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Alternative Educational Futures for a Knowledge Society^[1]

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ABSTRACT This article offers a critical analysis of recent trends in educational policy with particular reference to their assumptions about the knowledge society. It examines the implications of the analysis for the issue of elitism and the promotion of greater educational equality. The article concludes by offering an alternative approach to educational policy based on a social realist theory of knowledge.

Introduction

Despite my choice of title, I do not claim to make any predictions in this paper; my intention is to analyse some present trends in educational policy. My assumption is that such analyses provide us with the most reliable basis for shaping what is inevitably an uncertain future. I will focus on three trends which are currently given a high profile by European agencies, international organisations and many national governments. I will argue that not only are the claims made for the policies difficult to justify but that they are all too likely to lead to new inequalities. I shall be concerned more with the assumptions that the policies make and the alternatives that they neglect rather than the policies themselves.

The three policy trends are:

- the introduction of national qualifications frameworks;
- the shift to learning outcomes;
- the move from subject-specific to generic curriculum criteria.

Each trend will be familiar to anyone working in education, whether as an educational researcher, a policy maker or a teacher. However, they have not been widely debated up to now despite, as is certainly claimed by those emphasising the shift to learning outcomes (Cedefop [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training], 2008), being a radical new approach to educational reform and practice.^[2] A possible reason for this lack of debate is that, while there have been critiques of each policy individually (Young, 2007a, b, 2009a; Allais, 2007; Young & Allais, 2010), they have been treated as largely separate. Another possibility is that these policies appear to be being implemented through a process that researchers such as Jenny Ozga (2009), Martin Lawn (2006), and Antonio Magalhães (2008) describe as 'soft power'. As Magalhães puts it in relation to the learning outcomes approach that underpins the Bologna process that is establishing the European Higher Education Area: 'it is being appropriated by the European Commission and implemented by means of "soft" law and "soft" instruments aiming at the fulfilment of political agendas focused on economic relevance and global competitiveness' (Magalhães, 2008) To the extent that these policies are associated with achieving such broad and taken-for-granted economic

goals, it is perhaps unsurprising that they have not been subject to debate, either as means or ends in themselves.

Each of the three policy trends represents an attempt to 'open up' education systems, qualifications and educational institutions to a wider constituency, and all are identified with a broader set of progressive goals such as widening participation and social inclusion which few except the Far Right in England (Woodhead, 2002, 2009) would disagree with. It may therefore be that critiques of these policies have been few because they can easily appear to oppose the widening of opportunities and to be justifying a return to elitism and social exclusivity.

Following a brief account of the three trends that I have referred to, I will consider some of the political issues that a critique of them raises, especially in relation to questions of overcoming elitism and promoting access. I will then explore the common assumptions of the three trends and the problems I see them leading to if they are not questioned. Finally, I will suggest an alternative approach to educational policy that focuses explicitly on the curriculum – or to put it more simply (although the argument is equally relevant to the education of adults), what do we want our young people to learn in school? Instead of starting with the reform of qualifications or the importance of specifying learning outcomes, however broadly defined, this approach starts with the question of knowledge and how the knowledge that we want learners to acquire needs to be distinguished from the everyday knowledge that they bring to school, college or university (Muller, 2000; Young, 2007, 2009a, b; Maton & Moore, 2009).

Three Policy Trends

The Introduction of National Qualification Frameworks

The emergence of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), based on 8-10 levels that are expressed in terms of learning outcomes which are explicitly separated from any specific learning processes or programmes and cover all occupational and knowledge fields in 12-15 groupings, is a new phenomenon and perhaps best seen as the latest global example of educational rationalisation. Furthermore, not only does every country seem to want a national qualifications framework, but virtually all the leading international agencies are involved in persuading any countries that show reluctance that there is no other alternative if they want to be 'modern' and improve their economic competitiveness. By the end of the 1990s there were no more than five countries in the process of introducing an NQF – New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, and Scotland, and for vocational qualifications only, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Now the number is 70 and still growing. Under the influence of the European Union's (EU) own European Qualifications Framework, this number now includes most EU member countries and a much wider range of countries that have used it as a 'model', often supported by the European Training Foundation.

