Curriculum knowledge, justice, relations: The Schools' White Paper (2010) in England

Abstract

In this article I begin by discussing the persistent problem of relations between educational inequality and the attainment gap in schools. Because benefits accruing from an education are substantial, the 'gap' leads to large disparities in the quality of life many young people can expect to experience in the future. Curriculum knowledge has been a focus for debate in England in relation to educational equality for over 40 years. Given the contestation surrounding views about curriculum knowledge and equality I consider the thinking of two philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas and their work on justice, to trouble the curriculum framework and discourse of knowledge promoted through the policy text of The Schools White Paper (2010) and later associated policy reforms to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) curriculum in England. The Schools White Paper aims to make the curriculum more challenging to students by introducing tight controls in terms of the assessment framework and curriculum knowledge. I argue that, when considered through Derrida's perspective on language and meaning and Levinas's view on the ethical responsibility for the other, the reforms present obstacles to the search for a just curriculum. I look to the work of Sharon Todd and Paul Standish for a re-imagination of curriculum as or through relations in the light of Derrida's and Levinas's philosophies.

A major problem besetting education today is what is referred to as the attainment gap, that is, the inequalities in schools in terms of educational outcome between learners with different backgrounds and capabilities[i]. The attainment gap is important because benefits

accruing from an education are substantial and where such a gap exists, it leads to large disparities in the quality of life many young people can expect to experience in the future. The attainment gap relates to the concept of 'educational equity'. Although both educational equity and equal educational opportunity fall under the overarching concept of educational equality, 'equity' is not synonymous with 'equal opportunity'. Equity means 'all social groups achieving a similar profile of success with the same proportion doing well or poorly at school' (Collins and Yates, 2011, p. 111). It involves treating students fairly although differently, based on differences of need. It means that equitable educational outcomes or results are achieved regardless of the social, economic, cultural and personal characteristics of the learner. In contrast, 'equal educational opportunity' refers to the idea that every learner should have equal access to an equally good education, requiring, on most accounts, the same allocation of educational resources. In the latter case, given their different social backgrounds , learners' needs differ and some learners will achieve more success than others in a standardised education system (Brighouse and Swift, 2008). Of course, the above is a simplistic rendering of a highly complex and contested field, as the work of Calvert, (2013); Espinoza, (2007); Nash, (2004); Schouten, (2012); Jenks, (1988); and Bronfenbrenner, (1973), as well as contributions to this issue (Adami, Jones, Shuffelton and Wilson) attests.

Sociologists of education have made important contributions to the 'attainment gap' debate by examining the role student characteristics and background play in influencing educational attainment from both a qualitative research perspective (See, for example, Gillborn and Kirton, (2000); Gillborn and Mirza, (2000); Sveinsson, (2009) and Reay, (2006 & 2012) and from statistical analyses (for example, Demack, Drew & Grimsley, (2000); Raffe et

al, (2006); Cassen and Kingdon, (2007); Hirsch, (2007); Strand, (2008) and National Equality

Panel, (2010). Despite these researchers' collective recommendations to change

educational resourcing mechanisms, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and teacher

education policies and practices, the political will to reform policy in line with such

recommendations remains faint and the attainment gap persists. This does not mean that

policy makers eschew equal opportunity/equity data and arguments in their reform and

promotion of education policy. Attainment gap statistics are used by governments in line

with the 'policy by numbers' discourse (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Lingard, 2011), as a lever to

drive technicist and performative governance policies of target-setting, monitoring of inputs

and outputs, inspection and close surveillance of teachers under the banner of educational

equity (Clarke, in press). Discourses of attainment (and more specifically under-attainment)

become the means of pathologising learners by locating 'the problem' within the group of

students who are suffering as opposed to locating it within the education system that

produces the under-attainment (Gillies, 2008).

The notion of a 'gap' between attainment levels of groups of learners points towards

questions about relations between the 'high-attainers' and the 'low-attainers'. For

example: what is the nature of the 'gap'? why does it exist? what are the differences

between the groups of learners? are educational opportunities equal, equitable?   Taking

the theme of 'relations' as alluding to 'connections', 'attachments', 'affiliations',

'associations' between things in education - the 'things' maybe people, such as in the

relations between teacher and student, the relations between the self and the other.

