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## The Role of Policy in Philosophy of Education: An Argument and an Illustration

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Most of this chapter is a critique of a recent piece of British government policy-making: *The Framework for the National Curriculum: A Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review* (DfE, December 2011). But to set this in historical context, I begin with a discussion of the role of philosophy of education in UK policy-making since the 1960s.

### I

This essay is a contribution to a Special Issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education (JOPE)* on educational policy. That there is such a Special Issue may well not seem remarkable, no more remarkable than the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain's creation of the policy-orientated *Impact* series in 1999. The last three Special Issues have been on a range of subjects: methods of philosophising about education, the ethics of teaching, philosophy for children. Educational policy may seem to be a topic on all fours with these: that is, no more than a specialised interest that some, but not others, in our community share.

### 1960–1985

In earlier decades, the idea that educational policy could be a minority interest within our field would have made far less sense. To see this, we have to go back to the 1960s. My account is about the UK, but may have resonance in other countries.

The pioneering work of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst took place against a government-led upgrading and expansion of teacher education after the Robbins Report of 1963 and the election of a Labour government in 1964 committed to comprehensive schooling. Part of the thinking was that teachers in training should have wider and deeper intellectual horizons. The very term 'teacher training' was transmuted into 'teacher education'. The Bachelor of Education degree was introduced as a step towards an all-graduate profession.

It was widely agreed that teachers, at both pre-service and in-service levels, needed the broader horizons on their work that the disciplines of education provided. Philosophy of education was prominent among these. PGCE students at the London Institute of Education had weekly lectures in the major disciplines, including our own, each lecture followed by a seminar. Those who wanted to go further could also take an option course in the subject. Similar work was taking place in the new BEd courses in teacher education colleges.

All this activity required staffing. Not only did new teachers need inducting into our discipline: so did college lecturers already in post, as well as new lecturers plucked out of school teaching to cope with the great expansion of the workforce. Newly created part- or full-time in-service courses in philosophy of education, at Diploma, MA, or MPhil/PhD level, acted as conversion courses for these groups, as well as providing for teachers already in post, who became caught up in the intellectual excitement of the time. In addition to making abundant money available for this work, the Labour government, concerned about a shortage of BEd lecturers, asked Peters to run a tailor-made, one-year, full-time Diploma in Philosophy of Education—and funded the Institute to do so.

I have gone into these details to throw light on the early links between philosophy of education and policy. Those involved in the subject at every level—as student-teachers, serving teachers, college lecturers, teachers of college lecturers—were *instruments* of policy. All were aware of the transformation in education that was taking place and most, perhaps, saw themselves as willing participants in it. The idea that policy might be a minority interest within the field would have made scant sense at that time.

This is also true for a related reason. So far, I have been talking about *government* policies. But the scope of these was not so extensive as it is today. In particular, pre-1988 governments were not responsible for the content of the school curriculum. Decision-making about aims and curricula was left to schools themselves. *Each had its own policy on this.* This had weaknesses as well as strengths, but I am not concerned here to attack or defend this autonomy. My only point is that from the mid-1960s philosophy of education had abundant opportunities to influence policy decisions simply through its plethora of courses in teacher education at every level, as well as via their content. Many students were or became senior teachers, headteachers and inspectors, and face-to-face influence apart, there was the huge impact—on local authorities, the inspectorate and the civil service, as well as schools and teacher education institutions—that Peters, Hirst, Dearden and others had through their writings.

In an age when policy-making was far more widely dispersed than now across the system, much of the work published was written with policy in mind. The word ‘policy’ scarcely came up in this connection: it is more that philosophers of education took it as a large part of their job to help schools and their staff to gain a clearer and better-grounded understanding of what they should be about. Since schools were responsible for their own aims, curricula and teaching arrangements, it is not surprising that much of this early work in our subject was in these areas. It is against this background that we should view, for example, Peters’

writings on the nature of education and on moral education; Hirst's account of a curriculum based on 'the forms of knowledge'; Dearden's critique of the 'child-centred' theories then rife in the preparation of primary school teachers, and his alternative vision of good primary practice; Elliott's essays on aesthetic dimensions of education; as well as critiques of intelligence testing, arguments for civic education, discussions of classroom discipline and concept-learning, and much else besides.

