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Half our Future: 50 years on and the current state of 14-19 education

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Abstract

The 2013 Centre for Policy Studies in Education (CPSE) seminar series was a reflection on the 50 years since the publication of the Newsom report within the context of an English education system that has retained many of the features that Newsom sought to redress. This paper outlines some of the issues raised in these seminars and identifies some of the core themes around system coherence and system design.

The debate is lodged within public perceptions of 14-19 education and the deeply held historical understandings of what education should be. The academic –vocational divide is a fundamental framing of such discussion. It surfaces in 14-19 curricular provision, in what we include and what we exclude. It results in a continuity of educational hierarchies which underlie curriculum planning in education.

The paper explores the question whether we have (and should have) one system of 14-19 or an emerging separate system of vocational education post 16 which is subordinated to the stronger academic tradition.

Questions of system definition and coherence bedevil questions of system design. The voice of young people, educators, educational researchers and employers are identified within the paper as crucial partners in the formation of 14-19 education. However, implicit understandings about the current nature of 14-19 education continue to elude the proper articulation of such voices and present significant barriers to securing a better coincidence of education and the preparation for adult life.

The Newson Report, *Half our Future* in 1963 attempted to address the deficit in educational opportunity experienced by half of young people at that time. It sought to give voice to young people who had not been well served by the system to date and to fashion from their views an effective and universal system of secondary education which would prepare them for adult life and in particular the changing demands of a modern labour market.

The Centre for Policy Studies in Education (CPSE, 2013) at the University of Leeds recently held a seminar series to mark the 50th anniversary of this report .The series highlighted the similarities with regards to concerns with the state of educational systems and social inequality, despite these different times and numerous educational reforms. Alison Wolf, Peter Sloane, Tim Oates, Alison Fuller, Geoff Hayward, Liz Singleton and Mark Waters outlined key features of 14-19 education, each from different perspectives. Several contributors during the series identified the missed opportunities to lay the foundation of a transformed system. Such failures were made within the context of significant efforts at reform.

One might surmise that we are witnessing these ongoing struggles because the circumstances have not changed. A more optimistic take might be that changes in the educational system are slow to take hold, a process of 'tinkering towards utopia' (Tyack and Cuban, 1997). In this article we argue that both these scenarios are worth reflecting upon as we look to the future.

It seems to us and to the speakers from the CPSE series that critical questions about the definition and purpose of 14-19 education need to be asked in order for such tinkering to lead to reforms that take hold. This includes fundamental questions about the nature of 14-19 and how it might be interpreted as a system. The academic- vocational divide and the corresponding valuation of different forms of education and training lie at the centre of this. In the process of discussing the meaning and form of the 'system', it will be useful to look closely at questions concerning the design of a 14-19 system. Such questions look at how key stakeholders such as young people and employers influence what is planned; the efficacy of what is taught; the nature of vocational preparation within education specifically in Key stage 4; how vocational education is organised, how we accommodate the breadth of courses pre-16 and post-16 within the system and how we ensure that all young people are engaged in and benefit from learning and particularly those who fall outside of academic and vocational provision. These are the issues that were discussed in the CPSE seminar series, which we relate here in the context of a wider discussion about the current context of 14-19 education in England.

Purpose and organisation of 14-19 learning

The purposes of education and training in England have not been clear and as a result we cannot agree upon a common system definition that clearly states how education should be

organised. Such lack of clarity at a meta-system level forms a barrier to achieving the reforms we need.

On one end of the debate are those who propose a general education system for all, which was clearly named as a possibility in Geoff Hayward's lecture, entitled *General Education for All to 18: Possibilities and Challenges*. On the other end of the spectrum are calls for different systems for different folk. Tim Oates presented this perspective when he challenged the idea of general education up to the age of 18 and argued instead for a reformed vocational route. Tim not only advocated differentiation in learning routes and policies, but also indicated that part of the problem with 14-19 was the attempt to treat it as a single system (Oates, 2013). Tim felt that part of the failure of English vocational education was its inability to detach itself from policy discussions about general education. In this spectrum, the German system occupies a middle position and provides a useful point of contrast. Peter Sloane reminded us that theirs is a single system organised as separate pathways for young people and with a diffusion of responsibilities allotted to social partners. Peter Sloane indicated that the German dual system has two aims: increasing employability and developing citizenship.