Alternatively, the 'things' may be concepts, such as language and its relation with meaning;

social class in relation to examination results; the relations between philosophy and

education, and the relations of central concern here, those between curriculum and justice. This paper is replete with these kinds of 'relations'. However, in working with the ideas of French philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida (as I do below), I am conscious of how language operates in its creation of associations like causation and binary oppositions - language has a tendency to totalise and close down other ways of thinking than those which are expressed. The idea of 'relations' being 'between' things pushes one into a 'this' and 'that' (and maybe 'and the other') thinking space. This is a space where some 'thing' is related to some 'thing' else, and whilst boundaries direct thinking towards the 'things' and their 'relations', they simultaneously restrict the opening of new thinking spaces where the instability, undecidability and irruption of language which these philosophers acknowledge, can unfold to make room for the other. Thus, in the paper, I adopt a 'light-touch' approach to relations, one that Derrida describes as a 'relation without relation' (1997, p. 14). He uses this phrase to portray his critique of Heidegger's privileging of gathering (*Versammlung*). Derrida argues that the condition of my relation to the other is dissociation, not gathering, because the former opens up a space for the incoming of the radically singular other (ibid, p.14).

Curriculum knowledge in England: A brief background

One particular direction of thought in the debate about educational equality has recently focused on curriculum knowledge, as researchers discuss which configurations of knowledge might provide a just education for all students (Whitty, 2010; Collins and Yates, 2011; Yates, 2013; and Young, 2013). The 'new' sociology of education movement in England in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the London Institute of Education, spearheaded by Michael Young (1971) promoted the 'voice discourse' stance, whereby working class

under-attainment in school was claimed to be due more to the nature of the curriculum on offer in school than to the 'deficit' cultures of learners' homes and communities (Whitty, 2010). The solution to the inequity problem according to this argument involves constructing curricula on the basis of different kinds of knowledge content for different groups of students. In other words, it is about constructing curricula with differentiated knowledge bases. An example developed in school Humanities in 1960s England was Lawrence Stenhouse's Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP). Stenhouse described HCP curriculum knowledge as "a vernacular equivalent of the classics" (1983, p. 248), written for youngsters considered to be 'of average and less than average ability' (1979, p. 4) who had been neglected through a traditional academic curriculum[ii]. Such differentiation of curriculum knowledge for different groups of students is problematic in the sense that some configurations of knowledge are valued more highly by society than others.

This leaves a second option. A common configuration of curriculum knowledge is assumed to be appropriate , indeed, an entitlement for, all students, whatever their backgrounds and deemed capacities. In England and Wales in 1988, The National Curriculum, with its common knowledge base that all students in state schools were legally required to study was introduced to replace a diverse range of school curricula. But a common core curriculum leads to the problem of the decision about what and whose knowledge should be taught and why. Given differences in resources and in student characteristics, curriculum knowledge will be read in different ways according to students' class, culture and social relations (Apple, 1996, p.33). As we have seen, over the last 40 years in England, various debates have taken place amongst education professionals, politicians and the media about the problematic relationship between curriculum knowledge and equity, leading to several

stances, to name a few: the 'new' sociologists of education in the 1970s; the cultural

restorationists of the 1980s; the supporters of critical pedagogy and postcolonial theory; the

neoliberals of the turn of the century; and most recently the 'core knowledge' brokers of

the 2010 Schools White Paper in England.

Thinking curriculum knowledge alongside Levinas and Derrida

Reforms are currently underway in the English education system to change both the kind of

curriculum knowledge students learn in school and the curriculum framework through

which the teaching, learning and assessment of that knowledge takes place. In the pre-

election words of Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, the reforms will 'make

opportunity more equal in our society' (2009). Five folds of the reform are relevant to the

discussion here. The first concerns performativity. Here, the focus is on raising standards in

student test and examination scores and on raising the quality of the examination system

(DfE, 2010, paras 12, 4.4 - 4.6), in both cases in order to match the best performing

education systems overseas. Second, the policy plans to give teachers increased autonomy

(ibid, paras 12, 4.4). At the same time the third fold involves extending school

accountability for student performance through measures which include greater financial

transparency, use of data to compare school performance, reformed performance tables

and reformed Ofsted inspections (ibid, para 17-20). The fourth policy fold focuses on raising

standards for 'children from poorer families', those described as 'deprived' (ibid, para 20,

bullet 4) and/or 'vulnerable' (ibid, para 16, bullet 7). In response to criticisms that the

National Curriculum is overcrowded, the Government proposes the fifth fold: a focus on

'essential knowledge and understanding' (ibid, Para 4.1) in the form of academic subjects

(ibid, para 12), with 'clear expectations for what children must know and be able to do at each stage' (ibid, para 10). In spite of the acknowledgement of 'other' learners, this re-newed governance of education is taking place through a policy replete with totalising discourses of authoritarianism and regulation which, I argue later, leave little obvious space for those students who 'fail' by not fitting the dominant 'rules of engagement' (See also the work of Aislinn O'Donnell, this issue).