Influencing practice was not the only motive. The reality was, as always, complex. Richard Peters, in particular, had other things in mind, although their bearing on his practical 'mission' perhaps seemed clearer to him than it has seemed to many subsequently. He had come from general philosophy and was eager to establish philosophy of education as a respectable branch of philosophy, on a par with such areas as philosophy of religion or philosophy of law, revolving, like these, around its own field-specific concepts. In his case, these were concepts like *education* itself, *teaching*, *learning*, *indoctrination*, *socialisation*.<sup>1</sup>

I am not writing about a 'golden age'. There were many downsides as well as many upsides of our activities in this period. My key point is that it was then *taken for granted* that philosophy of education was by and large concerned with helping schools to improve their practices. One exception has to do with philosophical problems about learning emerging within general philosophy itself, not least from Wittgenstein's interest in language learning in *Philosophical Investigations*. David Hamlyn (1978) was a notable contributor to this kind of philosophy of education, beginning a tradition that has been brought into our new century by general philosophers like Michael Luntley.

As well as their writings with and for teachers, earlier philosophers of education were also sometimes involved in policy-related work as we would understand this term today, that is, to do with matters of national significance. A notable example is found in Peters' and Dearden's critiques of the Plowden Report on primary education in Peters, 1969.

### *1985 Onwards*

Things were very different in our field by the mid-1980s. Two factors stand out. The first is an understandable recoil in the late 1970s against the heavily theory-laden pre-service courses in teacher education, notably the one-year PGCE. It was widely felt that whatever role there was for philosophy of education, as well as other educational disciplines, at in-service level, a short course like the PGCE should have more practical priorities. As a result, philosophical lectures and seminars became rare events, although students were still sometimes exposed to philosophical ideas when philosophy of education staff participated in school-focused discussions about such things as mixed-ability teaching or multi-cultural classrooms.

This notwithstanding, until 1985 philosophy of education retained its links to the world of school practice and policy through its still thriving in-service Diploma, MA and MPhil/PhD courses. But—and this brings me to the second factor—in that year the Thatcher government abolished what had been called 'the Pool'. This

consisted in central government funds given to all teachers on in-service courses to cover their fees. Henceforward, teachers had to rely on their own money—or rare outside funding—so as to study our subject. Numbers plummeted. Staff were thinned out. The future looked black.

Prospects brightened in the 1990s with the new emphasis on research productivity in universities. Philosophers of education still in post found that they could now earn much of their keep by writing books and journal articles. Our own journal, like others in the field, coped with the spate of criteria-attaining pieces now flowing its way by increasing its number of issues per year, in *JOPE*'s case from two, to three, and then four.

What happened after the mid-1980s to the field's involvement in policy? The decimation of in-service teaching cut our day-to-day connections with the world of school policy-making almost to zero. This world shrank, in any case, after 1988, when the arrival of the highly prescriptive National Curriculum began to move policy-making upwards from school to central government level, with teachers increasingly becoming implementers of decisions made elsewhere rather than policy-makers in their own right.

Some philosophers of education, not least those used to working in a policy-relevant way, continued their involvement as best they could. The new, post-1988, regime of state-controlled curricula, testing and assessment, accountability and school effectiveness, provided them with plenty of material for philosophical critique, as did the tighter control of universities by the state. Since the main type of policy on which they could now comment was *national* policy, one unexpected consequence was that policy-making circles at national level began to take more notice of our work than they had probably ever done, even in the 1960s.

With more money available to schools to use for their own purposes after 1988 under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) regime, there was still some room for school policy-making, but within the more stringent system of control just described. Many schools were attracted by agencies offering courses and consultancy on such things as brain-based learning, learning styles, multiple intelligences and philosophy for children. These raised all kinds of philosophical questions and provided another source of work in the policy area.

