Education, Policy and Social Justice

Learning and Skills

James Avis
EDUCATION, POLICY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
Also available from Continuum

Pedagogy and the University, Monica McLean
Theory of Education, David Turner
Knowledge and Nationhood, James Avis et al.
EDUCATION, POLICY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
Learning and Skills

James Avis

Continuum Studies in Lifelong Learning
## Contents

Acknowledgements vi

**Chapter 1**
Introduction 1

**Chapter 2**
Fordism, post-Fordism and Beyond 9

**Chapter 3**
Work-based Learning and Social Justice: ‘Learning to Labour’ and the New Vocationalism 37

**Chapter 4**
Learner Dispositions: Continuity and Change 65

**Chapter 5**
Teachers and the Transformation of Practice 89

**Chapter 6**
Knowledge, Curriculum and Power 121

**Chapter 7**
Social Justice, Post-compulsory Education and Practice 143

**Chapter 8**
Conclusion 169

**Chapter 9**
Postscript 181

**References** 203

**Index** 225

In particular Chapter 3 draws upon ‘Work-based learning’, Chapter 4 on ‘From reproduction to learning culture’ and Chapter 5, ‘Shifting identity’. 
This introduction locates the ideational context within which post-compulsory education is placed. To begin with this chapter examines, albeit in a somewhat rhetorical fashion, the connections between education, the economy and social justice favoured by policy-makers – themes developed further in subsequent chapters. These connections have been iteratively present within state policy for much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Although the relationship between education, economy and social justice is uneven and has been articulated differently at particular historical moments, there is nevertheless a common thread in the way in which these elements have been combined and understood. This understanding draws a clear association between a successful economy, social justice and an education system that develops the skill and knowledge base of the workforce. It is claimed that a successful economy is one which offers greater opportunity and therefore, in a fairly straightforward manner, is thought to contribute towards social justice, prosperity and social well-being.

In the West lifelong learning is thought to be the key to economic success. Competitiveness is to be pursued with the whole of society oriented towards this particular end, with all members of society developing subjective dispositions that align with this goal. They are to become enterprising subjects who possess the flexibility and adaptability needed to respond successfully to the ever changing economic and social conditions
in which they are located. Competitive success in world markets, it is claimed, will not only offer economic benefits but also provide for social well-being, which in turn form the basis for social cohesion and inclusion. There is a happy coincidence, or at least so it is said, between the needs of capital, those who labour, other members of society and the state. We are all in effect seen as stakeholders who share a common interest in the ongoing success of the economy. A vibrant and dynamic economy is rhetorically construed as pivotal to the well-being of all.

These assertions are not new and the claims and demands that were placed on education throughout much of the twentieth century, becoming familiar themes following the end of the Second World War. What is new, however, in the current conjuncture is the urgency with which such claims are made and the manner in which they are set within a particular understanding of globalization, which is construed as an irresistible force. Globalization comes to be seen as a fact of economic life, one that has to be accommodated. Economic, education and social systems therefore need to adapt and respond appropriately to the consequences of globalization and its underpinning logic.

The result of these arguments for Britain, as for other Western economies, is that older forms of manufacturing which utilize low investment in both plant and the skills of the workforce come to be seen as no longer viable and will inevitably be relocated elsewhere in the global economic system. Such movements of jobs and plant should not be resisted but rather embraced and used as a stimulus to develop new skills within the labour force and to encourage a dynamic economy. To do otherwise would be to impede the social and economic development required to sustain a vibrant and successful economy on a global stage. Failure to respond creatively and dynamically to the demands of globalization would result in an economy trapped in redundant forms, leading to long-term social and economic decline.