Two philosophers who help probe and trouble the discourses of curriculum policy reform in England are Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Both are interested in going beyond ontology or 'what is' and 'what is thought to be', into the pre-originary realms of being, where an openness to the other in effect structures subjectivity itself. For Derrida, these concerns are tied to the operations of language. He shows that whatever form language takes it serves to deny accurate representation of the object it describes and instead is characterised by deferral, dissemination, undecidability (Derrida, 1982). Deconstruction allows the cracking open of pre-suppositions surrounding the assumption that words have stable and self-sufficient meanings. Reading deconstructively makes way for the chain of traces that reveal the incoming of the other, that allow for those who do not fit the discourse to enter, and in so doing, directs us to a 'justice to come' (Derrida, 1992, p. 27). In Derrida's famous words: "Deconstruction is justice" (ibid, p. 15). The responsibility of deconstruction is to disrupt those taken-for-granted meanings of curriculum discourses by opening them up and releasing them from their metaphysical assumptions to see what or who may have been overlooked, marginalised and omitted in the process of curriculum-making. The idea is that through this transgressive act, affirmative and more ethically just ways of knowing, making and doing curriculum might be instituted.

The concept of justice, however, runs into some trouble, since any attempt to define justice needs to accept that it cannot be defined. In other words, if justice is always to come, it cannot rest upon a self-present meaning from which everything can be determined: 'One cannot speak directly about justice, thematise or objectivise justice, say 'this is just' and even less "I am just" without immediately betraying justice' (ibid, p.10). Any declaration of justice implies a calculability, a conceptualisation, a theorisation, a pinning down of meaning that assumes a pure and self-sufficient presence, whereas justice is 'infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogenous and heterotropic' (ibid, p.22). This does not mean that justice should be abandoned. Indeed, even though justice remains "an experience of the impossible" (ibid, p. 15), there is no greater responsibility than the pursuit of justice. The possibility of justice, 'a justice to come' (ibid, p. 27), should always be kept open through a deconstructive relation to language. Derrida looks to the aporia, the impossible crossing or passage (1993, p.8), for the unexpected arrival of the other, for the release from totalising ways of thinking. He stresses the unlimited responsibility involved in deconstruction, a thought echoed by John Caputo when he writes about the aporia:

> Only then is there a genuine "responsibility" which means the need to respond to a situation that has not been programmed in advance, to invent new gestures, to affirm an unstable identity that differs from itself. That impossibility is the only possible invention, the invention of the other… (Caputo, 1997, p. 120)

In describing Derrida's understanding of justice as infinite, incalculable, and heterogenic, Caputo suggests a comparison with Levinasian ethics (1997, p. 136). Levinas offers an opportunity to engage with a call for goodness that, in the spaces of deconstruction, reaches beyond any doctrinal or totalising rules, principles or criteria governing human

behaviour. In this sense, Levinas takes a step further than Derrida does by bringing to the surface his view that justice arises through the realisation of one's responsibility to the Other: 'Levinas wants to overturn the primacy of ontology, and he wants to do this by showing that fundamental to our being, indeed prior to our *being* is our responsibility to the Other' (Standish, 2008, p. 59). The responsibility for the other does not operate within an economy of return, conditioned by reciprocity or 'give and take' (Levinas, 1996, p. 44). It is unconditional. It is an infinite obligation to respond to suffering. The ethical relation to the other sees the subject responding to and taking responsibility for the needs of the other without reward or pay-back. In explaining the relation between the subject and the other as one-to-one, face-to-face, Levinas seeks to move beyond the constraints of totalising discourses in which we are all trapped to witness ethics in the encounter between the subject and the bare and unadorned human face of the other, uncontaminated by cultural dispositions (Levinas, 1996, p. 53). The ethical encounter is prior to ontology, to language, to subjectivity.

