Education policy: ownership insufficiently disputed

Note

The phrase 'self plagiarise' comes to mind because what follows is based upon a chapter I have written for a book to be published shortly called *Mental Health and Well-Being in the Learning and Teaching Environment* (published by Swan and Horn http://www.swanandhorn.co.uk/). You can also find versions of some of the stories and endnotes in other places on this website (Miscellany and Miscellany 2).

This essay can be seen as parallel to the one in the following link in which, although the themes are similar, my emphasis is much more upon changing phases of educational policy in England.

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebFor%20DH%20Lawrence.pdf

As has been my recent practice I also draw attention to the following link as an aid to critiquing my writing and, if you find it useful, the writing of others.

http://www.criticalprofessionallearning.co.uk/assets/WebcriticalProfessionalConversation.pdf

Abstract

In this essay I address issues central to the well being of learners and the enablers of learning: their roles as receivers and implementers of policy and their exclusion from its conception and construction. The language and concepts of education are, I believe, controlled centrally and because the values inherent in policies have not been arrived at inclusively the damage to well being extends to society itself. The current touchstones for educational policy are league tables. I argue and assert that we can and must do better.

Introduction

My central argument is that when policy making is based upon an inclusive and consensual process of arriving at shared values it is better for the well being of learners, enablers of learning and society in general: better than policy making that excludes the concerns, interests, anxieties, experience, expertise and values of learners and enablers of learning.

I explore the meaning of politics and, its polar opposite, alienation. I also examine those concepts that form the basis of fought-over educational narratives. They are *progress, reform, improvement* and *modernisation.* Obtaining the power to define such concepts is important to policy makers. Losing the power to dispute those definitions is not good for learners, enablers of learning or society.

There is a strong international governmental urge to measure learners and educators and to demonstrate an improvement in their performance compared with previous years and with other countries. The reasons given usually make a link between educational and economic performance. As a consequence the educational emphasis is increasingly upon the setting and the hitting of targets. This is, however, not a phenomenon confined to education. Neither has the influence of people such as Michael Barber been confined to the UK. As a way of carrying out the business of government the approach that he now advocates globally places the emphasis upon instruction, delivery, performance management and a shift of accountability from government to the governed. The fountainhead for all of this is policy thought up, designed and handed down by government, sometimes with carefully managed consultation processes. We cannot, we must not, in my view, disconnect learning and the enabling of learning from our thinking about society; from our notions of democracy; or from our fundamental human values.

In support of this view I call upon John Dewey from the USA, Stephen Kemmis from Australia and Nurit Peled-Elhanen from Israel. The serious consequences of the exclusion of learners and enablers of learning from the process of educational policy making can hardly be overstated. Educational narratives are social narratives that help form our views of ourselves and of other human beings. Those views can disparage, disadvantage and demonise others. They can also celebrate and support. They can include and they can exclude. Forming policy on a narrow basis, however, reduces its legitimacy and calls for stronger measures of enforcement. An officially sanctioned narrative can be an un-noticed enforcement measure. It is un-noticed because, while policy targets are being chased, there is no time for inclusive discussion and we lose the habit of questioning anything except how to implement what is required. The creativity of

learners and enablers of learning does not extend to the shaping of policy: it is devoted to its delivery.

Towards the end I categorise the threats to the well being of learners, enablers of learning and society that arise from an exclusive approach to policymaking. The ultimate threat is, I believe, social fracture and, at present, in much of Europe and the USA, I see few possibilities of preventing it. That education, standing for growth and fulfilment, could be recruited to contribute to social fracture is difficult to contemplate and accept. Attempting to change this situation is like picking up a few bricks to re-build a house that the bulldozer has yet to finish demolishing. Nevertheless, I believe we ought not to stand idly by.

There are a considerable number of, sometimes long, endnotes that I hope will elucidate what the text has obscured. They are intended to develop arguments further, provide examples and offer more perspectives.

Main Text

The well being of learners and enablers of learning is affected by how public policy is formed and implemented. The effects can be direct in terms of education policy and, because social and economic policies set the contexts for education, also indirect. Policy decides what learners and enablers of learning do. It also decides its value, even their value as members of society. The process is interactive and how learning takes place affects the nature, the well being and even the publicly declared purpose and values of the societies in which we live.

The means by which this happens can be confusing, contradictory, contentious and even hidden from view. To make critical sense of the changing interactions between, on the one hand, learners and enablers of learning and, on the other, makers of policy we need, first, to discuss: a number of relevant concepts, the values with which they are associated and the effects that they can produce when turned into policy. We also need to look at who, at various times and to varying degrees, is permitted to contribute to the making of policy and the ascribing of value.

Politics and alienation

It might be thought that politics is what politicians do as they manoeuvre to acquire and keep power. The phrase ‘playing politics’ and the accusation of being ‘politically motivated’ contribute to this impression. They actually refer to partisan behaviour and manipulation. In fact, politics is the inclusive and collective process of arriving at agreed values[i]. Crucially for the subject of this essay it is a process that should take place before policies are established: political process first, policymaking second. If education policies are constructed without prior agreement about values the effect upon learners and leaders of learning is to reduce them to reacting to the values and decisions of those with power: it disempowers them.

