
Neoliberalism, education and ‘the neglect of knowledge’

A review essay of *Selling out Education: National Qualifications Frameworks and the neglect of knowledge* - Stephanie Allais. Rotterdam: Sense 2014

Paula Ensor

Any opportunity for us to examine an issue of global educational significance through the lens of South African experience is one to be celebrated. Allais’ book is an excellent and timely example of this as she grapples with an issue of South African complexity and offers lessons to educationalists tackling similar issues here and in other parts of the world. She has written a stimulating, insightful and provocative book, part scholarly monograph, part polemic, which will be of interest to educationalists across the spectrum of educational studies, both inside and outside of South Africa.

In her introduction Allais indicates that her primary aim in writing the book “is to convince educationalists about the value of organized bodies of knowledge, and that a primary role of education is assisting learners to acquire this knowledge; consequently, bodies of knowledge should be the starting point of curriculum design” (Allais, 2014, p.xv). She advances this position against those who privilege the ‘everyday’ within the curriculum, or competence and skills, or who in other ways promote instrumentalism or ‘relevance’ in educational offerings. In doing so, she draws on a substantial amount of work that has, in one way or another, addressed this issue (see for example contributions by Muller, Taylor, Moore, Young and Young and Muller in the bibliography of this book).

Allais sets out the three main arguments that span the book as follows: firstly, that the economy (by which she means neoclassical frameworks) has subjected education to the logic of the market and profoundly shaped the ways in which education is now understood and delivered; secondly, that education is presented as the solution to major social and economic problems which it is unable to address; and thirdly, that it is necessary to explain the “curious agreement” that has emerged between those on the “left” who have

promoted education reform, and those on the “right” who have advanced educational policies “that derive from neoliberalism” (p.xxii).

At the heart of the book lies the South African National Qualifications Framework, the local and international context within which it has emerged, its social logic, and its failure to deliver on any of the major promises made by its advocates at its inception. The SANQF rests on two central planks – learning outcomes and learner centredness – which together shape the way in which curricula are constructed. Both regard knowledge as ‘flat’, segmental and arbitrary. Allais returns at various points in the book to the issue of learning outcomes, the impact they have on curriculum design, and the importance of constructing curricula that take knowledge, the “heritage of humanity” (p.215), as a starting point.

Allais understands the NQF as an outcome of neoliberal insistence on the market, which has permeated state policy and reshaped the function of the state from provider of services to regulator of service providers. Market thinking in her view has also penetrated significant sections of the academy. She argues that educational policy internationally is shifting increasingly towards the rhetoric of ‘relevance’ and the making of curricula that are germane to work and everyday life, thereby purportedly addressing many of the social problems that emerge as a result of the rolling back of the welfare state and the introduction of new forms of regulation. Education is regarded as the solution to these deep-seated problems, and thereby set up as a scapegoat in that it cannot deliver on what is unreasonably expected of it.

The emergence of neoliberalism and the development of national qualifications frameworks in Scotland, UK, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa has resulted in the ‘export’ of qualifications frameworks to other parts of the world, especially poor and middle income countries, and Allais provides a graphic account of pitiful and expensive failure. Allais explores the relationships between qualifications frameworks, educational provision and labour markets, suggesting that the emergence of such frameworks is symptomatic of the weakness of such relationships rather than a mechanism to strengthen them.

A critique of neoliberalism courses through the book, and drawing on the work of Fine and Milonakis (p.175), Allais argues that “neoclassical economics imperialism” has penetrated educational policy, research and practice as well as the social sciences more broadly. This penetration has not,

in her terms, found adequate opposition, and this she attributes largely to the influence of postmodernism. The discussion of neoclassical economics imperialism and postmodernism is set up to provide a context for Allais to advance an explanation for why the 'left-wing' have either actively supported qualifications frameworks, or failed to adequately critique them. Postmodernist and constructionist approaches (which she regards as "epistemologically weak") (p.200) have either overlapped in their support of neoliberal educational policies, or failed to provide adequate opposition to them.

