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Publisher: Routledge

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## Journal of Curriculum Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tcus20>

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Version of record first published: 05 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: Michael Young (2013): Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: a knowledge-based approach, Journal of Curriculum Studies, 45:2, 101-118

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.764505>

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# Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: a knowledge-based approach

MICHAEL YOUNG

This paper begins by identifying what it sees as the current crisis in curriculum theory. Following a brief history of the field, it argues that recent developments have led to it losing its object—what is taught and learned in school—and its distinctive role in the educational sciences. Arising from this brief account of the origins and nature of this ‘crisis’, the paper argues that curriculum theory must begin not from the learner but from the learner’s entitlement to knowledge. It then develops a framework for approaching the curriculum based on this assumption which is illustrated by an example of how the Head Teacher of a large secondary school in England used these ideas. Finally, it examines three widely held criticisms of the knowledge-based approach developed here and the issues that they raise.

Keywords: curriculum; knowledge; specialization; subjects

## 1. Introduction

What questions should a curriculum theory address? My starting point, at least for the last decade (Young 2009) has been ‘what do students have an entitlement to learn whether they are at primary or secondary school, attending university, or following a programme of vocational or professional education that aims to prepare them for employment’ Such questions have no ‘once and for all’ answers; societies change, so every generation has to ask those questions again—and they are not easy. On the one hand, as educators, we have the responsibility to hand on to the next generation the knowledge discovered by earlier generations. It is this element of continuity between generations which distinguishes us from animals; it is a way of saying that we are always part of history. On the other hand, the purpose of the curriculum, at least in modern societies, is not only to transmit past knowledge; it is to enable the next generation to

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This paper is based on the presentation I made to the international conference of the Portuguese/Brazilian Association for Curriculum Studies held at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil from 4 September 2012 to 6 September 2012. Earlier versions were presented to a meeting of the same association at the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal in March 2012 and in the Faculties of Education at the Universities of Melbourne (Australia), Capetown and Witwatersrand (South Africa).



build on that knowledge and create new knowledge, for that is how human societies progress and how individuals develop. The earliest societies, which did not have schools, remained virtually unchanged for centuries. However, we have inherited one important feature from these societies and from the first societies with schools; although the knowledge schools transmitted was largely religious (and assumed to be fixed), it was clearly differentiated from pupils' everyday experience. This is a point this paper will return to in the contemporary context.

The interdependence of the two purposes of 'transmitting past knowledge' and 'being able to use that knowledge to create new knowledge', as well as spreading this capacity to an ever wider proportion of each cohort, raises difficult problems for curriculum theorists, curriculum designers and teachers. It requires a break from or at least a 'moving beyond' the two most prevalent approaches to education that we have inherited from the past.

One approach has characterized the European traditions but has parallels in those parts of the world which draw on the Confucian tradition and, if we go further back in history, on Islam as well. It inherits a view of the curriculum as a source of the 'sacred'<sup>1</sup> which, since the 19th century, has been progressively secularized to form the familiar disciplines of the university and the subjects of the school with their increasingly global reach (Meyer 1992). However, despite the massive expansion, both of new knowledge and of educational opportunities that these traditions have led to, they have not, at least up to now, become fully democratic and lead to 'education for all'. As a consequence, these traditions have inspired critiques and alternatives that have rejected the idea of the 'sacred' and put their trust not in 'knowledge building on knowledge' but in the innate capacities of all learners, and for some, all cultures. This progressive, learner-centred tradition can be traced back to Rousseau and took its most sophisticated form in writings of those influenced by Dewey.<sup>2</sup> It argues that only if learners are freed from the constraints of endorsing the 'sacred', and from what are felt to be the inherently exclusive traditions of the past, will their 'natural' potential be realized. Two very different models of the emancipatory possibilities of education follow. One puts its trust in *knowledge*, and for some, in its inherent openness—that the more we know, the more we are aware how little we know. For this tradition, teachers are not merely 'facilitators of learning' but pedagogic authorities in whatever field they have specialized in. The fault line and vulnerability of this tradition relates, on the one hand, to the increasingly specialized forms that knowledge takes and the limits which this places on its accessibility. On the other hand, it tends to forget how much we have still to discover about pedagogy, as itself a specialist field of knowledge, and how relatively few resources we invest in this task.