There remains, of course, the question of how inclusive or exclusive the political process can sometimes be. It changes.

When Karl Marx used the concept of alienation it was to help him describe how workers could be reduced to commodities and excluded from any discussion of values as a prelude to decision making on matters of great importance to them: the conditions of their lives and work. Alienation can lead to dehumanisation. If learners and enablers of learning are estranged and excluded

from decision-making about their roles, values and purpose the consequences can be stressful and counterproductive: socially and individually damaging[ii].

Taken together, the concepts of politics and alienation represent varying opposites. The smaller the group that agrees values and goes on to make policy the greater the group that is alienated. Setting the ratio for the two groups is the problem.

Governance without politics: the delivery of policy

Possibly the clearest exposition today of the belief that politics is subordinate to governance comes from Michael Barber who came into the UK government in 1997, first to effectively direct education policy and then to drive forward the 'delivery' of government policy in general. Afterwards he worked for McKinsey's and now for Pearson[iii]. His writings and his work have become very influential throughout the world.

Two concepts dominate his approach to education and the business of government. The first is *instruction*. The second is *delivery.* The first implies a manual: an authorised text: transmission of an approved orthodoxy. The second implies performance management and inspection. Put them together and we can see how policy makers set about their business by instructing others to deliver. *Instruction to Deliver* is the title of Barber's major book[iv].

At one time we might have thought of accountability as something that governments owed the people. In the instruction and delivery model the burden of accountability is borne by those that are managed. Whether we are talking about schools or universities or hospitals or businesses the effect is the same: policy makers decide the target for others to hit. This approach can, however, backfire when targets are not hit because they are badly chosen or they conflict with other targets. And sometimes even when targets are hit there can be unforeseen undesirable consequences. The question is who shall take the blame when things go wrong[v].

Another effect of the rigorous application of this model is that receivers (implementers) of policy can spend their time ironing out problems, complaining and resisting. For education this will, I suggest, take the joy out of learning. And learning without some joy is not, I believe, good for well being.

A cluster of four concepts and control of their use

Four concepts that we should take together are ***progress***, ***reform***, ***improvement*** and ***modernisation***. Although their meanings may appear, and can be, close, dispute over their defining results in them being used, sometimes simultaneously, in quite contrary ways. These concepts can dominate policy discourse in education so it is always important to unpick current meanings. They also represent highly desirable and sometimes fought-over labels.

Progress[vi]

Progress is a problematic concept because it carries with it the assumption that it takes place in a particular manner or direction. It also implies that countries, groups and people who develop in different and unapproved ways and directions are not progressing. 'Developing countries', for example, are expected to make progress according to the values of other more powerful countries: to fit an economic and administrative template drawn up by others. This can mean a country having to earn the right, granted by others, to be labelled a 'democracy', but of a particular kind. In a classroom it can mean having to demonstrate only such knowledge, understanding and skill that has been officially established as worthy of being awarded grades[vii].

Let me tell you the story of ***The Sheep and the Pig***.

> Some years ago, in a Liverpool Nursery School where the headteacher was very keen on Records of Achievement, a four-year-old child asked the headteacher if she could put one of the two pictures she had done that day into her portfolio. The answer was "Yes, which one?". Now the child had done one picture of a sheep and one picture of a pig. The picture of the pig was really very good: clearly a well-delineated and recognisable pig. The picture of the sheep, on the other hand, was not very good at all.
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> When she asked the child which picture she wanted to choose the head was surprised to be told "The sheep, of course". Being an experienced teacher, and remembering that a purpose of Records of Achievement was that the child should own the decision about what went into the portfolio, the head refrained from intervening at this point. She did, however, ask the parent who came to collect the child why she thought her child had chosen the poor

sheep rather than the much better pig. The mother replied, "Well you see, she has been doing pigs for months. Our house is full of her pictures of pigs. That's her *first* sheep."

In other words, the achievement identified by the child as worthy of celebration was the taking of a first step towards new learning.

Having heard the head teacher telling this story it has stuck with me for a long time and I often wonder what happened to that four year old girl when she 'progressed' through a school system that required her to submit the equivalent of better and better pictures of pigs and hide her pictures of sheep.

The idea that learning includes recognition of tentative steps to new, sometimes unexpected and often self-directed and un-polished, learning is not itself new. Jerome Bruner's ideas of discovery learning[viii] and Lawrence Stenhouse's encouragement of teachers to be researchers[ix], for example, support this approach and give it value. National anxieties to do well in international educational league tables, however, work against it. The competition to produce better pictures of pigs means that the poor sheep don't get much of a look in. Those national anxieties are transmitted, via enablers of learning, to learners.

In whatever context the concept of progress is used, whether it is the performance management of schoolteachers, the development of nations or the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding, the danger is that failure to fit the approved criteria defining progress results in negative labelling that might be somewhat unfair, especially if the criteria are not well and inclusively chosen.

