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What's Wrong with the EBacc?

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ABSTRACT As schools gear up for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), what is the point and purpose of this new performance measure and the curriculum it encompasses? In this article the author takes a critical look at the EBacc, its assumptions about the aims of education, the curriculum model on which it is based and the implications for how schools are to be judged. Despite its many flaws, by providing an entitlement for all children to a liberal education, he suggests that it might be a step in the right direction, and asks whether a progressive case can be made for it. He addresses this question via a discussion of Michael Young's notion of 'powerful knowledge' and draws appropriate conclusions.

Introduction

According to the consultation document of the Department for Education (DfE) (DfE, 2015b), the aim of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is to extend opportunity for all pupils in the education system, and in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by giving them access to a rich, broad and balanced academic curriculum, consisting of subjects from five subject areas (English/English literature; languages; science; maths; humanities). Previously, children had been fobbed off with 'equivalents' – 'poor quality vocational qualifications which counted for nothing when it came to progressing to post-16 education and training' (DfE, 2015b, p. 4). The EBacc curriculum will provide a grounding in the basics for a more specialised study later on, and ensure that young people are not prematurely committed to a narrow range of careers. Although it is broad and balanced in itself, it is sufficiently limited in scope to allow pupils to study other valuable subjects, 'including religious studies, arts subjects, or vocational and technical disciplines' (DfE, 2015b, p. 9). And so there is allegedly room within this framework for plenty of options to cater for pupils' individual interests and needs.

Liberal and progressive educators may have some sympathy with this view. Is it not the case that in 'gaming the system' many schools have 'dumbed'

down the curriculum and gone for 'soft options', often involving vocational courses of questionable value? Shouldn't we support the assumption that all or most children and young people, whatever their background, are capable of the 'higher-order' thinking required of an academic curriculum? Shouldn't we be in favour of the attempt to increase the numbers of pupils taking humanities subjects like history and geography, and modern languages? If we are concerned with an educational aim like the 'empowerment' of all students, then there is certainly a case for teaching what Young describes as 'powerful knowledge' – that is, knowledge which involves theoretical concepts and that is systematic and specialised. We might argue, for example, that pupils as future citizens in a democracy need to think beyond local contexts, to develop a grasp of concepts and complex ideas, and to be capable of making well-founded generalisations and thinking in a systematic way. And school should certainly be a place where such thinking is encouraged.

Aims of Education

The first point to make is that anyone thinking the EBacc is intended first and foremost to deliver a 'liberal education for all' will be disappointed. There are no references in EBacc documentation to important liberal values like autonomy or independence or any social goals like citizenship or even to the encouragement of 'love' of subjects. Culture is mentioned but without any discussion of how the academic core subjects of the EBacc might contribute, say, to cultural enrichment. Instead the emphasis is on economic goals. The document makes dubious claims about the direct connection between the EBacc and employment, with the emphasis on high aspirations, competitiveness and a desire for 'success' which will enable pupils from England to compete both in this country and internationally. The broader academic core 'will bring our education system more in line with our high performing neighbours and help pupils from England to compete in international job markets, increasing the productivity of the British economy' (DfE, 2015b, p. 15).

This emphasis on high aspirations, opportunity, success and competition reflects the managerialist rhetoric and ethos that prevails in most schools today. Rather than a cooperative enterprise, helping all pupils to improve their understanding and enrich their own lives and their culture, the academic curriculum is being used as a vehicle for helping some to get ahead economically and others, inevitably, to fail.

Another Headline Performance Measure

Second, we need to look at EBacc in the current policy context of school evaluation. EBacc entry and EBacc attainment are two of the five main headline performance measures for schools, the others being Progress 8, Attainment 8 and percentage of pupils achieving a good pass in English and mathematics. Progress and Attainment 8 have been welcomed by many teachers partly on the

grounds that they ensure a broad curriculum with options. The EBacc, however, may well undermine this. EBacc entry is a non-attainment measure which has implications for how the school chooses to deploy its teaching and learning resources. For many schools this will be a question of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Employing an extra French teacher, say, will mean dropping a non-EBacc subject like drama. The government no doubt would argue that there is no contradiction – schools need to teach both a 'broad and balanced curriculum' and the EBacc subjects – but in a period of budgetary constraint it is the former that is likely to suffer.