The second model puts its trust in the emancipatory capacities of learners, if only we knew how to realize them. It has been massively, although in my view misleadingly, boosted by the assumed potential of digital technologies to enhance learning. If only, some argue, teachers allowed learners un-fettered access to the enormous information resource



available on the internet, successful learning would become the norm for all and not restricted to the few. Despite the superficial persuasiveness of this argument, we still have no evidence that an information resource—however, extensive and accessible—can, on its own, promote *real* learning. The mistake of all such theories is to use the amazing capacity everyone has for experiential or informal learning as a model for the quite different task of moving beyond our experience—the opportunity that schools and teachers uniquely provide.

The task of curriculum theory, I suggest, is to transcend these two models. From ‘the sacred’ tradition, it must take not only the idea of a ‘store of knowledge’ but those peculiarly human values of inwardness and inner dedication that shape and are associated with disciplined study and enquiry. In response to the critics of the ‘sacred’s’ exclusiveness, it must argue that the exclusiveness of disciplines is not fixed or given but has a purpose—the discovery of truth—which is, in principle, open to all who are prepared to make the effort and are adequately supported in their commitment. This does not, of course, imply that in today’s societies, it is only effort that distinguishes those who progress as learners from those who do not; there are massive political factors shaping the distribution of opportunities. My argument is that a major task of curriculum theory is to identify the constraints<sup>3</sup> that limit curriculum choices and to explore the pedagogic implications that follow.

So far, I have outlined what I take to be the role of curriculum theory—specifically in relation to the issue of ‘access to knowledge’. It is a role that for a variety of reasons has, in my view, been largely neglected. That neglect is ‘the crisis’ referred to in the title of this paper. This is not to say that curriculum theory or strands of curriculum studies have neglected the question of knowledge content (Deng and Luke 2008). My argument is that this ‘crisis’ is expressed in the reluctance of curriculum theory, at least since Hirst and Peters (1970), to address *epistemological* issues concerning questions of the truth, and reliability of different forms of knowledge and how such issues have both philosophical and sociological dimensions.

What is the important knowledge that pupils should be able to acquire at school? If as curriculum theorists, we cannot answer this question, it is unclear who can, and it is more likely that it will be left to the pragmatic and ideological decisions of administrators and politicians. Following a brief discussion of possible reasons why the question of knowledge has been avoided by scholars in curriculum theory, I will go on to suggest what might be involved if curriculum theory did start with the question of knowledge; I will then briefly illustrate how such an approach might be applied concretely in schools. The paper concludes with a brief consideration to why the question of knowledge has been almost systematically avoided by educationalists as a whole and not just by those in the specialist field of curriculum theory. This is certainly true in the United Kingdom, where the current debates about knowledge and the curriculum are led almost entirely by government politicians (Young 2011). However, this tendency is not restricted to one country (Yates and Young 2010).



## 2. Origins of curriculum studies as a field

Raymond Callaghan argues in his brilliant and not well enough known book, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Callaghan 1964), that curriculum theory arose, initially in the United States, to solve problems faced by school principals. Early curriculum theorists, such as Bobbitt (1918), who had applied FW Taylor's 'scientific management' to improving productivity in factories were confident that the lessons from manufacturing could be successfully applied to schools. The goal of schools—in other words 'what was to be learned'—was taken for granted, so the curriculum was interpreted as the instruction and efficient organization of teaching resources. Instruction was understood by these early curriculum theorists and those that followed such as Tyler and Taba in a highly prescriptive way. The first critics of the model were Apple (2004 [1975]) and Pinar (1978). Together their early works transformed and literally 'emancipated' the field from the rigidities and aridities of the models associated with Bobbitt, Tyler and Taba.

In the United Kingdom, we were fortunate to avoid the American obsession with instructional objectives. However, as pervasive in its way was the concept of 'liberal education' associated with the fee-paying 'Public' schools such as Eton and Harrow. As a curriculum, the concept of 'liberal education' was given more formal expression in England by the philosophers Hirst and Peters (1970) and it was their formulation that was challenged, from an explicitly sociological perspective by what became known as the 'new sociology of education' (Young 1971).<sup>4</sup>

