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding (Sacks, 1997, p. 173).

Teaching, therefore, is more than a set of specific actions in which a particular person is helped to learn this or that. It is an activity in which the teacher is sharing in a moral enterprise, namely, the initiation of (usually) young people into a worthwhile way of seeing the world, of experiencing it, of relating to others in a more human and understanding way. In so doing, it is a transaction between the impersonal world of ideas embodied within particular texts and artefacts and the personal world of the young person as he or she struggles to make sense, searches for value, engages in discovery, finds ideals worth striving for, encounters ideas. That transaction between the impersonal and the personal is conducted through the interpersonal relation of teacher with learner. Whatever the temptation of government to manage learning (thinking “in business terms”), there can be no avoidance of that transaction—of that essentially moral judgement of the teacher over what is worth learning and what are the worthwhile ways of pursuing it.
4. The Impoverishment of Teaching

How we see and understand the world depends on the concepts through which experience is organised. Those concepts are “embodied” within the words, language and metaphors which we have inherited and use. Change that language and you change the way of conceiving things; you change the evaluations as well as the descriptions, the relationship which you enter into as well as goals which you are seeking.

In its attempts to transform the teaching profession in the United Kingdom into a more efficient and effective force, the government sought advice from Allen Odden, whose book (with Kelly) *Paying Teachers for What They Know and Do* provides the basis for doing this (Odden & Kelly, 1997). Odden and Kelley argue that the traditional way of paying and rewarding teachers is out-dated. Management and compensation in other employmentbs reflect much more what the employees can do and have achieved in terms of devolved responsibility and remuneration. Teaching should be rather like that: greater recognition, through an appropriate funding mechanism and through the devolving of management responsibility, of what teachers can do and have achieved. There is, in their view, an urgency to move in that direction because:

the tax-paying public, the business community, and policy-makers still pressure the education system to produce results and to link pay—even school finance structures, more broadly—to performance (p. 11).

The pressure arises from the felt need to raise standards, to improve “productivity” in relation to these standards, and to hold teachers accountable (both positively where they have succeeded and negatively where they have failed) for their professional work. To enable this to happen, there needs to be much greater precision in what teachers are expected to achieve—productivity targets; but this in turn requires the setting of reasonable targets—the clear statement of what good teachers of subject X and level Y should be able to achieve. There should be professional development to enable teachers achieve these targets. To help with that, the British government imported further advice from the United States. This time the firm Hay/McBer was paid £4 million (or $6 million) to spell out what were the characteristics of a good teacher, thereby enabling appropriate teaching targets to be set (Hay/McBer, 2000).

Odden and Kelley’s argument has been influential both within and outside the United States. Certainly it has had a profound effect upon the British government which, with the advice of Odden, is now swiftly introducing “performance-related pay” to schools in England and Wales. The government Green Paper, *Teachers: meeting the challenge of change* (DfEE, 1998), followed by a “technical consultation document” on pay and performance management, spell out a new pay and reward structure, connected positively with a “new vision of the profession”, including professional development.

The performance-based management of education takes on a distinctive language through which to describe, assess and evaluate an “educational practice” and
thus the professional engagement within it. It draws upon new metaphors, and through these metaphors the concept of the profession of teaching changes. Teachers and “their managers” perceive what they are doing differently. Hence, according to the civil servant responsible for implementing these changes, we must “think in business terms”—and thus draw upon the language and practices of the business world. That means that we look at the changes for the improvement of standards as a “quality circle” in which one defines the product, identifies the means for producing that product, empowers the deliverer, measures the quality, empowers the client and develops partnership between the clients, the deliverers and the managers of the system such that there might be a continuous review of targets and means for achieving those targets. The “product” is defined in terms of a detailed, outcomes-related curriculum. The “process” (or “means” for reaching the targets) is spelt out in terms of “effectiveness” in the production of this “product”. The changed management structures “empower the deliverers” of the “process” to satisfy the needs of the respective “stakeholders”. The “measurement of the quality” of the “product” is provided through a detailed assessment (a “testing against product specification”). “The empowering of the clients” comes about through the creation of choice, which is achieved through the availability of public data on effectiveness and through competitiveness amongst the “deliverers of the product” so that the clients can exercise choice. And “partnerships” are created for “stakeholders”, “deliverers” and “clients” to work together in developing the “effective processes” for producing the “product” (which is generally defined by someone external to the “process”). The management of the whole process is conducted by the cascading down from above of “productivity targets”.