Learners develop their subjectivities, their becoming who they are as subjective individuals and as members of communities and society through relations with the language and ontology of school curriculum knowledge. Curriculum knowledge is about language and meaning; it offers an opportunity to examine how the ethical relation might become a possibility as an horizon of thought; how it might open up the ethical relation to the other. Like Derrida, Levinas understands that justice cannot be discussed in terms of pre-determined definitions or principles which serve to totalise thinking. He proposes two directions of thought: autonomy and heteronomy.

The primacy of ontology marks the first direction of thought that Levinas calls 'autonomy'. Autonomy recognises humans to be free when they think rationally and act according to their own will. Levinas questions autonomy on the grounds that it excludes the relationship to the Other that he claims comes before Western rationality (Chalier, 1995, p. 6). He argues that this version of autonomy reduces the Other to the condition of the self, the personal, the individual, to 'man's [sic] ego' (Levinas, 1998, p.48). Autonomy as self-determination, personal freedom and morality, and as a long established aim of Western education systems, takes on a form Levinas rejects. Autonomy fails on two counts: because we cannot live together freely without agreeing to limit our freedom and because Western autonomy involves humans as rational subjects seeking to understand the world as it is already known, thereby denying the possibility of alterity (Strhan, 2012, p. 80).

Levinas's second and contrasting direction of thought he calls heteronomy. This involves a movement that goes beyond autonomy as self-sufficiency and freedom to choose. Catherine Chalier describes heteronomy as the place 'where morality is rooted… morality is not associated with my reasonable will or reasonable freedom, but in my aptitude to welcome the neighbour in such a way that his [sic] life will be more important to me than my own' (1995, p.7). Morality arises in a person when she becomes aware of her freedom in the eyes of the other who is not free, who is suffering, who is vulnerable. By welcoming the neighbour or stranger as more important than herself, she demonstrates a morality beyond freedom. Heteronomy involves the casting off of self-sufficiency, and opening the self to responsibility to the Other, to the debt to the Other. 'Rather than a subject who chooses, autonomously, to accept responsibility for others, I am responsible for and to the other person before I am capable of choice, and only become a subject in heteronomy' (Strhan,

2012, p. 82). The ethical responsibility for the other comes before everything. Levinas proposes that it is only when I have responded to the call of the other by accepting responsibility for the other that I can accept and use my sense of freedom. Encouraging students and teachers to recognise their autonomy in schools involves an awareness that we can only become autonomous after we recognise that we live in a community and society in which we depend on one another (Strahan, 2012, p. 91). In a similar vein, in this issue, Amy Sheffelton argues the need to recognise our interdependency before our autonomy, in the context of raising children.

Levinas and Derrida provide both troubling and yet promising thoughts for a consideration of curriculum knowledge and structure in the contemporary educational climate of international competition, regulatory structures and measurement of effectiveness. Derrida's challenge to the assumed security of meaning surrounding the language of standards discourses can be drawn upon in relation to proposed regimes of performance management for accountability purposes. Likewise, his suggestion of undecidability threatens the notion of undisputable truth as resident in the 'essential knowledge' of school subjects as well as punctures belief in totalising concepts that enframe and pin down that knowledge in neat and tidy schemes. Levinas's rejection of autonomy and his commitment to the ethical encounter with the other makes us think again about the dangers of curriculum as pre-defined knowledge, imposed by external interests, and prepared for speedy consumption according to a menu of 'what works', irrespective of the background and cultural disposition of the learner.

To see how the ideas discussed above 'rub alongside' an example of curriculum policy, I turn next to the document *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper* (DfE, 2010), published six months after the current Conservative/ Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came into power in Britain. Disapproval, on the part of the Government, of both the multiplying of awards[iii] in a wide range of academic and vocational subjects and of the supposed ease with which students could gain high grades in these awards led the Government to introduce into the English education system a new curriculum structure through the 2010 White Paper. The language of the policy is dominated by discourses of the international competition, autonomy, standards and traditional conceptions of school subject knowledge.

The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper (DfE, 2010)

The authors of the White Paper argue that the policy aims to raise the standard of the English education system in relation to its international competitors. It states in the Foreword: 'What really matters is how we're doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country's future. The truth is, at the moment we are standing still whilst others race past'[iv]. This is accompanied by the promise of 'a tighter, more rigorous, model of the knowledge which every child should expect to master *[sic]* in core subjects at every key stage' (DfE, 2010, para 11). The 'equality argument' underpinning the White Paper is that an externally prescribed common core curriculum will provide an entitlement for all to achieve social mobility, the Government's view of one of the main purposes of the education system, particularly for 'disadvantaged' youngsters: 'Our schools should be engines of social mobility, helping

children to overcome the accidents of birth and background' and 'the soft bigotry of low expectations' (DfE, 2010, Foreword)[v]. How such a social mobility-for-all movement can succeed within a competitive education system based on the selection of 'winners' through a prescribed and regulated curriculum and assessment regime poses fresh questions about the theme of justice in the Schools White Paper.