Enormous claims have been made on behalf of NQFs; that they will improve the curriculum, the delivery of education and the access and transferability of qualifications. Some of those promoting NQFs go even further; for example, the Commonwealth of Learning argues that qualifications frameworks represent "new notions of knowledge", and a "new hierarchy" in which education providers are no longer the leaders and standards-setters, and content (or inputs) is no longer the starting point for policies' (Commonwealth of Learning and South African Qualifications Authority, 2008).

I and others have discussed the problems that NQFs lead to in some detail elsewhere (e.g. Young, 2007; Allais, 2007). Here I will draw on some of this work to make two brief points. Firstly, NQFs are extremely diverse, so generalisations about the forms they are taking, let alone their impact, are difficult. However, the striking lack of evidence supporting the claims made for them has not hindered policy makers from treating them as some kind of 'magic bullet' for reforming education and training. In some countries, such as South Africa (and initially New Zealand), NQFs have been used to try to transform the whole education system whereas in others, such as Scotland and Ireland (Raffe, 2007) and France (Bouder, 2004), the aims have been more modest and introducing a NQF is expected to do little more than provide a link between existing qualifications. The sad irony is that it is in developing countries, where the need to build an institutional infrastructure is greatest, that most is expected of an NQF and where it is likely that least, if anything, will be achieved. We in Europe have some responsibility for this situation. Not only have

a number of NQFs, such as that in South Africa, been largely funded by the EU, but many Europeans employed by international agencies as consultants (and here I include my own work in South Africa in the early 1990s) were carried away by the claims and radical rhetoric about what NQFs could do. Secondly, most NQFs have their roots in attempts to reform vocational education and in most countries the primary motivation for introducing an NQF has been economic. It is in making qualifications more portable and transferable with the hope that this will lead to the overcoming of skill shortages that most claims are made for NQFs.[3] This may account for the relative lack of interest in NQFs by educational researchers – at least those not concerned directly with vocational education and training. On the other hand, many NQFs are designed to include all levels and types of learning, even that which takes place in universities. It is not insignificant that many of the assumptions of NQFs about outcomes are found in the Bologna Accord that is establishing the European Higher Education Area that I referred to earlier (Magalhães, 2008).

The Shift to Learning Outcomes

The second trend – the shift to learning outcomes – subsumes NQFs and operates over a broader canvas. It is represented most clearly by the recent Cedefop report, *The Shift to Learning Outcomes* (Cedefop, 2008). This report argues that this shift applies to higher education, schools and vocational education and has implications not only for qualifications but for curricula, pedagogy and the role of educational institutions. In a sense the Cedefop report is arguing for and predicting the emergence of a completely new approach to educational policy that is underpinned by the split in virtually all NQFs between outcomes and inputs. It draws on evidence from 32 countries and claims that there is a shift in educational policy from *inputs* – a focus on curricula, institutions and specialised pedagogies – to *learning outcomes* – a focus on what learners can do or know at the end of a learning process, which may or may not have involved study in a school, college or university. The term ‘learning outcomes’ is, however, almost useless as more than a policy slogan. It is not only ambiguous (Brockman et al, 2008) but, as with any slogan, masks a set of political priorities more concerned with wrenching power from educational institutions than improving the quality of education and training (Young & Allais, 2010). As with NQFs, enormous claims are made for this shift. For example, to again quote the Commonwealth of Learning, learning outcomes are a mechanism whereby: ‘*people outside of education institutions* prescribe competences, which are then used to determine the curriculum’ (Commonwealth of Learning and South African Qualifications Authority, 2008; my emphasis). It would be hard to find a clearer example of the reduced role of specialist educators that is expected in the future.