The language of education through which we are asked to “think in business terms”—the language of inputs and outputs, of value-addedness, of performance indicators and audits, of products and productivity, of educational clients and curriculum deliverers—constitutes a new way of thinking about the relation of teacher and learner. It employs different metaphors, different ways of describing and evaluating educational activities; but, in so doing, it changes those activities into something else. It transforms the moral context in which education takes place and is judged successful or otherwise.

The effect of this new language is not a matter for empirical enquiry alone, for that which is to be enquired into has become a different thing. So mesmerised have we become with the importance of “cost efficiency”, “value for money”, “productivity” and “effectiveness” that we have failed to see that the very nature of the enterprise—of an “educational practice”—has been redefined. Once the teacher “delivers” someone else’s curriculum with its precisely defined “product”, there is little room for that transaction in which the teacher, rooted in a particular cultural tradition, responds to the needs of the learner. When the learner becomes a “client” or “customer”, lost is the traditional apprenticeship in which the students are initiated into the community of learners. When the “product” is the measurable “targets” on which “performance” is “audited”, then little significance is attached to the “struggle to make sense” which characterises the learning of what is valuable.

Think, however, in terms of a different set of metaphors. Oakeshott
(1972), in his essay “Education: its engagement and its frustrations”, speaks of education as the introduction of young people to a world of ideas which are embodied in the “conversations between the generations of mankind”. Through that introduction the young learner comes to learn and appreciate the voices of poetry, of philosophy, of history, of science. There is an engagement with ideas, a struggle to make sense, a search for value in what often appears dull and mundane, an excitement in intellectual and aesthetic discovery, an entry to a tradition of thinking and criticism. As in all good conversations (especially one where there is such an engagement with ideas and where the spirit of criticism prevails), one cannot define in advance what the end of that conversation or engagement will or should be. Indeed, the end is but the starting point for further conversations.

Teaching, therefore, becomes a “transaction” between the teacher and the learner in which the teacher, as in the case of Fiedl Brandejs, mediates the different voices of poetry and of art, to those who are seeking to take part. That conversation between the generations, embedded within literature, drama, oral traditions and narratives, artefacts, social practices, works of art and so on speak to the needs and aspirations of the young people, but at different levels and in different ways. The art and skill of the teacher lie in making the connections between the impersonal world of what is bequeathed to us in libraries and so on and the personal world of the young people, thereby creating an interpersonal world of informed and critical dialogue. The fruit of such efforts will be reflected in thoughts, beliefs and valuing which are diverse, unpredictable and sometimes slow to mature.

The problems are reflected in the latest attempts to bring citizenship onto the curriculum (Crick Report, 1998). At first glance, this seems eminently sensible. To live intelligently and responsibly in a democracy requires certain skills, qualities, attitudes and understandings. To participate in government requires an inclination to do so and some understanding of the issues. It requires, too, the ability to engage with other people, whom one might disagree with, in attempting to arrive at agreed solutions to problems. Citizenship would seem, therefore, to be the very sort of “subject” which ought to be taught in schools. And so citizenship will soon be a compulsory part of the curriculum, and teachers are being trained specially to teach it.

According to Crick (Crick & Porter 1978), whose report provided the basis for this policy, “citizenship” is “the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to make a man or woman informed about politics and able to participate in public life and groups of all kinds, both occupational and voluntary, and to recognise and tolerate diversities of political and social values”. The concepts which the students of citizenship need to master are those of “power”, “freedom”, “rights”, “justice”—what Crick earlier referred to as the key words of “political literacy”, without which one would simply not be able to understand the political life and context within which one lives. There needs also to be, of course, relevant knowledge, about government, for instance. There are procedural skills, too, concerned with discussion and argument.

However, upon reflection it would seem that the “outcomes” of a citizenship course are the very skills, understandings and qualities which should arise from the
study of the humanities and the social studies. In Bruner’s (1966) *Man: a course of study*, learning was structured around three major questions: What makes us human? How did we become so? How might we become more so? Answers to these questions are, of course, the very stuff of the humanities, the social studies and the arts, as student and teacher explore together, albeit in the light of what others have said, what it is to be human. Such an exploration (seeking solutions to problems, listening to advice and even criticism, articulating one’s views in the light of evidence) requires certain procedural skills and attitudes towards argument and evidence. It is difficult to disassociate such qualities and skills from what we pick out as an *educational* practice within the arts, humanities and social studies or from what we would recognise to be as a moral enterprise.

