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# **The constraints of relevance on prevocational curriculum.**

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## **Bio:**

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# **The constraints of relevance on prevocational curriculum.**

## **Abstract:**

This paper reflects on how relevance has been invoked as a curricular principle, both by students and teachers, in curriculum documents and in curriculum theory, to explore its variously conceived parameters and conditions. By posing the questions ‘relevant to whom?’, ‘relevant to what?’, ‘relevant how?’ and ‘relevant when?’ this paper exposes relevance as both a curricular virtue and a curricular constraint. It draws on an empirical project undertaken in the prevocational curriculum offered in Australia’s recently extended compulsory schooling for students in non-academic pathways. Data vignettes offer windows into two settings to exemplify the different ways relevance can be interpreted, stretched or contested. Using Bernstein’s distinction between vertical and horizontal discourses and knowledge structures, the analysis identifies what is gained and what is lost when relevance, variously defined, serves as a principle for curricular selection.

## **Keywords:**

prevocational curriculum, relevance, compulsory schooling, vertical discourse.

A core task of curriculum theory is ‘to identify the constraints that limit curriculum choices and ... the pedagogic implications that follow’ (Young, 2013, p. 103). In this vein, this paper examines how a principle of relevance can constrain the types of curricular knowledge selected, and the pedagogic implications that flow from such selection.

Blackmore’s (1990) review of Australian school curricula across the 1970s and 1980s observed how the curricular principle of ‘relevance’ acquired different meanings depending on historical context:

Australia’s historically low retention rate has been often attributed to ‘irrelevant’ curriculum. The notion of ‘relevance’ must be contextualized. Whilst relevance in the 1930s meant ‘a practical orientation’ which had vocational value in manual labour, by the 1960s it came to mean relevant to the student’s individual experience. In the 1980s, relevance has come to mean a focus upon ‘work as the social phenomenon that is to provide a commonly shared learning for post-compulsory age students’. (Blackmore, 1990, p. 181)

Fenwick’s (2011) critique of more recent reforms of secondary curricula in two Australian states traced how a principle of more personalised relevance re-emerged to dominate curricular and assessment designs in response to new literacy theory and the needs of marginalised students, though at the risk of compromising their disciplinary learning. This paper will elaborate theoretically on these points to make sense of how relevance can be invoked in both official and enacted curriculum to mean different things to different actors within the same or similar contexts.

The curriculum of interest here is prevocational curriculum offered as a non-academic pathway in Australia’s recent extension to compulsory education. This development could be understood as a local instantiation of the global trend of ‘economized’ education policy (Spring, 2015) whereby ‘curricular reform has been linked to the reconstitution of education as a central arm of national economic policy’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 96). Across the globe, a broad policy consensus around the demands of the knowledge economy has driven greater social investment in education under human capital logics since late last century (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In a weak form, such policy simply aims for more schooling for more people. In a stronger form, such policy stipulates new competencies and dispositions for the knowledge workers of the future (Yates & Grumet, 2011). However, this intense interest in school retention could equally be attributed to the loss of manufacturing industry and associated manual work in rich capitalist societies (Weis, 1990; Weis & Dolby, 2012), which has precipitated new social policy

configurations to absorb and proactively manage risky populations of youth with limited prospects in the labour market (Willis, 2003). In many national settings, the goal of increased retention has created a 'broader senior schooling cohort than has historically been the case' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 96) whose inclusion is unsettling previous curriculum settlements across many national systems.

Under such logics, Australia has radically increased school retention (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004), and extended the compulsory phase of schooling. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments' Compact with Young Australians instituted the mandatory requirement that 'all young people ... participate in schooling until they complete Year 10 and participate full time in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until the age of 17' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority). This 'earning or learning' policy has effectively raised the minimum age for leaving school across all Australian states while restricting access to welfare entitlements for those age groups (te Riele, 2011). Where upper secondary schooling had historically focused on selecting students into further academic opportunities through disciplinary studies of increasing specialisation (Collins, 1992; McKinnon, 1988), these institutions and their teachers now have to cater for a growing number of 'reluctant stayers' (te Riele & Crump, 2002, p. 253) for whom the academic curriculum may offer a poor fit.

The presence of these students has institutionalised a second layer in upper secondary curriculum offering a 'prevocational' curriculum premised on claims of relevance to the students' life-world and vocational prospects. For example, the outline of the Queensland subject, Prevocational Maths, describes its orientation:

The SAS (study area specification) provides teachers with the flexibility to design courses of study that cater for the broad range of skills, attitudes and needs of students. Students study 5 topics (number, data, location and time, measurement and finance) integrated into teaching and learning contexts which have relevance to them. Because these contexts foster cooperation, and are supportive, enjoyable and non-competitive, students develop positive attitudes towards the use of mathematics. (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2014)

Such prevocational curricula do not result in certification recognised for the purposes of university entrance, but may serve as pre-requisites that articulate with further training opportunities in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector.

