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Education Cannot Compensate for Society: reflections on the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training

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ABSTRACT This article is a synopsis of the main argument of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training – in particular, the problems which gave rise to the Review, the ways in which the government has responded, and how the Review believes policy and practice should develop in the future.

My title is that of Basil Bernstein's paper written in 1970. And its repetition is one of the conclusions of the Nuffield Review – although one must be careful in interpreting it . We have seen, in the last decade or so, countless interventions by government in both the policy and the practice of education and training as it tries to overcome problems and apparent failures by schools and by young learners. But the problems, as they are defined, remain stubbornly with us. Perhaps there are limits both to what education and training policies can do on their own and to the powers of government to make thing work better.

What are the problems as they are perceived? Overall standards are lower than they should be and as they are compared with those of other and competing countries; participation and retention of young people in education and training post-16 remain relatively low – and constantly so, despite rewards to stay on; the NEET group (Not in Education, Employment or Training) has remained at just over 8% for ten years; we criminalise over a quarter of a million young people (age 11 to 17) each year; there are recent anxieties about the poor behaviour of many young people in school; higher education complains that those progressing to higher education are not well prepared for the experience; employers complain that the new workers or trainees have inadequate skill, qualities and attitudes for employment.

One solution is to set targets – for examination passes in schools and colleges, for apprenticeships, for reduction in the NEET group – and to motivate schools and colleges to hit those targets through rewards of various kinds or through the publication of failure.

But there are other solutions which deserve closer examination: a reform of the qualifications so that there might be more vocational alternatives to what is referred to as an 'academic' curriculum; greater collaboration between the different providers of education and training so that richer opportunities might be offered to young people; a greater emphasis upon the apprenticeship route into employment and indeed higher education.

I shall briefly look at each of these in turn, before, first, issuing a word of caution inspired by the words of Basil Bernstein; second, re-iterating three points strongly argued by the Nuffield Review.

Reform of Qualifications

The post-war decades have seen a constant 'reform' of qualifications. Indeed, improvement in the quality of learning, it is believed, will come through improvement in the system of qualifications. And, of course, there is some truth in that.

The specifications for the qualifications can support or undermine certain kinds of learning. Until the Beloe Report in 1962, there were no public examinations for those not in the top 20% of the ability range – those who went to grammar schools. After Beloe, the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) sat alongside the GCE 'O Level' as a qualification for the next 40% in ability – a different kind of examination, the third mode of which encouraged both teacher-created syllabuses and teacher assessment, rigorously moderated, so that learning could be more responsive to the learning needs of the young people. The merging of GCE 'O Level' and CSE in 1986 gave different messages – the potential of far more young people to benefit from the more academic curriculum, but at the same time the diminished importance attached, say, to oral capability embedded within CSE. The creation of pre-vocational qualifications in the late 1970s and 1980s – the CGLI 365, Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE), the Diploma of Vocational Education (DoVE), the various BTEC awards and the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) – endeavoured to reflect and respect a different, more practical and vocationally relevant kind of learning. But the short lives of many of these qualifications demonstrated the difficulties in such reforms. What employers now would recognise the virtues of someone (he or she could be but 33) who proudly showed them their CPVE?

There are several lessons to be learnt from such a brief review of history as far as the future reforms of education and training are concerned. First, we have been here before, and, if we do not learn the lessons of history, we shall be here again. Second, there is a perennial problem of 'parity of esteem' so long as there remains a separate qualification long referred to and recognised as 'the gold

standard' or 'the jewel in the crown' – I refer, of course, to GCE 'A Level'. Third, no qualification will have value without its recognition by higher education and by employers – no matter what the quality of the qualification might be. And it is very difficult for employers and higher education to keep up with the constant change of qualifications with their different levels and equivalences.

Should the new Diploma be seen as yet a further move in the pre-vocational tradition referred to? The concern of the Nuffield Review is that the Diplomas, sitting between the 'academic' track of GCSEs and GCE 'A Levels' and the vocational track of apprenticeships and the NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) will help maintain the tripartite mentality which has permeated educational thinking and policy since the 1943 Norwood Report. And this may not be overcome by the assertion that the Diploma has so many functions – to motivate the low attainment students, to provide a pathway into further training and employment and to provide a route into higher education. Is it trying to do too much, especially as it will necessarily be 'in competition' with the GCE 'A Level' for recruits?

On the other hand, we must not decry what it is intended to do within that pre-vocational tradition, namely, to indicate the value of practical and experiential learning, to applaud the motivating power of learning which is related to an occupational interest and to create a flexible framework within which there can be a combination of vocational and theoretical, of general with occupationally related learning, and optional choice with a focus on wider key skills.