What lies at the heart of the debate in England is a profound difference of perspective on the nature and implications of education. Unfortunately, these questions are not raised publicly as matters for debate. Discussion is often reduced to rhetoric (e.g. Geoff referred to the academic –vocational divide as 'overstated'). Such rhetoric may be misleading (e.g. Tim argued that the current system pretends to be universal but it involves some career narrowing choices from the age of 14) or lead us down pointless dead-end avenues for reform (e.g. Alison Wolf reported on clear hierarchies of qualification and institutions and she indicated that notions of parity of esteem were both illusory and dangerous if they were used to influence educational policy). What is needed in order to bridge this impasse, argued Geoff, is a thorough reconsideration of the nature of knowledge and the practice of expansive learning which is then used to re-frame education and its purpose.

However, if Alison Wolf and Tim Oates are correct, the impasse has a larger barrier to overcome – the implicit divisions and hierarchies which are historically embedded. As Alison Fuller pointed out in her talk, vocational education is widely seen as a default response for the forgotten 50 %. Accordingly, vocational education has developed in a limited fashion, with fewer resources and in the shadow of an academic system. It is viewed as an afterthought to the main business (Williams, 1961). Accordingly it is seen as second rate and as compensatory to those young people who cannot benefit from what is perceived as a first class education. As both Tim Oates and Alison Fuller indicated in their description of current 16-19 provision, we have not shaken the historical configurations and still have a clearly articulated and recognisable academic provision sitting alongside a patchwork quilt of vocational and semi-vocational courses that are ad hoc and poorly understood.

Potentially, the current Raising Participation Age (RPA) which will require participation in education and training up to 18 by 2015 opens up new conversations, at least about the provision for those 16 to 18 year olds who do not participate in the academic learning. In the light of this, we turn our discussion more specifically to the design of vocational education and think also about work-based learning and apprenticeships and entry level jobs for this age group. This discussion is underpinned by a stance that views vocational education as a ladder to a wide range of opportunities for progression to work but also to further/higher levels of study. These discussions of system design, we argue, raise new questions that could take us some way forward into another future, and require further consideration.

Problems of system design

The Newsom report tried to capture the voice of young people and that remains a challenge and a necessity of good policy planning and delivery. Two pieces of research referenced and several of the speakers in the seminar looked at the learner experience.

From research on apprenticeships (see also Fuller and Unwin, 2003) Alison Fuller made a useful distinction between expansive and restricted learning environments, differentiated by the opportunities they provide for participation in a 'community of practice' and personal development as well as the degree of reification (e.g. in terms of an established programme of learning or a qualification). Restricted apprenticeships tend to limit opportunities to cross boundaries and hence serve as a channel to specific vocations. Expansive apprenticeships, it is theorised, provide more opportunities to extend identity and learning, hence preparing a young person for a wider range of jobs on completion. Peter Sloane's figure indicating that 40% of young people on German apprenticeships progress to jobs in areas different to that which was specific to their training suggests that this broader preparation is an important feature of a 14-19 system of education that is intended to support transitions to work.

However, Alison Fuller reminded us that the purpose of education is more than just providing young people with opportunities to gain qualifications and employment. There are also issues of quality that cohere around a human process of transformative learning and knowing which do not need to preclude these more pragmatic aims of supporting progression through qualification attainment and employment. In discussing his research at the final Series forum event, Mark Waters explored the impact of social identity derived from the work place in securing the engagement and dedication of disaffected learners in the Jamie Oliver 15 programme. Mark believed that some young people would only recognise the value of theoretical learning when it was demonstrated through the work place. For him the key was to develop learning practices that developed the identity of young people, situated in the discipline of work. Liz Singleton made a similar reflection when she considered the valuable learning experience provided for learners when vocational education is taught by staff who have experienced working in that area. For Liz

teaching is about more than content - it is about the culture of that vocation, the expectations of employers and the behaviours displayed by the best in the business. Teaching of vocational subjects by academic staff treating the subject as an academic study out of a work context is insufficient preparation for work in that sector. She argued that vocational learning should be steeped in workplace experience and driven by industry / employer links to provide a real taste of working in the sector.