Given these developments at national and school levels, the field was now wide open for these philosophers of education to pursue their policy-related interests along a gamut stretching from newspaper articles at the one end; through essays on topical subjects in journals and outlets like *Impact*; to work on core philosophical topics in the background to policy—on knowledge and understanding (in relation to curriculum and assessment), personal well-being and morality (aims of education, PSHE, religious education), democracy and civic virtues (Citizenship), aspects of philosophy of mind (Gifted and Talented programmes, SEAL—Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, multiple intelligences), equality (the erosion of the comprehensive system).

Not all philosophers of education, by any means, were drawn towards policy. Most, perhaps, not least among those who took up the subject after 1980, when the policy relevance of our work was less and less taken for granted, had other

interests. It is indeed over this period that the idea, mentioned earlier, has taken root that policy involvement is a minority activity among us.

A major factor in this has been the internationalisation of our subject, promoted not least by the companies that produce our journals in their desire to expand their markets globally, and fuelled by the extra revenues gained from those same companies that have enabled scholars across the world to have regular meetings with each other. Again, this is not the place to debate all the pros and cons of this development of the last two decades. My interest here is only in its impact on policy involvement. Policies are proposed ways forward for *organisations*. This chapter so far has been about the policies of UK governments and of educational institutions. The government and school systems of particular jurisdictions may well diverge widely from those of other countries in the problems they face and proposals for overcoming them. The greater the pressure to publish work of trans-national interest, the less room there is likely to be for policy-related work, except where this relates to internationally shared experience. One such area concerns the policies of the global publishing organisations that market our work through journals like this one. I have not yet seen any discussion of these from the standpoint of philosophy of education, although recent interest in ethical issues around open-access publishing may well spark off policy-related work in this field.

A survivor from the 1960s, habituated to working in a policy-relevant environment, I find it hard to understand what philosophy of education could otherwise be like, and am not attracted by the inward-looking tendencies of much recent work in the field. I look forward to the day when teachers are given more time and resources for their own professional education, as well as more freedom and power to help shape what their schools offer. Philosophy of education will then, at last, resume its former role.

## II

As an example of contemporary policy critique, I turn to a discussion of *The Framework for the National Curriculum: A Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review* (DfE, 2011).

Although at the time of writing (May 2012) the Coalition has still not indicated its policy on the National Curriculum, the stance it is likely to take seems clear. Everything that ministers Gove and Gibb have said on the topic since before the general election of 2010 has been about the virtues of a traditional grammar-school curriculum.

Their recent English Baccalaureate proposals for a 16+ qualification are not about the National Curriculum as such, but will certainly, if carried through, influence the content of secondary schooling. They, too, have put traditional fare first. Like the London University Matriculation regulations of 1858, they demand English, mathematics and science, as well as a foreign language (to which the earlier version added Latin and Greek). The main difference between the two awards is that in 1858 history and geography were both compulsory, whereas now they are alternatives.

The Coalition has not as yet responded to the Expert Panel's Report *The Framework for the National Curriculum*, although its recommendations are in line with the Gove-Gibb predilection for curricular staples from the 19th century and wariness of newcomers like Citizenship and Design and Technology.

As shown in its Terms of Reference for the Expert Panel, the Coalition seems to understand curriculum learning in terms of 'essential knowledge (e.g. facts, concepts, principles and fundamental operations)'. A piece of essential knowledge it has overlooked is that there is no way of confining the curriculum within the epistemological domain. Do we teach children English literature only to give them knowledge? What about food for the imagination, and encouraging moral and aesthetic sensitivities?

And what, after all, is essential knowledge essential *for*? Let's take Gove's own preferred aims of education. According to him (Gove, 2009), this 'allows individuals to become authors of their own life story', and 'helps bind society together', thus strengthening our democracy.

If he genuinely wants schools to follow these aims, he will want them to deliver whatever is essential to achieve them. This of course includes knowledge, and in abundance. But authors of their own life story also need confidence, resilience, temperance and a host of other personal qualities, just as those who bind society democratically together are better off cooperative, attuned to others' wants and needs, imaginative about possibilities and critical of received ideas.

Even if we turn the spotlight on to knowledge, there is no need to assume, like the Terms of Reference, that existing subjects have a good track record. An understanding of British class structure today is essential knowledge for a young democrat, but he or she will not attain this from national specifications for history, geography or even citizenship.

## POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

The Expert Panel's Report, dutifully following the Coalition's remit, devotes itself to essential knowledge and the subjects that provide it. To judge by the order of its first two chapters, it puts more weight on these than on the aims of the curriculum in general. By its fourth line of text in Chapter 1 it tells us:

Subject knowledge can be seen as representing the accumulated experience of the past and the representation of this for the future. The concepts, facts, processes, language, narratives and conventions of each subject constitute socially refined forms of knowledge that is regarded as 'powerful'.

At the end of the same paragraph, we learn that the Coalition's National Curriculum Review as whole 'is operating with a particular focus on clear and well evidenced "maps" of the key elements of subjects—giving all pupils access to "powerful knowledge" '.

As just exemplified, ‘powerful knowledge’ has become a modish term in curriculum policy. The Expert Panel traces it to the writings of the sociologist Michael Young. In a recent on-line publication (Young, 2012), he has stated that ‘entitlement to “powerful knowledge”’ is ‘the primary aim of schooling’. This is a bold claim—and may help to explain why the Expert Panel give the term such prominence in their Report. ‘Powerful knowledge’ is also a beguiling notion. Who would not want children to acquire it?—And if anyone were to object, would they then prefer students to have *weak* or *useless* knowledge?

We should put the surface attractiveness of the phrase on one side and look to matters more substantial. Another notion much referred to recently is that the National Curriculum should put more weight on ‘big ideas’. The thought is that curriculum subjects can get cluttered with minutiae and need to refocus on what is really important: many science teachers could spend less time on chemical equations and other specifics and more on the Theory of Evolution; just as many RE teachers could abandon some of their many lessons on differences in rites and observances among the faiths for the sake of open discussion on the Existence of God. Some educationalists, when they first hear about ‘powerful knowledge’, take it that this must be about promoting ‘big ideas’ like these. But are they right?

Others may associate the phrase with the notion, once influential in policy circles, that a worthwhile school curriculum should be built around ‘forms of knowledge’, as identified by Paul Hirst. The Expert Panel indeed themselves use this phrase in the first of the two passages quoted above.

I will come back later to the links between ‘powerful knowledge’ and ‘big ideas’ on the one hand, and ‘forms of knowledge’ on the other. Meanwhile, I put these and other associations on one side so that we can see what account Michael Young himself gives of his now celebrated term.

Young (2012) tells us that ‘my argument for “powerful knowledge” rests ... upon the distinction between two types of concept—the theoretical (or scientific in Vygotsky’s sense) and the everyday or common sense.’ He continues: ‘It is everyday concepts which constitute the experience which pupils bring to school. On the other hand, it is the theoretical concepts associated with different subjects that the curriculum can give them access to.’ Acquiring ‘powerful knowledge’ is learning to use these theoretical concepts.

Young’s distinction comes, as he indicates, from Vygotsky (1962, Chapter 6). Vygotsky illustrates it by comparing an everyday—or in his usage ‘spontaneous’—concept like ‘brother’, with a theoretical, or ‘scientific’, concept like ‘exploitation’ as used in a (Marxist) social science course (p. 87). What characterises a scientific concept, unlike a spontaneous one, is that the learner focuses explicitly on its systematic relationships with the other concepts that enter into its definition.

We should not read too much into the word ‘scientific’. A better translation from the Russian to suit this context is ‘academic’. This is borne out by Vygotsky’s locating these concepts in the world of school learning (p. 93). His examples are taken from social science, but he suggests that ‘future studies should include concepts from various fields of school instruction’ (p. 118).



Young implicitly follows Vygotsky in adopting a conventional framework of curricular organisation. He ties ‘powerful knowledge’ (PK) to discrete school subjects. This comes out in his statement, quoted above, that it has to do with ‘the theoretical concepts associated with different subjects’. It is shown, too, in a statement from an earlier publication: that PK is organised into domains with boundaries that are not arbitrary and these domains are associated with specialist communities such as subject and professional associations. Where does this leave Young’s notion of ‘powerful knowledge’ and of entitlement to it as the primary aim of schooling?

