

WHY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS FOR THE SCHOOLS OF THE 21ST CENTURY?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I document the trend in both educational policy and thought in England to fear knowledge'. Instead of seeing knowledge as a source of freedom as the great philosopher of the Enlightenment would have argued, there is a worrying tendency to trust experience and see knowledge as something to be "freed from". I will explore an alternative to this "fear of knowledge" with the idea that the curriculum of schools should represent all a student or pupil's entitlement to what I will refer to as "powerful knowledge". This requires a clarification of both concepts, "power" and "knowledge". To do this I shall make reference to the concept of "powerful knowledge" as a curriculum principle, the idea that all pupils are "entitled to access to powerful knowledge" and that it is important to distinguish between a national curriculum and a school curriculum and the concepts of curriculum and pedagogy.

KNOWLEDGE • SCHOOL CURRICULUM • CURRICULUM THEORY • ENGLAND

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THE EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES TO KNOWLEDGE

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATION HAS UNDOUBTEDLY DECLINED OVER the years despite the claims that more and more occupations will be for university graduates. This is partly explained by government decisions to expand opportunities for higher education but without providing any parallel expansion of resources. I will start by identifying two kinds of trends which challenge the idea that education should be an entitlement to knowledge: I will refer to them as the *educational challenge* and the *political challenge*.

While we need to remember the political challenges which come from the government and the wider society, the primary responsibility of those who work in or are involved in the education system is to limit or even reverse the attacks on knowledge that come from within. It is such attacks therefore and the different ways that they are expressed that I shall give most of my attention to in this paper. I shall locate them largely within the educational community but they have also been associated with the policies of governments of both political parties.

For example, the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair frequently stated that our education policy was the best *economic policy* that we could have. It is hardly surprising therefore that his government's education policies focused on skills rather than knowledge (YOUNG; MULLER, 2013). However this led to little public debate, the emphasis on what

were referred to as 21st century skills left the question of knowledge as largely implicit until the election of a new conservative-led coalition government in 2010. A skepticism about knowledge was however alive in the abstract and esoteric debates associated with Cultural Studies and the Social Sciences and their endless assertions that there is no such thing as truth or “objective knowledge”. Furthermore such assumptions have become widely accepted in educational studies – often spilling over into my own discipline, the Sociology of Education.

“All knowledge is situated knowledge, reflecting the position of the producer or knower, at a certain historical moment in a given cultural context” (LENNON, 2010, p. 376). This is how the American philosopher Kathleen Lennon puts it, but hers is in no way an exceptional assertion. If all knowledge is situated in a context, this leads to a relativism which rejects the assumption of their being “better” knowledge in any field that could or should underpin the curriculum. As a consequence, the curriculum becomes open to a whole range of purposes other than the acquisition of knowledge.

Perhaps the most significant but least discussed issue is the argument that there is no knowledge important enough that it should take precedence over assumptions about student motivation, interest and performance (YOUNG; MULLER, 2010). I shall illustrate this claim with some historical examples. However, the sea change in attitudes to knowledge that came with the election of the coalition government is worth mentioning first.

After 2010, the skepticism about knowledge that was shared by many in the educational community was faced with an open and explicit alternative – the new government’s proposals for the national curriculum and its emphasis on subject knowledge. It was then that the skepticism about knowledge within the educational community became visible in the form of a series of attacks that were explicit, political and inextricably related to opposition to government policies in general. This was well illustrated in the newspaper columns of distinguished journalists and former Secretaries of State and various letters to the national press from leading teacher educators.

I shall draw on two kinds of arguments to illustrate my case about the “attack on knowledge”: one is loosely historical and one more personal and subjective. The former will trace this skepticism about knowledge back to the curriculum reforms of the 1970’s and take us up to 2010; however, the policies of the coalition government elected in 2010 had their roots in the work of Right Wing Think Thanks such as *Civitas*, *Politeia* and Reform. All had advised the Conservative Party before the election.

I shall then present some personal reflections on the extent to which what some have called a “fear of knowledge” has come to pervade

much thinking in the educational community and more broadly the thinking of those on the Left involved in education – both are groups that one might have expected to defend the entitlement to knowledge and its emancipatory potential as a right of all pupils. This section will be personal rather than formally researched for a particular reason. I became involved in debates about the curriculum from the Sociology of Education. However, nothing prepared me for the level and intensity of opposition to the idea of a knowledge-led curriculum from educationists on the Left; it was invariably associated with the policies introduced by the Conservative Secretary of State, Michael Gove.

