

Background paper for the Futures of Education initiative

Future pedagogies: reconciling multifaceted realities and shared visions

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Abstract

This background paper explores some of the tensions inherent in the visions of knowledge, participation and learner autonomy and freedom embedded in the Futures of Education documents. The normative positions about what education should be are in some ways at odds with the cultural pluralism and relativism also promoted by the Futures of Education. The paper situates this vision of education within the wider literature on learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) as a travelling policy, including some of the challenges faced in implementing it. The ‘pedagogical nexus’ of LCP embraces knowledge as fluid, and expects learner participation and learner autonomy; however, it is helpful to see these as questions of degree rather than absolutes. The background paper attempts to navigate these tensions in a way that allows ideals to be articulated while acknowledging that when they are contextualised in different settings their observable forms and philosophical underpinnings are likely to lead to variations in interpretation and practice. However, a rights-based perspective helps to establish some boundaries.

Introduction

Are there many pedagogical pathways to a humanising education and to human flourishing? If so, how can we reconcile community understandings of pedagogical relationships with normative positions on knowledge, participation, and learner freedoms? This background paper will make transparent some of the tensions between these understandings and positions, and suggest ways that they might be navigated.

Pedagogy (after Alexander 2001) is defined as both the observable act of teaching and the beliefs, philosophies and discourses that lie behind it. While some of these beliefs may be idiosyncratic to a particular teacher, many are shared by members of a cultural community, creating comparative differences across countries (e.g. Schweisfurth 2013) and across communities (including religious communities) within a country (e.g. Brinkmann 2019). Such collective beliefs are as powerful as policy in shaping teaching and learning, and are a major factor affecting the implementation of global notions of ‘best practice’, such as learner-centred education (Schweisfurth 2011).

Why does this matter in the context of the Futures of Education (FoE) initiative? Embedded in the four core areas are a number of normative positions which are likely to be *at odds with some teachers’ and community members’ cultural beliefs* about knowledge, about learning, and about adult-child relationships. These include the emphasis on ‘knowledge as fluid’, on learners as ‘active creators, designing and determining their own education pathways’, and on democratic participation and ‘freedom of thought and expression’. In some contexts, for example, a canon or scripture is not open to question; girls’ choices are circumscribed in the name of cultural continuity; or respect for elders (including teachers) extends to deference. Change comes slowly. The document also notes that learning is a ‘social endeavour’, ‘defined by context’ in a ‘plural social world’, but does not yet tackle the question of how these normative and relativist positions can practically or philosophically co-exist.

The tensions between these need to be understood, acknowledged and worked through if this UNESCO vision for 2050 is to be realised at the local level. This background paper analyses the issues and present suggestions for resolution that attempt to reconcile, within a human rights framework, these competing imperatives, while

allowing for recontextualisation and reframing (Schweisfurth and Elliott 2019). In doing so, it starts by charting the provenance and travel of learner-centred pedagogy (LCP), as the positions adopted by the FoE document invoke many of the principles of LCP¹. It then goes on to explore the tensions embedded in its vision of future teaching and learning, under the headings of knowledge, learner autonomy, and power, participation and relationships. Finally, it attempts to map a way through these tensions that may be meaningful throughout the global contexts the FoE aspires to influence. Throughout, the paper focuses on schooling in the compulsory years, in full awareness that this is only one dimension of lifelong learning, and that pedagogical power relationships are likely to have a different tenor when they involve adult learners or very young children.

Learner-centred pedagogy as an overarching concept

While the ideas for learning presented in the document are future-oriented, they are already in wide circulation and fit together under the broad umbrella of LCP. While LCP came to the forefront in the 20th century, especially the latter half, its roots go back as far as ancient Greece and Socrates c400 BC:

I will only ask him, and not teach him, and he will share the inquiry with me: and do you watch and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion. (cited in Brandes and Ginnis 1996:10)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work *Emile* (1904) was another early precursor in its romantic vision of childhood and its advocacy of children's control over their own learning, guided by their own natural curiosity. LCP's provenance grew in the early part of the 20th Century through the progressive ideas of John Dewey, and the alternative education envisaged and practiced in the work of Froebels, Montessori and Steiner. Like Rousseau's text, these latter were based on particular visions of childhood which emphasised the need for children to explore and not have their learning governed by heavy authority in the process.