The new model of knowledge formulated in The Schools White Paper for the General Certificate in Secondary Education examinations (GCSE[vi]) is located within a challenging curriculum framework in which grade boundaries are raised, end-of-module examinations are replaced with end-of-course examinations and opportunities to re-sit examinations through the course of the programme of study are removed. These measures are introduced to counter 'qualification inflation'. Two recent additions have been made to the policy reform. The first is the shift from lettered to numerical grades. Instead of eight grades, A*- G, where A* is the highest, the new system of grading institutes ten grades, where 9 is the highest, 1 is the lowest and U is unclassified.[vii] The change aims to provide more differentiation between students achieving the higher and middle grades, and 'improve the spread of grades', according to the Qualifications Authority, Ofqual (2013, p. 6). Extending the number of categories in the selection process involves a supposedly more 'precise' filtering mechanism for differentiating between those who 'succeed' and those who 'fail' in the high stakes assessment system. The second new policy involves the abolition of coursework and controlled assessment [viii]– both being school-based assessment methods. The new GCSEs will be 'fully linear', and externally, marked end-of-course examinations will become 'the default method' of assessment' (Ofqual, 2013). Restricting

assessment methods to written, 'terminal', summative examinations limits the range of practical and intellectual capabilities students are able to demonstrate.

Another arm of Coalition policy introduced via the White Paper is a high-stakes policy mechanism, the English Baccalaurate (E-Bacc). Although neither an award nor a qualification, it contributes, in the form of a performance indicator, to the rank position of schools in the examination league table. In order to 'qualify'/ 'count' for an E-Bacc, a student must gain five or more GCSE passes at top grades A*-C in a restricted number of traditional subjects, namely, English language, mathematics, science, a foreign language and either history or geography (computer studies was added to the list later). The E-Bacc imposes a status hierarchy on the school curriculum by privileging six subjects, excluding Art, Design and Technology, Drama, Food Science, Music, Religious Education and Sports Studies which offer approaches to knowledge that are different from that of the traditional academic subjects comprising the E-Bacc[ix]. Given its key role as a performance indicator, early research findings (Hobbs, 2013) indicate that, in response to the E-Bacc policy, schools are adapting their curriculum frameworks by influencing students' and parents' choice of GCSE subjects on the basis of perceived intellectual 'ability' to score a high grade in order to boost the school's attainment league table position. Students who are predicted to achieve below a C grade in a subject, yet enjoy learning the subject, will be dissuaded from studying it, because of the future impact on the schools' aggregated E-Bacc scores, and hence on school performance. The opposite is also true in that students who may wish to study a non-E-Bacc subject but who are considered capable of gaining a grade C or higher in an E-Bacc subject will be 'encouraged' to 'opt for' the latter instead of studying the subjects they

might enjoy and excel at. Under the E-Bacc, performance in league tables, unsurprisingly becomes the basis for subject choice in schools.

With respect to relations between the curriculum and learners, the reforms herald an extension of levels of state control over student experience of curriculum and introduce an increasingly fine-grained stratification and grading of students on the basis of externally prescribed and administered assessment criteria. Measuring educational experience is re-cast through a narrow focus on academic attainment within a system determined to differentiate, select and reward some students over others (Gillies, 2008). Opportunities for students to achieve high grades, especially amongst those with limited access to cultural and material resources, will decrease. The new relation between the curriculum and teachers serves to de-professionalise the latter by taking away teachers' rights to plan and teach coursework and to evaluate, critically, their students' responses to their teaching. Tight specification and, it is argued, improved objectivity of rules and criteria in the curriculum framework will challenge the ability of teachers to recognise and take responsibility for the needs of the culturally, economically and linguistically heterogeneous populations of students in their classrooms.

