

DAVID BUCKINGHAM

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INTERVIEWER: DEE MORGENTHALER

(Quote)

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#### BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID BUCKINGHAM

**David Buckingham** is currently Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, London University where he directs the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media. He has directed more than 20 externally funded research projects on these issues as well as been a consultant for bodies such as UNESCO, the United Nations, Ofcom, the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Institute for Public Policy Research. Additionally, he is the author and co-author or editor of over 20 books and approximately 200 articles and book chapters. Professor Buckingham has also been a Visiting Scholar at the Annenberg School for Communications, University of Pennsylvania, and a Visiting Professor at New York University as well as the Norwegian Centre for Child Research. He began his career as an English teacher in secondary school.

#### INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

*How did you become involved in media education?*

*What study do you have going on right now and how do you see your work continuing?*

*Do you think the field is moving in the right direction?*

*What do you want to see happen next in media education?*

(Interview Begins)

***DM: How did you become involved in media education?***

**DB:** I studied English at university, and I subsequently trained to be an English teacher in secondary school. Eventually I became what was called a “Media Resources Officer” which is a bit like what the U.S. would call a “Media Specialist,” but I think in the U.S. a Media Specialist is more like a librarian. What I was doing was a bit different. At the time I came into education, it was in the days of the Inner London Education Authority where education in London was run by a unified school district, which was much too radical and subsequently split up by Margaret Thatcher in the late 1980s. So you had quite a lot of things happening that were designed to encourage innovation in schools and having these Media Resources Officers, who would integrate media into the curriculum, acting as change agents in schools. These were mostly trained teachers who would work with teachers across the curriculum to develop media-based teaching materials. I am talking about the 1970s and it carried on until the 1980s.

I also became very involved in teaching media. Now, there had actually been media courses in the schools before, so I wasn’t coming in completely fresh but I ended up teaching specialist media studies courses for the top end of the secondary school, ages 14 and up which would be the equivalent to high school in the U.S. education system.

So how I got from English into media is an interesting question, actually. I studied English at Cambridge University, with as traditional an education in literary study as you can imagine. And I got to the end of it and was asking myself what the point of all of this was. What did it all add up to, in the end? Then I did a training course to teach and one of the issues I kept thinking about was how any of the stuff that I did in learning to teach English literature could be relevant to kids in an inner city school. I trained to teach in London. I suppose it was a combination of thinking about engaging working class inner city kids and their culture. There was also an element of personal interest and personal engagement. I grew up with television, and movies. I went through a period in the late ‘70s when I did a Master’s in Film Studies, which I did part-time while I was working in schools. So it was a combination of my education but also just a personal interest in studying and learning about media.

***DM: Did your interest have anything to do with the political climate of the ‘70s?***

**DB:** I think you can look at that time and see how media studies was considered a bit of a radical subject in the way that it challenged traditional forms of knowledge and pedagogy. And the book that I read at that time that influenced me was Len Masterman’s Teaching About Television which was published in 1980, which had a very radical, leftist view of what it was all

about. On one level, yes, there were radical, class politics about it but if you think about it in terms of the context of the time Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 and then we had 17 years of Tory government. In reality, you are talking about a massive swing to the right in the wider political climate. So you had wonderful, radical education ideas driven by, at least in the Inner London Education Authority, these wider radical politics when government policy was going much in the opposite direction.

I was only teaching media studies - and when I look at what is happening now, it's not so different. Education was shifting towards something that people disparagingly referred to as "cafeteria curriculum" -- a very "pick and mix" curriculum where kids could choose a range of different subjects, and media studies became one of those new subjects. The syllabus that I was teaching at the end of the 70s had already been implemented for quite a long time. All the innovation that happened at that point was at the school level. It was individual teachers in particular schools who could propose a course, and they would need to get that course validated by an examination board - a validating authority. It was actually very open and teachers had a considerable amount of autonomy to decide what they were going to teach. It was called a "mode-free syllabus" which meant that it was something that the teachers had control over. So, we devised it and then did the assessments. It was very much grassroots controlled by teachers. But we are talking about a time when teachers had considerable autonomy and all of that is gone.

Then we had a national curriculum in the late 1980s and then later the curriculum incorporated national strategies, testing, league tables etc. So, what you've seen since that time is increasing centralized control of government and a reduction in teacher autonomy. As things became more conservative, teaching became de-professionalized, with not much control over what they did.