It is worth noting that in these early days LCP was not a mainstream pedagogy and its principles were enacted primarily in private schools and in occasional pockets of state schooling where influential teachers or school leaders promoted its use. It was in England in the 1960s that it entered policy through the Plowden report (1967). This report aimed to change the direction of primary schooling toward an activity- and discovery-based model of learning. However, evidence suggests that while it entered policy discourse in many countries thereafter, and was promoted by international organisations including UNESCO, in most settings it was practiced less than it was preached. Even in the Plowden era in England, when the discourse of child-centredness was particularly powerful, research has shown that more traditional, teacher-fronted pedagogy was still prevalent (Alexander 2001). Even more remarkable has been the spread of LCP as a policy discourse in middle- and lower-income countries in recent decades. Analysis of education policies in sub-Saharan Africa from the 1990s has shown that LCP was so widespread in policy that virtually no country is untouched by it (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008); it has been described as a 'policy panacea' (Sriprakash 2010). However, incremental evidence built up over the subsequent years about the many challenges that such policies faced in implementation, from unrealistic policy demands and implementation strategies (e.g. Brock 2009), to lack of teacher readiness and preparation (eg Vavrus 2009), to clashes with local cultures (e.g. Nguyen et al 2009, Tabulawa 2013), to resource constraints including large classes and limited materials (e.g. Altinyenken 2010), to the continuing use of high-stakes examinations which reward rote learning and determine life chances (Liu and Dunne 2009). This evidence accrued piecemeal as the spread of LCP as a policy continued; a review in 2011 highlighted these patterns across countries (Schweisfurth 2011). However, the FoE is evidence that as a

discourse it still has considerable power. The question then becomes whether the move from policy discourse to belief and practice is desirable and feasible.

One of the issues with making LCP a reality is that it is a rather slippery and loaded term and so teachers aren't quite sure what they are working towards, or can call almost anything LCP. Pinning down a definition of LCP is challenging and I have in the past only done so when reviewers insisted. Given its complexity and myriad manifestations, it is best understood as a series of inter-related principles, most of which map onto the vision of the FoE. These might be presented as a series of continua, on which pedagogical forms are situated: from knowledge as fixed to knowledge as fluid; from learner as extrinsically-motivated recipient to intrinsically-motivated driver of the learning process, and from authoritarian to democratic classroom relationships.

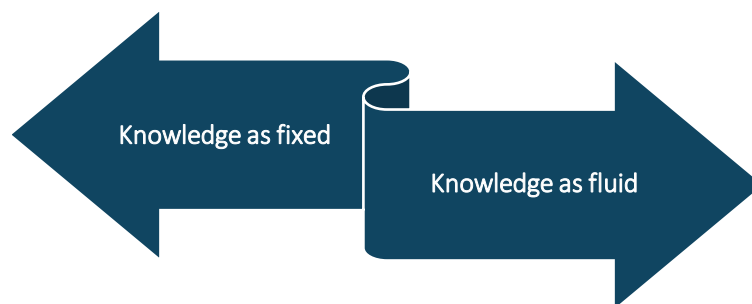
Thinking about these ingredients as continua rather than absolutes is helpful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it steers away from dichotomous thinking that puts all people or cultures into one camp or the other, and allows individual or community beliefs to be seen in their full range of possibilities. Secondly, it acknowledges, with a dose of realism, the constraints that teachers and learners face in reaching an ideal in the reality of classrooms, past and present, and which may well continue into the future. Thirdly, it provides a tool for teachers and others to reflect on practice and to consider where observable practice and aspirational practice sit on these continua. In the tradition of the reflective practitioner, pedagogical change is likely to start with some self-questioning: 'where am I/are we on each of these continua, and where would I/we like to be?' Finally, rather than holding up absolutes against which practice and belief succeed or fail, using these continua rather than fixed binary categories acknowledges that even the best pedagogy is always working towards a goal of improvement and that it responds flexibly to a given set of learners and goals.