Picking out citizenship as a subject in its own right reflects a failure to recognise this. It is to accept a limited and impoverished understanding of teaching. It fails to see it as a “practice” whereby young people (mainly) are introduced to the qualities and understandings which we have inherited (through literature, drama, history, the arts, etc.) and which prepare the next generation of young people to live a fully human life both as individuals and as citizens. It looks at the rest of the curriculum (now “delivering targets” set by government) and finds that such a curriculum is not helping young people address the moral and social issues, questions of personal identity, matters of value on which society is divided but which need to be tackled. In other words, it fails to see that all teaching, when conceived as a moral practice concerned with values and conceptions of what it is to be human, necessarily is a preparation for citizenship broadly conceived.

5. Preserving Teaching as a Moral Practice

Teaching can be very narrowly conceived as any intentional attempt to impart learning—the learning of specific skills or particular facts. Not all teaching is, therefore, necessarily educational; but teachers are, generally speaking, members of a profession. They have a role within the wider society of helping young people to learn those things which society (whether the civil society or that of religions or social groups) believes to be worthwhile. The teaching of literature and the sciences, of drama and the arts, of history and social studies assume that these studies somehow enhance the quality of life. Such teaching draws upon the rich cultural resources with which they are familiar through their own education, training and experience and endeavours to make them accessible to the students for whom they are regarded as valuable.

In that sense there are two levels of narrative. There is the “impersonal” level—the narratives within science or history or literature wherein ideas are preserved, developed, criticised within a public tradition. But there is the “personal” level at which young people try to make sense of the world and the relationships around them and at which they find, or do not find, valuable forms of life to which they can give allegiance. This personal narrative is where young people seek to understand who and what they are, partly, of course, in relation to other people and to the wider society. Teaching, as illustrated in the work of Friedl Brandejs or in the
Humanities Curriculum Project or in Bruner’s *Man: a course of study*, is where these two narratives are brought together, and it is the mark of the good and inspired teacher that this is enabled to happen. Teaching, then, enables that learning to take place in which the young person finds values in a range of activities which are of human importance and do so through being put in touch with what others have said, done and achieved. They become part of a wider learning community in which questions of value have been and continue to be explored. They learn that there is no end to this exploration.

Teaching, therefore, requires the recognition that all young people, even though academically not very able, have the capacity for what can be described as “moral seriousness”: that is, the capacity to think seriously about their relationships, about the kind of future (including jobs) they want to pursue, about loyalties and commitments. Both developing and supporting that sense of “seriousness” seem to be a central task of the profession of teaching. It requires, on one hand, roots within those traditions of thought and experience through which such questions have been posed and explored by others elsewhere. But it requires, too, a respect for the authentic voice and feelings of the young persons as they struggle to make sense of their place within society. In making the connections between the two levels of narrative, the teacher provides the wider perspective, questions the perhaps rather limited vision, points out other possibilities. In doing so the teacher is, through the different elements within the overall curriculum, deliberating about the ends and purposes of education, not simply about the most effective means of attaining someone else’s ends.

The danger is that, as we adopt a very different language of teaching—a language which for the sake of increased productivity and improved standards as conceived by those who think in business terms—this essentially moral purpose and character of teaching will be lost. The role of the humanities and the arts will be diminished. Teaching will become a purely technical matter of hitting targets.

During the brief period when I met Kohlberg at Harvard, I was advised to visit a school in outer Boston whose principal had been much influenced by Kohlberg’s work. Moral education required a reappraisal of the moral practice of teaching, and this in turn required a reappraisal of the moral ethos of the school. The principal was reading poetry, which she had written at the age of 11 when parted from her mother and twin sister, to an attentive group of 17-year-old high school students. Again, it was through poetry that they, seriously and attentively, were seeking to make sense of aspects of being human which too often can be swept on one side.

It was a large school, with therefore a sizeable intake of new teachers every year. To these teachers, the principal wrote the following letter.

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.

Children poisoned by educated physicians.
Infants killed by trained nurses.
Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.
So, I am suspicious of education.
My request is: Help your students become human.
Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans.
Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

I wish to argue that what makes sense of the curriculum, in educational terms, is that it is the forum or the vehicle through which young people are enabled to explore seriously (in the light of evidence and argument) what it is to be human. Such an exploration has no end. That is why teaching should be regarded as a moral practice.

Correspondence: Professor Richard A. Pring, Director, University of Oxford, Department of Educational Studies, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, UK. Fax: 01 865 274027; E-mail: richard.pring@educational-studies.ox.ac.UK

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