Reform

Taken literally this simply means change. The concept is, however, very powerful because it is associated with so many measures that have gained approval over so many years: abolition of slavery, extension of the franchise, welfare, free medical care and education for all, for example. It is easy to understand why politicians are so keen to apply the word to their policies. The question to ask is, if we believe that the use of the word *reform* confers approval are we tacitly accepting that when a policy is presented to us with that label it cannot be challenged?

As with *improvement* below once policy makers capture and control the use of the concept of **reform** critics can be made to appear to be opposed to a well thought of concept of high value. That is not a good position from which to make an argument.

Improvement

The international standards for quality assurance (ISO)[x] make much use of this word. A business should, they assert, always be seeking to improve its performance: to do better what it seeks to do. Questions, however, should be asked. First, is what a business seeks to do a good thing in and of itself? Second, who or what might be affected when a business pushes harder to achieve more? And third, how is improvement to be measured and described?

Imagine a government writing a national curriculum that concentrated on the drawing of pictures of pigs. Would that be a good thing? If the government says it is a good thing then it is, especially if no one outside government has the opportunity to contribute their views or the power to change things. If you cannot change a policy you have to work to the values placed on it by those that made it.

What might be affected if this policy is enforced? For one thing, there would be no pictures of sheep or of anything else. All the resources of a school, especially its human resources, would be devoted to teaching children to draw pictures of pigs. The curriculum would be very narrow, making much easier the task of measuring and inspecting performance. It will become a very simple job to identify those children and teachers that improve and those that fail to hit the target.

Then there is the question of how to assess and evaluate the pictures of pigs. Standards and expectations need to be established. Who does this and on what basis? The government could ask the learners and the enablers of learning to take a lot of time to research this before making any decisions. But politicians will have made pledges to the people that, unlike the previous government, they would ‘drive up standards’. And politicians prefer microwaved policies to slow cooked ones. Quick decisions are, therefore, likely to be made about what a picture of a pig should look like and teachers will be sent on courses to learn how to instruct children to draw them properly. Continuing professional learning would be timed, tidy and targeted with tangible evidence making it easy to carry out value for money analysis. It certainly would not be untimed, untidy and untargeted with intangible evidence: no chance of the accidental discovery of professional penicillin.

As for *standards,* how, we should ask, can they be driven up or, for that matter, down? They are only standards if they stay still so that measurements can be made against them. They are, however, part of the rhetoric of educational policy makers today. Learners and enablers of learning are now required to be fluent in a language that is essentially that of quality assurance. My argument is, however, that when the meaning given to standards keeps shifting without serious research but merely at the whim of a politician, the language is being misused to the detriment of learners and enablers of learning. And so we come to our next concept.

Modernisation

As with progress we could go back a while to trace and discuss this concept: back to the Encyclopaedists and Emile Durkheim and many others[xi]. It is not a recently introduced concept. It is, however, often a sloppily deployed concept. To say that it means that something is 'new' is an insufficient and possibly misleading explanation.

There can be times when the human spirit seems to want to put names to periods of history such as 'the age of enlightenment' in the eighteenth century or 'The new Elizabethan Age' in Britain as Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne. It can be part of wanting to feel both new and, by implication, modern, even refreshing and inspiring. To give names to ages is to satisfyingly categorise them and set them out as the steps we take in a modernisation process. By subscribing to this approach we can make ourselves feel that every day in every way we are getting better and better[xii].

To be referred to as 'old-fashioned' is, however, generally regarded as something of an insult unless, of course, someone wishes to label part of the past a 'golden age' in order to disparage the present. When they do it can bring out some of the contradictions inherent in a captured concept as the rhetoric uses an idealised past to legitimate devising policies for a preferred future.

The major point about the concept of modernisation is that it tries to bring together and unify the other three concepts discussed above so that they appear to represent a totally unchallengeable set of values. To march behind the banner of modernisation is to march in the approved direction. It is labelled *progress* and all change can be called *reform* leading to *improvement*. This is a very

powerful cluster of concepts, each one of which has to be engaged with in order to alter or influence the policy discourse or chosen narrative.

The debilitating task is, however, obtaining permission to meaningfully engage with the concepts and participate in policy making. Without this participation fulfilment for learners and enablers of learning can be limited to implementing received policy.

A phrase in widespread use is ‘best practice’. Professionals are supposed to discover, learn, follow and disseminate the best way of doing something. Two questions arise. Who decides the ‘something’ that they should be doing? And once that decision has been taken who has the power to identify the best way of doing it? We could ask a third question: once best practice has been identified does it close down experiment to find other ways of doing things?

In the late nineteen sixties and the seventies the government of El Salvador, in the name of modernisation, attempted to make a radical change to the role of schoolteacher. All lessons were to be designed and broadcast via television from the capital into the classroom. Alienated is probably too mild a word to describe how teachers felt. Protest was violently suppressed and blood was spilt[xiii].

So far, the introduction of Massive Open On-line Courses (MOOCs) has not involved bloodshed but it will be interesting to see what issues are raised as people debate this initiative[xiv]. Are critics who assert that learning is a social activity to be silenced by peremptory use of the word modernisation and made to feel out-of-date?