The significance of mentioning these 1970's developments is that while opening up the field of curriculum studies in quite new ways and leading to a variety of innovative empirical studies (Goodson 1987), they also politicized the field (Young and Whitty 1977) and paved the way for its absorption into the radical rhetoric of 'critical pedagogy' that still retains a significant following in Education Faculties (Giroux 1983, McLaren 1995). The strength of these strands of critical curriculum theory was that they made explicit the way that curricula are not given but always embody prevailing power relations. I have described this as a focus on the curriculum as 'knowledge of the powerful' (Young 2008). However, by its one-dimensional focus on who had the power to define the curriculum, this tradition neglected the extent to which some forms of knowledge give greater power than others to those with access to them, *irrespective of their origins*. A focus on 'knowledge of the powerful', despite its strengths, almost inevitably shifts the analysis from what goes on in schools to the distribution of power in the wider society and offers little either to teachers or to political movements seeking a more equitable approach to the curriculum. It made the assumption that the existing curriculum, based on 'knowledge of the powerful' could be replaced as a result of political changes—without providing any indication as to what such a new curriculum might be like. As politicians have found, in contexts not limited to education, on the few occasions in history



when the Left have gained power, without such alternatives, they are reduced to some variant of the old models that they had previously opposed.

Let me summarize my argument so far. It is that in moving from a technicist model of instruction, associated with earlier strands of curriculum theory, to an ideology critique, curriculum theory lost (or is fast losing) its primary object—*what is taught and learned in school*. Arguably, as a result, it loses its distinctive role in educational studies. This ‘loss of object’—the specificity of schools—has had two consequences. First, it has opened the door in curriculum theory to a whole range of writers in philosophy, literature and cultural studies who raise serious questions about culture and identity in modern society but have little specific to say about the school curriculum. The second consequence is that governments and curriculum designers—at least in the United Kingdom, pay less and less attention to curriculum theorists as specialists in the curriculum field. This may be a straightforward reflection of disagreement between policy-makers and theorists, but I suspect that it is also a consequence of curriculum theorists renouncing their distinctive specialist role. It is easy to bemoan the forces of neo-liberalism, and academics sometimes seem most comfortable criticizing governments for their policies; however, given curriculum theory’s renunciation of its object, we must take at least some of the blame. Despite the neglect by educational researchers of what is taught and why so many pupils learn so little in school, these are issues that will not go away and are issues that, in principle, curriculum theory is in the best position to address. Developing a more adequate theory, it follows, is a major task which this paper aims to be a contribution to.

### 3. Origins of the crisis in curriculum theory

Why then has this crisis in curriculum theory arisen? I want to suggest three reasons. Firstly, and arising from the previous analysis, is the distrust in specialization as the primary source of new knowledge in any field—in this, I will argue that educational studies is no exception. Both the English critique of the elitist legacy of ‘liberal education’ (Williams 1961) and the American critique of the narrow instructional models referred to what earlier began by questioning their taken for granted assumptions about knowledge. However, neither had a theory of knowledge (and, therefore, of the curriculum) of its own which might have led to a focus on the different forms that curriculum knowledge might take. Thus, they led the field away from a theoretical focus on the different forms that the curriculum might take to a political focus on issues of power, politics and as in the work of some like Pinar, to issues of identity. However, a focus on the curriculum as, in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘the arbitrary imposition of the dominant cultural arbitrary’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p.22) does not advance our knowledge of curriculum alternatives. There is a place for theories of the struggle for power in intellectual fields of the kind that Bourdieu inspired but in not



addressing the limits on arbitrariness that teachers and curriculum designers inevitably face, they do not address the difficult issue of curriculum alternatives in a modern society. This requires us to take the curriculum seriously as an object of practice and enquiry that operates within two kinds of constraints; those of power and politics and the epistemological constraints that tell us that regardless of the distribution of power, how knowledge 'is selected, paced and sequenced' (to use Bernstein's well known phrase) has consequences for who learns and what they learn in school.