His argument via Vygotsky is less than helpful. Look closely at its logic. Young—and the Expert Panel—favour a curriculum based around academic subjects because these provide PK. But what is PK? It is knowledge dependent on the concepts special to academic subjects. The reasoning is plainly circular. We are left without a good reason why schools should aim at PK—still less why, as Young claims, this should be their *primary* aim. None of this is to say that schools should *not* have PK in their sights. No one is going to deny that children should be introduced to the concepts of atoms and molecules, multiplication and probability. The issue is: *what role* should such learning have in their education as a whole?

On the way to answering this, we should ask: in which academic subjects do we find a rich source of PK, and in which do we not? Mathematics and the sciences, certainly. But what about such other staples of the traditional curriculum as geography, history, English and modern foreign languages? The only subject that Young (2012) discusses is geography, so let us look at that first. Young says:

Pupils know Auckland through their everyday concepts as the place where they live, whereas for the geography teacher Auckland is also known through the lens of the geographical concept of ‘city’.

Young is on to something here. A pre-school child who lives or stays with relatives in both London and Sheffield has some kind of everyday understanding of what a city is (even though he may not use the word ‘city’). He knows that it is a place where people live close together, full of houses, streets, buses and cars. He has also been outside the city where he lives and can contrast it with greener places that are not at all like this. Later, when at school, he will, as Young says in relation to his Auckland example, be able to see where he lives in a more sophisticated way. He will be able to rely on richer conceptual connections, between the notions of city and of types of infrastructure, local government, social class, housing policy, leisure facilities, etc.

Young is right that in our kind of society children cannot fare well in later life with the simpler conceptual understanding that they typically pick up at home. They need the more complex understanding of concepts (like *city*) that schools typically provide. But this does not tell us much about what their curricula should look like. It does not necessarily point to organising them around traditional subjects. Young calls the more complex concept of *city* ‘geographical’. But history, too, can deepen one’s understanding of it, not least in studying the rise of



urbanisation since the Industrial Revolution. Insofar as the concept is an important one for students to grasp, students can attend to it in non-subject-specific projects, as well as in non-canonical subjects in a British context like social studies.

It is because geography, unlike mathematics, has no concepts or truth-tests peculiar to itself that Paul Hirst's 'forms of knowledge' argument did not include it as one of the latter in his celebrated case for a liberal education based on these. Geography, in his view, is a 'field' of knowledge, not a 'form': it draws both on the physical sciences and on the human sciences, both of which are indeed 'forms'. This is one way in which the 'powerful knowledge' approach differs from the 'forms of knowledge' argument: Young is arguing for a subject-based curriculum of a familiar sort, while Hirst takes a 'forms'-based stance.

Problems found in Hirst's theory some forty years ago are relevant to a discussion of Young, as we have just seen with geography. Another such area is history. Hirst dropped this from his list of 'forms' as, once again, it turned out to lack its own distinctive concepts. History, as the study of causal connections between events, deals largely in such particulars. In producing its narratives on the five days of the Dunkirk crisis or on the rise of the Terror after the French Revolution, it draws for the most part on concepts familiar from everyday life, as well as, on occasion, specialised concepts in other areas like economics or statistics.

Modern foreign languages were always outside Hirst's scheme. They may do something to deepen a learner's understanding of the notion of language in general (although MFL is scarcely a *necessary* vehicle for this purpose); but the great bulk of its work is about the use of different words (*fromage, bleu, etc.*), and the grammar that directs this use, to express concepts with which the learner is already familiar.

Literature constituted part of Hirst's 'form' labelled 'Literature and the Fine Arts'. It raises problems of a different sort—for Young as well as for Hirst. For the most part, it relies on concepts familiar to us from our everyday life. The area may well have a few concepts of its own like *epic poetry* or *comedy*. But students are encouraged to read *Robinson Crusoe* or *Pride and Prejudice* with other aims in mind than being able to classify them as *novels*. It is also true that literature can deepen our understanding of human nature and that this comes into its justification. But if *knowledge* were its main contribution to education, its place could be taken by a mixture of psychology, anthropology, biology and reflective discussion about character and behaviour. What all this leaves out is that literature is a form of *art*, and that the values of art are not, at root, epistemological, but to do with a range of kinds of imaginative involvement and delight.