Knowledge

The FoE sets out a particular view of knowledge and its relationship to education: 'Education must take different voices into account; recognize local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, inter-cultural exchange, and the plurality and fluidity of knowledge'. This perspective on knowledge should also be seen in the light of its opposites, for they too have pedagogical expression.

Perspectives on the epistemological foundations of learning might thus be conceptualised as a continuum from one extreme to another:

Figure 1. Knowledge continuum



Individual or wider cultural perspectives would be situated somewhere along this continuum. Those who believe that knowledge is fixed are likely to believe in an unquestionable truth and a canon that should be learned by everyone. Pedagogically, this is supported by a content-based curriculum, rote learning, and content-based assessment that tests that learning. Those who believe that knowledge is fluid are more likely to see knowledge as negotiable, situated, and changing over time. They are also more likely to see the power dimensions at play in deciding what constitutes 'truth', and who gets to decide. In reality of course, most individuals or collectives are situated somewhere in between, and may themselves fluctuate. A teacher of science would be likely to argue that some facts about how viruses are transmitted are not negotiable, but they may also freely acknowledge that more politicised 'truths' about why certain policies attempting to stop them fail, and about who is vulnerable and why, are more open to interpretation. The latter perspective opens the door to more interpretive epistemological positions and in doing so, embraces plurality. In this perspective, for example, indigenous knowledge is as valuable as the hegemonic knowledge of the coloniser – a normative position adopted by the FoE.

A number of pedagogical implications flow from this position. Firstly, for many questions, there may be no correct answer, and a sharing of perspectives among learners (whole class, on small groups, or on-line) will lead to a broadened perspective. A truth, rather than the truth, may be the result of triangulation and deliberation rather than revelation. The process of arriving at this range of perspectives is more likely to be one of individual or collective research, rather than a top-down delivery of the facts from the teacher. One of the key skills that learners need to acquire is to judge the quality of evidence, especially given the risk of information overload from internet exploration, and the quality of information in the 'post-truth' society.

This approach to knowledge and its pedagogical implications are not without their critics. One critique stems from the mismatch between this view of knowledge and particular cultural tendencies to believe in and promote a certain view of truth. Guthrie (2011) has argued that 'revelatory pedagogies' stem from a deep cultural commitment not just to certainty but to respect for the revealer, and that if we are to embrace cultural pluralism then this needs to be taken into account rather than dismissed.

There are also disciplinary differences in how far such a view of knowledge might be tolerated. The development of scientific knowledge is a matter of deliberative, incremental growth in understanding. However, anyone who has recently watched some world leaders refute science selectively, or, alternatively, criticise scientists for changing their minds in the light of new evidence, will realise how fraught this process is and the expertise required to navigate it. On the other hand, the arts require a different kind of response: information and careful attention to a wide body of evidence may be less important than a personal, emotional, empathic or spiritual reading. In such a case there really is no right answer, just a better-illuminated one and one led by educated emotions. History is another subject where the ability to understand different perspectives on events enhances understanding, but to know the verifiable details of what happened, when and where, as far as they can be gleaned, is still important as a foundational structure for the account.