A second reason, I will suggest is that the massive expansion of schooling has led, in a contradictory way, to a loss of confidence in its potentially emancipatory role. This is, in part, a product, under the pressures of global capitalism, of the increased focus on the 'means' rather than the ends of education. From a younger and younger age, school students are encouraged to think of successful learning in terms of their future career or at least in terms of progressing to the next stage of education (primary to secondary or secondary to higher). This focus on 'means' shifts the motivation of learners from *internal ends*—often expressed as 'learning for its own sake' and dismissed as elitist, but crucial to the intellectual development of all students—to *external ends* such as employability. However, educational studies itself has played its part—especially those trends in the sociology of education which tell us that the role of schools in a capitalist society is the reproduction of class relations and by the interpreters of Foucault (1977) who draw parallels between schools, asylums, and prisons. It is not that these ideas are false or do not offer important insights. The problem is that they can too easily become one-dimensional descriptions of 'what schooling does'—a kind of left functionalism which leaves very little space for considering the politically less 'oppositional' but no less important learning opportunities that schooling can offer to all students. School subjects, such as physics and history, always offer contradictory possibilities. If learners are to succeed, they are required to follow prescribed rules and sequences that are laid down externally and can be experienced as imposed and even alienating; on the other hand, with a well-qualified teacher, it is in submitting to such rules that students gain access to alternatives and a wider sense of their own capabilities. This tension between 'compliance with rules' and 'going beyond them' is lost in a curriculum theory that dismisses such rules as only expressions of power or ideology or equally misleadingly, a theory that sees learning anything that does not have short term economic benefits as 'merely academic'.

The third reason for the crisis in curriculum theory that I want to suggest is the increasingly widespread acceptance among educational researchers of the idea that knowledge itself has no intrinsic significance or validity. It follows from this view that the question that teachers are faced with becomes limited to 'is this curriculum meaningful to my students?' rather than 'what are the meanings that this curriculum gives my students access to?' or 'does this curriculum take my students beyond their experience and enable to envisage alternatives that have some basis in the real world?'



University colleagues of mine who visit student teachers in schools report something akin to a ‘fear of knowledge’ in the schools they visit—knowledge is either not mentioned or seen as something intimidating and dominating. As a consequence, if curriculum theorists do not themselves have theory of knowledge, it is not surprising that teachers interpret expressions of cultural resistance among students as celebrating their subjective meanings and identities. This has led either to an over-psychological approach to identity focusing on the learner as an individual person rather than as a social being (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009), or to the romantic politicizing of some critical pedagogy. What such approaches neglect is firstly that teachers cannot escape the instructional element of their role. Parents send their children to school expecting them to acquire the specialist knowledge that they would not have access to at home. Secondly, it fails to recognize that although knowledge can be experienced as oppressive and alienating, this is not a property of knowledge itself. An appropriate pedagogy, which engages the commitment of the learner to a relationship to knowledge (Charlot 2012), can have the opposite consequences—it can free the learner to have new thoughts and even think the ‘not yet thought’.

I conclude that curriculum theory and, therefore, the curriculum must start not from the student as learner but from a student’s entitlement or access to knowledge. Curriculum theory needs a theory of knowledge (Young 2012) if it is to analyse and criticize existing curricula, and to explore the different forms that they can take. Curriculum theorists do not themselves make curricula; however, at least they can broaden the possibilities that curriculum designers have available to them.

My discipline (the sociology of education and more specifically the sociology of the curriculum) and specifically my own early work—has spent too much time on the political question—who defines the knowledge base of the curriculum? Important though that question is, it has led to a neglect of the knowledge question itself and what a curriculum would be like if an ‘entitlement to knowledge’ was its goal?

#### **4. Assumptions of a knowledge-based approach to the curriculum**

The framework for curriculum theory that I will outline is an initial attempt to address the question ‘what is the knowledge that school students are entitled to have access to?’ Before doing this, I will describe briefly the assumptions that I make and which shape both the framework and how I address the question of curriculum knowledge.

- In all fields of enquiry, there is *better* knowledge, more reliable knowledge, knowledge nearer to truth about the world we live in and to what it is to be human. At the same time, this knowledge is not fixed or given; it is always fallible and open to challenge. The difficulty this epistemological claim poses is how to hold these two ideas together—‘there is the better knowledge’ and ‘this



knowledge is fallible'. Fallibility does not mean 'anything goes' but that in any specialist knowledge community, there are rules and concepts which always leave open some questions. This means that in order to experience the fallibility of knowledge, you have to be part of or engaged with the community in question. The natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities pose contrary difficulties. At the school and even at the undergraduate level, students of the natural sciences have to take the idea of fallibility 'on trust'; they are unlikely to have progressed sufficiently in mathematics to make the idea of knowledge being 'fallible' real to them, except in the case of statistics. In the case of disciplines outside the natural sciences, there is often little agreement among specialists about what the rules and concepts of a discipline are. However, even in such fields, there is likely to be a degree of agreement on the range of meanings that would be recognized as open to debate within the discipline, and hence fallible. It is this knowledge, however, highly differentiated though it is, that I refer to as 'powerful knowledge'.