Themes and issues

The major themes of this essay so far have been: exclusion from the articulation and discussion of values prior to policy making; restriction of the creativity of learners and enablers of learning to the implementation of policy; and control by policy makers of language, discourse, narrative and ascribed value.

We could conclude that there are no issues here at all. If the purpose of learners is to ‘do what teacher says’ and if the purpose of enablers of learning is to teach what they are told to teach in the way they are told to teach it then what is the problem?

I want to introduce three witnesses. The first is John Dewey who began to articulate his educational philosophy in the USA before the First World War. He saw education as part of what made democracy work. Schools were *for* communities[xv].

Stephen Kemmis and colleagues in Australia provided us with the notion of a socially critical school: not a school that passively conforms to social structures and norms but a school that plays an interactive, even proactive, role in society[xvi].

By contrast, a disturbing perspective on the socially critical roles of learners and enablers of learning comes from Nurit Peled-Elhanen. Her close analysis of the treatment of Palestinians in Israeli school textbooks reveals what is essentially a dehumanisation of 'others' that also dehumanises those learners and enablers of learning that are drawn into a scarcely challenged national narrative[xvii].

Policies do not have to come in the form of laws when they are so culturally embedded that they cannot escape from the dominant discourse to be identified and disputed. There are no issues regarding well being if the policies cannot be 'seen'.

To look at the work of Dewey and Kemmis and Peled-Elhanen is to be reminded that education is not just about preparation for measurement: it is about growth as a human in relation to other humans. Educational policies, whether formal or informal, extrinsic or intrinsic, affect the terms in which that growth takes place. It can be positive. It can also be negative. And it can wobble in between.

The relationship between learners and enablers of learning

We could place together the interests of learners and enablers of learning and view them as joint receivers of policy with a median role for enablers of learning as transmitters of policy. This would be to neglect the dynamic of their relationship and to devalue the extent to which enablers of learning can also learn when they collaborate as joint participants with learners. In that dynamic also lies potential for disappointment and a lack of respect.

Let me give you another story.

I call this one ***Failure to Learn from the Learners*** or ***Who Should Write School Reports?***

It is my own story from the early 1980s.

> For some time I had been trying out different ways of producing school reports, attempting to escape from the eternal set of variations on the word ‘satisfactory’ combined with ‘very’, ‘quite’, ‘un’, ‘not’, ‘not very’ and more. Remember them?
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> My idea was that all the children were entitled to three things that so far had been kept from them. First, they were entitled to a framework and language that could help them make overall sense of their learning. Second, they were entitled to tell their teachers how they made sense of their learning. Third, they were entitled to be listened to before a teacher made any statement that passed judgment on them.
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> There was a fourth entitlement. They had the right to contribute to the shape, nature, scope and language of the sense-making evaluation framework.
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> So I drafted a framework and, mostly with my own registration class, got it into a shape that we thought would work throughout the school. The next task was to persuade colleagues to accept it. Here I made what I believe is a classic error. I believed that those members of staff who did not object to it were accepting of it. Having persuaded senior management to extend registration each Friday morning to evaluate the learning of the week we embarked upon what I believed was a journey into that socially and educationally fulfilling world called ‘comprehensive education’.
>
> Guess what? When it came to writing reports half the staff ignored everything the kids had written. I ought to have taken more care and more time to embed the project. The key to gaining consent was the sharing of ownership and after more than thirty years the feeling of having persuaded the kids to come to a dance at which teachers failed to take the floor with them continues to gnaw at me.

My questions today are what kind of a hearing do we give to what is now often called ‘student voice’? Are learners at the bottom of a triangle with policy makers at the top and enablers of learning acting as their agents? In what aspects of learning are their voices to be heard? Is it the job of enablers of learning to quieten those voices, especially when they are discomforting? Is it the job of policy makers to quieten the voices of enablers of learning, especially when they are discomforting?

Categories of threats to well being

A danger when describing and categorising threats to well being is that we might engage in that well known practice of re-defining as medical/social conditions the ordinary ups and downs of life. If grief over the death of a friend, for example, is categorised as a medical condition we can apply medication to treat the 'problem'. This is to visualise grief as something wrong with us that has to be cured[xviii].

If to be a little bored, to daydream or simply a bit fed up in a classroom is categorised as abnormal behaviour then we can develop an industry of educational consultants equipped with the latest ideas and gadgets to make the learner return to an approved normality. We may even accuse teachers who fail to deal with such abnormalities of professional shortcomings that must be corrected by means of special training sessions. I suggest that a bit of boredom and fedupness from time to time are normal for human beings and as for daydreaming, it can be very stimulating. They usually represent no serious threat to our well being and it is seldom necessary to make an issue of them.

Bearing in mind these caveats and also that no teacher enjoys hearing the phrase 'This is boring' I think that we can, nevertheless, identify some real and strong threats to well being that arise from the interaction between policy makers and those engaged, in whatever role, in organised learning. From a long list of many candidates I have a short list of three. I see them as a sequence.