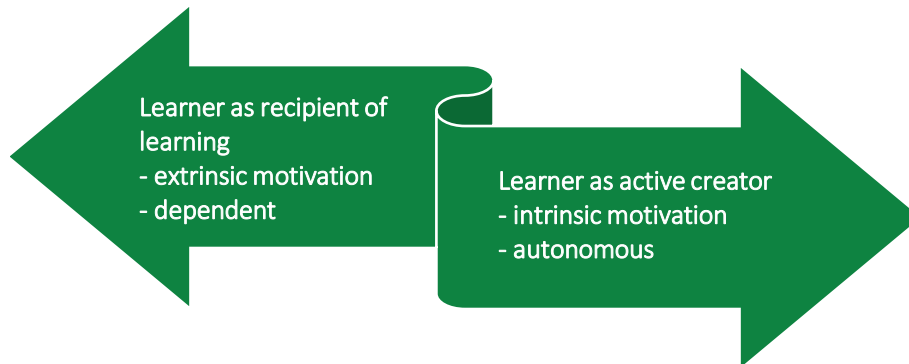
Apart from cultural and discipline-based critiques, one quite powerful critical voice has come in the form of arguments for direct teaching of 'powerful knowledge' (Young 2008) in the interests of equity. Young (2008) argues that some forms of knowledge open doors – to jobs, or respect, or higher education opportunities – and that learners are not equally well-equipped to discover this knowledge without relatively heavy-handed guidance from teachers who possess it. Without this more direct teaching, some disadvantaged learners will not acquire it, as they are less likely to come across it in the home for example or to have access to adults who have experienced its power. Without this knowledge basis, student-led discussions risk being hollow and unchallenging for such students.

Learner autonomy and control over learning

The FoE Outcome document notes: ‘...learners are increasingly recognized as active creators, designing and determining their own educational pathways. This trend should be applauded.’

This statement is effectively applauding one end of a continuum:

Figure 2. Learner continuum



Again, individual teachers', and indeed learners' views, would fit somewhere along this continuum, and within a given cultures at a particular time a discernible pattern will prevail. The link to motivation is perhaps debatable, as even highly-motivated learners benefit from encouragement, stimulation and facilitation, but the emphasis on independence does require a certain degree of intrinsic motivation. At one end of the curriculum, the learner makes more decisions in terms of what they want to learn, and how, while at the other, the teacher, or curriculum policy, places those decisions outside of the learner's control. The pedagogical reflection of the left of the continuum lies in learners having that autonomy both on a minute-by-minute basis and in the broader scope of setting the curriculum and creating classroom practices which allow their active creation to flourish. The actual situation usually lies somewhere between these ideal-typical extremes, and a skilled teacher may move between them depending on the needs of a class and the demands of the curriculum and standardised assessment.

This particular approach has also come under criticism and one of these again is from the equity standpoint. Children already disadvantaged educationally by coming from homes where parents or guardians are less educated may have that disadvantage compounded. It is harder for them to know what they do not know and therefore what they need to find out. The digital divide also means that access to the technology that allows independent inquiry is skewed to those who also are best-equipped to frame questions and make discerning choices in a context of information overload. Those without computers in the home are then doubly disadvantaged even if they can access them at school. There is an argument as well for an entitlement curriculum to ensure that some standards in essential subjects and skills – such as literacy and numeracy – are attained by all children. Choice in what and how to study may widen the attainment gap as those with guidance from home about what they need to learn to get ahead are advantaged over those picking their own path. Finally, as with most of these principles, where this attitude to the role of learners is not the cultural or pedagogical norm, teachers and learners may simply not be ready for the levels of autonomy advocated here. One study of the introduction of outcomes-based education in South Africa (Nykiel-Herbert 2004) found that some teachers implementing the demands of greater learner autonomy misunderstood (wilfully or not) their

new roles and tended to abdicate responsibility for pupils' learning because it was, effectively, the sole responsibility of the learners.