I am no supporter of the Conservative Party – far from it – but Michael Gove did open up a debate about the curriculum that was not even hinted at before, even when the first National Curriculum was launched in 1988. What was particularly disturbing was the extent to which the debate became almost *ad hominem*. The new National Curriculum was attacked as if it was some kind of personal project of the Secretary of State. Following the endorsement of some of my ideas by the Expert Group on the Curriculum appointed by Gove, some suggested that I must be Gove’s speech writer, that I was acting as a kind of political “cover” for all right wing policies, or that the new emphasis on knowledge implied a deficit theory of children as having no knowledge that they bring to their schooling. In trying to argue, as I have, that the case for a knowledge-led curriculum is consistent with a policy for social justice and greater equality, I have lost good friends and colleagues of many years standing; they felt I was “letting the side down”.

I mention these personal experiences because they may illustrate how deep this fracture in ideas and personal relationships and political loyalties brought about by the new government’s policies. They challenged two lynch pins of political thought about education: that a respect for knowledge is Right Wing and exclusive and an emphasis on learning is progressive and Left Wing. It maybe that questioning what almost amount to educational shibboleths is too uncomfortable when the old attempts to resolve inequalities either through widening participation or a more political alternative do not seem to work as they did in the 1970’s. It is either that many of the cultural bonds holding political and educational ideas together have been broken or that the broader politics in our neo-liberal capitalist world have become so diffuse that educational differences within the Left that have long laid dormant have come to the fore.¹

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One example of this is the case of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci who has long been a hero of the educational and wider Left, but is also endorsed for his emphasis on access to traditional knowledge (Latin in his case, in 1920’s Italy).

Good writers and researchers dedicated to comprehensive education for all, and whose work I have the greatest respect for, invariably avoid any discussion of the curriculum or knowledge and limit themselves to organizational questions. Why do they invariably

avoid curriculum issues? Maybe this is because they have an educational theory that schools should be organized without selection (in other words, comprehensively) but they have no parallel theory of a non selective curriculum. Also I think that maybe it is because curriculum issues are difficult and do not fit easily into traditional Left/Right distinctions about greater/lesser equality. It is as if we lack a kind of collective curriculum imagination that might replace old ideas that feel increasingly out of date and this is not helped by the field of curriculum studies (YOUNG, 2013) which has become so frightened by having to think about knowledge that it escapes into abstractions and almost loses its object: what are pupils should have access to at school.

The traditional English model of general education was articulated by the philosopher, Paul Hirst in the 1960's (HIRST, 1965) is no longer discussed as the basis for a modern form of curriculum for today. Some contemporary philosophers like John White start from the aims well being and happiness but they could apply equally to any institutions even those like the family or local community which have no curricula. Likewise there is no *educational* discussion of the contemporary relevance of the Leavis/Snow debate about the two cultures (KIMBALL, 1994), or of Matthew Arnold (CONNELL, 1950) and his form of nostalgic egalitarianism. These writers seem dated now but they did try to imagine a potentially common culture for their time which is something we at least could build on. Perhaps the last thinker who began to tackle this problem was the cultural and literary critic, Raymond Williams (1961); we lack our educational Raymond Williams for the 21st century. I mention these names because they point to an absent cultural resource which maybe explains why the curriculum debates have been so un-textured and almost vitriolic.

I will conclude these comments by emphasizing the difference between the progressive conservative view of knowledge in education I want to defend and the politically conservative views of knowledge of our current government. There are lessons to be learned from the Right if we are to establish a more just form of entitlement to knowledge that might be “for all” and not as in the past “for the few”. I will do this in explaining how I came from the Sociology of Knowledge to the idea of “powerful knowledge” as a curriculum principle. It does not solve all the problems, and one of my criteria – that powerful knowledge is inescapably specialized knowledge – is a double edged sword.

Specialization, as the French sociologist Emile Durkheim argued, maybe the motor of progress but it can also be the motor of new divisions. I hope, however that the idea of powerful knowledge might be the beginning of a resource for the education community, both in constructing new curricula at the national and school level (YOUNG et al., 2014) and in

persuading governments of all parties of the conditions necessary for the principle of “entitlement to knowledge for all” to be realized.