The Move from Subject-Specific to Generic Skill Criteria in National Curricula

This trend focuses explicitly on the curriculum, not qualifications. So far I only have evidence from the United Kingdom (with separate examples from England and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, all of which have recent new national curriculum proposals). However, there appear to be similar developments in Norway with its new Knowledge Promotion curriculum (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010) and in New Zealand (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2009). Here are some examples of this trend:

- subject content of the curriculum is being reduced (for example, 16-year-olds no longer have to know about the periodic table in science (Perks et al, 2006);
- student choice is increased and they are allowed to choose what to study at an earlier age (they can now take a ‘vocational’ route from age 14 in England);
- barriers between subjects are being weakened and cross-subject themes and generic criteria such as citizenship are increasingly emphasised (Whitty, 2009);
- the curriculum and qualifications are broken up into small units and students are expected to put together their own curricula (Young, 1998);
- boundaries between school and non-school knowledge are blurred by introducing topical issues such as the environment and HIV/AIDS (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency [QCDA], 2009; Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce [RSA], 2006);

- students are encouraged to draw more on their extra-school experience (QCDA, 2009);
- examination questions are expressed with less use of subject-specific concepts. One leading UK Conservative politician, Michael Gove (2009), gives examples of exam questions on nutrition in science which it would be possible for a student to answer correctly even if they had not attended any science classes.

The common theme in these trends is the shift of responsibility for an individual's education from the teacher (and the curriculum) to the individual learner and his or her interests and choices. Individual choices by both student and teacher in the new modular curricula are constrained only by lists of generic learning outcomes sometimes known as 'soft skills', such as 'thinking skills', 'learning to learn' and 'learning to work with others' (Muller, 2009) which can be found in almost every new curriculum proposal.

However, these developments leave serious educational questions unanswered. For example, there is no evidence that such generic capabilities can be acquired, taught or assessed separately from specific domains with their specific contents and contexts. It is far from clear what educational purposes are achieved, beyond providing a general accounting mechanism when generic criteria with no specific content replace subject-specific concepts such as the 'valency' of different elements which have a quite specific conceptual meaning. A similar point could be made about concepts in the humanities, social sciences and applied studies like finance or engineering or nursing.

Educational Policy and the Politics of the Curriculum: a return to elitism?

Before addressing the problems that the three trends that I have outlined give rise to, and before I go on to suggest the basis for an alternative, I want to return briefly to the political charge that a critique of what I will call these 'opening' trends implies a conservative return to old forms of elitism. I will make four arguments.

Access to What?

Widening participation and improving access are aims closely associated with each of the trends I have referred to. However, as educational goals, they invariably fail to specify *what* the participation is to be in and what the access will be *to*. Educational access cannot, I would argue, unlike the right to vote or the right to a living wage, be an end in itself. The South African philosopher of education, the late Wally Morrow, sharpened the debate about access policies by introducing the useful concept of 'epistemic access' (Morrow, 2009). This immediately raises the question of knowledge and 'access to what?' Unless questions about knowledge and curriculum content are raised, widening participation can lead to little more than the 'warehousing' of young people – a term used to describe how the majority of the unemployed school leavers on training schemes in England in the 1980s left with little, if any, more knowledge than they had when they began (Coffield et al, 1986). Morrow's concept of 'epistemic access' reminds us that the opportunities offered by educational institutions are not necessarily educational.

Education as an Institution

My argument here is that education involves a pedagogic relationship between teachers and learners; it is therefore an *institutional process*, not an outcome or an output. Educational processes do have and indeed should have 'outcomes' for the learner and for society; however, evidence of learning outcomes that does not refer to the processes and programmes that lead to them captures only a very small element of their meaning.

People learn in a variety of different contexts; some are institutions and some are not. However, there is no such thing as non-institutional education. This is not to dismiss or undervalue informal, non-formal or experiential learning, or the learning that takes place in workplaces. What I want to emphasise is the importance of distinguishing between types of learning and between what can be learned under different conditions, and in particular the differences between the learning that is incidental to some other activity – as in homes, communities and workplaces – and the

learning that is possible in specialised *educational* institutions such as schools, colleges and universities.