The final curriculum reform to be considered here is that of curriculum knowledge. The move away from a skills or competency-based curriculum was driven by the Coalition Government's call for the reinstatement of 'real knowledge'. 'Real knowledge' in the Government's eyes consists of traditional neo-conservative knowledge which is re-packaged and re-branded as the knowledge of the liberal education movement. Gove takes the descriptors of liberal education knowledge and applies them repeatedly to traditional neo-

conservative knowledge, saying, for example that core knowledge is 'one of the central hallmarks of a civilised society' and 'a chance to be introduced to the best that has been thought and written' (Gove, 2009, p. 3). In Gove's words, it encapsulates 'a shared appreciation of cultural reference points, a common stock of knowledge on which we can all draw, and trade' (ibid, p. 4). It 'must embody their [students'] cultural and scientific inheritance, the best that our past and present generations have to pass on to the next' (DfE, 2010, para 4.7).

The 'real knowledge' promoted by the 2010 White Paper bears more affinities to the 'core knowledge', of the neoconservative educational foundation[x] in the USA led by E.D. Hirsch than to the knowledge of liberal education espoused by Richard Peters and Paul Hirst of the London School of the 1960s and 70s. Hirsch's 'core knowledge sequence', comprises 'What every American needs to know' in the form of a 'coherent, cumulative, and content specific grade-by-grade curriculum' (Hirsch, et al, 2002). The White Paper, (DfE, 2010) states that 'All children should acquire' (para 4.1) or 'be expected to master' [*sic*] (para 4.6) core knowledge, and that teachers should know 'how to convey knowledge effectively and how to unlock understanding' (para 4.8). In the White Paper core knowledge is pre-determined knowledge, stable and unproblematic, something to be 'retained' and 'applied' by students. It is claimed to be important for accountability, as it represents 'a body of knowledge against which achievement can be measured' (para 4.2). The new curriculum will 'act as a new benchmark for all schools'. Parents will be able to use this 'slim, clear and authoritative' curriculum 'to see what their child might be expected to know at every stage in their school career' (para 4.12). Parents will be able 'to hold all schools to account for how effectively

their child has grasped the essentials of, for example, English language and literature, core mathematical processes and science' (DfE, 2010, para 4.12).

It would be foolish to argue that an education system should not be 'rigorous' or accountable. But an examination of the underpinning totalising principles and concepts on which the curriculum knowledge of such a system is built provides clues about the (im)possibility of that system opening a space for justice, for the ethical relation to the other. Intensification of high stakes assessment regimes, teachers making subject choices for students and prescribed cultural restorationist knowledge close down opportunities for the arrival of the other and for the expression of ethical responsibility necessary to address the attainment gap. Totalisation of knowledge, according to a pre-determined scheme for the transmission of particular cultural values is at work through the 'core knowledge' concept, but totalisation of the teaching and learning processes in the form of transmission of knowledge within the banking system (Freire, 1970) is evident too, as the teacher is assumed to 'pass on' and 'convey' core knowledge which the learner 'acquires', 'masters' [sic] and 'applies'. Driven by the 'race to the top' in the global market, the 2010 White Paper policy reform is dominated by increased curriculum prescription, regulation and technicisation which not only make ethical questions about the sensitivity to students' subjectivities, to the demand of the student as the other, redundant, but obstructs the teacher from fulfilling her or his ethical responsibility to the student, instituting and reinforcing, to my mind, a cycle of violence[xi] and injustice.

In the next section, I turn towards a re-invention or re-imagination of curriculum as/through relations. This turn is made in response to Humes and Bryce's, 2003 claim that post

structuralists 'fail to move beyond deconstruction' in order to offer practical solutions to serious education policy problems. Humes and Bryce describe this failure as 'a kind of intellectual dereliction' (p. 186). In an attempt to avoid this accusation, or show that it is a wrong assumption in the first place, because it is based on a misunderstanding of the potential inventiveness and ethical commitment of certain forms of poststructuralism, I argue that Derridean and Levinasian thinking can inform the official curriculum by disrupting its taken-for-granted totalising concepts and by making an unconditional demand for the responsibility to the other. How this might be worked towards is explained below.

Re-imagining curriculum (as/through relation)

To 'apply' Derrida's and Levinas' thinking to curriculum in the form of a neat and clear programme of instruction for teachers or policy-makers would be to subscribe to the very totalising and instrumental tendencies to which they object. But, as Strhan (2012) argues, the thinking of these two philosophers does disturb – profoundly - existing curriculum orthodoxies and makes us think about the impossible: how things might be different if we attend more to the potentialities and imperatives for justice in curriculum knowledge configuration and structure. The works of Sharon Todd and Paul Standish are helpful in indicating two directions this might take. The former is interested in the role of curriculum within pedagogical relations (Todd, 2001, 2009) and the latter in the role of curriculum knowledge as ways in which the relation to the other might be realised (Standish, 2004, 2008). Like other authors in this issue (Greenhalgh-Spencer, Todd and Hoveid and Finne), Todd and Standish argue for the cultivation of practices and knowledge that are open, plural and diverse at the same time as valuing the unique and singular.