Collaboration Between Providers

One very positive consequence of the introduction of the Diplomas has been the recognition that individual schools cannot provide the range of learning experiences that all young people are entitled to. Partnership between providers is necessary. Indeed, we need to think no longer of 'comprehensive schools' but of 'comprehensive systems' in which participate collaborating schools, colleges of further education, independent training providers, employers, the youth service and the voluntary bodies which offer a range of expertise. Schools cannot generally offer either the expertise or the facilities for many of the more practically based subjects, and need to rely upon the local colleges of further education. Many thousand 14-16 year olds spend a significant part of their time studying in further education colleges, and the evaluation studies have demonstrated what an enriching and successful experience this is.

But this collaboration must be seen further than merely providing the benefit to schools of vocational options delivered by the colleges. Over half the GCE 'A Levels' are taught within the further education sector – which includes also sixth-form colleges. The range of 'A Level' options is reduced for many young people unless there is this collaboration across institutional boundaries. Evidence to the Review shows that the policy of developing sixth-forms in

11-16 schools or 'sixth-form presumption' (a policy encouraged in some places where academies are being created) leads to poorer 'A Level' results and a poorer staying-on rate amongst those who are unlikely to proceed to 'A Level'.

Apprenticeships

'Apprenticeship' has traditionally referred to a trainee in some craft-based employment who learns mainly on the job, who is contracted to an employer, who would study part-time at the local college on day-release and who, if successful, would thereby be qualified to undertake certain tasks in relation to a range of occupations. That success would be recognised in a vocational qualification awarded by such a body as the City and Guild of London Institute (CGLI).

The nature of apprenticeships inevitably changes as industry changes and as new skills are needed to meet different technological needs. One particular problem has been the decline in placements in different kinds of employment. Apprenticeship places of the traditional kind are not so available. Therefore, there has been a frequent 'reform' of apprenticeship. And the government figures of increased apprenticeships are due as much to an 'evolution' of the concept as they are to any increase in numbers. Long-standing employees undergoing retraining are now included amongst the apprenticeships; the big increases have been at Level 2, which would not be regarded as a successful completion of apprenticeship in most European countries; an apprentice no longer needs to be contracted to an employer; and many young people, who would previously have been encouraged to begin apprenticeships, are now persuaded to enter higher education in order to meet targets there. None the less, this route from 16 into employment has been boosted by the government and efforts made to encourage employers to take on apprentices or for college-based routes to be developed where there are insufficient employer places. Perhaps, especially in a time of industrial stagnation, there is a need for greater financial incentives for employers to do so.

Word of Caution: social and economic context

However, there is need for a word of caution as Bernstein pointed out. There is a wider social and economic context within which schools and colleges have to operate and which affects both the ability and the motivation of so many young people to learn. In the blame attached to schools for the failure to attain certain targets, the context in which they work goes unrecognised in the 'performance indicators' and the achievements of those schools, as they struggle with that context, go unacknowledged.

The Review points to many factors in the wider social context of many young people which affect not just the capacity to meet targets but more profoundly what those targets should be:

- the extended period of adolescence as young people mature physically much earlier but enter employment much later (38% of males and 33% of females have a sexual relation before the legal age of 16, a rise from 14% and 5% respectively since 1964; less than 30% of 17 year olds have experienced full-time employment, down from 30% in 15 years);
- the changing family patterns (25% of young people are in one parent families, up from 8% in 1971; and 60% of those lone parents with dependent children live in poverty);
- there is according to the extensive research of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation a considerable increase in the 'work-poor' (those who have no employment and who have never experienced employment) and in the widening gap between the 'core poor' and the 'exclusive wealthy', where also these live in increasingly exclusive communities;
- UNICEF reports that Britain is producing the least happy young people in the OECD;
- recent studies of mental health amongst young people estimate that 10% have mental disorders which affect the quality of their lives and their learning. (pp. 33-34)

One could go on. But these factors, though profoundly affecting the capacity to learn and the power of schools to help them to learn (or at least to meet targets set by government), are outside the control of school or college. That is not to say that schools and colleges cannot do anything to alleviate the situation or to overcome many of the barriers to learning. Rather is it the case that, given such antipathetic contexts, there is need to think differently about the purposes of education and training for such young people, the appropriateness of the targets, the institutional framework and what 'quality of learning' means.

Nuffield Review

The Nuffield Review has argued that, in looking to the future and in addressing the problems which have been identified, it has had to start with asking the question: 'What counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age?' What are the understandings and knowledge required for 'the intelligent management of life'? What are the practical capabilities (a phrase taken from the RSA's 'Manifesto for Capability' in 1986) which all should develop? How can we ensure the moral seriousness essential for a fully human life? What skills and dispositions are required to ensure active and mature engagement in the wider community?

Only in addressing these questions is one able to think of what we mean by 'quality of learning', the most appropriate curriculum and mode of assessment, the kind of institutional provision for the 21st century, the role of teachers and so on. The Review has many recommendations but it stresses in particular three things.