This very compressed summary of the book provides a glimpse of Allais' breadth of interest. The strength of the book lies in this wide scope, and the ways in which it uses the experience of the South African Qualifications Framework to engage with educational issues across a broad spectrum, to illustrate how educational policy is shaped by economic and social pressures, and to problematise the relationship between education and labour markets. One does not have to agree with the moves she makes, or the positions she adopts, to recognise the importance of the book in painting this broad canvas. I expect that it will serve as grist for discussions in education for some time to come. While I am critical of aspects of the book, which I discuss further below, I regard it as a significant and refreshing contribution to the field. Refreshing particularly because of its polemical aspects, by which means Allais pins her colours to the mast and sets out her own educational commitments regarding the NQF and education more generally.

Adopting a polemical style, as Allais does in parts of the book, has recognisable strengths in that it shaves off ambiguity and targets issues directly by setting them up in particularly sharp relief. In a field such as education where the stakes are high, and the intellectual and material resources for dealing with them are not always as robust as they should be, establishing clarity about the issues and naming those agents who promote and hinder change is understandable. The downside is that at times the polarities are perhaps too sharply drawn, too little evidence is provided to make the case, and the claims made are too sweeping. For example, many sociologists will be surprised at the following suggestion made in the book:

Referring to any kind of resource as capital cedes conceptual ground to neoclassical economics, and digs us deeper and deeper into a conceptual morass (Allais, 2014, p.184) [. . .] including Bourdieu's more nuanced notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, 1984). By using the term to refer to social resources, trust, knowledge, networks, or any of the other

aspects of society which have been labelled as a kind of ‘capital’, we are accepting an economic re-writing of society as a whole (Allais, 2014, p.185).

The trenchant critique made by Allais of postmodernism and its political cul-de-sac is apt but ignores the contribution of scholarship (which she might describe as ‘postmodernist’) to our understanding of the workings of power and inequality, consumerism and the commodification of culture, and of identity formation.

Notwithstanding this and other criticisms I have about lack of precision in some of the arguments, the book is a welcome contribution to educational debate in South Africa and one that all students of education should be encouraged to read. Allais has made a sharp critique of the potential effects of neoliberalism on education which is timely and important, especially given the proliferation of qualifications frameworks internationally. In raising my concerns I do not wish to diminish the contribution of her work but to contribute to meaningful discussion of the issues she raises.

My first concern relates to what Allais means by a ‘national qualifications framework’. As she concedes, there are many frameworks in existence globally, which are built according to different logics and which consequently have different effects. While she makes the concession that there is variability in type, she does not always make clear what form of framework draws her ire. It seems to me that there are at least three fundamental dimensions of variation in relation to national qualifications frameworks: firstly, whether they are based on whole qualifications or unit standards; secondly, whether they are compulsory or voluntary; and thirdly, whether they are intended to span all educational sectors, or only vocational education. I felt that the book needed to clarify this variation explicitly from the outset. It makes a fundamental difference whether an NQF is based on unit standards or on whole qualifications. The Scottish QF and the Australian QF, for example, appear to have started life as mechanisms for positioning whole qualifications comparatively, and were not intended to span formal education and training. The New Zealand QF was born as a unit-standards based framework, but was not compulsory, and higher education for example withdrew very early on.

What distinguishes the South African experiment is that it was compulsory, based on unit standards, and was intended to embrace all facets of education and training. At its heart lay the logic of credit accumulation and transfer (CAT), which Allais does not refer to in these terms. In its original conception,

CAT framed the logic of the SANQF, and was intended to penetrate the school system to include the FET level as well. The difference between an NQF built on unit standards and one built on whole qualifications is crucial, and the impact (and potential damage to the system) of each follows on from this. Whole qualifications frameworks are not necessarily framed by outcomes, as Allais concedes. They are able to generate outcomes on the basis of existing qualifications and arrange these in some kind of hierarchy in order to make judgements about commonality and difference.