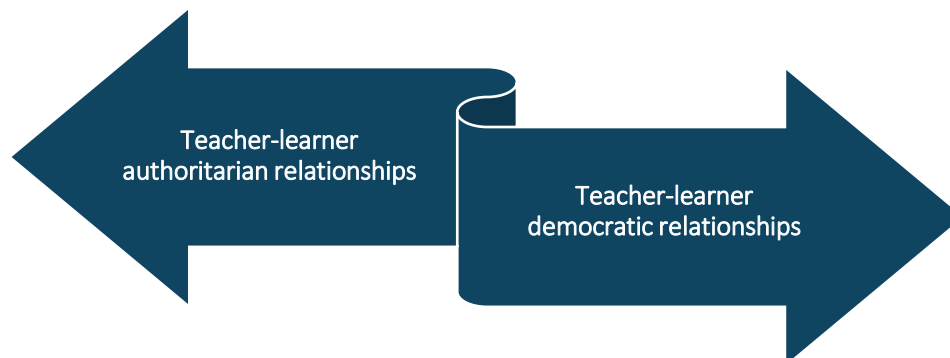
Power, participation and relationships

According to the FoE document:

Participation is fundamental to creating preferred futures. Education must strengthen capacities for collective action and deepen commitments to democratic values, including respect for pluralism, diversity, intellectual emancipation and freedom of thought and expression. At the same time, education institutions and systems must live out and enact these commitments in their own operations and processes.

In relation to pedagogy, the primary relationship in question here is between teachers and learners, and the nature of this can again be expressed as a continuum:

Figure 3. Teacher-learner relationship continuum



Pedagogically, moving toward more democratic classroom relationships shifts the traditional power balance between teachers and learners. The extreme authoritarian end of the continuum sees teachers' authority as unquestionable and the teacher as the controller of all that happens in the classroom. One of the extreme manifestations of this is corporal punishment, but authoritarianism need not necessarily be associated with physical cruelty. Where relationships are more democratic, pupils have the right to express their views and have them taken seriously. This may take the form of more discussion (whole class or in groups), negotiation of rules and procedures, and a relaxed tone of communications. Forms of representation may exist – such as school or class councils – so that structures support participation. Again, most teachers fit somewhere in between the two extremes, and professional responsibility includes being able to adapt to particular situations as the person accountable not only for the learning but for the safety of children. During a fire or indeed a pandemic is no time for negotiation about procedures.

Presumably, the link between the operations and processes in schools and democracy in the wider society is based on the assumption that experiencing democracy in schools prepares learners for participation as democratic citizens. Prefiguring theory (Fielding and Moss 2011) suggests that this kind of experiential learning – living democracy and understanding what it feels like - is important for the development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of democratic citizenship. While this seems intuitive, evidence is relatively thin that it is actually the case.

As with the question of the nature of knowledge, the nature of children and their relationship to adults has strong cultural foundations with some cultures more 'power distant' (Hofstede 2001) than others. The nature of relationships between teachers and pupils is likely to reflect the relationship between parents and children. Having very different relationships in the home as compared to the classroom can create social challenges. Questions arise as to how far schools can lead this move to greater adult-child egalitarianism, and how far they need to reflect wider society in order to avoid dissonance and home-school conflict.

An important distinction should be drawn here between authoritarian teachers and authoritative teachers. The former is about teachers expressing power over learners. The latter is about teachers who are reliable and knowledgeable. This includes knowing their subject area well, which may or may not mean that they are more likely to use teacher-centred methods.

Knowledge, autonomy and relationships in the pedagogical nexus

It is no coincidence that the principles of knowledge as fluid, learners as the creators and drivers of learning, and relationships as democratic all resonate with the broader literature on learner-centred pedagogy. These three arguably work together in any given 'pedagogical nexus' (Hufton and Elliott 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott 2019). The pedagogical nexus in any given context is the combination of 'ingredients' that make up pedagogy. However, this is not just a list of variables or components. Together they form a mutually reinforcing web that works to make practice sustainable, often sustained despite reforms attempting to change it and despite substantial changes beyond the school and classroom. The concept was developed to help explain how some fundamental strengths of the Russian education system – including teacher professional knowledge, home-school relationships, alignment of curriculum, homework and assessment, and the mode of progression from one school year to the next – were consistent from pre-Communist times, through the Soviet era, and beyond. It was the fact that they all pulled in the same direction in ways that helped all of them to stay in place and on track that made the nexus resilient to a range of changes.