Having introduced the educational challenge to, or even attack on knowledge, I turn briefly to the political challenge. These are not new and because they are often taken for granted are often not recognized. The key question is “an entitlement to knowledge for whom?” For the few or for all? Do current government policies consider the conditions for any significant extension of the entitlement to knowledge? Or do they rely largely on parent choice and market pressures? Despite their support for a knowledge-led National Curriculum, it is the government’s economic policies that will influence how the entitlement to knowledge is distributed.

Two examples of many illustrate this point. One is the reduction of State support for Humanities degrees in universities and the consequent cuts in their teaching budgets; this will concentrate humanities degrees in the top universities where those from state schools are under-represented. The second example is the reduction (known as “re-structuring”) of educational maintenance grants for low-income families with children staying at school after 16.

THE CHALLENGE TO KNOWLEDGE FOR ALL: A BRIEF CURRICULUM HISTORY

This section is a brief curriculum history; it can give no more than a flavour of what I mean by the implicit educational challenge to knowledge and its underlying relativism.

An early phase of curriculum reform in the 1970’s was supported by the government funded Schools Council. In retrospect it can be understood as a response to the collapse of the youth labour market and consequent increase in the proportion of pupils staying on at school. There were a string of curriculum developments somewhat euphemistically titled “Mathematics for the majority”, and “History, Science and Geography ‘for the young school leaver’”. The knowledge base of traditional subjects was weakened so that more practical, work-related and community oriented activities could be included which it was hoped would interest the so-called “non academic” child. These pupils, who previously had entered factory or domestic jobs on leaving school became a construct of the curriculum reforms themselves; for example the Newsom Report which led to these programmes generated not only the “Newsom child” but Newsom Departments in schools.

In the 1980’s the focus shifted towards the examinations for students who had previously been assumed to be “un-examinable”; this involved initially developing Certificates of Secondary Education

(CSE's) and Extended Education (CEE's) and their later integration in the mainstream examination for 16 years old (the GCSE).

Then in 1988 came the first National Curriculum which defined 10 subjects that were to be compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 16. It turned out to be un-manageable and led to teacher strikes and some sensible reforms; however, progressively during the next decade compulsory requirements were reduced so that two decades later only Maths, English and Science and Religious Education remained as compulsory for all pupils until the age of 16. Schools were free to drop History, Geography, foreign Languages and single science subjects (Physics, Chemistry and Biology) and were allowed to provide “vocational” subjects. Finally from 2007, there were two further steps in modifying the knowledge-base of the curriculum. The first was the introduction of a competence model of assessment. These programmes emphasized the experience pupils had acquired in the local community rather than access to subject knowledge. At the same time a set of equivalence levels was established so that all programmes could be ranked on a single scale, regardless of their different models of assessment.

The criteria and focus of the reforms changed in 30 years but the links to an implicit relativism in relation to distribution of subject knowledge remained and subjects which were linked to progression to university and even in many cases to employment were the entitlement for the few not for all. The absence of knowledge was more explicit in the earlier programmes. For example in the “Mathematics for the majority” Programme, the emphasis was on Mathematics oriented to its use in everyday life. However as research by Paul Dowling (1998) and others was to show, Maths curricula oriented to everyday contexts made it extremely difficult for students to grasp and use mathematical concepts independently of their context. In other words the so-called “majority” were excluded from the power of Mathematics and the generalizing capacities it offers in a similar way to the programmes for Science and Geography for the “young school leaver”.

The designers of these curricula either rejected the idea that there was objectively better knowledge that was less bound to particular contexts or experience, or they made the assumption that such knowledge was not accessible to all pupils. At the same time, each of the developments I have described contributed to the year-on-year increase in examination pass rates that continued for 30 years. As no one wanted to appear to criticize teachers or pupils there was virtually no debate on whether curricula that relied on a relativist approach to knowledge might lead to “dumbing down”. It took the election of the new conservative coalition government in 2010 to change this situation. First, they introduced a new set of criteria for ranking schools known as the *English Baccalaureate* – EBacc –, based exclusively on academic subjects.

Secondly they commissioned a report by Alison Wolf's (2011) on 14-19 vocational education to challenge the assumptions idea of equivalence on which the earlier policies were based. Wolf's data showed that while increasing numbers of 14-16 year old students gained certificates equivalent to academic subjects, they gained little knowledge.