A units-standards based qualification framework based on credit accumulation and transfer is a different kettle of fish altogether, and it is this type that draws the heat of Allais' rejection of NQFs in general. Such an NQF rests on a fundamental assumption: that knowledge can be broken up into what Allais describes as 'bits', and that different 'bits', generated within different contexts, can be rendered equivalent. The NQF assumes that there is an invariant quality to all forms of knowledge that allows the 'different bits' to be compared on a common framework. Level descriptors provide the rungs upon which unit standards are to be arranged. As Allais shows in her critique, this framework has failed, either to achieve equivalence, or to improve qualifications, or to promote recognition of prior learning, or to strengthen vocational training, and has failed at huge cost.

Because the different kinds of possible NQFs are not consistently and visibly demarcated in the book it is not always clear which forms have been exported. Chapters 4 and 8 describe a large number of countries, particularly poor and middle-income countries, which have been persuaded to implement NQFs. However it is not always apparent whether the frameworks have been implemented at all, and where they have been, whether they are based on whole qualifications or unit standards, or whether they are voluntary or compulsory. It seems that the export process has entailed for the most part the take up of qualifications frameworks for vocational training only. It would have been helpful to summarise this crucially important research in, for example, tabular form so as to gain a clearer picture of which frameworks are being implemented, and how.

A further concern is the way in which Allais takes up the notion of 'learner centredness' and curriculum construction. The CAT approach to building a NQF is used by Allais to launch a criticism of 'learner centredness' in general, which she takes to mean the design of curricula based on the needs and interests of learners rather than on organised bodies of knowledge. While

I am sympathetic to Allais' general point about the problematic notion of 'relevance' and to her criticism of the fragmentation entailed by the unit standards approach, the use of 'learner centredness' to describe the pathology she wishes to identify is perhaps unhelpful. Its reach is too broad, the polarities too stark, and it risks targeting also those who might share her concerns. As Allais concedes, 'learner centredness' can apply to curricula (shaping the way these are structured) and to pedagogy (taking the needs, interests and experience of learners as a starting point in teaching from these 'bodies of knowledge'). She is in favour of the latter, but not the former. But I would argue that 'learner centredness' enters into curriculum construction as part of the mechanism whereby knowledge becomes curriculum.

Bernstein (1990) makes the point that the physics (or mathematics, or history) that learners encounter in school is not the same as that encountered by university students, or by mathematics or physics researchers. School physics is formed by drawing selectively from physics as an academic discipline. "The rules of relation, selection, sequencing, and pacing [. . .] cannot themselves be derived from some logic internal to physics nor from the practices of those who produce physics. *The rules of the production of physics are social, not logical, facts.*" (Bernstein 1990, p.185 my emphasis). Putting this differently, it is the moral order of society and of education which shapes what knowledge is selected, how it is distributed and how it is configured. The 'bodies of knowledge' of physics and other disciplines are recontextualised to form the curriculum of schools, universities and colleges, on the basis of what are determined to be the purposes of education and the needs, capacities and interests of learners at any point in time. Number theory is a highly complex domain of mathematical enquiry, but it is not taught in the foundation phase. Rather, children learn to count and to calculate using their fingers or other tokens, and then progressively learn to abstract from this concrete apparatus to manipulate numbers as concepts. Number theory cannot guide teachers and curriculum planners on how to construct a curriculum but offers an important resource for this to happen. The hierarchy at play in the Foundation Phase is not the hierarchy of mathematics, but a constructed cognitive hierarchy of learning that has come to be accepted as a natural trajectory for all children.