My interest in the curricular principle of relevance was prompted by a particular classroom episode I observed in 2013 when students vehemently protested about the nature of the prevocational curriculum they were engaged in, and demanded more relevance. I use this episode to pose the larger question for curriculum studies of whether one can have too much of a good thing in relevance. The paper's elaboration of relevance uses aspects of Bernstein's (2000) theory of the pedagogic device to consider the affordances and constraints of this curricular principle, its different dimensions, and how it plays out in curricular enactments for better and for worse. The paper proceeds in six sections. To set the scene, I briefly outline the empirical project informing this paper, and present an account of the observed episode where students disputed the nature of their curriculum, to exemplify the principle and logic of 'relevance' in their terms and paint a broad brush picture of how relevance should inform curricular selection in this student cohort's eyes. From this empirical provocation, I review literature around the larger problematic of which curricular principles have typically applied to whom in educational settings. I then develop a theoretical frame on curricular principles and the shelf-life of curricular knowledge using Bernstein's (2000) distinction between vertical and horizontal discourses and knowledge structures, and the temporality of pedagogic identities. Using this conceptual framework, I revisit and reconceptualise the curricular principle of relevance at play in the observed episode. I argue that while the curriculum offered to these students aspired to be prospective, orienting to future work and life scenarios, these students were demanding that the curriculum be grounded in their present, that is, as knowledge for immediate consumption, given their limited prospects to imagine skilled futures. I then offer observations from a second empirical site that configured the relevance of its prevocational curriculum differently. The conclusion reflects on what is gained and what is lost when relevance serves as the dominant principle for curricular selection.

### **1. To set the scene**

The empirical project was designed as classroom ethnographies of classes for 16 year olds in non-academic pathways, informed by Watson-Gegeo's (1997) insistence on the importance of a holistic perspective on teacher-student interactions, and Hammersley's (1990) 'action' model that attends to how order is achieved (see Doherty, 2015). I followed eight class groups (involving seven teachers) across three to four weeks of their timetabled classes in five sites (two high school settings, two alternative TAFE settings and one hybrid TAFE/high school program). The sites were sampled in three towns with high youth unemployment, that is, social settings more likely to retain students in formal schooling longer given the dearth of entry level

employment opportunities. I also interviewed all the teachers on repeated occasions about their accounts of incidents observed, and some students in each site about their schooling experience (a total of 17 student interviews). With teachers' and students' informed consent, classes were audio-recorded, and selected episodes were later transcribed. This ethnographic immersion in multiple sites enacting similar curricula for similar students built a rich sense of what was common or different across the settings.

The Year 11 class where the protest erupted was studying 'Prevocational Maths' in a secondary school setting. In one of the maths classes, the teacher (T) was explaining how to calculate foreign currency conversion. This sparked a protest from a female student (S1), then others (S2, S3, ...):

S1: You know what I think?

T: Yep?

S1: What I think we should learn in school?

T: What?

S1: How to fill in Centrelink<sup>i</sup> forms, how to drive, things we're going to use in our life.

S2: You don't know how to fill in Centrelink forms?

S1: Yeah, they're not as easy as you think.

T: ... just stop for 5 minutes and let's have a talk. What sort of forms are we looking at here?

S1: Like leaving home ones and that.

T: Like rent?

S1: Yeah. And like how, like in maths, we should be working out how to, like, pay our bills and stuff.

T: We did a budget.

S1: Yeah, but we should like, we should, we should do it like ...

S3: We should be learning like how to take out a lease and all that.

T: How to take out a lease, yep.

S3: Actually sample forms

T: Now when you get into Year 12 there is a program called [post-schooling induction program] and part of that shows you that in Year 12.

S4: Yeah, but we should do it all throughout school so we know what we're doing when we go out into the world.

At this point, the teacher abandoned her lesson plan, and for the remaining class time took the opportunity to listen to the students' suggestions about what curriculum they wanted. Students' suggestions included: sex education; how to lease an apartment; steps in buying a car; hands-on skills for the vocation they aspire to; preparing resumes and job applications; and how to complete welfare forms. Their discussion offered a critique of the curriculum they were experiencing ('this shit's just irritating and boring'; 'they teach us stuff that we don't even need'; 'not just fucken people in chairs and shit like that'; 'writing an essay, you're not going to use that in a job!'). They also articulated their criteria for what should count as curricular knowledge ('if we were made aware of this it would make living so much easier'; 'it should be something you want to do'; 'we should be able to work out a job, work out what we need for it and be able to do it'; 'we should be doing stuff that we'll actually need instead of like writing a review on a book').