Within this particular zeitgeist the role of the state is to facilitate global economic success and enable the workforce to develop new skills in order to add value to the products and services produced. Highly skilled workers who marshal
their skills effectively in the labour process are seen as the route not only to global economic success but also to societal well-being. In the latter years of the twentieth century the association between the development of skilled workers in Western economies and economic competitiveness was understood in a relatively straightforward manner. The development of the skills base would bring with it value-added wage labour that would lead to competitive advantage. However, as we enter the twenty-first century the emerging economies of China and India, as with other similarly placed societies, are also investing in the development of skilled labour. In the West the response has been an intensification of the call for the development of value-added waged labour. There has however been scant concern for the impact of these developments upon social and economic relations. The logic of globalization, at least for policy-makers, dictates the route to competitiveness and the type of labour market and training strategies that should be adopted to produce the knowledgeable and skilled worker now required in the workplace. Such a worker is able to respond adaptively to the turbulent economic conditions that are now encountered, and is able to continually develop skills that contribute to value-added labour processes.

Throughout the post-war period education was seen as key not only for the development of skilled and knowledgeable workers but also as an important route to greater social and economic equality. It was hoped that providing more equitable educational opportunities would enable the upward mobility of disadvantaged groups, particularly in relation to class, gender and ethnicity/race. The manner in which this was to be accomplished varied according to the educational sector and period in which interventions were made. In the late 1960s and 1970s comprehensive schools were seen as vehicles to deliver greater opportunities for disadvantaged groups. However, with the advent of Thatcherism, and latterly New Labour, specialist schools, academies and colleges of various kinds have come to be seen as more suited to this goal. Yet despite variations in institutional forms there remains an overarching assumption that the economy demands ever increasing skills from its
workforce and that this provides a dynamic towards greater equality. In other words the economy holds the promise of offering skilled, knowledgeable work with a resulting increase in wages, and in tandem with this claim rests the suggestion that correspondingly the demand for un- and semi-skilled labour will be reduced.

Echoes of meritocracy surround these arguments that suggest changes in the economy open up greater opportunities for all members of society. Economic changes aligned with the provision of educational opportunities that offer disadvantaged groups wider opportunities in this way contribute towards social justice. The interest in widening participation as well as the development of lifelong learning is rhetorically constructed as a means to this end. Sitting alongside this argument is the claim that whatever position we hold, whether it be in or out of work, with few or many skills or qualifications, there is a constant need to develop and acquire new skills. In such a context post-compulsory education and training (PCET) occupies an important place.

For those unfamiliar with English education it is useful to indicate briefly the way in which various terms are being used. One of the unfortunate characteristics of the English context is the plethora of terms surrounding education that can lead to confusion. The term PCET is being used in a fluid way. On one level it is being associated with colleges of further education (FE) in England, institutions that bear some resemblance to community colleges in the USA and with technical and further education colleges (TAFE) in Australia. Further education colleges in England have been concerned with vocational and technical education but they do much more than this, having an important role in 16–19 education, latterly provision for 14–19-year-olds, and also adult education. FE colleges are diverse institutions whose provision can range from basic skills to degree-level work. Colleges are marked by their particular histories as well as and relatedly the local and regional contexts in which they are placed (see Lucas, 2004). However, at the time of writing there is a state concern to clarify the role of further education as well as to wed it more firmly to meeting
the needs of the economic system (Foster, 2005; LSC, 2005; DfES, 2006). In this book the term post-compulsory education and training is used as a generic term to describe the breadth of provision that is encompassed by the sector, regardless of institutional location. As a result of the funding arrangements deriving from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), as well as the orientation of much of the sector towards vocational technical and skill development, it has been described as the learning and skills sector. This sector encompasses the range of provision provided within colleges of further education as well as that of other training providers.

The learning and skills sector and post-compulsory education and training are seen as playing a crucial role in the ongoing development of national competitiveness. It is anticipated that they will make a contribution to the development of skilled labour at craft and technician level, whether this is in service or other sectors of the economy. It is at this level that it is felt there is an inadequate supply of skilled labour (see Foster, 2005; Leitch, 2005; DfES, 2006). The education system is thought to be successful in developing highly skilled workers through higher education, but lower down it is considered to be much less successful. If the economy is to be successful, so it is claimed, these deficiencies need to be addressed and post-compulsory education and training are central to this project.