Such aspects of the learner experience and the journey of learning though identity and participation in informal but realistic communities of knowledge and skill need to form a central part of policy. This may well be provided by the curriculum but a key role is to be played by the teacher, particularly one who has industry experience and hybridised identities as both teachers and vocational experts (Farnsworth and Higham, 2013). This suggests a need for reform to address not only current practice in schools and the workplace, but also in the training and recruitment of educators responsible for these young people. Another key stakeholder in vocational education and the process of young people's transition, as Mark reminded us, is the employer. Tim Oates critical stance on the amount of deadweight training which had been supported since the 1980s is pertinent here. By this he meant the use of public investment for training that would have taken place anyway. Tim advocated an economic case for employer investment in apprenticeships as part of a broader industrial strategy.

Employer engagement was a theme across the seminars both as receivers of the graduates of education but also as the potential co-designers/investors in a transformed system. Challenging us to look further up the training ladder, Liz Singleton argued that work-based learning beyond level 3 should be provided and should align with a wider range of careers by focussing on developing high level skills, including leadership and management skills. She proposed the establishment of employer based centres of excellence which would reframe perceptions of the 'system' as not just about formal education in schools, colleges and universities, but also potentially involving the 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) and employers.

In her talk, Alison Wolf used a proxy for employers' engagement by examining 14-19 through the efficacy of qualifications gained within the labour market. She argued too much investment had been afforded to poor vocational qualifications and accordingly was very careful in her report (Wolf, 2011) to support vocational programmes that had demonstrated benefit for their learners. As a result, she was a firm advocate of English and Maths GCSE being made available up to the age of 19 because this has demonstrable benefit in the labour market.

However employers can also play a key role in supporting young people's engagement with the world of employment as a learning experience. School based work experience was one of the recommendations of the Newsom report:

> All schools should provide a choice of programme, including a range of courses broadly related to occupational interests, for pupils in the fourth and fifth years of a five year course, and should be adequately equipped to do so. (Newsom, 1963, p. 16)

Corresponding to changes within the labour market for young people Alison Wolf thought it was no longer viable for this experience to be part of pre- 16 provision. Perhaps as a result of her influential Wolf Report (2011), the statutory requirement for work related learning at Key stage 4 has been removed. Accordingly there is now a need to look afresh at the contours of young people's exposure to the world of work especially at Key Stage 4.

One potential barrier to reform of Key stage 4 is, ironically, the political desire to create a set of learning programmes that engage and motivate all learners. Alison Wolf is correct to point out that there is no automatic link between vocational education and motivation and we need to question the underlying assumption that vocational education per se is more appropriate for some learners. Moreover, from Liz Singleton's experience, the association of vocational learning with provision for NEET or disengaged pupils undermines the credibility of vocational learning as a genuine and valued route to the workplace and/or further education. Thus, the attempt to frame vocational education as a strategy implicitly to motive and engage disengaged youth de-values this pathway and hence its ability to be the motivating factor it portends to be is impaired.

Mark Waters made a similar reflection on his own involvement in Key stage 4 Engagement. This programme was organised under the last government to provide additional activities, often out of school, for young people disengaged from learning. Although he thought that such programmes offered useful learning opportunities for the young people they were in the main standalone interventions and were devalued by their failure to be part of a wider system of learning which encouraged transition at 16.

Another design issue theme from the series relates to the institutional configuration of the vocational education landscape. In England, we discussed the opportunities for vocational learning located in schools, FE colleges, workplaces and also, in the case of Germany, in a combined approach where learning took place in multiple locations. Peter Sloane also identified a growing third track of young people in Germany who could not be placed in the dual system and were part of what he called a 'transition system'. The transition track, he noted, is dealing with large numbers of young people but their needs and learning opportunities are not being looked after to the same degree as those provided by the dual system. A parallel could be made between this track and the group of young people in England who are not able to access 'A' levels or Apprenticeships. As Alison Fuller noted, Traineeships which were about to be introduced in 2013 may cover this group of young people, but she also feared it could be a return to the warehousing of young people. The common theme to emerge is a questioning of the pedagogic and curricular resources government and industries are willing to invest in supporting 'half our future.'

Conclusion

The central tension in the seminars was around how we can describe 14-19 as a system and, if we can, how we might implement effective system design. The problem around system design arises when we seek to describe it as deploying a universal approach up to the age of 19. Tim Oates and Alison Wolf were clear that policy confusion arises from the attempt to pretend we have a universal system of 14-19 education. Tim wanted us to recognise this and seek reform in the post-16 vocational routes. Geoff Hayward saw the failure of a universal system as the basis for exploring new understandings around teaching and learning to create an effective general education for all. This, he argued, can be achieved through more collaboration between educators and researchers who share a common interest in providing the best learning opportunities for young people. We reflected in this article on what it would take to pursue both these agendas by providing quality learning opportunities within various 14-19 vocational pathways. Such an approach to system design does not preclude asking questions about the extent that the demands of the labour market can be placed upon the education system and whether such demands become more legitimate as the young person gets nearer transition into the world of work.