How do the epistemological, agentic and relational dimensions of this nexus work together? The core areas in the FoE document already start to broach this nexus by bridging these: 'Scientific research and other processes for generating, sharing and applying knowledge should be inclusive, democratic, transparent, localizable, and participatory'. Where knowledge can be questioned, or is assumed to be a temporary expression of the state of human understanding, teachers' authority is immediately levelled as they no longer hold the key to learning. The power balance is shifted. Where knowledge is discovered on the basis of research, and one learner's understanding may be as valid as another's, each learner must learn to govern and control this research process, developing the autonomy to manage this. Teachers are facilitators of this process rather than sources of the knowledge itself.

However, for this nexus to be built where it does not currently exist, it needs to be more than self-referential and self-reinforcing. For the proposed nexus of fluid knowledge, learner autonomy and democratic relationships to become established it needs somehow to replace the existing nexus. In many countries this nexus is characterised by the opposites: a fixed canon of knowledge which is not questionable and which is tested in high-stakes examinations; learners conceptualised as empty vessels to be filled with this knowledge; and teachers who by cultural (or sometimes religious) decree are figures of authority firstly as adults, secondly as

adults *in loco parentis*, and finally as experts in possession of ‘the’ knowledge and therefore imbued with the power to share it at their professional discretion.

If we hold the first nexus as ideal, then the question is how to work towards it in contexts where the other prevails. This is challenging, as the literature on the problematic import of LCP as a travelling policy reminds us. A longstanding pedagogical nexus is powerful and not readily changed. Teachers are very likely to teach as they were taught, given that modelling is more powerful than being told, and rarely is there time or space in in-service teacher education for extensive reflecting. Teaching and learning patterns *both reflect and sustain* cultural norms, as Rapplee and Komatsu (2017) argue in their study of the transfer of Lesson Study from Japan to the US, and pedagogy is part of the cycle of renewal of ontological forms within a given cultural context. However, while the pace has been slow and its spread uneven and arguably exaggerated, there are contexts where the LCP nexus has taken hold where more authoritarian and knowledge-driven pedagogy was previously the norm. It can be done if it is something to work towards and the conditions support it.

Cultural pluralism and future pedagogy

Futures of Education seeks to envision teaching and learning beyond 2050, in terms of what is predictable, what is possible, and what is desirable (FoE website). These three ‘takes’ on the future require rather different thinking. Let us start with the relatively easy one: what is *desirable*.

The language of FoE statement and the four core areas is poetic in its aspirations for a fairer, more inclusive and more participatory future. It is not inhibited by the kinds of constraints to pedagogical change which I have been setting out above. It is idealistic. A very important question is whether these ideals are shared universally among all people. That is doubtful. The question then is whether UNESCO has the authority to set these ideals. It is the UN agency with this mandate in relation to education and its relationship to culture, and so by virtue of its mandate, it has that authority. Many of these principles also chime with a child rights perspective, including the right to participate, the right to have a voice, the right to have a say in matters affecting them in accordance with their age (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12). Arguably, articles 29 and 30 of the UNCRC concerning cultural respect and safeguarding of cultural practices could be interpreted to protect a plurality of knowledge systems. So, they carry the weight of that nearly-universally ratified Convention and if pedagogy does not conform to this, it cannot be argued to be rights-respecting. In idealistic terms, the FoE is on strong ground.

In terms of what is *predictable*, the future is never predictable and the current situation with COVID-19 makes it even less so. On the day I am writing this, the Secretary-General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, has warned that the world faces a ‘general catastrophe’ due to school closures (BBC on-line news, 4 August 2020). However, other voices are declaring the potential to ‘build back better’ (e.g. Rigall 2020) or exalting the transformative potential of new modes of teaching and learning that a period of independent learning and increased emphasis on on-line engagement has created, facilitated by the kind of democratic access to information that technology can afford (e.g. Baker 2020).