All institutions rely on traditions and past habits, and educational institutions are no exception. That is why we trust them, but that does not mean we should not criticise them or try to reform them. It does mean they have an inescapably *conservative* role which provides the basis for our trust. In the case of *educational* institutions such as schools, colleges and universities, part of their role is to conserve and transmit to new generations the ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2009b) that has been discovered by previous generations. Schools and other educational institutions are ‘conservative’ in the same sense that science and other disciplines are ‘conservative’. This does not imply that the knowledge that they conserve and transmit is fixed or given – a point I will come back to. However, if educational institutions did not ‘conserve’ and transmit knowledge, each generation would have to re-invent it and there would be no social progress and no new knowledge would be produced. The crucial point is to distinguish between this conservative role of schools and their politically conservative role of preserving privileges and benefits for the few – a role that they are also involved in as institutions in unequal societies; it is the latter form of conservatism that needs challenging, not the former. The relationship between these two types of conservatism – we might call them ‘cultural’ and ‘political’ – is a major but under-researched topic for the sociology of education. Few researchers up to now have clearly distinguished between them and most have concentrated almost entirely on the second or ‘political’ form.

The Replacement of Educational Categories

This argument about the trend of recent educational policies draws on some ideas in a paper by my colleague at the International Labour Organisation, Stephanie Allais. She draws on the work of the economist Ben Fine and argues that the language of learning outcomes involves:

a rewriting of education according to a very narrow economic script that is dominated by the idea of individuals (learners) making rational self-interested choices, supported by mechanisms such as quality assurance and outcomes-based qualifications which are designed to regulate the ‘market in learning’. (Allais, 2009)

Fine describes this as a form of ‘economics imperialism’ that is ‘marked by the attempt to reduce as much as possible of non-economic activities (such as teaching and learning) to the optimizing (i.e. economic) behaviour of individuals’ (Fine & Milonakis, 2009). From this perspective, educational policy makers promoting the learning outcomes approach and learner choice as the ‘drivers’ of educational reform are in danger of replacing any specialised educational language and set of concepts with the language and sets of concepts of neo-classical economics (for example, markets, choice and outcomes). This trend to replace educational and political categories with those of market economics has a number of disturbing implications. For example, in the target-driven educational culture that has been introduced in the United Kingdom, students themselves are encouraged to forget that education has a distinct meaning that has little to do with ticking boxes and recording outcomes according to a prescribed list.[4] Another possibility is that, with learners having to choose between outcomes not subjects, and the disappearance of the idea that education is about promoting young people’s (and adults’) intellectual development, critiques illustrating how the market is encroaching on education will do little more than redescribe a world we know all too well. We are left, as it were, with having to accept, as Margaret Thatcher put it, in another context, that ‘there is no other way’.

The Real Purpose of Education

My final response to the charge that a critique of the three trends I outlined implies a conservative return to elitism is that these trends obscure the need for a debate about the purposes of education – whether school, vocational, professional or university. These purposes should be open to debate in every generation as they face new circumstances and new possibilities. Hence I restate my basis for engaging in such a debate in the following terms: ‘The purpose of (formal) education is to ensure that as many as possible of each cohort or age group are able to acquire the *knowledge* that

takes them *beyond their experience* and which they would be unlikely to have access to at home, at work or in the community' (slightly modified from Young, 2009b). What this knowledge is and how it should be made available are, I suggest, the core questions for research and theory. The problem with each of the three trends which I have outlined – NQFs, learning outcomes, and the move from content-specific to generic curricular criteria – is that by reducing education to choices between outcomes, they neglect or disregard debates about the terms on which such choices are made.

Common Assumptions in the Three Policy Trends

In this section I want turn to two assumptions that the trends I have referred to have in common and explore their implications. They are:

- that a global process of *de-differentiation* of institutions, knowledge and sites and types of learning is taking place; and
- that a language and set of concepts that are specific to education and its purposes are of decreasing importance.

The De-differentiation of Institutions, Knowledge and Sites and Types of Learning

By de-differentiation I am referring to the idea that historically distinct institutions and activities are becoming more alike. It draws on a view about how modern economies are changing that can be traced back to debates in the 1980s about flexible specialisation and the idea of a networked society.