Powerful knowledge has two key characteristics and both are expressed in the form of boundaries.

- It is *specialized*, in how it is produced (in workshops, seminars and labs) and in how it is transmitted (in schools, colleges and universities) and this specialization is expressed in the boundaries between disciplines and subjects which define their focus and objects of study. In other words, it is not *general* knowledge. This does not mean that boundaries are fixed and not changeable. However, it does mean that cross-disciplinary research and learning depend on discipline-based knowledge.
- It is *differentiated* from the experiences that pupils bring to school or older learners bring to college or university. This differentiation is expressed in the conceptual boundaries between school and everyday knowledge.

These characteristics of 'powerful knowledge' are not restricted to what in England we call STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines and subjects, although STEM disciplines and subjects express the features of powerful knowledge least ambiguously (Young and Muller 2013). Although powerful knowledge is not general knowledge, powerful knowledge has generalizing capacities. The concept applies to:

- *Ethics*—for example, Kant's famous principle—'treat everyone as an end in themselves and not as a means to your ends') is 'powerful', not because it explains or predicts, but because it is as near to being a generalizable (or universal) principle for how human beings should treat others as we can get. Almost identical principles can be found in other great works of philosophy such as those of Confucius.



- *Literature and the arts*—great art works are ‘powerful’ because they engage with feelings such as guilt, remorse, regret, responsibility and joy that are emotions experienced in particular contexts but common to all human beings.
- *History, geography and the social sciences.*

In each discipline there are those(not all) who have a commitment to the goal of searching for the best, and most reliable accounts of phenomena, to the idea of shared rules and concepts and to the idea that knowledge progresses by building on past knowledge, even when that knowledge is rejected as in the case of much modern art and music. On the other hand the phenomena they are concerned with are different from those that the natural sciences focus on and not only are their methods and concepts different, but they inevitably do not claim the same reliability.

I assume that the curriculum question ‘what knowledge?’ is both an *epistemological* issue that defines what should constitute the entitlement for students at different stages and in different specialist fields and a *social justice* issue about the entitlement to knowledge of *all* students regardless of whether they reject it or find it difficult. If some knowledge is ‘better’, how can we deny it to all pupils and allow some, as we do in England, to be limited to what in effect is ‘powerless knowledge’ from the age of 14 or 16?

## 5. A knowledge—based approach to curriculum

With these assumptions in mind, I turn in the next section to the main principles that need to be taken account of in designing a knowledge-based curriculum. These will include:

### 5.1. *Its form of specialization*

From my assumption that ‘powerful knowledge’ is specialized, it follows that specialization in the university curriculum takes the form of the boundaries between disciplines and that such boundaries are defined by concepts, and rules for inclusion/exclusion, inference and argument and for sequencing of concepts. School curricula, on the other hand, have pedagogic rather than research goals. Subjects, which are ‘re-contextualised’ from disciplines are the form they take.

Re-contextualization, in this sense, means (in Bernstein’s terms) the selection, sequencing and pacing of contents that takes into account both the coherence of the discipline subject and the limits on what can be learned by students at different stages of their development. In other words, while researchers and university teachers will be largely limited to epistemic criteria, school teachers also have to take account of pedagogic criteria and their knowledge of the capabilities, experience and (and potential) of the students. This difference is one of structure and



sequencing, not of content; the concepts of school physics are always specific cases of the concepts of physics itself (for example a student will learn that ‘mass = force/acceleration’ at school and ‘mass = energy/speed of light(squared)’ at university, but the former is a special case of the latter). How re-contextualization is done will vary widely across different disciplines and subjects. Furthermore, a disciplinary/subject-based approach does not preclude students gaining sufficient confidence by working within the boundaries of a discipline or a subject to able to challenge them.

### *5.2. The relationship between a national curriculum and the individual curricula of schools*

A National Curriculum should limit itself to the key concepts of the core subjects and be designed in close collaboration with the subject specialists. This limit on National Curricula guarantees autonomy to individual schools and specialist subject teachers, and takes account of schools with different cultural and other resources, different histories and in different contexts (for example, schools in cities and rural areas). At the same time, it ensures a common knowledge base for all students when some may move from school to school.