Many of these courses have since lost their eligibility for funding and schools have begun to switch to academic subjects. One problem with the Wolf (2011) recommendations is worth mentioning because it symbolizes a wider problem of resource distribution and the availability of specialist staff. A key finding of the report was that many students with low grades in Maths and English moved to vocational courses at the with no Mathematics or English after the age of 16. This is unique in European countries, and it is despite the evidence that employers rate success in Maths and English highly. The government has now made continuing study of English and Mathematics compulsory for these students. However many colleges have neither the staff not the resources to offer students the extended and innovative programmes in English and Maths that they need.

To summarize this section, subject knowledge – in defining the entitlement to powerfull knowledge for all pupils – involves rules agreed by subject specialists about what counts as valid knowledge; such criteria which derive from the pedagogic knowledge of subject specialist teachers and their links with discipline-based specialists in the universities provide access to the “best” knowledge that can be acquired by pupils at different levels thus ensuring the possibility of progression.

However curriculum policy in England since the 1970's took a different turn: faced with growing numbers of pupils staying at school who had previously left school for unskilled factory jobs, subject rules and criteria were modified in developing new curricula that it was hoped would relate to their interests and motivations. The alternative, would have involved much greater investment in curriculum and pedagogic research and could have led to a combination of innovative pedagogies, smaller classes and an extension of the length of time for pupils to reach agreed standards. The decisions were a series of pragmatic curriculum solutions responding to short term difficult pedagogic situations faced by the schools with pupils not motivated to learn but still willing to remain at school. This curriculum differentiation was seen at the time as a necessary pragmatic response to what was assumed to be the absence of “academic” abilities among these pupils.

The programmes were well intentioned in conception; however, by focusing on the attributes of low achieving, poorly motivated pupils as a given, the curricula designed for them treated knowledge criteria as flexible. As a consequence courses were designed which offered pupils little possibility of progression or future employment – they became

the precursors of what are now known as those Not in Education, Employment or Training – NEETS. It was not surprising that the current government’s reforms which followed the Wolf Report represented a serious challenge to the teachers involved, nor that they generated considerable opposition. The alternative of extending learning time and developing new pedagogic and curricular strategies would have raised insurmountable resource problems and a confidence among teachers that with support and time, the vast majority of students could reach an acceptable level in Mathematics and English before they left school.

I turn next to some examples of the “fear of knowledge” culture within the educational community in this country and elsewhere.

IS KNOWLEDGE REALLY UNDER ATTACK?

It is, in a way, a bizarre question. How could anyone in education be against pupils “knowing more”? How could students on any course not be entitled to the “best knowledge” there is? And yet such ideas are attacked or resisted in a variety of ways.

The American philosopher Paul Boghossian (2008) refers to a “fear of knowledge”, not only among teachers. Here is an example that illustrates his case in education. A colleague of mine spends a lot of time visiting students on teaching practice. He commented that in all the schools he went to the one thing he never heard teachers discussing was knowledge or *what* they were teaching – behavior – yes, attitude to learning – yes, test scores – yes, but never “what were they learning?” or “what might excite students and help them see the world in new ways?” It was as if emphasizing knowledge was going to be intimidating and might put them off making sure they “learned enough” to get good grades.

Another way this fear of knowledge is manifest is in how learning has taken over from education in policy and curriculum language; for example, we have module at the Institute called Vocational Learning not Vocational Education. Learning is seen as open, good, progressive, and creating opportunities for new learning, why disrupt things by enquiring what students are learning? The current emphasis is on encouraging students to always being open to new learning opportunities – the ubiquitous “learning to learn” – can easily make students lose confidence in what they already know; if a student has acquired some knowledge that helps her or him understand the world better, the learning which may involve giving up that knowledge should be difficult, not easy.

The shift to learning has another anti-knowledge consequence: it makes teachers feel they should not be in authority over their pupils just because they know more. It is as if authority is something

uncomfortable and un-democratic especially when knowledge is disassociated from learning and easily equated with facts and Hirsch's (1988) lists of "what every child should know". This is to criticize how Hirsch's lists can be used, not necessarily his ideas; however it serves to remind us that education is acquiring a "relation to knowledge" not just facts or even scientific laws. That is why the Internet, although a fantastic resource of information can never replace the pedagogy of teachers if pupils are to acquire a relation to knowledge.