The teacher in turn shared her perspective and constraints:

T: I know, for a fact, it's no use me teaching you algebra, it would be totally a waste of my time teaching you algebra because none of you are going to ever use that at this stage. ... You need to be aware of things that are going to be relevant for you. But this is why there is Prevoc Maths, but I can only teach what is in the curriculum.

She explained how she had some flexibility to make the curriculum responsive to their needs, and how she shared their rationale of seeking relevance:

T: I guess from my point of view, I'm lucky 'cause I run the Prevoc Maths, so you know I say what goes ... and if I want to change it, I change it. ... Okay, there are certain things you must do, you must do the finance part because everyone's involved in finance when they leave, either doing a budget, buying food, layby-ing<sup>ii</sup>, shopping, paying your bill. Everyone's involved in that, it's called living, okay.

In response to another student's challenge, 'But maths ... why is maths important?', the teacher explained its relevance to everyday adult life: 'Well maths is really important, you need to budget, you need to buy a house, you want to go to the shops and buy something. How do you know someone's giving you the right change?' The teacher sought to find some middle ground



to placate the protestor: 'I know how hard it is growing up and I know that things you're doing in subjects probably aren't relevant. But some are.' However the initiating student dismissed her claim: 'They're not, that's the problem though, they're not.'

This vignette of curricular politics at the chalkface serves to foreground 'relevance' as a curricular principle, and to exemplify different standpoints and competing interpretations of its range, that is, how far 'relevance' stretches. It also raises the questions of 'relevance to what?', 'relevance to whom?' and 'relevant when?'. The students invoke two 'relevancies' – urgent immediate concerns of buying a car, moving out, and qualifying for welfare/income support (relevant NOW); and a more prospective imagined future of differentiated work pathways (relevant to SOME, not all). The teacher invokes a universal ongoing relevance that applies always to 'everyone' (relevant to ALL). In this way, the curricular principle of relevance can become refracted and disputed. If wanting relevance now, one will discount relevance to a more distant future. If wanting relevance to some, one will dispute the relevance of generic learning. Relevance to all will thus fall short on delivering the particularity of relevance to some. The vignette also serves to illustrate how these students imagined their futures – on welfare, or in particular jobs – and the way in which these imaginaries both curtailed their educational horizons and constrained the possibility of relevance through a generic curriculum.

In Australia, prevocational programs for 'reluctant stayers' are offered in both high school and TAFE college settings. These different institutional settings create different expectations and conditions for curriculum. Broadly speaking, in schools, curriculum for the compulsory years build generic foundations to enable multiple future possibilities. By extending the age of compulsory education, the design of a generic curriculum (relevant to all) enabling multiple futures is also extended. In contrast, the previously post-compulsory upper secondary years were characterised by more differentiation and specialisation through subject choice, working towards individual's particular aspirations for further study or employment (relevant to some). By retaining students who don't fit these curricular templates at school, this second tier of curriculum for non-academic pathways in extended schooling becomes locked into the more generic, less specialised mode, and the claim to 'relevance' becomes more diluted or attenuated. Using Bernstein's (1971) classic concepts of classification and framing, the former being 'the nature of the differentiation between contents' (p. 49) and the latter being 'the degree of control teacher and pupil possess' (p. 50), this new compulsory educational space could be described as a mix of weak classification (unspecialised knowledge) and strong external framing (prescribing attendance).

In contrast, Australian TAFE college programs, by design, are more focussed on training towards employment in particular occupations for the local job market. 'Relevance' features again in mission statements, for example: 'TAFE Queensland is the largest provider of practical, relevant and quality training in Queensland. TAFE training meets the vocational and business needs of individuals, employers and the community' (TAFE Queensland, 2014). However, this capacity to specialise curricula with a high degree of relevance to an imminent future does not apply in the case of the prevocational programs offered in TAFE colleges as an alternative setting for extended compulsory schooling. While the moral order in the TAFE settings is more attuned to workplace expectations of conduct, the pre-vocational curriculum must still entertain multiple yet-to-be-determined possibilities and build generic capabilities for nebulous futures. The students are yet to win apprenticeships or traineeships that might sponsor them in more targeted vocational programs. In this way, relevance in the prevocational curriculum remains more diffuse, heuristic and speculative.

In both institutional settings, the retained students are suspended on the brink of adulthood in curricula that they may find hard to legitimate against their preferred criteria of relevance-to-now, or relevance-to-some, as exemplified in the data above. The students' complaints above come from circumstances borne of a particular policy moment in a particular context, but they pose a broader theoretical problem. Under what principles and logics are curricular selections legitimated? What knowledge counts for whom? When is curricular knowledge intended to be consumed? What is the intended shelf life of curricular knowledge? The next section reviews theoretical differences around curricular principles more generally, to trace the growing dominance of instrumentally conceived 'just in time' relevance as a legitimating logic.

