Government intervention and the problem of knowledge in education policy[1]

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1. Introduction

This paper seeks to explore possible connections between the range of work in the sociology of education concerned with the role of government in promoting marketisation and choice in education and the issues around knowledge and the curriculum that I and others such as Muller (2000) in Capetown and Moore (Moore 2004) in Cambridge have been concerned with.

This relatively new work in the sociology of educational knowledge moves beyond critiques of the sociology of knowledge of the 1970s (Young 1971) and offers an alternative to the relativist cul de sac that those approaches led to. It draws on Basil Bernstein's later work (Bernstein 2000)- in particular his analysis of vertical and horizontal knowledge structures and the curriculum changes that he refers to as 'the regionalisation of singulars'. but it is wider than that.

It starts from three assumptions. The first is that the *question of knowledge,* its acquisition, transmission and creation, must be central to the sociology of (and indeed the practice of) education. The second is that both education and knowledge are inescapably *institutional* phenomena; (something I have only time to touch on in this paper). The third assumption that distinguishes this body of work from earlier sociologies of educational knowledge is its approach to questions of truth and the objectivity of knowledge. It assumes that the idea that knowledge is not tied to specific contexts and viewpoints is crucial both to the idea of a curriculum and to whether sociological analyses can take policy makers and practitioners beyond their practice and experience. To put it another way, the argument is not only that it is possible to combine a sociological approach to knowledge and the curriculum with the idea that knowledge can be objective but that the conditions for this objectivity are social (Collins 1998). The tasks for sociology therefore are (i) to explore the conditions for the production or creation of knowledge and the types of knowledge that can claim

objectivity- a reformulated sociology of knowledge*,* (ii) to identify the conditions for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge- ***a reformulated sociology of the curriculum and pedagogy*** and (iii) to interrogate the existing curriculum in light of the conditions for acquiring knowledge that sociological analysis has identified.- ***a re-formulated critical sociology of education.***

These are of course a very different goals from that which I and others proposed for the sociology of the curriculum in the 1970s, when our focus was on unmasking the ideological assumptions of the official curriculum. This task remains important; however on its own it led, as many have noted, to the untenable position of reducing all knowledge to the positions and standpoints of the knowers Moore and Muller 1999). However, if the sociology of educational knowledge is to be concerned with ***the conditions for knowledge***, and not just ***a critique of knowledge***, it has to be aware of the powerful ideological role of prevailing concepts of knowledge and the danger of being trapped in a status quo that treats them as given.

2. Grounding the sociology of knowledge

The idea that the sociality of knowledge can also be the grounds for its objectivity is not an easy one. I found the formulation by the American philosopher, Charles Peirce[2], helpful.

Pierce wrote that

> "(truth must be) determined by some external permanency- by something on which our thinking has no effect" (Pierce   )

Without such an assumption it is difficult to imagine how one could have a curriculum or knowledge at all. This of course does not mean that any particular external permanency is un-changing.

At another point Pierce states that we may define the real as " that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be"(op cit). On the other hand he combined this notion of the objectivity of the natural and social worlds with a human-centred vision of "thought as an action… excited by the irritation of doubt"

Pierce further stated that:
"our intellectual progress (takes place through) our interactions with an *independent reality*"(my italics) Without that assumption, it might be argued, intellectual (and by implication social) progress would be impossible. Some have drawn on Nietzsche to defend the position that both truth and intellectual progress are impossible and therefore necessarily ideological. However I prefer Bernard Williams's view that truth and intellectual progress are inescapably linked and that Nietzsche did not reject the idea of truth but was searching for a deeper grounding for it than was possible from science or religion. .

It follows that for the sociology of education and more broadly for all of us who work in the universities, the search for truth must set the terms for what we mean by knowledge and therefore for out research and teaching. If this principle is threatened, then there is a real educational crisis and the universities are in danger of losing their raison d'etre- as Furedi argues in his recent book Furedi (2000).

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[2] Pierce is sometimes mistakenly assumed to be the founder of pragmatism, a theory of knowledge that is quite at odds with that argued for here.

3. Sociology and the curriculum.

The nature of knowledge, how it is created, pedagogised within curricula and disciplined in research, and how it differs from the everyday experience which students bring to school and policy makers bring to their work is what the sociology of educational knowledge has to explore. Without an understanding of the social conditions that make the acquisition of knowledge possible, we are in danger of being a victim of one of two fallacies, one internalist and the other externalist.