### ***DM: Did the Media Technologist position disappear in schools?***

**DB:** I don't think that position exists anymore. I am not quite sure when that ceased to exist. But the big change in London was when Margaret Thatcher abolished the Inner London Education Authority. She also, very shortly after that, entirely abolished the Greater London Council which was a unitary authority for London similar to local school boards in the U.S. system. What happened was that London was split up into 12 districts, and the districts were then given control of the education in the according district. So all of the innovative work that the Inner London Education Authority was doing -- like these media resources jobs, and other teacher specialist positions -- had to disappear. So all of the support was wiped out by Thatcher at the end of the 1980s.

The national curriculum, followed by national testing came in under Thatcher and was then extended by Blair; it represented much more centralized control. The politics of it all have been very odd because what you had under Labor was an incredible amount of control; they wanted to determine not only what the teachers would teach but also how they would teach it. So they initiated the National Literacy Strategies, National Numeracy Strategies and various sorts of things which were very much about dictating from the center how teachers should be teaching literacy. It was very much back to the basics, all about syntax and phonics; this really prescriptive approach.

The teachers and schools were measured by national tests - we call them the SATs as well. The SATs meant that kids have tests upon entering school and exiting school, at the ages of 7, 11, 14, and at 16. But much more emphasis was placed on testing and also on the creation of League Tables which compared the schools based on the results of the tests.

***DM: What happens to schools that don't perform or teachers that don't perform well?***

**DB:** Basically, they get humiliated and punished due to such a thing called the "failing schools." The point of League Tables is to measure the test results and to show you broadly where middle class people send their children. It doesn't actually tell you how good the schools are. This is then reinforced by what many people may see as a very punitive inspection regime. You have inspectors that come into schools that are deemed to be a "failing school" and then all sorts of humiliation begin to take place. The management could be removed from the school or somehow the school could be publicly made to look bad. In turn, parents are going to be less likely to send their children to that school. So what you have is an increasing degree of polarization within the system.

***DM: It sounds a lot like Race to the Top or No Child Left Behind in the U.S.***

**DB:** Yes, there are lots of similarities between what has happened in the U.S. and what's happened in the U.K., yet it has happened on slightly different time scales and in slightly different ways. But the paradox now is that we had this period of incredible centralized control, but we have also had a marketization of the system as well. You have this idea that schools need to be competing for customers. And then you have the Tory's coming in - the new government - which is moving towards this odd mix of still very strong centralized control because they don't trust teachers. They can be very punitive. But at the same time they have this new system of so-called "free schools" which allows parents to set up their own schools very much like a charter school. So it has all vastly changed.

Last year I started doing a new research project looking at learning progression in media education. It is a big project and we are working in several schools outside of London. And I have had a real culture shock because although I have done work in schools fairly consistently, what I have tended to do is to go in and do focus groups with kids. But actually spending time in schools and in the classrooms and observing what is going on -- there is a lot that is very familiar and recognizable. What the teachers are doing in media studies is very familiar to me - the technology has changed but actually the basic principles and the concepts that people are using shows a lot of continuity with what I was doing. But the wider culture has been utterly changed.

The one difference between the U.S. and the U.K is that in the U.S. system, it has been very hard to get media education into the mainstream curriculum, so when people are looking for interesting things they are looking at after school settings, community neighborhood settings and so on. Whereas in the U.K., we have had media education as a separate subject in school for about 40 years. It has stayed in the curriculum but let's be clear - it is not a compulsory subject. It's been an element of English, and English is obviously a compulsory subject, and that has been there since the 60s. But media studies as a subject is always optional. What happens is that

children get to the age of 14 and are forced to specialize in a particular subject. At that point they drop some subjects and take up new subjects and then they specialize further when they reach the age of 16. So for 4 years of schooling they specialize in one subject and media studies has been one of those subjects. It is not necessarily offered in every school but I think it is increasingly being offered in many schools. Aside from the media elements that happens within the subject of English, those specialist courses like media studies are only optional.