One version of this argument is that industrialised countries are at a stage when they need to reverse the differentiation and specialisation that was the basis for their industrial growth and development since the mid or late nineteenth century. This change, it is argued, is partly, but not solely, a consequence of the emergence of standardising technologies (particularly those based on electronics) that are transforming previously distinct sectors, occupations and knowledge fields. This process of de-differentiation challenges most occupations. However, it goes right to the heart of education and the role of specialised educational institutions. Formal education as we know it is based on taken-for-granted but strongly held assumptions about the differences between types of knowledge and sites and types of learning. Most crucial is the assumption that those sites which specialise in the acquisition and production of certain types of knowledge need to be clearly distinguished from those which do not.

NQFs and learning outcome approaches exert a de-differentiating pressure that puts them at odds with this differentiation of knowledge, institutions and sites of learning. This is one of the reasons why in New Zealand, England and South Africa, universities, in particular, have resisted or found ways round such reforms. This resistance has no doubt partly been because such institutions have a long history of taking for granted their autonomy; however, it is also because the logic of an outcomes approach is to undervalue the specialised learning opportunities that they offer, and treat them as less and less distinguishable from learning outcomes that are available elsewhere. If education is defined by outcomes laid down within a national framework, why should they not be offered by any provider, as long as they subscribe to the quality assurance and assessment rules?

If the de-differentiation argument is accepted, then the grounds for claiming that learning opportunities must be linked to specialist teachers, programmes and institutions becomes weaker. Likewise the de-differentiation argument undermines the grounds for treating the curriculum as an opportunity to acquire specialised knowledge rather than just another response to individual or wider economic needs. The disciplines and subjects that have traditionally constituted the curriculum become little more than examples of how specialist teachers protect their privileges. Furthermore, the logic of de-differentiation means it is no longer possible to claim objective grounds for a clear differentiation between school knowledge and the everyday or common-sense knowledge which people draw on in their lives and bring to school or college as pupils or as students.

It is these ideas, summarised by the concept de-differentiation, that I suggest underpin, albeit not explicitly, the logic of the shift to learning outcomes, the marketability of outcomes and the

claim that, for example, the level descriptors of an NQF can be the basis for equating aspects of someone's life experience with another person's doctoral thesis.

I am not suggesting that de-differentiation is more than a tendency. However, there are a number of problems with the claims that it makes as an account of social change. Firstly, of course, there are standardising technologies. However, there is no evidence that developing fields of research or industry such as fuel cells, new materials, and bio- and nano-technologies, or new approaches to the care of those who are vulnerable or at risk, or to community banking and financial loans are the product of standardisation, or that specialisation and differentiation will not continue to be the basis for the development of new knowledge. Invoking standardisation is always attractive to those in power; it has brought obvious benefits in fields such as transport and it appears to increase the possibilities of making public services accountable in increasingly complex modern societies. However, the corollary is that standardisation also inhibits progress and – as in extreme cases such as Stalinism – not only is the basis of oppression but always breaks down in the end. Knowledge progresses because it is open. The dilemma of standardisation was the central problem that Weber and later Habermas addressed.

Standardising has its place (industrial growth would have been impossible without it) and there is an assumption that it can be relatively seamlessly extended from industrial processes to a widening set of social processes. This takes new forms such as quality assurance, and the standardised sets of procedures for informing appointments and bids for research funding. These processes mirror the developments in the curriculum referred to earlier. Under a banner of fairness and objectivity, they represent a shift in power away from those with specialised knowledge to those with the procedural or generic knowledge of the rules which are embodied in standardisation. Whether such developments can in practice lead either to innovation or to fairer decisions, as they claim to, rather than to more compliance and control, seems doubtful.

However, educational policy does not depend only on economic changes unless you accept the inevitability of Fine's 'economics' imperialism that I referred to earlier. As researchers, therefore, we have a responsibility to try to discover (or perhaps invent) a language and meaning for education for our time. The only alternative to current educational policies, with their focus on outcomes and learner choice, is in danger of being a conservative return to old traditions with all their elitist associations (Woodhead, 2009).