It is difficult to be optimistic about these developments in performance measures as a whole. Schools may welcome the emphasis on progress as well as attainment, but at the end of the day students will still end up with a profile describing their attainments in terms of exam passes, however much progress they have made. One could say of X: 'She made expected progress in science but did not obtain a passing grade.' So where does that leave X? Would she have made enough progress to take science post-16? Probably not from the school's point of view. In what way could she regard herself as a scientifically informed citizen? Would she feel confident enough to think independently about questions involving science in an everyday context knowing that she had made progress but 'failed' in science? Of course, officially no one 'fails'; they just do not obtain a 'good pass'. The new GCSE grading system makes matters more confusing by distinguishing between a top C (now grade 5) and a bottom C (now grade 4). The latter attracts an award at level 2 but only the former is a 'good pass'. The EBacc makes it worse by emphasising the higher status of traditional subjects. Despite the new focus on Progress and Attainment 8, a 'good pass' in one of these is clearly of more value than one in a non-EBacc subject.

Changes to the Curriculum

Third, it is also important to examine the EBacc in the context of other changes to the curriculum and assessment system. Introducing the EBacc at the same time as an allegedly more rigorous curriculum is likely to make schools more rather than less focused on exam performance. To meet the changing accountability framework, many schools have introduced a 'pathway' route through the curriculum and have moved to a two-year Key Stage 3 (KS3) and a three-year KS4. Students are often already set within the core subjects of English, maths and science; now, they will be put on 'tracks' at an earlier age with GCSE performance in mind.

The EBacc was clearly a policy which was on the go and for which many schools were gearing up before the consultation document was sent out. There were already some concerns. As the government admitted, based on its own statistics, although the EBacc performance measure had increased the numbers of pupils taking the qualification, the rate of progress had slowed. The percentage of pupils entering the EBacc was 21-23 between 2010 and 2012.

This jumped to a peak in 2013 of 35.5 but has since flattened out. Of more concern, however, was the achievement rate. This began as 15.1% and rose to 23.9%, with the gap between entries and 'passes' a great deal higher in 2015 than in 2010. Even for those schools that were sufficiently advantaged and well placed to attempt the EBacc, the 'failure' rate was high – something not commented upon in the document.

A student who may have been making headway under the old system is now confronted by the need to study, say, French, with higher hurdles to jump in all subjects, with no course work in certain subjects and no second chances in the same year. Even if things could be 'arranged' to show that students were making steady progress in the next few years, this would still feel to pupils and teachers alike like a labour of Sisyphus – no sooner would the top of the hill be in sight, than you would be back down to the bottom again. Unfortunately, any criticism of these attempts to 'raise standards' is met with the charge of having 'low expectations' by the powers that be. But despite all the talk of social justice and equality, it's difficult to see how these changes will benefit the majority of students.

The Curriculum Model

Fourth, the curriculum model itself is wide open to criticism. It is claimed that the EBacc subjects are the 'primary colours of an educated person's palette' which provide for 'the basis for a more specialised study later on' (DfE, 2015b, p. 7) or, to use another DfE metaphor, they are the 'five pillars' on which the curriculum is built. It is evident that some notion of 'form of knowledge' lies at the root of this. Most educationalists are probably familiar with the philosopher Paul Hirst's notion of a 'form of knowledge', which many understand as providing an epistemological underpinning for the traditional academic curriculum – each 'form' characterised by its distinctiveness as a tradition of enquiry, with its unique concepts, logical structure and methods of testability. This has been subject to criticism over the years, and Hirst himself has revised his position, but it seems this is what the DfE has in mind with talk of 'primary colours', 'pillars' and 'grounding'.

But rather than taking them as given, a more up-to-date view would be to conceive subjects as dynamic historical entities – traditions of thought with their own situated (socially constructed) rationality embodied in a social practice grounded in a historical and political context (see Kuhn, 1970). The DfE's conception seems more in line with the old-fashioned, neo-conservative view of the curriculum promulgated by traditionalists like Michael Gove, the ex-Secretary of State, who introduced the idea of an EBacc. Gove did not disavow economic goals, but he would have justified the EBacc in Arnoldian terms, as enabling everyone to have access to 'the best that has been thought and said', which could be identified unproblematically as a fixed canon.