The threat of abnormalisation

This is a very strong word but, I believe, appropriate. I have chosen it because it signifies the difference between approved and non-approved beliefs and behaviour. Having the power to label people *abnormal* when they disagree with you destroys not only their arguments but also their self-esteem. Many cultures have a history of making fun of and disrespecting people because they are different. If the people who are considered different have similar power they can retaliate in kind. If they do not all that is left is resentment.

Our subject here is the interaction between, on the one hand, learners and enablers of learning and, on the other, policy and policy makers. The threat is that policy establishes what we might

call an official educational religion. Believers in the religion are normal. Non-believers, however, are abnormal and must take the consequences of wearing a negative label. Powerful official educational religions not only have liturgy but also the equivalent of bishops and priests. Schoolteachers and lecturers who wish for promotion must demonstrate that they are confirmed members of a church that is strongly organised with the power to excommunicate. And so, the next threat.

The threat of exclusion

This is a very subtle threat. It is a consequence of abnormalisation. Learners and enablers of learning who have never known what it can be like to articulate and discuss their concerns, interests, beliefs, anxieties (their values) as part of a process leading to policy making might not expect or hope for inclusion in the process. What you never had you never miss. So who or what is being threatened by the exclusion?

There are three layers to this threat. The first is learners who are excluded from contributing to decisions about what and how they learn. The second is those enablers of learning with deep and long professional experience that they are not allowed to bring to the policy making party. The third layer is the next threat.

The threat of social fracture

Ultimately it is the well being of society that is being threatened. When unorthodox learners and enablers of learning are deemed to be abnormal the different perspectives that they can draw to our attention are ignored or devalued. When both unorthodox *and* orthodox are excluded from discussion of values prior to policy making the policies that emerge have a narrower and more fragile base. The ownership of policies will be confined to a small group liable to change as elections take place and ministers are re-shuffled.

When we talk about the well being of learners and enablers of learning we are, surely, also talking about the well being of society. Dewey, Kemmis and Peled-Elhanen did not confine their writing about education to what happens in classrooms. They were fully aware that learning: how it is organised; the values that shape it; and the human beings closely involved in formal educational systems are part of a societal ecology. That ecology can malfunction[xix].

Why choose the word 'fracture'? Two forces are at work. One creates a distance between makers and implementers or receivers of policy. The other creates turmoil as it rotates policy makers. I am not proposing an oppressively enforced harmony between the two groups[xx] nor a sterile stability with little change. I am arguing that learning should be fulfilling and that without fairness and inclusion the fulfilment of some will come at the expense of others creating an unequal distribution of well being[xxi].

We may mend our fracture with a temporary weld here and there from time to time. Unless, however, learners and enablers of learning are respected as having something to contribute to discussion before educational policy is made the damage to well being will not be confined to them but will extend to society.

The interests closing the door to policy making are driven by a belief that only a single-minded approach to education, targeting high attainment in specific subjects, will bring about economic success. They have the power. The interests trying to open the door not only appear weak because it is more difficult to gain a hearing for complex arguments from different perspectives but really are weak because, having no control over discourse, so many of them are now conditioned to accept the simplistic: not enough shoulders pushing at the door.

When it comes to policy-making, exclusion damages individual and social well being. So I take my stand on inclusion. A more general ownership of policies and a growing habit of taking part will enable a more equal and a more fair social interaction. That is, if we ever contrive the chance to try it out.

Conclusion

All of the points made in this essay bring us to a single question: how might it be possible to make the formation of policy a more inclusive process? If, in particular, education policy makers gave a more than desultory hearing to the interests, anxieties, concerns and values of learners and enablers of learning policies could be more widely owned and, I believe, become more effective in achieving fulfilment not only for learners but also for enablers of learning.

Essentially, however, this is about the well being of the kind of societies in which we wish to live. Consequently, the arguments we hear about the world of learning should not be confined to examining techniques of teaching, learning and assessing. We must look to Dewey and Kemmis and Peled-Elhanen and many others to create touchstones against which we can examine policies

for the social and human values that they represent. Who now, when attempting to qualify as a teacher, is encouraged to think, for example, about the works of Plato, Aristotle and Rousseau? Coming from so long ago does not make what they wrote irrelevant. The questions that they posed and mused upon were about what it means to be a human being interacting with other human beings.

Today's touchstones are league tables. Rational argument and appeals evoking fairness and humanity are unlikely to alter the habits of politicians addicted to forming policies on an exclusive basis and expecting to hold to account those charged with their delivery.

Without the inclusive and consensual articulation, by both learners and enablers of learning, of social and human values against which we can critique policies we shall remain reactors to what is given. Assuming that we wish to, where shall we begin to do this and obtain a hearing? In many countries today I am not so sure that the process of qualifying to be a teacher makes much space for discussion of professional values. And to be inducted as a new professional to a school, college or university is to very quickly learn, adopt and internalise the means by which those institutions have come to respond to governmental imperatives.