Our survey has covered most of the subjects of the traditional school curriculum, including all the subjects of the new English Baccalaureate. Among these, Young's 'powerful knowledge', with its focus on academic rather than everyday concepts, *is prominent only in mathematics and the sciences*. The Expert Panel is unwise to make it the basis of their thinking. For all its superficial glamour, 'powerful knowledge' lacks the substance it seems to promise. It is *too weak a prop* whereby to shore up the place of traditional subjects in the curriculum.

The seed of truth in Young's account is that much of it has to do with deepening students' understanding of concepts so that they see their links with related ideas.

But this goes beyond subject learning. There is a good case for giving students greater insight into the ethical and practical concepts we rely on to lead a worthwhile life—the notion of cooperation, for instance, and its connections with ideas of common purposes, compromise, tolerance, good-naturedness, rational planning, persistence in the face of obstacles, and so on. It may be that some subjects—like history or English—can study some of the connections just mentioned in some way. But if that were all that the learner imbibed on this topic, it would be likely to give him or her a *detached* grasp of these conceptual links, not the understanding *from the inside* provided by actual experience of cooperation. This is one reason for extending curricular activities beyond subjects to collaborative projects.

Clarifying issues around ‘powerful knowledge’ is not an academic exercise. We saw above how the Expert Panel uses it in their opening paragraphs to framework their curricular recommendations. They later rely on it (in paras 4.8 and note 57), if not quite by name, as a criterion to exclude Citizenship, Design and Technology and ICT from the proposed National Curriculum and relegate them to the ‘Basic Curriculum’.

Their Report says that these do not ‘have sufficient disciplinary coherence to be stated as discrete and separate National Curriculum “subjects”’. In a note (57), it explains that this means they lack ‘a distinct way of investigating, knowing and making sense with particular foci, procedures and theories, reflecting both cumulative understanding and powerful ways of engaging with the future.’ What this means is scarcely transparent; but the thought is plainly Youngian, as the reintroduction of the term ‘powerful’ indicates.

Even within a Youngian framework, there is more of a case for promoting rather than relegating Citizenship. *Democracy* is a complex political concept, whose links with such other notions as political equality, personal autonomy, limited government, freedom of thought and expression, representation, discussion, majority rule and the protection of minorities need to be explored in a school context.

The Report includes MFL and PE, but not Citizenship, in their proposed National Curriculum. Using their own criterion from note 57, what is MFL’s ‘distinct way of investigating’? Is it in the business of investigating at all? Where are its ‘theories’? Similar points could be made about PE.

Neither the Report’s recommendations, nor the notion of ‘powerful knowledge’ on which they rest, are well-founded. This is not surprising, since both the Expert Panel and Young himself begin their curriculum thinking in the wrong place. Knowledge is obviously of great importance in education, and very often, perhaps more often than not, it may be best acquired within familiar subjects. But knowledge is not where we have to start. If knowledge of this or that sort is held to be educationally valuable, we have to ask ‘Why?’ This points us towards the *proper* starting point for curriculum planning: the question ‘What should we be aiming at?’

## AIMS

The Expert Panel get round to this only in Chapter 2 of their Report, having set their course in Chapter 1 via the notion of ‘powerful knowledge’. Their treatment

of aims is perfunctory and derivative. The five they favour—to do with economic, cultural, social and personal considerations, as well as sustainability—are not argued for, but are drawn by and large from aims found in high-performing systems elsewhere in the world. The Report does not show how their favoured aims bear on their allocation of different subjects to the National or to the Basic Curriculum.

It is sad, in a Report of this stature, to see so little attention being paid to aims. For these are not only important, but all-important. They are the source from which the whole of the curriculum and the whole life of the school unfolds down to its smallest details. Far from being a routine preamble to the ‘real’ curriculum—at best an obligatory mission statement that can then be ignored when more nitty-gritty matters take over—aims should colour every school activity.