Another example of the "fear of knowledge" is found if teachers are led to confuse a necessary respect for the cultural values of a community with the truth of the explanations offered by school subjects. Multi-cultural societies pose quite new problems for teachers; they have to distinguish the "context specific" meanings that are a feature of all "cultures" with the "context independent" meanings of the curriculum. Students may "know" much about their city through growing up in it; however Geography teaches them quite a different type of knowledge about "cities" – knowledge which they can use to generalize with.

Two other things are worth mentioning about the "fear of" or "attack on" knowledge. Firstly, and largely un-noticed outside the Social Sciences and Humanities, traditions in Philosophy have developed from Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein leading to today's post modernists such as Rorty, Lyotard and Foucault which have made the critique of the western tradition of knowledge into an intellectual project. This means that ironically, the anti-knowledge educationists and social scientists can call on Philosophy to make the case against knowledge and as a support for their anti-knowledge arguments. These philosophers do not often write about education although Foucault's book *Discipline and punish* and Louis Althusser's *Ideology and ideological State apparatuses* have had a powerful, if baleful influence in educational studies.

A second irony which almost amounts to an hypocrisy was brought home to me when I gave a lecture some years ago on the topic "What are schools for?" There were over 200 people at the lecture and I got repeatedly attacked during question time, especially from those working in community education for arguing that the main purpose of schools – even if often not realized for all – was to provide access to knowledge. I could not check on the background of those attending, but given how they had been recruited, I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that virtually everyone in the room had a degree of some kind and yet they were arguing that the knowledge they had acquired should not be an entitlement of *all* children. If it is not hypocrisy it is certainly an example of confusion. It was if they wanted to demonstrate that they were progressive but would not let this effect their own personal lives, or no doubt, that of their children.

I was recently in Brazil speaking at a conference on the entitlement for all children to “core knowledge”. Most members of University Education Faculties in Brazil oppose the idea of a “common core of knowledge” for all children – they see it as a threat to the autonomy of teachers and a denial of Brazil’s cultural diversity. At the same time most of them send their children to private school which ensure their children have access to core knowledge. I did not invent this; it was reported to me by a member of the conference.

The context and history of Brazil is very different from England – slavery is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, the anti-knowledge educationists who oppose the need for a national core curriculum make the same mistake as those who reject the current curriculum reforms in England. In Brazil they associate any policy for a national common core curriculum with the anti-democratic military dictatorship, not with the potentially emancipatory power of knowledge. The parallel in England is with opposition to the Secretary of State’s curriculum reforms because they are associated with a right wing Conservative government. There are many things that need criticizing in our current government’s education policy but I would argue, one is not the idea of a common curriculum for all pupils up to the age of 16. This leads me to the most important and difficult part of what I want to say about the knowledge and the curriculum. I mean difficult in two senses.

WHY IS THERE A FEAR OF KNOWLEDGE?

First, how do we explain that it is educationalists, mostly on the Left, those most likely to support a more equal society in all spheres of life, who are so opposed to the idea of all pupils being entitled to “powerful knowledge”? What has happened to the Enlightenment idea that knowledge is the only real source of freedom – freedom from being trapped by one’s own experience – freedom as the sociologist Basil Bernstein (1996) put it “to think the unthinkable and the not yet thought”. Experience alone does not give us to those freedoms; freedom may be a right of all, but it has to be worked for and learned – however alien much potentially emancipatory knowledge may seem to be at first. It is because the pedagogy involved in ensuring the entitlement to knowledge for an ever wider proportion of each cohort is difficult that, in educationally successful countries, teaching is one of the most highly respected professions and Education is the university faculty in Finland with the highest ratio of applicants to places – an unthinkable situation in England – Education faculties more difficult to get into than Medicine and Law!

Why are educationists not fighting for that entitlement to knowledge for all but actually opposed to it? We have to *understand*

this. I think we are dealing with something much more than another academic argument – this is how the philosopher John Searle (1996) puts it. Searle discusses “people who are convinced by social constructivism” – and by this Searle meant the view that all knowledge is tied to the circumstances of its own production and context and therefore essentially relative; there is in other words no “better knowledge”. He argues that such people have a deep metaphysical vision and no kind of detailed refutations address that vision”. Their vision is one of creating the conditions of freedom which they see as threatened by knowledge and its “objectivity”, its “rationality” and its associations with science – the most rational form of human enquiry. This vision leads them to put their faith in experience and the knowledge people generate in the contexts in which they find themselves. It is as if reason has led them to oppose reason in favor of experience. It is difficult to know where if anywhere this leaves teachers or schools or educational researchers who take this view. All they can do is create critiques of the prevailing system like “a curriculum of the dead”, that provide no tools for enabling them to envisage alternatives. Here is how one such critic – a distinguished Australian sociologist describes his idea of curricular justice. It is, she states:

[...] a curriculum organized around the experience, culture and needs of the least advantaged members of the society – rather than the most advantaged, as things stand now. A socially just curriculum will draw extensively on indigenous knowledge, working class experience, women’s in thinking about the curriculum experience, immigrant cultures, multiple languages, and so on. (CONNELL, 2012, p. 682)

This is where it leads if, in thinking about the curriculum, you focus on knowers (especially those who are reluctant learners) and their experience and not the knowledge the curriculum might give them access to. In effect such an approach wants to roll back history to a time when there were no schools and life as the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (2008) famously put it was “nasty, brutish and short”. There would of course be no place in such a society for those critics or Thomas Hobbes either.

The alternative is not easy, but people do change their minds and this must always involve a combination of theory and experience. In the final section of my article I want to describe how I came to the idea of “powerful knowledge” and why I believe it is a useful idea for thinking about the curriculum.

WHY “POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE”? A VERY BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I began as an enthusiastic social constructivist, not an extreme one, because I hardly knew what the term meant at the time. My first book, *Knowledge and control: new directions in the Sociology of Education*, was published in 1971 (YOUNG, 1971). I endorsed the view expressed by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, that the curriculum is a “cultural arbitrary”, academic subjects a form of tyranny, and pedagogy a species of symbolic violence. Later I found it useful to describe this “social constructivist” approach as leading to a view of the curriculum as “knowledge of the powerful”. The strength of such a view of the curriculum was that it was a reminder that unequal power relations are always involved in decisions about the curriculum as in all other aspects of education. However, in its focus on power and who decides, all it points to is the need to change the groups who decide; it offers no curriculum alternatives; what, for example might a curriculum decided by those without power be like? Think back to my quote from Raewyn Connell (2012).

It was working with the democratic movement in South Africa in the early 1990’s that taught me that I had been wrong in my approach to the curriculum, and that some of my early critics such as Pring (1972) in his justly famous paper “Knowledge out of control”, had been right. The democratic movement in South Africa had overthrown apartheid, at least in terms of the right of all citizens (not just Whites as under apartheid) to vote. Many got involved in creating a more just education system; they drew on the work of Paulo Freire and identified with “people’s education”. The message this slogan carried was knowledge as a “social construct” and a view of the curriculum as the transmission of knowledge had been a tool of oppression under apartheid and had to be overthrown like the laws preventing blacks marrying whites. So they created, with some help from naïve well wishers from Europe, Australia and New Zealand like myself, a broad framework of values for a racially “integrated” education system and left the teachers in Black schools free from what had oppressed them under apartheid – a highly specified top down curriculum.

But of course the teachers did not know what to do with the freedom – most Black teachers had received barely any post school education and the only experience they had was of following instructions from white administrators; it was hardly surprising that the schools slid into chaos that they are still 20 years later, struggling to overcome. In this context, it gradually dawned on me that there is far more to emancipation than a combination of a critique of the past, experience and democratic values – important though they all are. Education is a specialized activity, like medicine and law, and what was needed was

knowledge of curricula and pedagogy and knowledgeable teachers – even if as in South Africa, some of that knowledge was associated with the hated apartheid system.

When I got back to England I had to face a series of academic critiques of my earlier work, and started re-reading Durkheim, Bernstein and Vygotsky. It was out of this reading and my South African experience, that I inverted the terms power and knowledge – if the original concept “knowledge of the powerful” became the new concept of “powerful knowledge” we might have the basis for asking a set of questions about what a curriculum that took seriously the idea of “entitlement for all”.

WHAT IS POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE?

The idea of “powerful knowledge” starts by making two assumptions: (i) that there is “better knowledge” in every field, and (ii) that at the root of all decisions about knowledge in the curriculum is the idea of differentiation; that there are different types of knowledge.