### *5.3. The difference between conceptual (curriculum) knowledge and content (everyday) knowledge*

The difference between school knowledge (in other words, the curriculum) and everyday knowledge is that they are constituted by concepts that are different in both structure and purpose. The everyday concepts that children acquire in growing up enable them to make sense of the world in relation to specific contexts. They are context-specific but are flexible and endlessly adaptable to new contexts and new experiences. Experience, in this sense, can be understood as the acquisition of more and more context-specific concepts. However, the coherence of everyday concepts, such as it is, is tied to particular contexts, and without the opportunity to engage with the concepts of a subject-based curriculum, children’s understandings are inevitably limited to those contexts and those experiences. In contrast, the concepts associated with a subject-based curriculum are not tied to specific contexts; they are linked to each other and the underlying theories associated with the subject in question and underpinned by the community of subject specialists. It is this difference in structure that enables students with access to subject-based concepts to generalize beyond their experience and provides the educational rationale for the curriculum and its links to the broader purposes of schooling. Here is an example to illustrate this simple but rather abstract point;

‘pupils live in a city like London—they know about the part of the city they live in, cops and so on. This is an example of the non-school knowl-



edge that pupils bring to school—it will be different for each pupil and limited by their experiences in growing up. Acquiring such knowledge is not dependent on going to school. At some point, however, pupils will meet a geography teacher. Geography teachers have a very different kind of knowledge about cities which relates to how they differ, their history and how they change. This is school knowledge—in this case, the conceptual knowledge of geography—the city is one example of a geographical concept. It does not replace a pupil's everyday experience; it extends that experience and enables the pupil to generalize about it. Other examples could be taken from literature or history. In the case of the sciences, pupils are likely to come to school with some knowledge of the natural and material world. However, most science does not relate to directly to their non-school knowledge. In science classes, laboratory experiments play the part of the everyday world to generalise from for the student. The concepts of physics and chemistry enables them to think beyond the specific activities they undertake in the laboratory. (abridged from Young 2011)

#### 5.4. *The difference between pedagogy and curriculum*

Pedagogy,<sup>5</sup> in the sense, I am using it in this paper, refers to what teachers do, and get pupils to do; however, teaching is not just a practical activity (or a craft, as some English politicians claim). Teaching depends on both the knowledge that teachers have of their subject, the knowledge that they have about individual pupils and how they learn—and the knowledge that informs what they require their pupils to do. In contrast although the curriculum refers to the knowledge that pupils are entitled to know, it does not include pupil experiences. Pupil experiences are a crucial learning resource for both student and teacher; however they vary widely, and furthermore, pupils do not come to school to know what they already know from experience.

#### 5.5. *Assessment as 'feedback and assessment as the driver of the curriculum'*

- Distinguishing between *assessment as feedback on pupil progress*—to pupils, teachers, parents and government, and *assessment as a driver of the curriculum and pedagogy*. Teachers are increasingly under pressure to shift the balance from the feedback role of assessment towards its accountability role as a policy or curriculum driver.

### 6. Practical implications—an example

I have been having discussions over a period of perhaps 18 months with a head teacher of a large mixed secondary school (over 80 staff) in England; they initially arose out of her reading my book (Young 2008) and led to some of the issues raised in this paper. Recently, she wrote a manifesto for



her school staff titled a *Knowledge-led School* (see Appendix). I am not suggesting that her ideas derived in any direct way from our discussions. However, I think her manifesto does illustrate how ideas often dismissed as abstract can be constructive in supporting a head teacher's role as curriculum leader and how difficult theoretical and often abstract issues in the sociology of the curriculum can be expressed in ways that are accessible to non-specialists. Her next step is that she intends to ask her Heads of Department to respond to the manifesto from the point of view of their subjects.

## 7. Objections to a knowledge-based approach

The approach to the curriculum which I have outlined is widely rejected in England, not only by teachers but by many educationalists in university Faculties and the majority of those who see themselves as 'On the Left' politically. I want to conclude, therefore, by considering three of the commonest types of objection to a knowledge-led curriculum that I have faced as a curriculum theorist in the United Kingdom.

I find it useful to distinguish three types of objection, the practical, the epistemological, and the political; inevitably, of course, they overlap.

### 7.1. Practical objections

Even in developed and relatively well-resourced countries like the United Kingdom, a significant proportion of secondary school pupils fail to achieve a reasonable educational level by the age of 16. The kind of knowledge-based curriculum that I am proposing could, if there were no other changes in staffing of schools or the preparation of teachers, almost certainly increase this proportion of failing pupils and encourage more disaffection and drop out.