This book examines the global policy context within which PCET is placed. It explores the nature of the competitiveness education settlement, seeking to consider the limitations and possibilities that exist for progressive social and educative practice. Underpinning the current competitive settlement lies a particular construction of the economy and its place within globalization. This carries with it a particular role for education, namely to develop the forms of labour required by a globalized economy. How, within this context, is work imagined? A number of concepts have been used to describe the apparent shifts that have taken place in waged labour, amongst which we find Fordism, neo- and post-Fordism. The promise offered in the competitive settlement is that value-added waged labour provides the route to personally satisfying
and creative work. These notions need to be deconstructed and set against alternative constructions of the economy and social relations. Whilst this is a theme that runs throughout the book it is a particular feature of Chapter 2, ‘Fordism, post-Fordism and beyond’, where these issues are addressed.

Chapter 2 examines the way in which employment and education are conceived in education policy, drawing upon the notion of settlement, Fordism and post-Fordism as well as constructions of the knowledge/information society. The latter discussion addresses questions of individualization, networks and the knowledge economy. The argument in this chapter is closely linked to an examination of the implications of the analysis for questions of social justice. Social justice is another thematic concern that is addressed throughout the book.

Chapter 3, ‘Work-based learning and social justice’, engages with a number of the arguments that were addressed in the preceding chapter. Work-based learning has been understood as a way in which economic competitiveness can be enhanced as well as a means of developing social cohesion and inclusion. This chapter explores debates concerned with work-based learning and considers them in relation to notions of knowledge and social capital. In particular it examines debates concerned with work-based learning and work-based knowledge, as well as the development of vocational pathways for the 14–19 age group. Policy-makers hope this pathway will provide a route for social inclusion by building upon the vocational interests of those young people who have become disaffected or disillusioned with school.

Chapter 4 ‘Learner dispositions: continuity and change’, has two ambitions. First, to explore the lived experiences of students in further education, seeking to examine the empirical continuities and discontinuities in learner dispositions towards PCET. This is accompanied by an analysis of the way in which theorists have tried to make sense of these relations. The chapter reviews some of the early work that has addressed learner experience within PCET and sets this against more recent work. Throughout the chapter there is an interest in relating these theorizations to the socio-economic context
from which they derive. The chapter concludes by returning to questions of social justice and the possibilities and limitations for the development of progressive practice, a theme returned to in Chapter 7.

There is a major paradox surrounding policy constructions of waged labour that emphasize the need for knowledgeable and skilled workers. Although post-Fordist work relations are construed as a developing feature of waged labour, teaching within PCET is marked by managerialist relations and the intensification of labour. Following the incorporation of colleges in the early 1990s after removal from local authority control, managerialist forms have become a dominant feature of labour relations within the sector. This has resulted in a loss of professional autonomy and control for teachers. Chapter 5, ‘Teachers and the transformation of practice’, explores the social and economic context of teaching within post-compulsory education. It examines the lived experiences of lecturers working in the sector and suggests that the attempt to explain these in terms of proletarianization or reprofessionalization is limited, arguing instead that we are witnessing a transformation of teaching and learning that opens up new forms of practice and identities for lecturers. As with the earlier discussion running through the book the progressive possibilities as well as limitations that reside are examined, in this case specifically those of new work relations within further education. The analysis in this chapter can be set alongside that of Chapter 4, which examined student orientations and formative processes in relation to class, race and gender, alluded to in Chapter 3.

Chapter 6, ‘Knowledge, curriculum and power’, draws upon the earlier analysis exploring the construction of knowledge and the curriculum in PCET, seeking to relate these to questions of power. It engages with discussions of socially situated learning and the manner in which this is articulated to the production of knowledge. The chapter explores conceptualizations of the curriculum ‘as fact’ and ‘as practice’, as well as the orientations of public educators and industrial trainers towards knowledge. It similarly relates processual understandings of the curriculum
to social realist models of knowledge. The chapter explores the limits and possibilities of the curricular frameworks within which post-compulsory education is placed. The analysis anticipates the arguments developed in Chapter 7 that call for an expansive notion of practice which extends beyond the classroom into the wider social formation.