Recovering the Purpose of Education for Educational Policies

Ben Fine's (2001) argument that the use of the language of economics is 'attempting to reduce education to the economic behaviour of individuals' has at least two implications. The first is that in dealing with the three educational trends that I referred to we are dealing with a form of economic ideology. Educational policy makers seem to be convinced that in introducing NQFs based on learning outcomes they are responding to real economic changes rather than replacing educational concepts concerned with intellectual development by economic concepts concerned with optimising choice behaviour. The challenge, then, is to take on this 'economisation' of educational thinking without being idealist and neglecting the questions about market economics that were raised in different ways by Keynes and Marx. This leads me to make a sociological case for reasserting the positive educational purpose of differentiation and boundaries.

The second implication of Fine's argument is that if we reject the displacement of educational categories by economics that is expressed in the language of learning outcomes, we need to be explicit about what is distinctive about educational concepts and their logics. If we are able to do this, we have a chance of improving the intellectual capabilities of the whole population, and as the neo-institutionalists such as David Baker (2009) in the USA claim, making a real contribution to economic growth. I turn therefore, in the next section, to the origins of the three trends.

The Three Trends and their Common Origins[5]

The trends I outlined at the beginning of this paper can all be understood as attempts to open up the rigid, inflexible and elitist education systems that most European countries have inherited in one form or another from the nineteenth century and earlier. These systems were overwhelmingly

static, because social and political imperatives were dominant and the inherent openness of knowledge to change was suppressed or denied. However, by the end of the nineteenth century (at least in Europe), two democratising social forces could not be avoided. They were *the demand from below* for the massification of schooling, and *the explosion of knowledge* about the social and natural worlds which challenged the traditional idea of knowledge and of the role of the curriculum as transmitting a fixed body of knowledge which students were expected to memorise. National systems dealt with these challenges in different ways and at different times. Some, like England, deferred any significant opening of access as long as possible – arguably until the second expansion of the universities in the 1990s. However, such marginal reforms could not deal with two basic problems that these societies generated:

- labour markets that could not absorb any more of the workers produced by such low-performing systems of education and training
- mass schooling systems that were over-dependent on the culture of the middle class and a small section of the working class that was a condition for their relative success – Bourdieu’s argument about the unequal distribution of cultural capital.

Mass schooling systems were divided along social class lines – to different degrees in different countries – with the curriculum as a major stratifying instrument. A key mechanism of this stratification was perceived, by those who opposed it, to be the form and content of the elite curriculum; it was overt, and strictly stipulated and paced. Its boundedness was seen to be the main problem, so it was the removal of the more overt of these boundaries that became a preferred solution for reformers. The latest phase of this process, which initiated the type of ‘opening out’ proposals I outlined, was probably the Delors report (1996), which introduced the idea of lifelong learning – a radical idea at the end of the 1980s. It is the idea of a boundary-free, supposedly undifferentiated future, that underpins NQFs, the shift to learning outcomes and the collapse of the school/non-school knowledge distinction as the basis for the curriculum.