Throughout the book Allais returns many times to the importance of internally organised bodies of knowledge that need to be acquired, and cites mathematics as a particular example of a subject exhibiting a "clear hierarchical structure" (Allais, 2014, p.158). But it is arguable whether a

single unique hierarchy organises mathematical knowledge, either within the discipline or within formal education. The Bourbakists attempted from the 1930s to develop such a disciplinary hierarchy on a set-theoretic basis, and efforts were made to replicate this in schools as 'new maths' in the 1960s. This was a failure on two counts. Set theory failed to provide the axiomatic foundations for the organisation of mathematics, and teaching set theory to school learners did not significantly advance their mathematical thinking. Similarly it is questionable whether unique hierarchies organise history, literature, biology, geography et cetera. The challenge for teachers and curriculum planners is to construct vertically robust and coherent pathways from disciplinary knowledge in order to induct students into conceptual understanding. This understanding is configured differently at different levels of the education system, and the age of learners, for example, is an important consideration in developing curricula that offer worthwhile and powerful forms of knowledge in a coherent way. It is hard to see how any curriculum can be constructed without considering the needs, capabilities and interests of learners, so in this sense every worthwhile curriculum is 'learner-centred'. Allais concedes that consideration of learners' needs is an important dimension in curriculum construction, but the concession is at times obscured by the valid criticism of a version of 'learner-centredness' which promotes the experience of the child rather than the acquisition of knowledge (a position which, parenthetically, I do not consider Dewey to be guilty of). Perhaps the difficulty is in part because of the use of the terminology, and using 'progressivism' rather than 'learner centredness' to target very specific forms of curriculum construction may have served the argument better.

My third concern relates to Allais' use of the term 'education'. It is not always clear what stands at the forefront of her attention when she discusses the needs of education, and especially the need to concentrate efforts on the acquisition of powerful forms of knowledge. At times it becomes clear that she is discussing the education system as a whole, at other times she is in fact discussing vocational education, and at other times she is discussing a specific variant of qualifications framework. This becomes problematic when the CAT-type qualifications frameworks that she uses to exemplify neoliberal education, with their emphasis on outcomes, on market relevance, on knowledge as "little bits of information" (p.172), are made to stand for the education system as a whole.

Ambiguity about what constitutes 'education' also seems to imply that all domains of education are of a piece, with the same interests and requirements,

and subject to the same threats. One of the difficulties of a national qualifications framework of the South African type as originally conceived is that it rests upon sectors that are different in their symbolic structures and modes of social organisation. If Allais is making the claim that the needs and requirements of education and training are the same, then we need to understand the commonality of their social base. The SANQF sought to integrate education and training without considering the specificity of each. Formal education institutions (universities, colleges and schools) for the most part negotiate discursively elaborated knowledge in specialised sites set aside exclusively for learning. The institutional boundary between formal education, work and everyday life is usually a strong one. Vocational education entails discursively elaborated as well as tacit knowledge, and requires direct teaching as well as modelling in the site of practice. Allais cites Gamble in relation to vocational education as follows: “evaluative criteria reside not only with the master, they reside in the master as the carrier of the collective knowledge tradition” (Gamble, cited in Allais, p.161). This is not the case with formal education, where the ‘collective knowledge tradition’ stands independently of those who transmit and evaluate it.

The idea that students in vocational education should have access to powerful forms of knowledge is a compelling one, but we need to go further to spell out what the specificities of vocational education are, and how the links between vocational education and occupations might be meaningfully made. Unless we outline the specificities of vocational education and schooling we end up with yet another proposal to integrate education and training, this time on the terms of formal education rather than of training.

This difficulty is particularly starkly framed in the last chapter of the book where Allais’ attention is focussed almost entirely on schooling. Given the challenges she points to throughout the book that face vocational education in so many parts of the world I hoped to find more discussion of how we might move forward to improve matters in this area. I accept that there is no ‘magic bullet’ to resolve the many challenges relating to education and the labour market, and strongly endorse her call to build strong institutions to provide high quality education. But given our experience in vocational education since 1994 it would have been useful to find at least a review of the main lines of debate to date, and the policy implications of these. A more pressing challenge facing schooling at the present time is not the framing of curricula in terms of unit standards, but the very strong emphasis placed on assessment targets and testing which is a fragmenting strategy of another kind. The threat of

competence-based approaches and the fragmentation associated with them is named as a threat to vocational and adult education, but these are not discussed in much detail at all. At many points in the book Allais advances the argument that we must prioritise knowledge in the making of curriculum but there is little detail of how this should be achieved in relation to vocational or adult education, except to argue strongly for the need to promote verticality and coherence in vocational education.