It is clear that these 'pillars' are not all of a piece epistemologically. They include what the sociologist Bernstein called 'hierarchical' structures like maths,

physics and chemistry, as well as 'segmented' structures like geography. The former involve the development of knowledge through the development, integration and deployment of an increasingly tight-knit and logically coherent set of concepts, and the latter make progress by adding another 'segment' horizontally (see Maton, 2011) and are characterised by weak 'verticality' (internal relations among ideas), 'grammars' and boundaries with other subjects. Historically, this seems to have been reflected in the National Curriculum, where science and maths have been considered 'core' and geography and history 'foundation'. The EBacc appears to dismantle this (though schools, strangely, still make the distinction), but there is clearly no recognition of the interdisciplinary nature of a subject like geography, or of the problems involved in it being regarded as a 'primary colour' or a 'pillar'.

Powerful Knowledge

Despite these flaws, is there a progressive, even a radical, case for the EBacc? Certainly someone like Michael Young (2014) thinks there is. He describes his as the 'radical' as opposed to the 'conservative' option, 'radical' for him meaning relating to the 'key issue facing most countries today: the persistence of social inequalities in education' (Young, 2014, p. 90). In making the case for a subject-based curriculum, he distances himself from a Govian traditionalist who thinks of the subjects as 'given' rather than as changing through time, but nevertheless, he finds it 'hard to disagree' with the idea that up to age of sixteen all students have 'the right to study a foreign language, at least one humanities subject, and at least one science as well as English and maths' (Young, 2014, p. 84). In short, the EBacc subjects.

Young assumes that these subjects are bearers of 'powerful knowledge', a 'better' and superior kind of knowledge to students' 'common sense' or everyday knowledge, the latter being limited because it is tied to the local contexts of their experience. Thus, such knowledge might be thought of as cognitively constraining or even 'disempowering' because it limits people's horizons and does nothing to help them act on the world in the light of an understanding of the structures and forces which shape their own lives as well as society in general and the natural world.

I see what Young is getting at here. Formal knowledge certainly can be construed as 'powerful' in certain circumstances. But although common-sense or everyday knowledge has its limitations, is it always less powerful than formal, discipline-based knowledge? If by powerful we mean knowledge that enables people to become effective agents or to develop the confidence and assertiveness to take action in oppressive circumstances, or some such definition, then we can think of many situations where 'local' is more important than 'universal', where 'know-how' is more important than 'know-that'. Whether knowledge is 'powerful' or not seems to depend not on whether it is formal or informal but on whether it is of any practical use in a given context.

Even in situations where we would expect formal knowledge to be useful, it may not be beneficial or 'empowering' without taking into account local knowledge. One famous example is described by Irwin (1995) in his analysis of the conflict between farmworkers and the Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) over the use of the pesticide 245T. He showed that expert accounts were inadequate because they failed to draw on the everyday knowledge of the farmworkers. As one of the latter put it: 'They (the experts) may know the risks of 245T. They may handle the stuff properly. They tell us we're all right if we use the spray normally. But have they any idea what normally means in the fields?' (Irwin, 1995, p. 112). The farmworkers could also identify a variety of spraying conditions and circumstances of operation (equipment that was not adequate, long distances from washing facilities, drift on to other fields, for example) which were not taken into account by the experts. The former were also operating with a social model of farming (i.e. isolated workers dependent on one employer for housing and wages) which was different from that of the ACP.

In any case, is common-sense knowledge as cognitively constraining as Young seems to think it is? There's an assumption within the traditionalist view and evident in the writing of Young that 'better' learning always has to be within disciplines, as if this determined and exhausted all the most educationally productive forms of intellectual engagement – like, for instance, higher-order thinking, critical thinking, logical reasoning and concept development. But it is not self-evident that discipline-based understanding is always of a 'higher order' than thinking with 'spontaneous' concepts expressed in ordinary language. As Aikenhead (1996) has shown, common-sense ideas about mixtures (in chemistry) can be richer and more complex than the scientific classification of heterogeneous and homogeneous. Moreover, in his study, the reason students resisted the heterogeneous construct was not because they didn't understand it but because it proved less useful than their common-sense understandings.

The underrating of local knowledge and the assumed superiority of formal knowledge in all circumstances leads to a deficit view of students' common sense which can undermine their self-confidence, surely one of the essential ingredients of an empowering curriculum? It is true that good teaching involves engaging with pupils' experience in order to help them to understand and deploy abstract concepts. But it is always important to make clear that (a) common sense can be 'right' and (b) in practical contexts formal knowledge will not necessarily provide all the answers. They will always need to use their common sense and shouldn't be so taken with 'big science' that they cease to think themselves.