***DM: Can you tell me more about the study you have going on right now and how you see your work continuing?***

**DB:** The project is called Developing Media Literacy and it is the first time I have ever had serious funding to do research about media education in the classroom. When I moved into teacher education, one of the first things I did was to offer continuing teacher education - what is called post graduate education. I first set up a teacher research group because one of the problems was that Len Masterman's theory of teaching and the picture that he painted was rather different from my experience as a teacher. Masterman talked about how he would radicalize students, yet my experience was actually that the students knew a lot more about this than we tended to give them credit for. Also, what happened in my classroom was not a process of radical conversion, and I didn't see myself as a sort of political evangelist in that sort of way. So what I wanted to do was to do research on the teachers who were teaching it to study their own practice.

Around 1990, there was a book that came out called Media Learning. This was the first study to really give some evidence as to what was happening in media classrooms, as opposed to what people said should be happening. I have had lots of research funding for studies about youth and media, but actual research about classrooms and teaching and learning had been really quite hard to generate.

So what we are doing in the Developing Media Literacy research is working with groups of teachers - and we are actually looking across the age range - from about 6 years through to year 11 and the 15-16 age range. We are working with the teachers to devise curriculum, teaching materials and classroom activities which they then implement in their classroom. The point is that you obviously don't teach the same thing to 6 year olds that you do with 16 year olds, but there is a shared core, with similar aims and often some similar materials. We want to be able to compare across the age range.

What we are really trying to get at is what kids of different ages are capable of understanding. And what you find is that younger kids are actually much more capable than you might have imagined. In many ways, younger kids can do a lot of the stuff that we have been trying to teach 14 year olds. Seven year olds can get quite a lot. If you provide media education in a systematic way over time, and didn't just leave it until secondary school but put it in the primary school as well -- if they did media education every year all the way through, what you would get at the end of it would be something that is quite challenging and complex, which is more than students are getting at the moment. Another part of this project is that we are in two very different locations. One is broadly white middle class; the other is much more working class and I think class differences are really crucial to be taken into consideration, because differences are quite

shocking both in the assumptions that teachers make about the kids but also in what is really possible. They are very different worlds. The teachers develop the curriculum with us.

***DM: When teachers are being trained in the U.K., is media literacy a part of their training?***

**DB:** Not really. A lot of the training has now been shifted into schools. When I started teacher education in the mid '80s, we actually had a lot of time with the student teachers. They would go off and do their teaching practice but actually they spent quite a lot of time in the university, and we were teaching both the basics of media studies but also how you teach media studies. At some point, more and more of their time is spent in school and there has been a feeling from the government and policy makers that it's people like us, the teachers, who give students these crazy ideas and we are dangerous. They want to shift the training more and more into the schools so the time that you have with students at university is less and less. When I started teaching, we had a specialist course for teachers who were going to be teachers of English and media studies. All the English teachers had a lot of time in courses on media studies. Now that course doesn't exist anymore. I also think that increasingly, there is less and less available to teachers now because it has all shifted into schools. And that is a problem.

So if you want to train to be a media studies teacher you have to come and be a part of the training - part of the master's course. Most of our energy goes towards running a master's program. You might have a tiny little taste of media education when you are doing your initial training, but if you want to do this as a specialist thing then you really have to come do a master's. We work with the British Film Institute (BFI) and run modules where the students can do them as free-standing courses, but they also build up towards a master's course. Largely those teachers are paying for themselves, and they are doing the work on their own time. And that is all part of the de-professionalization of teaching I was referring to. When I first went to work in the mid-1980s at the Institute of Education, we had a group of full-time students who were all teachers who had been given a year out of school to become specialist media teachers. They were challenging to teach; they really knew what they wanted. They were often people that had been teaching for quite a long time already, and it was a great opportunity for them to have that one year. Now that just does not happen anymore. Thankfully there are teachers that want to continue their studies but it has become harder and harder for teachers to get specialized courses like that.

***DM: Do you think the field is moving in the right direction?***

**DB:** I think we are in a paradoxical place. I mean, on one hand you could say that the kind of work that I was doing as a teacher in school in the 70s or in the early 80s -- that has become institutionalized. There are now very well recognized exam courses in media studies. Students can go to do media studies at university. It is often denigrated as being not a serious subject, but actually it is quite competitive to get into media studies and I think it is taken seriously as a subject by many people, but not by everybody. And that is still a struggle.