For any thinking about the curriculum, the most basic distinction is between school or curriculum knowledge and the everyday knowledge or experience that pupils bring to school. It is not that one is “good” and the other is “bad”. It is that they have different structures and different purposes. Curriculum (or subject) knowledge is *context independent* unlike the knowledge based on experience that pupils bring to school and is tied to the contexts in which people live and in which it is acquired. It follows that the task of the teacher in drawing on the national curriculum is to enable the pupil to engage with the curriculum and move beyond her/his experience. That is why it is so important for teachers to understand the difference between curriculum and pedagogy.

The curriculum is a resource for charting the teacher’s and the school’s and a country’s goals – what is valued that it is important that all pupils have access to. In contrast, pedagogy refers to how the teacher engages with the prior experiences of pupils and enables them to have access the concepts of the curriculum. Through their involvement in pedagogy as learners, pupils come to see their experience in new ways; this may involve reading a poem or doing a chemistry experiment – the teacher’s goals have always to be that the student has grasped the idea or the concept and can use it in any appropriate new context.

POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE IS SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

Powerful knowledge is knowledge that draws on the work of communities of specialists that we describe as the disciplines which are the forms of

social organization of knowledge that have been developed for producing new knowledge. In this country as in others, disciplinary specialists have worked with school teachers who have themselves studied one or more discipline and in their preparation to be teachers become subject specialists. They draw on their knowledge of how children learn and of the capacities of pupils levels to create school subjects which set out the possibilities for students to progress in their learning. This process was described by the sociologist Basil Bernstein (1996) as *recontextualisation*: taking knowledge out of a disciplinary context and setting it in a new context of a school subject. Specialist forms of knowledge differ in their structure, the powers that they give access to, and the aspects of the world they relate to. Obvious distinctions are between the Sciences, the Social Sciences, the Humanities. Each are the basis of core subjects in the school curriculum.

The most debated aspect of the concept of “powerful knowledge” is power. Power is so easily interpreted as “power over” and often as in politics at any level, power over others. However, different subjects offer the student different kinds of power. For example, the Sciences generate the power of abstraction and generalization; the Social Sciences provide weaker sources of generalization, but they also provide new ways of imagining how people and institutions act. The Humanities do not provide the bases for generalization but they can show – in examples of great plays, films and books – how the particular, a character for example in a great play or story, can represent something about humanity in general.

CONCLUSION

To conclude and I hope, to make the idea of powerful knowledge more concrete I want to include something written by a Headteacher of an English secondary school I met at a conference. It arose out of her reading my book *Bringing knowledge back in: from social constructivism to social realism in the Sociology of Education* (YOUNG, 2008), and says many things about schools and the curriculum far better than I can. It has led to a book four of us have written together which we hope will be read and found useful by teachers, especially head teachers, *Knowledge and the future school: curriculum and social justice* (YOUNG et al., 2014). I hope it will be translated into Portuguese.

A KNOWLEDGE-DRIVEN SCHOOL²

TO THE STAFF

We are the people who offer powerful and shared knowledge to the nation’s children. That knowledge comes from centuries of

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By Carolyn Roberts (former Headteacher of Durham Johnstone comprehensive school and now Headteacher of Thomas Tallis School, Greenwich).

learning, and from the research of universities and subject associations. It is powerful because it enables children to interpret and control the world: it is shared because all our children should be exposed to it. It is fair and just that this should be so.

It is unfair and unjust when children are offered poor quality knowledge which fails to lift them out of their experience.

Here are 10 things to remember:

- (1) Knowledge is worthwhile in itself. Tell children this: never apologize that they need to learn things.
- (2) Schools transmit shared and powerful knowledge on behalf of society. We teach what they need to make sense of and improve the world.
- (3) Shared and powerful knowledge is verified through learned communities. We need to keep in touch with universities, research and subject associations.
- (4) Children need powerful knowledge to understand and interpret the world. Without it they remain dependent upon those who have it.
- (5) Powerful knowledge is cognitively superior to that needed for daily life. It transcends and liberates children from their daily experience.
- (6) Shared and powerful knowledge enables children to grow into useful citizens. As adults they can understand, cooperate and shape the world together.
- (7) Shared knowledge is a foundation for a just and sustainable democracy. Citizens educated together share an understanding of the common good.
- (8) It is fair and just that all children should have access to this knowledge. Powerful knowledge opens doors: it must be available to all children.
- (9) Accepted adult authority is required for shared knowledge transmission. The teacher's authority to transmit knowledge is given and valued by society.
- (10) Pedagogy links adult authority, Powerful knowledge and its transmission. We need quality professionals to achieve all this for all our children.

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