Todd reminds us that we cannot consider curriculum knowledge and its framework outside the pedagogical relationship: 'Curriculum … is neither just a cultural or political instrument divorced from the concrete practices of teaching, nor a solipsistic rendering of personal or autobiographical knowledge' (Todd, 2001, p. 446). Arguing that curriculum plays a role in pedagogical relations between the subject and the 'other', she reminds us that within this is an ethical relation bearing the unlimited responsibility of the 'I' to respond to the needs of the other in such a way **that secures her right to be other**. This is an obligation that cannot be ignored. Within relations, 'curriculum lends substance to the process of "learning to become": it is the symbolic raw material that students use, discard or rewrite in making meaning for themselves. Curriculum is, thus, fundamental to the symbolic elaboration necessary to ego-making' (Todd, 2001, p. 446). In a curriculum framework made up of a pre-determined, fixed configuration of knowledge, imperatives of grade comparisons in a culture of competition and the stratification of students into 'high', 'middle' and 'low' attainment categories, relations between the teacher and the learner will be reduced to those that are less than ethical on Levinas's understanding. The knowledge component of the curriculum, 'delivered' by the teacher under pressures of accountability, may be oppressive and inappropriate to the other who is the student, because it shows no respect for her otherness, her alterity. Students respond to curriculum in unpredictable ways, but when knowledge is prescribed, closed down and imposed on students, it effects a violence in denying their otherness. The Schools White Paper does our students an injustice by assuming it can institute meaning in advance through curriculum objectives, assessment criteria and regimes and impose a fixed and totalised curriculum knowledge within pedagogical relations.

The second direction of thought is interested in how curriculum knowledge might *constitute* the relation to the other. Standish argues that curriculum is a matter of language, and the relation to the other occurs through language. Through language the curriculum becomes one way the relation to the other can be realised. Totalising forms of curriculum knowledge, such as core knowledge, assume and emphasise the goal of students acquiring comprehensive knowledge and gaining 'mastery' over that knowledge. Instead, Standish suggests that an ethical relation with the language of the curriculum (knowledge) allows the teacher and student to develop deconstructive attitudes towards knowledge and to go beyond curriculum specifications and objectives. Cracking open the totalising effects of language reveals other knowledge, other ways of knowing that cannot be predicted, and that fascinate, puzzle and excite the learner (2008, p. 64). The teacher is not an operator who teaches disciplinary and technical 'tricks' to drill students to gain high scores in examinations, but is instead a sensitive and engaged guide towards knowledge that is intrinsically rich and bears potential to extend student thinking along unexpected and inventive paths. Given the momentary nature of our ethical engagement in teaching and learning, the teacher attends to the students' needs, exercising an ethical care that exceeds the demands of the technical aspects of the curriculum. The teacher understands, too, that the knowledge bound up in disciplinary subjects is not a closed shop – an 'other' knowledge demands a sensitivity to different points of view, opportunities to move beyond the boundaries of the subject, to attend to intuition, creative imagination and 'lateral as well as linear thinking' (Strhan, 2012, p. 136). The teacher acknowledges that school subjects should never take for granted their existence, but should forever self-interrogate, adopt a questioning role towards their own other of knowledge, 'pursue little sideroads, or venture

into unmarked areas – open knowledge up, find a way to read "otherwise"' (Caputo, 1997,

p. 76). This does not lead to a rejection of the knowledge of the classic disciplines, but

disrupts their taken-for granted authority and allows an investigation about what they omit,

how, why and what alternative knowledge might be.