If we want to accept that the system demarcates vocational education from academic, then we are faced with questions of system design in terms of how and when such a demarcation takes place. Tim Oates favoured such an approach and advises the maintenance of 'A' levels with some reform of how subjects are aligned and a transformed vocational system released from the restriction of the policy constraints of general education. The risk, however, is that this continues to position vocational education as sub-par and outside the educational system. A potential way forward is to seriously consider the relationship of academic to vocational knowledge. Principles that could emerge from such deliberation could inform a universal offer of education.

Including employers in the educational system may also go some way towards re-balancing the valuation of vocational education. The seminars identified a potentially important role for employers in supporting transitions throughout the educational system. However, unlike the German system where a role and responsibility for employers is clear, in England the role of employers is accepted at a policy level but not worked through at a cultural or implementation level. As a consequence, policy framing resorts to financial incentives instead of regulation, which as Tim Oates points out does not tackle the central issue of why employers should be involved in the transition of young people.

The question of what are the suitable arrangements for Key stage 4 remain open. Alison Wolf was clear that such arrangements needed to be of high quality and have purchase in the labour market. What remains unclear is how the whole pattern of Key stage 4 now accommodates vocational education and work preparation generally with the decline of work experience and careers guidance.

The seminars underline both the importance of making changes in 14-19 and also the difficulty in doing so. The challenge for us is to avoid another set of seminars in 2063 lamenting the failure of English education to tackle the educational needs of all young people. There are important pointers in each of the seminars as to how this might be achieved.

First of all we need to explore questions of the nature and purpose of our education system. Policy on 14-19 currently rests upon implicit and often contradictory assumptions about the level of generality within the 14-19 curriculum and the strength of its vocational preparation. The continuing failure to explore these assumptions enables a policy fudge to be maintained. Tim Oates was right to challenge thinking on that. We need to make explicit the underlying policy assumptions of the 14-19 system we want. As Geoff urged us, we should pursue these efforts collaboratively, connecting researchers and educators to elicit the voices of young people and use our best knowledge of teaching and learning to reform the system.

Secondly both Alison Fuller and Alison Wolf were right to challenge the assumptions made about the compensatory and motivational aspect of vocational education. We need to look afresh at what we want from vocational education and where it sits within the 14-19 system as a key design question. It needs to be positively affirmed, not introduced as a deficit model. Framing the system around multiple partners and pathways may be one way to cohere 'the system'.

The third pointer is that Key stage 4 represents the last year of a shared education for all and as such needs to bear the common level of preparation we wish to impart to young people about adult life and the world of work. The seminars drew attention to the challenge that Newsom made about the nature and benefit that all young people received from statutory education. The series pointed to several issues that need to be addressed including the kinds of options available to young people post-16, opportunities to access these options and the information and experience they have to make decisions, to the extent that they have choices. Doing away with dead-end vocational qualifications and work based learning at Key Stage 4 may have been necessary, as Alison Wolf argued, but these changes nonetheless leave a gap in the provision that must be addressed.

The impact of these recent changes on transitions both at 16 and 18 are yet to be seen. A key concern we have is that in the absence of a concerted design approach to a viable 14-19 system, the RPA may simply defer poor transitions into adult life until 18. What remains clear is that, 50 years on from the Newsom report, many young people leaving compulsory schooling with average and below scores remain ill served by the education they receive. The planning of post-16 education for young people not on the academic route is incomplete and this is one area where Germany and the UK may share a common set of problems around transition at 16 which require a policy response.

Finally we need to look at the wider nature of learning. What improvements might expansive learning, mentioned by both Alison Fuller and Geoff Hayward, have to offer for 14-19 education? If we approach 14-19 solely through the prism of qualifications and courses we will miss the rich opportunity of the potential of transformational learning and all the insights of situated learning within work based environments (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The learning experience of the young person is key to resolving the problems identified by Newsom 50 years ago. We need to build our policy response around their learning experience. Newsom was right to talk to young people and that's where we should begin.

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