## **2. Competing curricular principles**

Schooling is a complex social practice with inherent tensions which have been exacerbated as its remit has been extended to more diverse groups:

The goal of equal educational outcomes for different social groups thus stands as the Janus face of two fundamentally different modes of reflection and ethical impulse: it appears as a technical objective of government, to achieve a socially optimal distribution of trained capacities and lifestyles; and it is also represented as an absolute moral right to self-realisation, claimed on the behalf of our common humanity or universal moral personality. ... Not only do the two modes lead to different substantive conceptions of the scope of education, they are also accompanied by different kinds of expectation of

the school system and, perhaps most importantly, different ethical and political demeanours in those attempting to satisfy such expectations. (Hunter, 1994, p. 95)

In a similar vein, Seddon (1994) mapped three overlapping 'broad tendencies' (p.66) - educational progressivism, cultural conservatism and vocationalism - that were competing in the curricular reforms of the 1990s in Australia. Labaree (1997) also described three contradictory goals that habitually wrestle for ascendancy in US curricular reforms (democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility), while Apple (2011) has more recently tracked the powerful if contradictory partnership of neoconservatism and neoliberalism shaping curricular reform agendas globally. Curricular selection thus attempts a solution or settlement to multiple coexisting agendas, and will accordingly be open to criticism on a number of fronts and from different standpoints: 'The whole becomes a sheer compromise and patchwork between contending aims and disparate studies' (Dewey, 1902/1990, p. 72).

Within such tensions within the field, any logic invoking relevance as a curricular principle brings its own complexity. Firstly a principle of relevance seeks to craft a relationship between curricular knowledges within schools and the world beyond the school (to answer the question, 'relevant to what?'). Secondly, it will also construct some temporal relationship between the knowledge transmitted in the school curriculum and its eventual application or consumption in the world beyond school (to answer the question, 'relevant when?'). Thirdly, it claims some relationship between curricular knowledge and the student (to answer the question, 'relevant to whom?'). Finally, this relationship may orient to different constructions or facets of the student's identity (to answer the question, 'relevant how?'), for example, to student as citizen, worker, consumer, individual, or every(wo)man. Relevance as a curricular principle is potentially open to dispute along any of these dimensions.

Relevance as a curricular principle has had powerful advocates in curriculum studies. Freire's (1974) critique of the conventions of didactic schooling was encapsulated in his metaphor of 'banking education':

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. ... the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (p.58)

Freire (like the students quoted above) protested at the passivity this model inculcates in the students it oppresses and marginalises. This passivity contrasts with his depiction of knowledge

creation ‘through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry’ (p.58). The banking metaphor implies saving towards a deferred, distant and perhaps specious future, in contrast to immediate consumption in the known world of here and now. The former relies on the teacher to know about the world and to choose what students need, whereas in the latter model, everybody is in a position to know and to choose. Freire argues for dialogic ‘problem-posing’ education (p. 68) with teachers and students learning from each other around problems ‘relating to themselves in the world and with the world’ (p.68). In Bernstein’s conceptual vocabulary, the difference is firstly, between strong versus weak framing in the teacher/student roles, and secondly, between strong versus weak classification between the knowledges in the ‘banked’ curriculum and those knowledges deemed relevant to the students’ lifeworld. While banking knowledge might make sense to the academically ambitious, the students above were not interested given their urgent desire for immediate relevance to their familiar world.

Dewey’s work on the school (1902/1990) was similarly concerned about institutional settings built more for listening than doing, and about student passivity: ‘the dependency of one mind on another’ (p. 32). He argued for ‘the power of relevance’ (p.13) in the education of children, to be achieved through a very porous boundary between school and the student’s life beyond:

The great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school – its isolation from life. (p.75)

In Bernstein’s vocabulary, this is a critique of overly strong external classification such that knowledges from home and school are kept strictly apart. Dewey’s solution would breach that strongly insulated boundary: ‘Relate the school to life, and all studies are of necessity correlated’ (p.91).

These broad critiques call for schooling to be more closely tied to local context and relevant to students’ immediate lifeworlds. For both Dewey and Freire the appeal to relevance stems from their critique of the ‘passivity’ built into institutional pedagogies that stifles learning processes, as much as from their critique of curricular selection. The prevocational students’ desire for ‘not just fucken people in chairs and shit like that’ quoted above makes an equivalent connection between curricular relevance and pedagogic engagement. Critical pedagogues continue in this

tradition to critique the academic curriculum as alienating for working class, and too far removed from the knowledges they could profitably bring from their life experience.