The Subject-based Curriculum

The EBacc also re-establishes and sets in stone a subject-based curriculum, which thwarts any possibility of a radical, progressive curriculum development. To pretend the EBacc subjects reflect a context-free, 'neutral' differentiation of

knowledge is basically dishonest. If subjects are socially and historically situated 'traditions of thought' they are just as politically vulnerable as any other social practice. Social interests are always at work in social action, and in the case of the EBacc it is not difficult to demonstrate the influence of vested interests.

Take geography, for example. Interdisciplinary, cross-curricular or 'thematic' courses are often portrayed as soft options by specialists in part because 'rigour', as a subject specialist would understand it, is sacrificed to relevance and accessibility. In terms of the painting metaphor, such courses would be a mix of several colours rather than a 'primary colour', with all the muddle and lack of clarity this would entail. Such studies are often viewed as too fragmented, superficial and incoherent in comparison with the systematic, conceptually sophisticated, distinct 'way of knowing' that should characterise a core subject. Yet geography is clearly an interdisciplinary subject.

In the GCSE specifications for geography laid out in the DfE document (DfE, 2014a), human geography is described as involving the study of cities and urban society – 'an overview of the causes and effects of rapid urbanisation ... contrasting urban trends with varying characteristics of economic and social development'; also 'global economic development issues ... the changing context of population, economy and society, technological and political development, international trade, aid'. There are clearly some contentious issues around the whole concept of development, but my point here is that this is surely a description of an out-and-out interdisciplinary subject. If we think in terms of subjects studied in universities, there are several alluded to here – economics, politics, sociology, history, psychology and even science.

But it is curious that placed in brackets at the end of each paragraph in the list of subject aims and outcomes are requirements like 'knowing geographical material', 'thinking like a geographer', 'studying like a geographer' and 'applying geography'. This reads like a last-ditch attempt to claim the territory and maintain the boundary in order to justify the inclusion of geography as a 'primary' subject and part of the compulsory core to be taught by specialists.

These territorial concerns often result in the curriculum being overloaded with material which may be of interest to the specialist but only marginally relevant to the educational aims of the course of study. Such aims are always contested, but if we think, as many do, that students' ability to engage with social, cultural and political issues of the day is important, then addressing these questions as part of a subject is not the best approach. Take concerns about the environment, for example. In chemistry specifications, there does seem to be an awareness of the importance of teaching students about 'issues' (e.g. 'recycling', 'climate change', 'pollution' and 'earth water resources') (DfE, 2015a, p. 32). These 'applications', however, are more like add-ons rather than central foci of concern. Students are expected to spend most of their time learning about chemical concepts and their relationships, including the application of mathematical formulae. But do students really need to trawl through all this in order to get a handle on the chemistry input to the argument? The preoccupation with the fundamentals of chemistry seems to reflect the views

and interests of chemistry specialists rather than the needs of students. The syllabus gives credence to the authoritative, top-down nature of 'big science', superior to and always trumping local knowledge, a view which so many sociological studies have shown to be flawed. As Irwin puts it, 'the model is one of informing rather than empowering the public' (Irwin, 1995, p. 87). Moreover, subsuming these important topics under chemistry downplays the interdisciplinary nature of the exercise, and reduces the significance of the formal knowledge of other disciplines.

I have also heard the reverse of the 'soft' option argument. Interdisciplinary subjects are considered too 'hard' at this level, requiring students to develop 'ways of thinking' in several different subjects or disciplines in the context of one course of study. But in addressing 'issues' in their everyday lives, it is evident that people have no difficulty linking together concepts and ideas relating to a variety of perspectives. These may include concepts which are 'picked up' unconsciously in particular contexts, others which are more 'theoretical' but have been 'worked into' ordinary language, and some that don't quite fit either description in that they are derived from people reflecting on their everyday knowledge.

We can see this even in the highly 'localised' conversations between mothers and their pre-school children in the home environment. From her analysis of many such conversations, Walkerdine (1990) concludes they often involve more than one knowledge dimension at a time. Thus, in relation to conversations about money, maths, politics and economics at some level are all involved. In conversations about gardening, there are examples of conversations which involve mathematical and scientific terms such as size, speed, time and growth.

'Useful' Knowledge?