What is *possible* is again open to interpretation, but let us be optimistic. From a rights-based perspective, the UNCRC and the Convention on Human Rights form a strong foundation for setting some ‘red lines’ about pedagogy and classroom practice that help to make positive change enforceable. Cultural norms around adult-child relationships are often cited as reasons for the continuing prevalence of corporal punishment in

classrooms, even where it has been legally banned (see, for example, Tiwari 2019). A rights framework effectively interrupts that difficult-to-answer argument, with Article 19 of the CRC requiring states to take: ‘all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child’. So no matter what teachers or parents believe – that it is in the child’s best interest; that they will learn better; that there is no alternative for maintaining discipline - beating is not acceptable. The UNCRC also protects children from discrimination (Article 2). Some of these red lines become a bit blurred, however, when in securing for ‘the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (Article 12). When children are old and mature enough to form their own views may be open to interpretation, and views are likely to vary between cultures.

Interestingly, while setting out some principles for teaching and learning, the FoE documents do not in any way set out any particular prescriptions for what happens in classrooms. It does not try to say what democratic relationships look like, or what kinds of techniques or technologies need to be used to achieve learner-driven learning. It therefore gets at the invisible side of pedagogy. This demands a shift in how teachers and others understand their work, and this is of course challenging. However, this is ultimately helpful by making a range of responses possible within the framework of these principles. By not prescribing particular practices or indicators, it allows for an adaptive re-imagining how these principles might be applied in contexts where observable pedagogy – ie teaching methods and teacher-learner interactions – do not conform to conventional understandings of learner-centred methods. In this it departs from most policy related to LCP, and helpfully so. However, in order for it not to flounder on its own contradictions, the FoE initiative needs to consider how these fundamental principles can be translated into multiple pathways that accord the respect to pluralism and inclusion that the document advocates.

Elsewhere (Schweisfurth 2013a and b), I have set out seven ‘minimum standards’ for learner-centred education which resonate with this approach. These aim to establish a flexible set of principles which may have local variations once they have been recontextualised. Three are particularly relevant to the discussion of these three principles underpinning the pedagogy implied by the FoE. They would include the extreme end of each continuum but are designed to allow for an incremental move in that direction, while respecting that different cultures may have different tolerances and expectations that will shape how the principle is enacted:

1. Curriculum is based on skills and attitude outcomes as well as content. These should include skills of critical and creative thinking (bearing in mind that culture-based communication conventions are likely to make the ‘flavour’ of this very different in different places).
2. Learning challenges build on learners’ existing knowledge (bearing in mind that this existing knowledge might be seen collectively rather than individualistically).
3. Atmosphere and conduct reflect mutual respect between teachers and pupils. Conduct such as punishment and the nature of relationships do not violate rights (bearing in mind that relationships might still be relatively formal and distant). (Schweisfurth 2013 b: 6)

The first may not specify knowledge as fluid, but it calls for a move away from fixed knowledge content and the development of the skills necessary for engaging with varied sources of information and more fluid interpretations of knowledge. The second does not go so far as to always have individual learners making their own curricular choices, but it ensures that learners’ experiences and existing understanding are taken into account. The third may not prescribe a fully egalitarian relationship between teachers and learners, and nor

does prescribe a tone for teacher-learner interactions, but it ensures that respect prevails and that teacher authority cannot be cruel or arbitrary.

Conclusion

This background paper has explored some of the pedagogical tensions inherent in the positions taken up to now by FoE: tensions which put some of its normative statements at odds with its embracing of pluralism.

The paper has advocated adopting these positions as flexible principles likely to be dynamically recontextualised to fit a plurality of contexts. Taking this approach has a number of benefits. It allows the progression towards the ideals of the FoE to be built from the existing pedagogical nexus. This is partly to respect cultural pluralism in pedagogy but also to be pragmatic about the likelihood of success of a standard that is too alien. It allows for progress without demanding instant paradigm shifts. These are desirable and possible; the FoE venture can help to make them more predictable.

Notes

¹ In this I draw extensively on my own work on learner-centred education as a travelling policy, including Schweisfurth (2011) and especially Schweisfurth (2013a).

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