There is however a counterpoised body of critique expressing concern about the limited utilitarian imaginary behind the growing instrumentalism of curriculum in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, whereby 'education is seen as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself' (Kennedy, 1988, p. 363). The widespread ascendancy of instrumentalism in the school curriculum has been informed by human capital theory that ties the work of schools to the labour market under a logic of financial efficiency and accountability. This shift in curricular principles has re-instituted and dignified vocational education in the schooling sector while displacing wider humanist, critical or liberal purposes to schooling (Kelly, 2009). The curriculum becomes the object of economic design:

educational purposes have been redefined in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development and the role education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the national economy. (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 3)

Again, relevance serves as the legitimating rhetoric, but here refers to economic relevance on a grander scale: 'In general, schools were being asked to provide a more relevant curriculum that was attuned to the needs of a rapidly changing society' (Kennedy, 1988, p. 363). A more instrumental curriculum is distinguished by both weaker external classification and weaker external framing, in that the world of work and its representatives are by design allowed to penetrate and make demands of the school curriculum. This creates pressure on the curriculum to make itself (and the student as future worker) more relevant to industry (relevance to whom), and to pitch its relevance into the foreseeable economic future (relevant when). This design risks pursuing short-term relevance to a fault and thinking within narrowly imagined limits dictated by the economic present that constrain more transcendent or transformative goals of education (Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid, & Keating, 2010).

The opposed curricular principle that eschews such a rationale of immediate economic relevance would hark back to Arnold's maxim of making available the 'best that has been thought and known current everywhere' (quoted in Moore, 2004, p. 179). Arnold's (1869/2006) argument drew a distinction between 'our everyday selves' (plural) and our 'best self' (singular). He mapped the former to individuals' circumscribed everyday worlds which in their diversity risked splintering society: 'because we habitually live in our ordinary selves, which do not carry us beyond the ideas and wishes of the class to which we happen to belong' (p.70). The latter, the

best self, transcends these limited contexts, to look beyond to a more cohesive ‘impersonal’ community (p.71) in ideas and sentiments. The transformed best self is achieved through exposure to what would now be termed high culture, ‘which simply means trying to perfect oneself, and one’s mind as part of oneself’ (p. 61). This principle would tie schooling to a broad cultural orientation as an end in itself through a common curriculum steeped in canonical cultural heritage (claiming relevance to all, always). This curricular principle remains alive and well in debates, and was recently advocated by conservatives (Berg, 2010) when Australia’s national curriculum was under construction. This kind of curriculum would be characterised by strong external classification and framing – what goes on in the school need not reflect nor be held accountable to the world of work or everyday life.

More recently, there has been a realist effort to ‘reclaim’ (Muller, 2000) knowledge as uncommon sense (strongly classified knowledges) in the curriculum in response to the perceived relativism of standpoint epistemologies and progressive constructivist pedagogies dominating much educational thought and practice (Moore, 2004; Muller, 2000; Wheelahan, 2010; Young, 2008, 2014). This realist stream of thought is critical of the popular push to blur the boundary between the codified knowledges of traditional school curriculum and the everyday commonsense and experience beyond schools (weakly classified knowledges) whereby knowledge is legitimated in terms of its relationship to the knower – a reified version of relevance-to-some. This school of thought argues that while knowledge is inescapably social, ‘it is quite another matter to use an argument about the role of experience in even the most abstract forms of knowledge as a way of dismissing the degree and form of objectivity that such knowledge can provide’ (Young, 2008, p. 11). This camp claims some knowledge is more powerful and useful regardless of personal stakes, and should therefore be dignified in the curriculum, rather than knowledge of limited reach and use:

What uniquely schools can do for all pupils, and that is why the curriculum is the pre-eminent issue for all of us in education, is to offer opportunities for pupils at all ages to move beyond the experience they bring to school and to acquire knowledge that is not tied to that experience. (Young, 2014, pp. 8-9)

This position could be understood as a call for strengthening the external classification of knowledge in the school curriculum. The unfinished business under this argument remains around the issue of ‘how this promise works out and for whom, and why it is un-realised for so many students’ (Young 2014, p. 9) such as the reluctant stayers profiled above. While these

arguments above offer extreme cases derived from opposed principles, most practice falls or oscillates between the two poles to manage their curricular settlements.