Michael Reiss and I are publishing a full account of how this works in our book *An Aims-based Curriculum* (Reiss and White, 2013). Its basic idea is simple. If general aims were taken seriously, they would generate subordinate aims that would provide all the curriculum objectives any national system or individual school could want. Suppose, for instance, we take the ‘responsible citizenship’ aim in the Expert Panel Report (2.16). For this, students would need, among other things, to know something about the society they live in. One aspect of this, *inter alia*, is understanding something about how its economy works. And for this last sub-aim, they need some understanding of the scientific and technological basis of that economy. Thus, by beginning from very general aims, in some cases one can soon reach curricular objectives of a familiar sort, to do in this case with aspects of physics, chemistry, ICT, etc. most relevant to understanding today’s economy. This is just one example of how a general aim can generate aims at lower levels.

The example has been about knowledge sub-aims, but an aims-based curriculum (or ABC) can embrace much more than these. One based on the thought that schools should be equipping students for a life of personal flourishing as well as for helping others to lead such a life would have to go much further. It would little avail any school leaver to have mastered the whole gamut of knowledge but to be lacking in confidence, practical nous, attunement to others’ concerns, artistic sensitivity and a whole range of other personal qualities.

An ABC approach of this sort, working as it does from general considerations downwards, prioritises ‘big ideas’ over smaller ones. *Evolution, God, urbanisation, infinity* will all be there. But so will *human rights, personal wellbeing, the aesthetic appreciation of nature, concern for others*. It is not only Young’s ‘powerful knowledge’ that can include ‘big ideas’. These overflow subjects, and they go beyond the acquisition of knowledge into wider aims.

This is not the place to go further into all the details of an aims-based curriculum and problems it may face in its implementation. These come in the book mentioned above. I finish with just one of the points we make there. There is no case for returning to pre-1988 days and leaving school curricula entirely in the hands of teachers. The aims that power them will, in virtually everyone’s view, have much to do with the kind of lives we hope individuals will be leading in the future, in the kind of society of which they are co-citizens. Teachers have no more right than shop assistants or physiotherapists to have a privileged voice on this matter. It is a

political topic, one on which every member of our democracy should have an equal voice. This speaks in favour of some kind of political control of school aims. But this control is only over the main framework, not specifics. The more detailed the aims in an aims-based curriculum become, the more leeway there is for professionals to make their own decisions about priorities among them, and ways of realising them, in the light of the particular circumstances of their school. Here they *are* the experts, and those in the political world, however tempted to pronounce on the teaching of long division or synthetic phonics, should give way to their judgement.

In such a system, schools will again have a larger role in policy-making. In such a system, teachers will need educating, at both pre-service and in-service levels, in the general aims and sub-aims of education; their interconnections; reasons for them—which will take them back to personal, moral, aesthetic and civic values; and practical ways of realising them. These topics are complex and heavily dependent on philosophical understanding. In such a system, philosophy of education will rediscover its lost *métier*.

Meanwhile, there is more than enough to keep it active in the new world of policy involvement. Here it has a civic role in subjecting to its own kinds of critical assessment the unending flow of official and otherwise influential policy pronouncements. This is no superficial enterprise, but one that, as in the above illustration, drills downwards to core issues. Neither is it merely negative: it can help to lay, on philosophically thought-through foundations, pathways towards a better education for all.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

1. In addition, much of Peters' early work in philosophy of education was indebted, sometimes over-indebted, to his earlier work in general philosophy, not least in the field of political and moral values. Themes from his *Social Principles and the Democratic State* (1959), co-written with Stanley Benn, were echoed in the later chapters of *Ethics and Education*. Their application to practical educational issues was generally helpful and apposite, but sometimes caused problems of relevance, especially where the earlier book dealt with state institutions like the penal system. How many elderly teachers and ex-teachers still remember lectures that teased away at the concept of punishment in general and the strengths and weaknesses of the various kinds of justifications commonly used, in political discussion, to support it? Conversely, there were themes in *Social Principles and the Democratic State* that Peters did *not* take up and apply to education, although they seemed tailor-made for this and through the work of other philosophers of education soon became staple topics in our field. This is especially true of Chapter 4 on 'Rights'.
2. I would like to thank Patricia White for all her wise help in suggesting improvements to this chapter.

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