It is impossible to deny that these trends are gaining ground in Europe and beyond, nor that they have powerful support from the characteristically unrealistic assumptions about the educational potential of digital technologies that are widely shared within the policy communities. The weakness that is common to all of them is that they misconceive and misrepresent educational boundaries as necessarily and only barriers to learning, access and participation. This misconception applies to boundaries between subjects, to those between the curriculum and the everyday experience of learners, between theory and practice and, most fundamentally, between knowledge and experience. The counter-argument, traceable back to Emile Durkheim writing before World War I (Durkheim, 1983), is that these boundaries are social, they have a history and were developed for particular purposes. However, they are also *real* in the sense that they are not arbitrary: they constrain what decisions we can make about the curriculum. There is not the place here to go into the theoretical argument by the English sociologist Basil Bernstein which extended from Durkheim’s original ideas (Bernstein, 2000; Young, 2007a). Suffice to say, attempts to dissolve boundaries invariably create confusion for learners (witness the problems facing students on modular programmes). At the same time, the boundaries remain but become less invisible in ways that are exaggerated for the most disadvantaged. In other words, against their best intents, the opening up policies are likely to render the contours of knowledge less visible to the very learners that the more open curriculum hopes to favour – this is the argument made by Basil Bernstein with his concepts of *visible and invisible pedagogies* in the 1970s (Bernstein, 1975). Furthermore, these ‘opening up’ policies are unlikely to be taken up by the elite and private institutions, with greater inequality an almost inevitable consequence. In the English case, the elite fee-paying ‘public’ schools are already dropping public sector exams in favour of the ‘more demanding’ Cambridge Pre-U (for 18-year-olds) and an examination based on the old, more subject-content-based Ordinary level certificate for 16-year-olds that was abolished for state schools over 20 years ago. Different groups support the trends I have described, although they often have very little in common politically or educationally. For example, there are the neo-liberals who are obsessed with promoting markets and individual choice, the radical social constructivists who hope that learning outcomes will free learners from authoritarian syllabuses and curricula, the supporters of generic criteria as the basis for a more unified system and a framework for integrating academic and vocational pathways (Yates & Collins, 2010) and promoting equity; lastly, of course, there are the

pragmatists who make the best, like most teachers, of what is current. However, they all share some underlying epistemological similarities. All end up with an instrumental and 'over-socialised' view of knowledge with its inevitable relativist consequences and a view of the curriculum as, at least to some degree, a tool for achieving particular political or economic purposes.

Towards a Social Realist Alternative

The alternative I want to briefly outline arises from the previous analysis and draws on ideas in the sociology of knowledge that I have been working on with colleagues, Johan Muller at the University of Capetown (Young & Muller, 2009) and Rob Moore at the University of Cambridge (Moore, 2004; Maton & Moore, 2009), in particular. This alternative is based on the assumption that there are specific kinds of social conditions under which powerful knowledge is acquired and produced and these are the conditions for real learning and, in the terms I used earlier, for 'epistemic access'. These conditions are not given; like the boundaries I referred to earlier, they are historical but they have a reality beyond individual perception and specific contexts. Their historicity is denied by traditional elitist systems which are left with a false objectivity based on the givenness of knowledge. The 'opening out' trends for reducing curriculum content, basing the curriculum on learning outcomes, and giving priority to individual learners rather than the knowledge they are trying to acquire, deny both the historicity and objectivity of knowledge domains and specialist and increasingly global knowledge communities that are their social basis.

This alternative starting point for curriculum policy leaves us with a number of important questions which the trends I have discussed avoid. I will mention three:

1. How do we identify the most reliable criteria for making judgements about the selection, pacing and organisation of knowledge in the curriculum? This takes us to two issues.
 - (i) How are links established (or in some cases re-established) between university-based subject specialists and their school-based colleagues? These links were crucial to the beginnings of the expansion of upper secondary education but have been significantly weakened in the course of 'massification'.
 - (ii) How are subject-specific pedagogies developed in an era where generic concepts of pedagogy dominate educational studies?
2. Why do some forms of knowledge, most notably the natural sciences, tend towards *specialisation* and others, characteristically the humanities, tend towards *variation* or *diversification*? And how do we conceptualise those forms of knowledge in the middle ground – the social sciences? Should the latter follow the sciences and economics in making their knowledge claims more robust and mathematically based or should they recognise that the phenomena they study require distinct forms of rigour which are not undermined by the reality that the potential for their knowledge to progress is limited? And what are the implications of these differences for the curriculum? Whereas the first tendency poses questions about sequencing, pacing and hierarchy, the latter poses questions of choice and its basis, of what to include in the curriculum, and when and on what basis.
3. Many programmes in upper secondary and higher education have a vocational or professional focus directed to different occupational sectors. This means that curricula inevitably point both to the demands of the occupational sector and to the intellectual development of the learner. This raises the question hardly acknowledged by those involved in the design and development of professional and vocational programmes of how to balance and bring together the conceptual coherence which is the basis of intellectual development and the contextual coherence that relates to demands of any occupation or sector (Muller, 2009).