Chapter 7, ‘Social justice, post-compulsory education and practice’, explores a tension between an interest in social justice and the ongoing improvement of practice. To address this, it examines two rather different types of literature. First, early policy documents that address post-compulsory education and second, current debates concerned with educational research and critiques forwarded by the state and other commentators which suggest that educational research has not engaged sufficiently with practice and has therefore failed to make any significant impact upon learning and teaching. The concluding sections of the chapter explore the notion of practice, returning to the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) project that was discussed in Chapter 4 and in addition considers the work of Lingaard et al. (2003a, b). This discussion seeks to explore the notion of practice and set this alongside an expansive understanding that locates practice within its wider socio-economic context.

Chapter 8, ‘Conclusion’, draws together the main arguments of the book. This is followed by an examination of current debates that call for a policy emphasis upon the development of ‘well-being’. This debate seeks to respond to the social costs of neo-liberal economic policies and contains both possibilities and limitations for radical practice. It can however, in Gramsci’s terms, easily sit with passive revolution that secures the interest of capital.
This chapter explores a number of issues that address the ways in which employment and education are conceived in policy and practice. A useful way to examine these issues is through the notion of settlement and the discursive shifts in the way in which the economy and economic relations have been understood in the post-war period and the early years of this century. This latter theme entails an examination of Fordism and post-Fordism followed by an analysis of constructions of the knowledge/information society. A common theme throughout this chapter concerns questions of social justice and the construction of learners, economy and skill.

The competitiveness settlement

It has almost become a cliché to talk of a settlement or new consensus formed around education in general and post-compulsory education in particular, whereby schooling is to be closely aligned with the needs of employers. Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century education systems have been criticized for their failure to produce the forms of labour required by capital. Although this criticism has been applied with some vehemence to English education, it has also been the case elsewhere. For example, US education has been similarly castigated for its failings, as have from time to time

As we enter the early years of the twenty-first century the association between education and employability seems to have become embedded within educational policy discourse, as well as more popular understandings of the purposes of education. Consequently there has been the formation of a generalized consensus surrounding education. This consensus is not all of a piece, being fractured in various ways, but is one that attempts to hold together a diverse range of constituents – employers, young people, parents and so on – having differing and potentially conflicting interests. The Gramscian notion of settlement addresses these issues and points towards processes that are concerned with the ongoing formation of a generalized common sense that aligns with the needs of capital.

By settlement I have in mind a generally agreed framework, or set of assumptions, surrounding the nature and development of education in general and post-compulsory education and training in particular, as well as, crucially, their relation to the economic system (see Avis, 1993, 1996a, 2002; Avis et al., 1996). Educational settlements seek to ‘organize’ a range of constituents from educationalists through to industrialists, and in addition attempt to take on board the interests of ordinary people in their own economic well-being and that of their children. Settlements seek to organize common sense in a manner that is compatible with the interests of capital. In the case of post-compulsory education elements of the current settlement have been present for some time and have centred upon a shared analysis of the failings of the English economy and its education system. For a number of years the English economy has been castigated for its short termism and lack of investment in training and education (Hutton, 1995, 1997). At the same time the education system has been criticized for its elitism and failure to encourage mass participation in post-compulsory education and training, initially in relation to further and latterly to higher education (see Ainley, 2005a, b; DfEE, 1998a, b; Kennedy, 1997).
What is useful about the notion of settlement, coming as it does out of Gramscian Marxism, is its ability to take on board contradiction, tension and negotiation as well as an awareness of the fragility of settlements (see Education Group II, 1991). The notion of settlement embodies a recognition of attempts to create a social bloc or alliance around education through which the interests of capital are secured. Stuart Hall, writing on Thatcherism, comments:

The whole project of Thatcherism as a form of politics has been to construct a new social bloc, and in this project ideology is critical. A social bloc is, by definition, not homogeneous. It does not consist of one whole class or even part of one class. It has to be constructed out of groups, which are very different in terms of their material interests and social positions. The question is, can these differences of position and interests be constructed into a ‘unity’? (It never is a unity, in the strict sense.) Can these diverse identities be welded together into a ‘collective will’? (1988, p. 262)

Although the Thatcherite project failed to construct such a social bloc, it did succeed in constituting the framework upon which subsequent educational and economic policies were developed. Thatcherism promulgated the construction of a common sense in which ‘there is no alternative’ but to accept the existence of a market-driven competitive capitalism.