### 3. A theoretical framework for curricular principles

These broad curricular principles and others as outlined above will compete in any curricular debate. To understand this diversity and the dimensions of their competition, Bernstein (2000) offers a typology of pedagogic identities produced under different curricular orientations which seek to realise 'different approaches to regulating and managing change, moral, cultural and economic' (p.66). He suggests that these orientations can coexist while struggling for dominance at any point of curricular reform – thus pulling social change in different directions. He distinguishes between **centred, de-centred and re-centred** pedagogic identities as projected by different curricular orientations. The first aims to produce uniform pedagogic subjects oriented to maintaining the premises of the collective past. The second aims to produce differentiated pedagogic subjects oriented to the present in terms of market opportunities. The third seeks to produce uniform pedagogic subjects but re-oriented towards a collective future.

This de-/re-/centred typology helps to elaborate the possibilities for relevance-to-what, and relevant-when. The centred pedagogic identity and orientation would be exemplified in common curriculum to sustain a coherent national identity with reference to past glories and achievements on the basis of relevance to all, always. The de-centred pedagogic identity and orientation would be exemplified in differentiated opportunities, relevant now to some, for students to pursue personal strengths and interests. The re-centred pedagogic identity and orientation would be exemplified in a common curriculum redesigned to enhance national economic competitiveness, thus relevant to all in the projected future. He also outlines another de-centred 'therapeutic' pedagogic identity nurtured by curriculum informed by progressive individualism and self-actualisation, as relevant to 'me' always. This orientation was influential in curriculum debates in the latter half of the twentieth century, but is less evident now.

The generic non-academic curriculum the prevocational students above experience could be considered to be designed to project a weak re-centred, future-oriented identity for the students, shaping them and their competencies towards some form of future workforce participation and 'new participatory responsibility in the economic sphere' (Bernstein, 2000, p.68). The weakness is in the incapacity to imagine or focus that imagined future as yet without identifiable job prospects.

There is another axis of relevance to be considered in terms of the type and structure of knowledges on offer in a curriculum. Over his career, Bernstein sought to understand and

explicate how symbolic control is achieved through pedagogic discourse. He was interested in how the degree of specialisation in the knowledges transmitted in curriculum constructed identities for the learner who invested in those knowledges. His theory built from Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane to distinguish types of knowledge:

the former referred to the relation to the form of knowledge (its otherness) and to the social and discursive obligations this relation required. The latter, the profane, referred to the contextual demands and constraints of the economic context. (Bernstein, 2000, pp. 203-204)

The more strongly classified the knowledge, the more restricted, or disciplined the 'voice' it projects. Bernstein (2000, p. 157) associates this discursive specialisation and 'otherness' of the 'sacred' with the 'uncommon sense' of vertical discourse. Under Bernstein's definition, vertical knowledge, characterised by hierarchical principles and axiomatic abstractions, is acquired and distributed through explicit pedagogic processes. It will not be acquired through experience alone. In contrast, the 'profane' is associated with the familiar 'common sense' of contextualised horizontal discourse: 'a set of strategies which are local, segmentally organised, context specific and dependent, for maximising encounters with persons and habitats' (p.157). Horizontal knowledges can be acquired through lived experience in local contexts. Their attribute of being 'segmentally organised' refers to how

what is acquired in one segment or context, and how it is acquired, may bear no relation to what is acquired or how it is acquired in another segment or context ... they are not related by any principle integrating their specific acquisitional 'knowledge' (p. 159).

These different knowledge structures offer differently scaled relevance. A vertical knowledge structure by dint of its capacity for theoretical abstraction is capable of relevance or application in multiple contexts. The horizontal discourse with its locally contextualised immediacy delivers a difference sense of unmediated relevance but, by the same token, this relevance is restricted to just this segment of life. In this way, cognate knowledge demands in another segment may not benefit from the knowledge/competence accrued in the first local context. In this way, 'relevance' as a curricular principle can be further interrogated in terms of which students get which version of relevance in their curriculum.

#### **4. Rethinking relevance as a curricular principle**

Teese's (2013) 'social history' (p. xiv) of secondary school curriculum in an Australian state plots the intersection of hierarchies in both schools and school subjects. This big picture analysis demonstrates how curricular reforms that were intended to embrace more students have



effectively produced ‘private academic compounds’ of high achievement in high status curriculum in high status schools, and ‘unfortified sites’ (p. 242) of low status public schools offering low status curriculum with low levels of achievement. In turn, school completion converts to very different outcomes and trajectories for different groups of students. Teese argues that the system has been historically structured and maintained to protect the interests of those with investments in the academic curriculum: ‘It is a sad irony that the young people who most need to succeed if they are to counteract the economic breakdown and degradation that surround them are instead the most likely to fail’ (p.2). By constructing yet another lower status layer of curriculum premised on notional relevance for reluctant stayers, even success becomes ironic because it can only deliver students into their present relatively disadvantaged position.