The internalist fallacy follows from the position adopted by those in the Right Wing parties and Think Tanks. They take an a-social view of knowledge as given or rather an inherited legacy. This however, merely serves to defend the existing ordering of knowledge and its associated social structures of selection. It is ironic that this curricular legacy is threatened by just those forces of the market that those on the Right have endorsed! Inevitably such a position not only perpetuates or extends existing inequalities; it precludes the intellectual progress endorsed by Pierce that I referred to in the previous section.

The externalist fallacy takes the opposite position. Rather than treating knowledge as given, it sees nothing special about any particular ordering of knowledge- all are contingent. It follows from this point of view which is very similar to the present British government, that both the curriculum and research should be driven as far as possible by social and political goals. Outcomes and targets are identified to drive the curriculum and research priorities, whether they are social inclusion, widening participation or economic competitiveness.

Despite their fundamental differences, both the internalist and externalist positions have one thing in common (Moore and Young 2001). They fail to take account of the conditions for producing and transmitting knowledge. This is precisely the focus of where Bernstein's analysis. He argues that knowledge structures can be distinguished in two ways- *horizontally* in terms of the relations between different fields of knowledge- his concepts of weak and strong classification are one expression of this- and *vertically* in terms of the relationship between the curriculum and everyday knowledge; verticality is expressed in his concept of framing which mirrors Vygotsky's distinction between scientific and everyday concepts (Young 2003) is a way of addressing this relationship.

Historically school and university curricula developed on the basis of strong classification and what Bernstein refers to as vertical discourses expressed as vertical and horizontal knowledge structures. Whereas the internalists treat the existing knowledge structures as a-historical criteria which not surprisingly reproduce old social inequalities, the externalists treat knowledge as just another instrumentality designed to serve the goals of whatever government is in power.

4. Three educational policy issues

In this section I refer very briefly to three current policy issues, the role of sociology in educational research, the reform of 14-19 curriculum and improving vocational education, and the 'crisis' in the professions which I have discussed in more detail elsewhere(Young 2004;Young and Beck 2005; Young (forthcoming). In the last section of the paper, I try to link the issues they raise to more general questions in the sociology of knowledge and current forms of government intervention in education.

4.1 The role of sociology and the effectiveness of educational research

Successive UK governments have introduced various strategies to try to gear educational research to their political goals and away from the criteria and priorities of disciplines such as sociology. (Examples are the shifting of funding towards programmes rather than bids from individual researchers, the requirements for coordinated doctoral programmes, the Research Assessment Exercise, and the 3encouragement of universities to bid for government tenders). My argument (Young 2004) is that in weakening the disciplinary basis of educational research government strategies weaken the potential for educational research to produce real advances in knowledge and, in the longer term to contribute to improvements in policy.

4.2 The 14-19 curriculum and improving vocational education

The recently published Tomlinson Report is concerned among other things with the poor quality and low status of vocational education. However its solution is entirely in terms of reforming qualifications (i.e outcomes). It proposes that academic and vocational qualifications are merged into a single diploma structure based on common 'generic' requirements for all. If these proposals become policy they will inevitably weaken specialist knowledge, both academic and vocational and lead to further academic drift as the lower levels of the four-tier structure are treated, like existing vocational qualifications, qualifications for those who have failed. The problem with vocational qualifications in the UK and why they are dismissed by employers in their is that those achieving them lack specialist occupational knowledge and skills. By focusing on merging qualifications, the Report completely misses the importance of the knowledge young people need to acquire now that very little of that knowledge can be acquired 'on the job'.

4.3 The crisis in the professions

In a recent joint paper (Beck and Young 2005) we applied Bernstein's analysis of the processes of regionalisation and genericism to the crisis of professions assailed by state regulation, and in the case of law and accountancy, the encroachment of the market. Bernstein argues that while *singulars* (best expressed in disciplines) are oriented 'inwardly' towards themselves, *regions* such as medicine and engineering have both an inward and an outward orientation. Professional knowledge emerged in this tension between inwardness and outwardness and sometimes developed into new singulars. Marketisation, Bernstein (2000) suggests, has created a new external force weakening the link between inward and outward; this he refers to as 'genericism'. With its roots in consumption and customers, genericism breaks the tension between regions and singulars that is the basis for the development of professional knowledge, thus undermining their autonomy and therefore their knowledge base.