The idea of hegemony sits alongside that of settlement and refers to the organization of consent whereby members of society recognize that there is no alternative but to accept the current economic arrangements. This ensures that the ability of capital to secure its interests is sustained. The notion of settlement refers to similar processes taking place in relation to education.

Hegemony involves securing both the conditions for future capitalist production and the consent of the subordinated population to the social and cultural implications of ‘progress’. It is exercised not only through law and coercion, but also through ‘educative’ processes in a larger sense, including schooling, the media and centrally political parties. It necessitates the building of new alliances that may be active
in promoting new solutions. Hegemony is not uniquely a product of ‘the state’ but involves the institutions of ‘civil society’ too.

If hegemony refers to the overall relations of force in a society, we wish to use the term educational settlement to refer to the balance of forces in and over schooling. Settlements entail at this ‘regional level’ rather than ‘global level’ some more or less enduring set of solutions to capital’s educational needs, the putting together of a dominant alliance of forces, and a more widespread recruitment of popular support or inducement of popular indifference. (Education Group, 1981, p. 32)

It is important to recognize the vulnerability of hegemonic arrangements to challenge, as well as having an awareness that not all members of society will necessarily accept these arrangements as just or valid. However the point is that whilst we may challenge and contest these ideas they secure their power through the production of a common sense which claims there is no alternative. The Blairite interpretation of globalization would be a case in point. Here it is claimed we have no choice but to accept the reality of global economic competition and adjust our economic and education systems, as well as our individual orientations to paid labour, in line with this reality. Richard Johnson captures these ideas well when he writes:

The hegemonic is not necessarily what everyone practices, nor what everyone believes in. Hegemony is not dominant ideology saturating the whole formation; winning consent is not necessarily agreement. Rather the hegemonic is that for which ‘there is no alternative’. [My emphasis] (1998, p. 90)

Similarly Ann-Marie Smith reminds us:

A hegemonic project does not dominate political subjects: it does not reduce political subjects to pure obedience and it does not even require their unequivocal support for its specific demands. It pursues, instead, a far more subtle goal, namely the vision of the social order as the social order itself.

To describe a political project as hegemonic, then, is not to say that a majority of the electorate explicitly supports its policies, but to say
that there appears to be no other alternative to this project’s vision of society. (1994, p. 37)

These notions of hegemony and settlement carry with them contestation, renegotiation and iterative processes that attempt to constitute and reorganize forms of common sense to align with capitalist interests. Forms of opposition and contestation will inevitably remain but their visibility will be dependent upon the balance of force existing at the time. Implicit within conceptualizations of hegemony is an interest in securing the long-term goals of capital. This means that at particular moments concessions will be given to oppositional forces. Such a process is reflected in the post-war social democratic settlement with concessions being won by the working class in relation to the welfare state, commitment to full employment and so on. However, as a consequence of economic changes these concessions have been reined back and more oppressive forms of neo-liberal social relations have been put in place, albeit New Labour has attempted to mitigate the harshness of these relations by introducing a concern with social inclusion and cohesion (DfEE, 1998a, b; DfES, 2005a, b). Lawton (2005) discusses the tension within the Labour Party between an ethical socialism concerned with social justice and a Fabianism oriented towards economic efficiency. However in the current period this tension has been resolved through the dominance and acceptance of capitalist and globalized economic relations for which it is held, ‘there is no alternative’.

The key focus of this chapter is upon the relationship between education and economic relations and thus far the discussion of settlement has been lodged within a capitalist logic. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of such a position before returning to a discussion of the economic and educational nexus. The Gramscian notion of hegemony and the utilization of this framework by the Education Group (1981) to formulate the notion of educational settlement that was drawn upon earlier, carries with it a number of tensions. Hegemony is rooted within a capitalist logic that prioritizes class at the expense of other social