When the students above demanded useful knowledge that could be relevant now to apply in their known or familiar lifeworlds, they were thirsty for horizontal discourses offering ‘just in time’ knowledge for immediate consumption across buckshot or segmented needs. This design would confine the curriculum to a reactive or responsive role – putting out spot fires as they emerge in the students’ life experiences. In their report on a corpus of empirical work with early school leavers, Dwyer and colleagues (Dwyer & Youth Research Centre, 1996, p. 45) similarly described the ‘reality test’ which the students in their study typically applied to school knowledge: ‘it had to be validated through direct personal experience’ before these students would engage with it. Such conditions require curricular knowledge to be accountable to the already known, as opposed to offer a doorway to forms of consciousness that reach beyond lived experience. By demanding learning restricted to their current known reality, these students are also effectively shaping their futures. Their version of relevance would not just align with their current reality; it would also produce their future reality. When relevance-for-now serves as the curricular principle, there is an absence of any imaginary of how life might be otherwise, or support to open up the risky but motivating space created by aspiration.

As well as reducing the academic demand and reach of the curriculum, the students’ thirst for curriculum as horizontal discourse refused to dignify vertical discourse in the curriculum. By my observations, this stripped their curriculum of a more technical or conceptual register that would allow their language and consciousness to articulate with concepts that could transcend their local context. The teacher explained this pressure in an interview:

I have to change the terminologies a bit and make it like...we always use the word ‘times’ in this class, which is really a no no for me, because it’s always ‘multiply’ but this is what these kids understand. Things like ‘times’ and ‘take’ instead of ‘minus’ or ‘subtract’ you

know? Those sort of words. They don't understand if you use 'multiply', well they understand but they don't use it or they don't seem to comprehend what multiply means but if you say 'times' they know what times is.

A curriculum premised on relevance for now to a local reality and its horizontal discourses makes sense to these students because of its imminent use value – students see the knowledge as useful and can apply it immediately. However, these retained students are completing school-based subjects that carry little symbolic weight. Completing Prevocational Maths will not count for entrance to pathways that might deliver the student into a radically different future. Rather, a curriculum premised on the here and now of their realities would merely recreate the present in the future.

Another problem with a curriculum offering knowledge relevant for now transmitted through horizontal discourse and held accountable to students' reality test, is that all knowledge claims occupy the same status. In this way, an observed lesson on household budgeting became a forum for competing anecdotes and opinions about what is right/wrong, appropriate/inappropriate in this process. The teacher's attempt to introduce the vertical discourse of 'needs versus wants' was only processed through the horizontal discourse of examples of each, and their contestation. Where vertical discourse implicates some epistemic principle to draw out the concept above its horizontal discourse examples, horizontal discourse operates on the same plane, and no claim can carry more weight than another. Students would bring legitimate knowledge of their everyday lifeworlds to class, and any attempt to teach about this world would be open to debate.

As a final reflection on the constraints of relevance, the student's request to learn 'how to fill in Centrelink forms' seems a sad travesty of what schooling might offer these reluctant stayers. This request makes evident how these non-academic students, in these poorly resourced schools, in these communities with high youth unemployment, may not subscribe to the nebulous imagined future of economic participation that underpins 'earning or learning' policy. This seems a hollow policy if it can't promise jobs. Like Willis's 'lads' (1977), these students' reluctance to engage with the curriculum only serves to further damage their limited prospects. The appeal for relevance-for-some realised in more differentiated, specialised or de-centred curriculum offers an alternative principle that might help these students imagine themselves into a skilled credentialed future, and nurture more engagement with formal education. This however would require more, and more specialised, resourcing to offer vocational alternatives.

## **5. A closing scene**

Another program I sampled in a similar community had negotiated some middle ground, offering both generic pre-vocational and specialised vocational curriculum for a similar cohort of students retained under the ‘earning or learning’ policy. The program was hosted at an underutilised TAFE College campus which offered access to a variety of trade workshops and a broader ethos oriented to working futures. The students occupied a hybrid space, enrolled in both generic high school curriculum and TAFE Certificates in their chosen fields. This allowed the program to address foundational generic learning (relevance to all) as well as accommodate students’ different aspirations (relevance to some). When interviewed, a female student from this program expressed a hopeful sense of the future, one which involved longer term educational investment and a vision of work:

Well at [former school] I was sailing, I was really - because I’m not a straight A student, I’m more of a D, C student and I think I just got fed up with school and I started missing days. ... my original plan was to do all the way to year 12 and as soon as I did year 12 I’d come here to do TAFE, but to hear that I got a two year head start, that encouraged me, yes I can do it. Yeah it’s made me snap into line and I think I need to - like I haven’t had a single day off this whole year so far... Yeah and I’m working towards something for once, not just like ‘Oh yeah, get to the next day’... I don’t know how long my TAFE class is - I don’t know if it goes for three years or two years, I’m not sure but I’m sticking around until I’ve done everything.