Conversely, you can say that media education has arrived and has its place in the curriculum. With younger kids it is part of English but it is still not happening independently in primary

schools. There are people talking about it, and people pushing at that, but it's not really sufficiently established or as established as I would like it to be in primary schools. But nevertheless, you could say media studies as a specialist subject is well established. On the other hand, you have the paradoxical presence of the regulators. If you have heard about Ofcom (the Office of Communications), the government passed a communications act in 2003 which established a new, converged regulator for media to promote media literacy. Now, what they thought media literacy was is not entirely clear. But there are people within Ofcom who *do* know what media literacy is. And that has been quite striking and surprising, gaining recognition of media literacy by government. One of the Culture Ministers under Labor, Tessa Jowell, said, "Media literacy is as important as math and science." So you had this very high-rank recognition of media literacy, while realizing that what they describe as media literacy is not quite what we mean - there is a debate to be had. You have people say... "Oh, what is media literacy? We don't know what it means," but the term has become much more widely recognized at a policy level. So there is one argument where you can say that media literacy is important, but there is still a struggle that goes on. And the struggle is about, "Is this serious? Is this an important area of study?" There are people who would like to denigrate media studies and see it as trivial and a waste of kids' time. I guess that has always been around and probably always will be around because there are people who find the whole idea really frightening.

I think the complicating factor is technology, which I have written an entire book about called Beyond Technology. There was a massive push towards technology in schools and I looked at that and compared it with when I was teaching in the late 70s and early 80s - struggling to do media production work, which for me was always the interesting thing. And you will find that Len Masterman was very negative about it; but for me that was the interesting stuff. I was trying to do it with clunky VHS videos and making animation mini-films. To me, creating and producing the media was the means to critically understanding the media; that was what it was all about. But it was a struggle because it was hard. Access to the technology was hard, technology was hard to handle.

Now we are in a completely different world. Today, seven year-olds can edit films on i-movie or any other program. And in our research they are doing that. There is a danger of them confusing media education with technology. People think that if they are doing things with technology then they are doing media education and they're not. What they are doing is a very instrumental use of technology which is very uncritical and unthinking. It is driven by technology hype - over-excited view of the wonders of technology. This is a very dangerous moment for us. How do we insist on the critical dimensions of media literacy being important at a point when everybody seems to be rushing to get kids doing very functional things with technology as though by wiring them up we are somehow going to solve the world's problems?

I think it is exciting that children are capable of creating content but it needs to be accompanied by a kind of critical thinking about what you are doing and a certain level of reflection on the choices you are making, and undertaking the process consciously. I think that often gets lost as people get carried away by creativity and the wonders of technology. All of the critical questions get pushed to one side.

***DM: What do you want to see happen next in media education?***

**DB:** I think there is a recipe in an article that John Pungente did - a review for UNESCO about media literacy around the world. You need recognition at the level of policy; you need good teaching materials; you need partnerships with media industries; and you also need a grassroots movement among teachers. You also need it to be possible for teachers to come together to reflect upon their practice, to network and so on. And I think there is a formula there for what you need in order for media literacy to happen. It is a combination of recognition at the top. In a sense this is what we have in the U.K. that we have not had in the past.

But what is more difficult has been the grassroots teacher networking because I think there was a lot of that in the '80s, and it is gone to a large extent because of the de-professionalization of teachers. I think what was lost is the sense of a grassroots movement among teachers and that has been a struggle in the last few years. We had a Media Educators Association that was active in the '80s that limped through the '90s. We have had a new teacher's association established that Cary Bazalgette is heading up, but it is difficult to get teachers involved in that because they are so pressured.

There is a book by Terry Bolas on the history of media education before my time, in the 50s and 60s. It is very interesting to look at the history of a discipline that has seen itself as a rather radical, vanguardist movement.

Looking at history, you tend to assume that there was one idea, and then there was another idea, that it is all just a history of ideas. But that is not the case. This is a history of practices, and practices are very much shaped by the context in which they happen. So what was possible in the past, just as now, depends a whole lot on the wider political context but also on the politics of education policy, and the institutions and the various stakeholders in power and the balance of power between the stakeholders. You really need to understand all of that if you are going to understand why these ideas seem to take hold and other ideas don't, or how the ideas were shaped in particular ways. It is very much about understanding the historical context.