Practical and Experiential Learning

There is constant criticism that the curriculum is too academic for many young learners – not because they are less intelligent but because they are able to learn and are motivated to do so in a much more practical context. 'Knowing how' to do some thing is a logically different kind of knowledge from 'knowing that' something is the case, and those who succeed in the latter may fail in the former.

And yet there has been an increasing failure to recognise the importance of practical knowledge, of practical capability and of experiential understanding in the way in which the formal curriculum has developed. This has been re-enforced by an assessment regime which requires easy and unambiguous marking to specified standards. The Review notes the decline of practical learning in schools since the 1988 Education Act and the way in which the practical learning in the pre-vocational initiatives, such as the GNVQ, gets distorted by the need to demonstrate one's capacity 'to do', not by 'doing' but by writing about 'doing'.

Of course, this has been recognised partly through the very partnerships between school and colleges already referred to in which 14-16 year olds are taught in their local college in the more practical aspects of their courses. But two matters to note.

First, these are often referred to as 'vocational' options, made possible by the 'disapplication' of humanities from the compulsory national curriculum at the age of 14 for those who are deemed to be better motivated by vocational courses. But this is a reduction of the 'practical knowledge and learning' to vocational – by no means the same thing, and a confusion which makes 'parity of esteem' between different kinds of learning more difficult to achieve.

Second, here is the danger of once again an insidious division between learners, this time at the age of 14, as they proceed up different tracks – the so-called academic and the so-called vocational. It demeans the notion of general education which values practical intelligence and capability as much as the theoretical understanding.

But the Review points to the many interesting examples of where that distinction is challenged through for example, the RSA's 'Opening Minds' curriculum, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's 'Musical Futures' and the extension of the underlying principles across other subject areas, the Young Foundation's Studio Schools, the projects supported by the Edge Foundation and many others. There is a quiet revolution going on, though resisted by an assessment regime which promotes the 'transmission of knowledge' and 'teaching to the test'.

Strongly Collaborative Learning System

The Review welcomes the policy of partnerships between different providers, and there are som excellent examples of where this is happening – for example, in Stevenage and in Wolverhampton. Evidence of such partnerships is a

condition of being accepted for teaching the different lines of the Diploma. But there are clearly difficulties in the implementation – the need for common timetables, the cost and logistics of transporting young people between different institutions, the sacrifice of institutional autonomy, the added cost of coordination, and in rural areas the sheer distance between providers.

Nonetheless, this would seem to be the way forward – a very different institutional framework within which all young people might have access to the range of opportunities which cannot be provided in any one institution. But the Review goes further than that in arguing for 'strongly collaborative learning systems'. There are other partners who need to be part of those systems. The Review has witnessed the particular expertise of youth workers in helping with those most likely to drop out; the promotion of 'restorative justice' by specially trained police has kept many young people out of trouble and from the courts; different voluntary bodies such as the Princes Trust, Rathbone or UKSkills bring a range of experience to schools as they have to cope with a richer range of learning experiences. And the government has recognised, following *Every Child Matters* the need for more joined up thinking between education and social services.

However, these positive developments are undermined by other aspects of government policy – an assessment regime and targets which narrow the experience of learning, evaluation of schools and colleges not as in a partnership but as autonomous providing institutions, the promotion of small sixth-forms.

Strengthen the Teacher; Weaken the Government

The language of education has increasingly become dominated by the language of performance management – the language of targets and performance indicators, of audits and quality control, of outputs related to inputs, of clients and customers. Part of that same language of management and control is to see the teacher as 'the deliverer' of the curriculum – the curriculum being a content and a plan of action created elsewhere.

This is a far cry from seeing the teacher as an expert both in that which has to be taught and in the learners who are to be transformed by what the teacher has to say and to do. The role of the teacher is to communicate what is seen to be worthwhile in terms of knowledge, understanding, appreciation, skills or practices to the young learner – bearing in mind the particular learning needs and problems of these learners in these contexts. As such, the teacher is a curriculum developer rather than a curriculum deliverer.

This professional role of the teacher has been emasculated by the centralised and detailed organisation of learning by the government operating through targets and through ever more restrictive specifications for learning. But it was not ever thus, and if so many of the problems outlined above are to be tackled then the more positive and creative role of the teacher needs to be reasserted.

Following from that is the need for the kind of continuing professional development of teachers which is responsive to such a professional task, preferably in 'teachers centres' which once flourished and which should be part of the collaborative learning systems.

Conclusion

The full report of the Nuffield Review is published by Routledge and entitled *Education for All: the future of education and training for 14-19 year olds*. It is intended to raise issues which need further debate and questioning. The evidence on which the Review is based can be found on the Nuffield Website, and it is hoped that readers will contribute, from their experience and knowledge, to the debate. A free copy of the summary of the report is obtainable from the Nuffield Review, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, United Kingdom.

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