5. The nationalisation of educational knowledge?

In each of the three cases I have referred to we can note a shift from a reliance on *generalising principles* associated with specialist professionals to a reliance on *procedural principles* devised by administrators. To put it another way, we can note a shift from epistemological to *administrative* accountability. I want to suggest that this can be seen as an example of the 'nationalisation' of educational knowledge.

In using the term nationalisation, I do not mean it in the sense that the term has been traditionally used by socialists to refer to the public take over of privately owned businesses[3]. I am referring to the requirement that activities which traditionally have had significant (professional) autonomy, whether in the public or private sectors, increasingly have to comply with goals specified by government. The autonomy of social scientists, members of professions and subject specialists in schools and colleges is being restricted in the interests of making their activities more accountable to regulatory bodies. However what these new forms of accountability neglect is the extent to which a degree of autonomy or self-regulation maybe a condition for the effective educational research, or professional work and that in each of the examples referred to the curriculum needs to be based on internal criteria defined by specialists and not just administrative criteria defined by government.

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[3] Crouch( ) uses the term ;commercialisation to refer to similar processes, although he is not concerned explicitly withy knowledge issues.

In each of the examples, government is responding to public dissatisfaction with the work of professionals by seeking to modify the structures that shape their practice in light of political goals. I do not seek to deny the reasons for the dissatisfaction; early student drop out at 16+, weak educational research and medical malpractice are real enough issues. The issue is the nature of the government's response and the over-instrumental view of knowledge and education that is involved. Secondly, I want to suggest that issue for debate is not just that education is being privatised (important though that is when the responsibilities of 'failing' local education authorities is handed over to profit making companies) but the form in which it is being *state-ised* or nationalised. The terms are hardly adequate but I am searching for a way of describing the shift from a view of public education as a professional practice with significant autonomy from state intervention, to the present situation when education is increasingly a state-directed practice under national rules and accountability procedures.

I am aware that the process I have referred to as *nationalisation* borrows the language and strategies of the private sector-examples are niche marketing, branding, business plans, cost effectiveness etc. However the power of intervention is the power of the state and, more specifically, that of the elected government. It is state power being used to bring education into line with government goals. My own view therefore is that it is only partially true to refer to this process as privatisation. For example, although educational institutions are under increasing pressure to submit to forms of competition in what are sometimes referred to as 'quasi-markets', they have few if any of the freedoms associated with private businesses in the market for profit.

What then is happening to schools and universities under current government policies? They are not becoming like *private businesses* such as the privatised utilities. Most of these in the UK (the Railways are an exception) are no longer supported by government funds and are free to do almost anything as long as it is profitable. Educational institutions (like hospitals) are becoming *delivery agencies*, whether of research results, overseas students, qualified teachers, exam passes, higher rates of participation or whatever the government has identified as their preferred outcome.

The combination of regulation, quantitative targets and tight funding associated with this process of nationalisation means that the specificity of the educational sector (and other sectors) is reduced; the only priority becomes delivering targets and outcomes. The difference between the present government and any possible future conservative governments is that the latter will retain the delivery agency model (which they invented), but will modify the nature of the outcomes by allowing a greater role for user choice and the real private sector- a stronger version of marketisation.

A new and distinctive feature of this nationalising process under the present Labour government has been the replacement of the Labour Party's older re-distributionist goal of promoting greater equality of opportunity by the new goal of overcoming social exclusion. The rhetorical power of social inclusion as a slogan is indicated by how difficult it is to challenge it without appearing to be conservative or elitist; who could be opposed to it except an old elitist? This is of course a classic 'third way' strategy. The problem with the language of social inclusion is that in its focus on the potentially or actually excluded it precludes debates about what people are being *included in* and about the possibility that more social inclusion might be associated with greater inequality.

To summarise the argument so far - I have suggested that we are witnessing an increasingly instrumental approach to educational policy that inevitably leads to a the loss of autonomy to educational institutions and the under-valuing of what is specific to education, or as it is often referred to in the UK, the idea of 'education for its own sake'. Instrumentalism sees 'education for its own sake' as little more than a mask for privilege and vested interests. This is perhaps not surprising when the dominant English idea of 'education for its own sake' has been the elitist liberal education tradition of Newman, Arnold, Leavis and Eliot. To what extent education (or knowledge) whether or not 'for its own sake' can be other than in some sense elitist is a point that needs further discussion. It seems likely that if the current trend of government policy continues, 'education for its own sake' will be more and more restricted to the private school sector and to a few richer research-based universities that have some financial autonomy from government. Money is important for the space that it buys. The traditional left view is that it is a space for continuing unfair selection; a view that is supported by the example of fee-paying schools and the privileged funding of Oxford and Cambridge. However, in the cases that I have referred the spaces that are disappearing under greater regulation are for specialist teaching and the creation of new knowledge. In other words, the delivery model, justified by its commitment to inclusion, is in danger of removing the space for education itself.