It follows, for some educationists and many teachers that such a curriculum is not practical for all students. It does not recognize the real difficulties teachers would face in engaging more than a minority of pupils on the basis of such a curriculum. Many students, it is argued, need a curriculum more related to their interests and capabilities. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that while programmes based more on pupils' immediate interests may make them happier at school, at the same time, they deny them access to the very knowledge they need if they are to progress to further study or have a reasonable chance of employment. That is the inescapable practical dilemma of mass secondary education, at least in western capitalist societies, which community-oriented or employment-oriented programmes do not fully face up to. What such programmes do, however, is to mask the problem of educational failure and limit the likelihood that it will be addressed at its origins which are, substantially, not in the schools but in the wider inequalities of society. As I will come back to, this leads us beyond the curriculum to political questions. The practical dilemma stands more as a critique of a type of society than of a curriculum theory.



## 7.2. *Epistemological objections*

The knowledge-led approach to the curriculum is criticized by some educationalists in two quite distinct ways. Those endorsing postmodernist and poststructuralist theories of knowledge claim that all knowledge is unavoidably ‘from a standpoint’. It follows that from such a perspective identifying some knowledge as ‘powerful’ is little different from accepting the dominant definitions of knowledge found in elite schools.<sup>6</sup> Again, from such a perspective, a knowledge-led approach is ideological. It asserts that as all knowledge is arbitrary a knowledge-led approach is no more than the imposition of special interests. Student interests or preferences are, from such a perspective, as good criteria for a curriculum as any others. As I indicated earlier, denying the potential universalism and generalizability of ‘powerful knowledge’ means that all that is possible for curriculum theory is critique. The only alternative such a perspective offers to teachers is that they should help students find some meaning in their lives, regardless of the limited possibilities this may leave open to them.

The epistemological objection to a knowledge-based curriculum that is made by some philosophers (e.g. White 2012) is that ‘school subjects’ are out of date and inappropriate in a world in which knowledge is changing so fast. However, this confuses the content with the structure of the curriculum (Young 2012). The historical fact that secondary school students in England in 1870 studied history and physics and still do does not mean their content has remained unchanged. Subjects are educational resources that topics and interdisciplinary themes (like the environment) important though they are, can never be. Subjects are:

- Sources of stability for schools, students and teachers. This is important as part of the role of the school is to ‘transmit’ knowledge acquired by previous generations.
- They are sources of national (and international) coherence. Families move and students go to a new school in the same country or another country. Subjects give some guarantee (some subjects more than others) that a student will be able to continue and further his/her studies in a class of a similar age group in another school. Students taking non-subject-based courses, based on themes and topics, often find themselves repeating the same things year after year with no sense of progress.
- Subjects are sources of identity for both students and teachers. For teachers, they have been developed by specialist professional associations (for teachers of mathematics, for example) where they can share and discuss new approaches. For pupils, the role of subjects is analogous but different. They initially enter what for many will be an alien world of the curriculum; their prior experience has not been subject-based. However, subjects with their clear boundaries and rules offer them an opportunity to develop new identities as part of new communities of learners and so become



keen to follow questions defined by the boundaries of subjects that take them further in a subject and, in some cases, allow them to challenge those boundaries.

- Subjects, I argued earlier, are recontextualized from disciplines which are a society's primary source of new knowledge. The link between subjects and disciplines provides the best guarantee that we have that the knowledge acquired by students at school does not rely solely on the authority of the individual teacher but on the teacher as a member of a specialist subject community.

### 7.3. *Political objections*

In the United Kingdom, the Coalition Government's curriculum proposals (DFE 2011) place a considerable emphasis on a specific and narrow range of subjects, effectively limiting choice for both schools and students. These proposals, as I indicated earlier, have been opposed by virtually all those 'on the Left'. They are seen as elitist and promoting social injustice and greater inequalities. Like the poststructuralists I discussed earlier, these critics accept, by implication, the relativist argument that there is no such thing as 'powerful knowledge' that is represented by subjects which should therefore be the entitlement of all pupils to have access to. They assume that 'access to subject knowledge' can be discarded as a priority for perhaps a third of each cohort by the age of 14 or 16 on the grounds that those pupils are not interested or find it too difficult or that it puts impossible demands on teachers. The disturbing lesson that I take from this objection is that many of these critics are somehow able to rationalize their avoidance of the question of 'knowledge', or perhaps are reluctant to accept a realist position that recognizes that epistemological constraints are for all practical purposes inescapable.