The elite curriculum, developed at a time when knowledge changed very slowly, was content-driven and largely fixed. In its worst pedagogical form, it was dominated by memorisation and rote-learning. Consequently, the main alternatives to the elite curriculum, as represented by the three 'opening' trends I outlined at the beginning of this paper, take a stance against 'mere' content and 'mere' rote by stressing generic skills and the active role of the learner. In its most radical forms (Jessup, 1991) such an 'over-socialised' view of knowledge opposes all stipulation of content and all forms of memorisation as examples of pedagogic dictatorship. The logic of such a radicalism and its

eschewal of content, either by reducing it or by leaving individual teachers free to decide and learners to choose, is to deny learners what I referred to earlier in this paper as 'epistemic access'.

The eight generic competences agreed by the European Parliament [6] are an example of the swing away from content-based priorities, and the way in which concepts which depend on specific contents can get marginalised. Learner progression is a conceptual process and can only be stipulated in conceptual terms. It follows that concept-based stipulations cannot be generic; they necessarily involve content or what is being conceptualised.

Not surprisingly, defenders of learning outcomes and generic approaches to the curriculum would no doubt claim that this is no more than a new way of justifying the old content-based elite curriculum. However, the approach taken here makes a clear distinction between a content-based curriculum which treats knowledge as given and one which recognises that knowledge changes and treats contents as carriers of concepts, not ends in themselves. Graduates may not remember or use much of their school or university curriculum in later life; however, it is through those contents they gain access to concepts and to ways of thinking that they are able to draw on as adults.

A reliable model for a curriculum and a pedagogy of the future has to embrace content, concepts and skills. Furthermore, it has to begin with the acquisition of specialised knowledge; generic competences can be no more than broad guidelines to teachers and curriculum developers. Such a model will apply in different ways to a general (or school) curriculum and to a vocational or professional curriculum and the different sectors, and in some cases the different ages of the learners they are concerned with. If the curriculum is too driven by content (as in the old elitist model), or skills and competences (as in the new generic models) some important educational goals (such as opportunities for progression) will get lost; in each case there will be implications for the distribution of educational opportunities and achievement.

Recognising the differentiation of knowledge both between domains and between the curriculum and experience as a basic educational principle implies that concepts, skills and content are *all* important and must be stipulated in any curriculum. How this principle is applied will depend on the purposes of specific programmes and the prior experience of the learners. Failure to recognise this principle of differentiation will lead to a slowing down of any progress that has so far been made towards equalising epistemological access. This has implications for both social justice and the possibility of a knowledge-based economy in the future.

Notes

- [1] This paper is an edited version of a keynote speech given at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) at the University of Vienna in September 2009. I am grateful to Ian Hextall and Ursula Hoadley for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- [2] As a recent European Commission document puts it, 'The concept of learning outcomes ... is potentially revolutionary in its implications. It can help to define training standards and related curricula in a way that serves best the needs of both the learner and the labour market, provided that employers are involved in defining, designing, certifying and recognising learning outcomes. It can help to develop a common language: instead of classifying jobs by occupational type and knowledge by education programme (as has been the case so far) we can now move toward describing both in terms of competence' (European Commission 2009).
- [3] The evidence, such as it is, suggests that it is partnerships between educational institutions and between educational institutions and employers, not qualifications frameworks, that are most crucial for achieving transferability and progression (Young 2009a).
- [4] If you think I am exaggerating, try reading the Cedefop report, *The Shift to Learning Outcomes*, or look at an assessment portfolio for an outcomes-based qualification for work-based learning like one of the United Kingdom's National Vocational Qualifications.
- [5] The final sections of this paper draw on some ideas discussed in Young & Muller (2009).
- [6] These are listed as the recommendations of the European Parliament on 18 December 2006 as follows:

- digital competence
- learning to learn
- social and civic competences
- communication in the mother tongue
- communication in foreign languages
- cultural awareness and expression
- mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- social and civic competences.

(http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11090_en.htm)

Few would disagree with the list as a broad set of educational principles or priorities. The problem is that as curriculum principles, they do not specify the concepts that might give learners access to the concepts that the list implies.

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