My fourth concern with the book is the attempt to explain how the 'left' (which incidentally is never defined in the book) have come to support NQFs and other educational policies emerging from the neoliberal right. She suggests there are three possible reasons for this: that the 'left' believes these qualifications frameworks are "potentially liberatory" in spite of the risk of co-option by the right-wing (p.189); that the "centre left has conceded so much conceptual ground to the right that there are few fundamental differences between them" (p.189) or thirdly, "that the epistemological ideas traditionally favoured by many left-wing educationalists in fact weakens education, by leaving it with no intrinsic criteria or sense of specificity, which has opened it up to being redescribed in economic language" (p.189)

The discussion on these three points is extended, and at the risk of oversimplification in reducing this to a nutshell, it appears that Allais, drawing on the work of Fine and Milonakis, is suggesting that weak epistemology in the social sciences, attributed largely to the influence of postmodernism, has enabled neoclassical economics to colonise the social sciences and reduce scholarly enquiry to the categories and imperatives of the market. This has eroded the capacity of the social sciences in general, and education in particular, to mount an effective critique of neoliberal policies in education.

At a rhetorical level the arguments are thought provoking and interesting and it would be productive to explore how far they work empirically, both in form and extent. It is not explained why neoclassical economics (which has been around for over a century) has now come to decisively frame the social sciences (and education) globally, nor are we given illustrations of how this colonisation has worked itself out methodologically and theoretically across the social sciences and education, and in policy and practice. The focus here is almost entirely at the level of contesting ideas, rather than on social groups,

their material interests and how these play out in the field of education and elsewhere.

The surfacing of group interests (and not simply the complex contestation of ideas, and who is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’) would assist in explaining why elements of the ‘left’ in South Africa supported the NQF, and why so many employers and workers have now lost faith in it. The proposal promised the improvement of educational standards and a massive expansion of access to education. It promised accreditation of workers on the shop floor who had for decades performed jobs for which job reservation had denied them certification. It promised to adults who had been forced through poverty to leave formal schooling at an early age the opportunity to learn again, become qualified, and alter their conditions of life. The SANQF was supported by many of those who had committed themselves to the struggle against apartheid because it was believed to advance the conditions of poor people. Neoliberalism and postmodernism had little traction in the minds of those who took seriously the promise of a better life for all. If the epistemological resources for critique have been so badly compromised, how do we explain that formal education freed itself so early on from the CAT logic, and that the NQF has shrunk to a shadow of its former self?

Bodies of knowledge, our ‘human heritage’ as Allais puts it so well, stand as a powerful resource for the constructing of curricula, but I question whether they are able to form the ‘starting point’. Bodies of knowledge have no agency. As Bernstein (2000) points out, political interests (via the pedagogic device) contest the rules for the selection and distribution of knowledge in the making of curricula in any historical conjuncture. It is not simply neoliberalism as an ideology that configures our moral order today, but globalisation, a radical form of social restructuring that enables global capital to transform production, capital flows, trade, labour markets and the nation state internationally, concentrating massive wealth in the hands of the few and creating unemployment and poverty for the multitude. How do we envision a new moral order which redeems all sectors of education from the threats which Allais so sharply identifies, and which at the same time acknowledges our position in a globalised world? Access to powerful bodies of knowledge and strong educational institutions to offer them is necessary but not sufficient. A new social and moral order is required to establish new grounds for making curricula. There is a substantial body of literature which spells out the implications of what Bernstein (2001) calls the “totally pedagogised society” (p.365); the eroding of solidarity and commitment, the hollowing out

of identity and the installation of what Stephen Ball refers to as a form of “economic Darwinism”: “adapt, evolve or become irrelevant” (Ball 2009, p.203). The challenge is to develop a vision for education that takes us beyond this, a vision which can provide a ‘starting point’ for making powerful curricula in our time.

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Paula Ensor
School of Education
University of Cape Town

paula.ensor@uct.ac.za