The starting point may have to be during the post qualification and induction stage: continuing professional learning. When this is called 'in-service training' we may expect it to be biased towards instruction in how to implement new policy. When it is called continuing professional development the risk remains that the development is still according to an approved template. Witness the widespread advertising by publishers and consultants offering CPD 'tool-kits' matched to policy. I advocate the word 'learning' because it is less constrained. There are more possibilities. It is therefore open to be given meaning by learners and leaders of learning.

I suggest three things:

that we need more and more international conversation about the experience of enabling learning and what that means in terms of values;

that the experience of learners be given voice;

and that, by every means possible, policy makers be drawn into the conversation.

If learners and enablers of learning wait for policy makers to open the door to dispute, discussion and debate they will grow cobwebs. I have no detailed plan to persuade them to open the door and what I suggest might generate lots of hot air. What can, however, be guaranteed is that

silenced voices persuade no-one and my professional prejudices lead me to believe that the hot air of learners and enablers of learning is preferable to the hot air of certain policy makers.

Key Points

Point 1

Politics is a process of inclusively and consensually arriving at values prior to policy making. Devising and implementing policies without following a political process threatens not only the well being of learners and enablers of learning but that of society as a whole.

Point 2

The urge to 'deliver' policy is spreading and increasing pressure to hit targets that are imposed rather than consensually agreed.

Point 3

The concepts of progress, reform, improvement and modernisation dominate educational discourse. It is in the interests of policy makers to control how they are defined and so create a narrative that serves them. The power of learners and enablers of learning to dispute these definitions is diminished.

Point 4

The creative powers of learners and enablers of learning are confined to the delivery of educational policy that it is assumed will be the key to economic performance.

Point 5

The threats to well being include the categorisation and dismissal as abnormal those with other perspectives and values.

Point 6

The consequences of policy that is made exclusively rather than inclusively will be social fracture.

Cliff Jones August 2015 (the original written two years earlier)

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End notes

[i] **In 1962, when Bernard Crick published *In Defence of Politics*, his intention was to restore the meaning of politics: to remind us that it is about public values. Fifty years after Crick's book went on sale Michael Flinders, a successor of Crick's at the University of Sheffield, published *Defending Politics* with a similar intention. Why, we should ask, is it necessary from time to time for us to have to be reminded that politics is an inclusive public activity and not one exclusively limited to a few people making policy?**

[ii] **In 1940 (shortly before Trotsky was assassinated) Edmund Wilson published *To the Finland Station.* The 2003 edition contains a new and reflecting introduction by Wilson written in 1971. As a history of the development of socialist thought and action it is like reading a series of intellectual car chases. For me it is one of the best books to go to in order to realise that even if you take away from the writings of Marx and Engels the rather confusingly contrived and be-devilling notion of dialectical materialism what you are left with is a passionately expressed and meticulously researched denunciation of the exploitation of workers as commodities. Alienation as a concept can be traced back to Rousseau and even to Hobbes and others but as used by Marx and Engels it is such an appropriate term.**

[iii] **Partly self-deprecatingly and partly proudly Barber has adopted the word 'deliverology' to describe his central belief of how to do government by setting clear targets and hitting them as a sign of success. In 2005 he left his UK government job to become a partner and head of McKinsey's Global Education Practice. While there he co-authored, in 2007, *How the world's best-performing school systems come out top.* The word 'instructor' replaces 'teacher' in this short work. Now he is Chief Education Advisor at Pearson, a profit making company with a huge global educational reach. He has been described as 'the control freak's control freak'.**

[iv] **First published in 2007 Michael Barber's *Instruction to Deliver* was revised in 2008. It is endorsed by academics who are fascinated by how government works and keen to know how it can be made to work efficiently. It is almost a textbook for politicians and administrators around the world who want to learn how to implement policy.**

[v] **For an antidote to Barber's book and an understanding of how governments, even when putting Michael Barber in charge of the delivery of policy, often do not work efficiently and often work extremely inefficiently, especially when they forget to do politics inclusively, it is useful to look at *The Blunders of our Governments* (2013) by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe. Although the majority of the blunders described and analysed took place in the UK their sections on Human Errors and System Failures are globally relevant. The recurring questions as you read the book are how on earth the devisers of disastrous policies managed a) to escape the blame and b) give all the difficult jobs to others.**

[vi] **In Volume Three of his *Man and Society* (1963 and 1992) John Plamenatz provided us with an authoritative disquisition on the *idea* of progress: how at times it has been taken as a law governing history; how much it is associated with the growth of knowledge; and how much it has been associated with happiness. And more. As I hope I indicate in the text, progress is not a straightforward concept. To hold its meaning captive is, however, to give the impression that it is.**

[vii] **First, lets look at the notion of 'developing countries'. In order to join the G8 or the G20 or the EU, for example, countries must satisfy criteria and agree to share values concerning, mostly, the regulation of trade but also, sometimes, human rights and, as we shall see, approaches to education. We have to see the process as applying to join a club that you hope will bring you advantages. To gain admittance you must show that you have become like the existing members and have left your old, now undesirable, self behind.**

For a self-confident advocacy of why countries wishing to wear the label 'successful' must fit a largely Anglo-Saxon template I suggest having a look at *Why Nations Fail, the origins of power, prosperity and poverty* (2012) by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. You might agree with me that the application of the label 'failure' could be based upon a rebuttable assumption.