Finally, is subject knowledge 'useful' in the sense of 'empowering' students in practical contexts? Students who go on to specialise in maths or science would, in a sense, be empowered in school and university contexts. One suspects that the DfE has this group in mind when referring to the new maths GCSE including 'new content to improve progression to A-level' (DfE, 2015b, p. 8). However, will it be of much use to the majority, even those who achieve a passing grade?

You wouldn't know from perusing government documents on the curriculum that there has been a long-standing debate among teachers, mathematicians and other educationalists about the value of mathematics in the curriculum (see e.g. Burghes, 1989; Quicke, 1995; White 2000, 2016). Burghes, a maths specialist, felt there was little in secondary maths that we could in all honesty defend 'as being directly useful to future life' (Burghes, 1989, p. 86), a point also made by White. Things may have changed somewhat in recent years, but it is still difficult to see how, for example, learning how to 'move freely between different numerical, algebraic, graphical and diagrammatic

representations including linear, quadratic, reciprocal, exponential and trigonometric functions' (DfE, 2014b) would ever have any practical value in the life situations encountered by most students. If they ever did require such knowledge at some point in the future, they would almost certainly have to re-learn it.

When the philosopher John White (2000) comprehensively reviewed the instrumental as well as non-instrumental arguments for including maths as a part of a core, he found they were all full of holes. Maths may be learned 'for its own sake', as a culturally enriching experience, and it may even be construed as having a moral dimension in that all kinds of personal qualities are required to do mathematics well. But the same could be said of many subjects not included in the core – for example, psychology, philosophy and sociology, which are just as enriching and more easily taught in ways that make them accessible and relevant to all pupils.

The point stressed by most of these authors is not that maths has no value but that it is a question of priorities. Certain aspects of maths – for example, basic numeracy and statistics, perhaps – should be compulsory, but there is a strong case for treating most of the current content as optional.

A similar argument has been used in relation to modern foreign languages (MFL). Again, there is a history of debate in this area. David Hargreaves (1982), for example, the well-known academic and school improvement expert, saw no direct value of learning a foreign language to the community-oriented core curriculum he advocated over thirty years ago. John White, however, is as far as I know the only person to challenge the academic value of learning a foreign language. As he points out, 'Modern foreign languages may do something to deepen a learner's understanding of language in general ... but the great bulk of its work is about the use of different words ... and the grammar that directs this use, to express concepts with which the learner is already familiar' (White, 2012, p. 511). In other words, if we consider the teaching and learning of new concepts (i.e. 'powerful knowledge') to be a central feature of an academic curriculum, MFL clearly does not provide this. As with maths, most critics are not against teaching MFL in schools but think it should be optional.

Concluding Comment

For this writer there is nothing wrong with the idea of a broad, balanced, academically rich curriculum as an entitlement for all students. The EBacc, however, is not it. As a performance measure it reinforces all those features of the system which are problematical from a social justice point of view – for example, streaming, high-stakes testing and the priorities of a traditional subject-based curriculum.

It is difficult to see a way forward in the current circumstances. The back-to-the-future curriculum is but one aspect of a government education policy which has ruthlessly undermined any possibility of progressive educational reform in schools.

'Areas of study' which historically have been organised around socially relevant cross-curricular themes rather subsumed under traditional subjects have been reduced in status, if they appear on the curriculum at all. Personal and social education (PSE), media studies, citizenship, environmental studies, and science, technology and society (STS) – all these could act as hooks on which to hang a genuinely relevant and empowering entitlement curriculum. All could be taught by teachers who were not necessarily specialists in any of the contributing subjects, in ways which required 'higher-order' and critical thinking.

It would take another article to argue the case for this alternative. Suffice it to say it would have to begin with an identification of educational aims. Discussions relating to aims are thin on the ground in reviews of educational priorities today (some notable exceptions are to be found in the works of Reiss and White (2013) and Alexander (2016). In the dominant managerialist discourse, they are usually presented as self-evident and uncontroversial, easily summarised in a few bullet points at the front of a school prospectus and usually never mentioned again.

Even general aims cannot be considered without reference to the social, cultural and historical context in which they are to be realised. They would have to be decided democratically and would almost certainly involve the construction of a consensus. Curricula should reflect societal needs deemed the most pressing at a particular historical conjuncture, often relating to perceived deficiencies in the current order, like the democratic deficit, for example, which was among the mix of reasons (another would be the alleged 'brokenness' of society) for the development of citizenship education.

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