However, there is never enough time or resources for teachers to attend to the needs of

their students. And, of course, teachers have serious responsibilities to their students,

parents and communities. They are employed by the state, so it is difficult for them to

protest against those totalising curriculum policies and practices with which they are

compelled to comply in schools. According to Strhan, they are not de-politicised or re-

politicised in their role, 'but are rather always and already political and ethical subjects'

(2012, p. 181) because they make political and ethical decisions about how they respond to

the aporia of concrete situations of injustice in their daily interactions with students and

colleagues. Awareness amongst teachers of their political and ethical responsibilities and

discussion of the dilemmas they face, with students and colleagues in schools, in subject

association fora, the media, HEIs and wider society, give rise to spaces in which these issues

can surface, gain prominence and encourage the generation of inventive responses to the

needs of the other. Thinking about curriculum as/through relations, alongside Derrida and

Levinas, provides a disturbing and liberating dimension to this awareness and discussion. It

goes beyond curriculum, beyond teaching and learning as acts of coercion and compliance,

to the promotion of a non-violent means of realisation of being in the world. It jettisons the

idea of language as representation in order to open up language to fresh ways of

understanding the world. It offers participation by students, teachers and community in

emergent networks of responsible relations to explore curriculum knowledge through

human interactions and communications which are recognised as always and already steeped in ethics and politics.

The Schools White Paper promotes the idea that a tightly controlled curriculum structure and pre-determined official knowledge for the school curriculum serve as an entitlement leading to increased educational equality for all students. I argue a different case. First, that a tightly regulated and controlled curriculum structure which seeks to increase distinctions between successful and unsuccessful students and schools on the basis of comparison, differentiation and individualisation, leading to increased labelling, will decrease educational equality and influence student subjectivities in ways that are socially and educationally divisive and unjust. Second, the imposition of core knowledge is unjust in the sense that it does not respect the lifeworlds and perspectives of the other since it is externally imposed, culturally fixed and tightly defined, obstructing access to and engagement with that knowledge for certain social groups. Third, the external prescription and definition of curriculum knowledge as unproblematical and fixed exerts a sclerotic effect on meaning, denying access to rich, exciting and ethically just ways of thinking for all students.

Curriculum as/through relations draws attention to the links between language, discourse, subjectivity and curriculum, and how taken-for-granted discourses of performativity, autonomy, accountability and core knowledge can settle, rest and remain undisturbed in the individual, national and international psyche until they are tracked down and we are compelled to think otherwise. Thinking otherwise, beyond the self, provides an interruption from outside the discourse, from heteronomy, where an opportunity to see curriculum as

other opens up – curriculum as inventive, bold, strange, demanding and enriching. Opening

up our eyes to a curriculum otherwise, engaging with and attending to curriculum through

the ethical relation to the other seems to offer a possibility for an ethically just future.

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[i] A student from a 'more socio-economically advantaged' background 'outperforms' a student from an 'average background' by the equivalent of a year's education in reading (OECD, 2010 p.14). In English maintained schools in 2003 a 32% difference existed between students from 'professional' and 'other/not classified' backgrounds gaining 5+ GCSE grades A*-C (DfE, 2006, p.42).

[ii] Other examples of differentiated curriculum knowledge bases existed in England during the 1990s and early 2000, when, despite the existence of a National Curriculum, New Labour allowed schools to choose to teach either the discrete subjects of Geography, History and Religious Education, or a competency/skill-based curriculum like Opening Minds (Bayliss/RSA, 1999).

[iii] Awards are the qualifications students obtain by taking external examinations organised by institutions referred to as 'awarding bodies'. These institutions were called 'examination boards' in England in the past.

[iv] The Expert Panel Report (DoE, 2011) highlights the countries which are 'racing ahead' as China, Hong Kong SAR, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan: 'the assumption here is that deep engagement with subject matter, including through memorisation where appropriate, leads to deeper understanding' (8.6).

[v] Academies, free schools and independent schools are not required, legally, to follow the National Curriculum. They are charged, instead, with providing a broad and balanced curriculum.

[vi] GCSE is a 2-year programme of study usually taken by students aged 14-16. Examinations are now only available at the end of the 2-year programme.

[vii] It will be impossible to compare the new grades with the current A*- G grades.

[viii] Controlled assessments 'take place under supervised conditions and are either set by awarding organisations and marked by teachers, or set by teachers and marked by awarding organisations' (Ofqual, 2010). Course work does not require supervised conditions.

[ix] Change to the E-Bacc policy was introduced in October, 2013, when the number of subjects qualifying for the E-Bacc was raised from 5 to 8.

[x] E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation is a traditional conservative education movement, not one founded on the liberal education tradition.

[xi] 'Violence'. The word derives from the work of Paulo Freire, where he writes of oppression that negates humanity entailing violence which is not necessarily of a physical kind (1972).