For a country to be called a democracy is today another desired label. It was not always. The framers of the constitution of the USA (a republic) took a great deal of trouble to prevent the country becoming one. They did not completely succeed. By contrast there are numerous monarchies that wish to be regarded as democracies. It is a very disputable and variable concept. John Keane's *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009) is the first history of democracy to have been written for more than 100 years. If there is a single message from this very large book it is that, despite its desirability, the concept of democracy is fragile.

My main point, however, is about the effects when countries wish to join a desirable education club as part of their plans to become economically successful and desirably labelled: perceiving hard driven education policy as key to this.

Curricula may vary according to local and national customs and priorities but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which perceives a link between educational attainment and economic performance, has created a Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It is a way of measuring the performance of school children across the world over a rather narrow range of subjects. Every time the tests are announced the number of countries wishing to take part increases. Unfortunately the club is also a league table.

Two anxieties come into play: the desire for membership and the fear of being outperformed by others. Countries that respond to this fear by introducing more central control, a narrower curriculum, more competition and intensive testing seem not to have noticed that Finland, the country that consistently comes at or near the top in the PISA tests, does the opposite. I suggest reading almost anything by Pasi Sahlberg.

[viii] **From Jerome Bruner come lots of terms that gained currency especially in the 60s, 70s and 80s: terms such as *scaffolding* and *discovery learning* and *the spiral curriculum.* As a psychologist he is interested in how learning takes place as a human activity and how it can be re-visited in differing contexts over time. He also, like Dewey and others, takes account of cultural links and contexts. While some may wish to portray his ideas as simply allowing children to do as they like that would be to disregard the need for careful planning and observation required by his approaches.**

What, however, continues to puzzle me is why educators and psychologists such as Bruner in the USA use the word 'instruction' to describe what educators do. It's meaning seems totally counter to his approach.

[ix] **In 1975 Lawrence Stenhouse produced *An Introduction To Curriculum Research And Development.* It was an Open University set book. The Times Educational Supplement called it 'a profoundly important book' and predicted that it would be read widely. That was a time when thinking and experimenting about what and how to teach and what and how to assess were regarded as proper activities for professional educators and when universities appointed professors of curriculum development: a time when at least some educational policy was made on the ground.**

Although he began and did much of his work in Scotland it was in England at a time when the Teaching Council was dominated by educators that he became part of, and a force for, professional research activity. He even saw school inspectors as collaborators with and enablers of schoolteachers undertaking research. We have moved far away from that position and now, monitored by inspectors, must hit targets set up by others.

[x] **The International Standardisation Organisation (usually represented as ISO) has a family of standards derived, first, from a set of British quality assurance standards but, ultimately, from the USA which some years ago realised that if a soldier aiming a gun at a target pulled the trigger the bullet should go on its way as intended. Becoming qualified to wear an ISO label is important for many businesses. It means that other label wearers accept them. Label wearers are able to advertise to customers that they only deal with or sub-contract to fellow label wearers. This becomes a quality assured family all of whom are dedicated to doing better what they already do. Asking awkward questions about their central purpose is not part of the accreditation process. It is also not part of the audit process. Is education going this way?**

[xi] **We often regard the French Revolution as the great event that gave us so much inspiration to confront and correct social injustice and exploitation. It also gave us the word 'terror'. To start our modernisation clock in 1789 would, however, be to neglect the prior eighteenth century work of the, mostly French, Encyclopaedists. They were not of uniform mind but, nevertheless, a sizeable, collective and widely influential intellectual attempt to generate and make sense of new knowledge. Their work helped demonstrate the ancientness of the current regime in France. Along with the French Revolution it suggests, in my view, that the concept of modernisation (though the concept had yet to be so named) included, at least for a time, an increase in equality.**

To see how the concept developed we should mention Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) who is often referred to as the father of sociology. In France during a time of political upheaval and military defeat but also of artistic and philosophical creativity he developed ideas about what it took to make societies cohere. Structure and function feature prominently, as you might expect, and have contributed to a general belief that they are the

two main pillars of modernisation. To work on better and better structures and to push to make them function better and better is, if you accept this way of thinking, what it means to modernise.

The concept has been formulated, re-formulated, promoted and critiqued by very large numbers of philosophers, anthropologists, historians, political scientists and sociologists. Without venturing into postmodernism and post-postmodernism I think it is sufficient here to point out that modernism remains a very powerful concept and that policy makers are very keen to capture it.