This student articulated a focus, ambition, strategy and commitment to an imagined future. Her response was representative of other students’ strong endorsement of the hybrid design. This curriculum’s relevance was not for now or ‘the next day’, but rather had been rescaled for a more ambitious and distant, yet tangible, future which helped makes sense of investment and effort here and now. The hybrid program stretched the dimension of ‘relevance for when’ while bringing that future forward with ‘a two year head start’, thus placating this cohort’s typical impatience to get on with adult life. The differently configured, more adult setting of the TAFE College was observed to both dignify and test their claim to maturity. This quasi-experimental hybrid program was only possible because of the unique circumstances and institutional partnership underpinning it, but its ‘both/and’ curricular design could be helpful for other settings, if adequate resources were to be allocated to the needs of this group of students.

A vocationalised curriculum in late stages of schooling is not a new proposition, having re-emerged since the 1980s in response to growing youth unemployment (Yates, 2005, Blackmore 1990). Governments keep rediscovering and reinventing how schools might incorporate

vocational training and certification (see for example, Crowe & Trounson, 2014). What I would highlight here is the face validity that the dovetailing of generic and specialised curriculum achieved for this new extended phase of compulsory education. The partial differentiation projected a less nebulous identity for students in the future, and this curriculum could achieve the ‘relevance for some’ that was reportedly missing in the first vignette’s setting. This in turn allowed the generic curriculum to resonate within a more broadly scaled and more aspirational relevance, producing what were observed to be happier, less volatile classrooms. The irony here was that none of this effort could fix the dearth of job opportunities in the community.

## 6. Conclusion

When should ‘relevance’ become irrelevant? This paper has reflected on how relevance has been invoked as a curricular principle, both by students and in curriculum theory, to expose its variously conceived parameters and conditions. By posing the questions ‘relevant to whom?’, ‘relevant to what?’, ‘relevant how?’ and ‘relevant when?’ this paper exposes relevance as both a curricular virtue and a curricular constraint. It has drawn on an empirical project undertaken in the vexed space of Australia’s recently extended compulsory schooling for students in non-academic pathways. The vignettes shared offered windows into two settings and the different ways relevance could be interpreted, stretched and disputed.

In essence, relevance describes the nature of the relationship between school knowledge and the knowledges that operate in the world beyond school. Classic curriculum theory from Freire and Dewey would blur the boundary between school and the experiential lifeworld, while others such as Arnold would argue that school knowledge should have the capacity to rise above and transcend the student’s experiential context. A similar position promoting powerful de-contextualised knowledge in the curriculum has more recently been argued by social realists. Each principle has its own appeal and logic, thus competes with others in curricular debates. Bernstein’s typology of curricular orientations and associated pedagogic identities offered a way to make sense of the temporal design inscribed in curricula. In addition, his distinction between vertical and horizontal knowledge and discourses offered another dimension to help conceptualise versions and scales of relevance.

With this vocabulary, it was possible to characterise the observed protest demanding more ‘relevance’ in a school setting as a rejection of the weak re-centred prospective orientation of their generic pre-vocational curriculum, a de-legitimation of any vertical discourse, and a call for horizontal discourse addressing their immediate present. However, on closer examination these conditions would strip their curriculum of the capacity to make links across lived contexts, or to

project into an otherwise-imagined future. In this sense, abiding by these students' version of relevance-for-now and knowledge for immediate consumption in their everyday lives would merely deliver them back into their constrained present. A second setting constructed a hybrid curriculum offering both some generic relevance-for-all curriculum and some more differentiated relevance-for-some curricula. By students' accounts, this design seemed to offer the same type of student a differently scoped relevance that made sense of educational investments towards a longer term future. The students could make more sense of the curriculum's what and why.

The paper has hinged on two different ethnographic case studies and does not claim to broadly characterise the pedagogic work of teachers in these settings nor student outcomes in prevocational curriculum. Rather their contrast has allowed the analysis to explore the limits and logic of relevance as a curricular principle. While not every setting will be able to access the resources that made the hybrid program possible, all settings could make a more conscious and explicit effort to show students how horizontal discourse can articulate with the resources of vertical discourse, and hence harness its capacity for broader relevance. These students tend to live in sticky, problematic presents, so the least extended compulsory schooling can offer is the means to reach beyond these circumstances. With more powerful cognitive tools and dispositions relevant to broader horizons, these students might replace their habitual 'reality test' with an 'imaginary test', to ask how far the learning or ideas might take them.

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<sup>i</sup> Centrelink is the name of the government agency responsible for welfare entitlements and unemployment benefits.

<sup>ii</sup> Layby refers to a purchase accomplished over a schedule of partial payments.