We are dealing, I suggest, with an aspect of the changing division of labour in modern societies. Prior to the 19th century, the knowledge necessary for most people could be acquired at home, at work or from peers. With industrialisation and the growth of science more of the knowledge which people needed to acquire could not be picked up at home or at work. This led in all countries to a vast expansion of specialist institutions, teachers, and spaces like laboratories; the processes of knowledge acquisition and creation were becoming increasingly institutionally specialised.

The history of this expansion of public education can be seen as involving two struggles- one over extending access to education to the wider public and one over the nature of the public education that was provided. In England most of the efforts of the left and labour movements were directed to the former struggle. The recent efforts of government policy to influence educational practice by laying down targets and outcomes is the latest (and top down) expression of this struggle. It is not a struggle by a popular movement and those in power but between government and what it sees as 'conservative 'educational institutions. However it is also a struggle over the internal division of labour of the public sector- over what should be the basis for relations between government and the different sectors of education.

Since 1976 and the famous Ruskin speech by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, all governments have tried to find ways of making education more subservient to their political goals. This was given a powerful push by the second and third Thatcher governments but has been taken even further by Labour. It is the form of this greater public accountability, the emphasis on delivery and the various forms of quality assurance and outcomes, targets and outcomes that I am questioning, not the issue of public accountability itself which can and does take very different forms (e.g across the EU countries).

My argument in relation to the three issues discussed earlier is that the extent to which educational institutions are forced into delivery models based on administrative principles is undermining the specificity of education and the epistemological basis of good professional and research practice.

In the three cases referred to I have suggested that the knowledge base crucial to each- the discipline base of educational research, the specialist knowledge of subject and vocational teachers in the 14-19 curriculum and the autonomy of professional expertise- is threatened, not by privatisation, but by new forms of government intervention.

What I have argued is that in the cases I have referred to we have examples of a *centralising state* not a *privatising state* and that it may be even more likely to undermine the conditions for high quality post compulsory education, discipline-based educational research or professional practice than an education system based more directly on the market. As in the USA, the latter would (in the case of universities) leave st least some institutions relatively free of external pressures.

If we look at these forms of state intervention into the acquisition and production of knowledge as forms of privatisation, we may get trapped in a state/private dichotomy that has outlived its analytical usefulness. It is the state that is intervening into professional domains, not the private sector. We are in new circumstances and we may need to re-think what categories like the state and the private sector mean.

6. An alternative approach to knowledge

I have recently discovered Michael Polanyi's <u>The Republic of Science</u>[4] as providing the possibility of an alternative approach to thinking about the role of the state. Polanyi, writing in 1962 was facing a similar problem in relation to science to the one we are facing more generally in universities and schools. He describes the state-interventionist approach to the creation of knowledge which was popular at the time that involved setting political goals for science. It was expressed in its most extreme form in the Soviet Union with Lysenko's environmentalist biology. Instead of simplistically arguing that state intervention in science was wrong and scientists needed to be left on their own, Polanyi makes a distinction between what might be described as the unboundedness of economic free markets (for profit) and the boundedness of the 'market of ideas' in science and other fields of knowledge. He argues that science is an institution promoting scientific progress through competition between ideas. However it is an institution based on tradition and a respect for authority that places the highest value on innovation and the creation of new knowledge; it shapes the curriculum as well as research priorities. The role of the state is, he argues, to support the institution of science, not try to direct it. Polanyi's concept of the role of th state still applies to a considerable extent in reltion to the science research councils despite pressures for a more economically driven approach. The issue is how far such an approach offers possibilities for an alternative view of the role of the state in promoting rather than undermining the conditions for the acquisition of and creation of knowledge in universities, colleges and schools.

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[4] I am grateful to Professor Johann Muller (University of Capetown) directing me to Polanyi's classic paper in an unpublished report on the future of higher education in South Africa.

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