[xii] **The French psychologist Emile Coue′ (1857-1926) gave us this phrase, which he suggested should be repeated as a mantra. Autosuggestion and psychotherapy are not my fields. And maybe he was right that there are great benefits for our health in being optimistic. I am, however, borrowing the term to suggest that it can be unwise to accept history uncritically when it is presented to us complete with some rather grand labels suggesting that the future will be better than the past.**

[xiii] ***Modernizing Minds in El Salvador, Education Reform and the Cold War*** **(2012) by Lindo-Fuentes and Ching describes how, in the name of modernisation, supported by lots of money and designed by very clever people, the military regime of the country managed to create an educational policy that helped to start a civil war. Failing to include schoolteachers at the policy making stage was a contributory, some think key, factor.**

[xiv] **MOOCs are discussed very frequently on the professional network LinkedIn. On the one hand we have arguments about this being the only way forward and warnings that universities and countries that stay out of the game will lose out somehow. On the other hand we have arguments about the social nature of learning. Squeezed into the arguments are points about practical problems and low completion rates.**

What I think is detectable is a fear by some that a future is emerging that will be disturbing because it challenges them to adapt to new technologies and at the same time seems to be threatening long held beliefs. When change seems to signify a combined threat like this to competence and values there is the potential to become lost in a modernisation maze and a need to find something solid on both counts to which you can cling, if only till you get your professional bearings.

[xv] **First a confession: in the late 1960s, when I was qualifying as a schoolteacher, we were given a lot of Dewey. Looking back, although he was born in 1859 and died in 1952, he could almost be said to have represented the Spirit of 1968. At the time, however, I suppose I lumped him with all the other people such as Rousseau with whom our teachers had chosen to burden us: he and his like were simply yet more 'stuff' that we had to wade through in order to qualify. Having since had to experience formal education as it has entered the cul-de-sac of instrumentalism I find him inspiring. There are far too many books and articles for me to recommend a single text, and I am not suggesting total acceptance of everything he said and wrote, but to be reminded that education is about far more than passing examinations: that it is part of what makes a democratic society he has to be revisited.**

[xvi] **In 1983 Stephen Kemmis, working with others, produced** ***Orientations to Curriculum and Transition: Towards the Socially Critical School.*** **The authors argue that schools can do better than simply prepare young people for a world of work or for life as individuals: that they need to realise that schools are not simply preparers for society but are actually participants in society and that this has implications for how they approach what they do.**

The book was written in Australia but I have used it with educators in Israel and the UK over many years. For me it helps to show leaders of learning that there are other perspectives: that there is a valid educational language somewhat different from the language of a quality assured pursuit of targets.

[xvii] **Published in 2012 Nurit Peled-Elhanen's** ***Palestine in Israeli School Textbooks, ideology and propaganda in education*** **confronts an issue that is not confined to Israel. It is the issue of establishing an official national narrative that suppresses the narratives of others. Except that, unless it is revealed, there can be no issue. To be dehumanised and devalued is to be dismissed from discussion. If you are one of the 'others' your maps, your place names, your customs and your celebrated events are not allowed into the classroom.**

[xviii] **In** ***Cracked, why psychiatry is doing more harm than good*** **(2013) James Davies looks very closely at how respected medical academics and famous pharmaceutical companies so easily medicalise everyday sufferings, hide research failings and build up false categories of conditions in order to meet the targets sustaining a massive industry. Is it possible that the education industry might do the same in response to policy imperatives?**

[xix] **I am thinking here of the work of FW Riggs. In 1964 Fred Riggs produced *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society.* Because he introduces readers to so many newly minted terms (a tendency of structural functionalists) his book, though short, can be a struggle. The irony being that his new language was part of an attempt to make his work accessible.**

He saw society *and* administration in ecological terms and in order to get us to see this clearly he used the concept of a prism. Fused light indicated a society administered by means of very simple administrative structures. Refracted light indicated societies beginning to generate multiple structures. He was careful, however, not to see this simplistically as a transition from traditional agrarian societies to 'modern' industrial ones. His point was that here was a way of looking at the shifting inter-relationships between administrative structures and society.

[xx] **In *Prismatic Society Revisited (1974)* Riggs gives us a term for oppressively imposed harmony: 'malintegration'. If, for example, the different parts (we might think of them as components or interest groups) of society are integrated in such a way that they serve the interests of or work to the values of one dominant part we have malintegration. We can, in other words, have a multiply structured society that might appear to acknowledge variety and difference but in reality damps it down.**

[xxi] **In the last few years there have been a number of books appearing arguing in favour of a more fair and a less unequal society. At times the arguments are made on moral grounds: that it is simply wrong that people can be exploited while others are privileged. Powerful economic arguments in favour of fairness and equality are also made.**

In 2012 Stewart Lansley published *The Cost of Inequality, why economic equality is essential for recovery.* Based upon considerable and very thorough research his point is that if we wish for a good economy we must narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. Concentrating mostly on the UK and the USA he shows the social, individual and economic damage that has been done in those countries since the end of the 70s when the gaps began to widen.

Joseph Stiglitz, concentrating mostly on the USA, makes very similar points in *The Price of Inequality* (2010).

Lansley quotes Wilkinson and Pickett's book of 2009, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better.* The point being made here, supported by a great deal of evidence, is that not only does inequality increase illness and stress for individuals but that society at large, including the presently rich and privileged, will enjoy more well-being in a more equal society.