The dilemma is easier for those on the Right as they do not believe in even the possibility of the progressive reduction of inequalities. They can accept a version of 'powerful knowledge' as the basis of the curriculum and locate the levels of failure it could lead to entirely in the choices of individual pupils (they don't work hard enough or their parents do not support the teachers). Morally and politically, I do not find the argument that rests on individual choice tenable; the possibilities of choice are not evenly distributed. However, that does not help resolve the dilemma faced by those on the Left who are committed to greater equality.

My own view is that no curriculum can, on its own, significantly reduce educational inequalities. In our capitalist societies, schools will reproduce those inequalities—acutely in some countries, less so in others. However, reducing social inequalities is primarily a political task of establishing a more equal society, not an educational task. In England, a primary source of *educational* inequality is the opportunity that wealthy parents have to buy a 'better' education<sup>7</sup> for their children in private fee-paying schools which charge up to and over £30,000 per year. It is a sad



comment on the Labour Party, as the main party of the Left, that twice in 1945 and 1997 when they had large majorities in Parliament, they avoided the ‘private school issue’. However, this is a political, not an educational issue; it is only a task for educators in our role as citizens. There is a real division of labour. I am no longer convinced, as I was in the 1970s, that it is helpful to see everything as political. I may have views about private schooling, but I have no political space to act on such views; the Labour Party are light years away from tackling the issue and there is no longer even the possibility of a socialist left or any idea as to what kind of alternative it could offer. For those of us who are curriculum theorists and our colleagues in the schools, our task, whatever our politics as citizens, is to develop curriculum principles that maximize the chances that all pupils will have *epistemic access* (Morrow 2008)—or access to the best knowledge we have in any field of study they engage in. Denying access to this knowledge to some pupils, because they find it difficult, is like denying the equivalent of our hippocratic oath—to make available to them the ‘best knowledge’ that we can. At least a knowledge-based curriculum will highlight and not mask the inequalities in our society as so-called pre-vocational programmes invariably do. The *political* message of a knowledge-based curriculum is that inequalities in the distribution of resources of all kinds must be reduced if educational opportunities are really to be improved—and that, in the contemporary phrase is ‘a big ask’. Meanwhile a better curriculum, supported by good teachers who believe in it remains the highest priority. The struggle over schooling has always been a struggle for knowledge; that is what the debate about the curriculum should be about. Curriculum theorists are, I have argued, education’s experts on knowledge; for this, we draw on sociology and philosophy and sometimes psychology. Political parties and the governments that they elect need our expertise, even if they do not recognize it, if their curriculum policies are going to support such claims as education for all and equal opportunities.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lyn Yates for her comments on an earlier version of this paper and the helpful criticisms from one of my referees. Also, thanks to Carolyn Roberts for the text: A knowledge-driven school.

### Notes

1. I use the term ‘sacred’ in the broader way introduced by Durkheim (1915) which is not limited to religion but refers to any meanings that are separated from the problems of everyday life such as obtaining food and shelter.
2. This is not to imply that Dewey was unaware of the limitations of a child or learner-centred approach. However, it cannot be denied that this is how many of his followers have interpreted him (Egan 2004), or that despite what he wrote, his own pragmatist epistemology lays him open to such a critique (Durkheim 1983).
3. Here, I am focusing epistemological constraints on a curriculum if it is to enable students to access to what I will refer later to as ‘powerful knowledge’



- (Young and Muller (forthcoming). Curricula are also determined by external constraints which take us to political questions and beyond the scope of curriculum theory.
4. Of greater conceptual depth and more lasting significance for curriculum theory, as well as the sociology of education was the early work of Bernstein (1971). However, it is only recently, and partly inspired by a paper on knowledge structures (Bernstein 1999) written towards the end of his life, that the importance of Bernstein's early work has fully been recognized (Moore 2004, Muller 2000, Wheelahan 2010, Young 2008).
  5. I am using the term 'pedagogy' analytically rather than descriptively to refer to teachers' practices and the theories (often implicit) on which they are based. In Latin languages like Portuguese, this can be confusing as the meaning of pedagogy is almost equivalent to the broader English word 'education'.
  6. I have referred earlier to this view as seeing the curriculum as an expression of 'Knowledge of the powerful'; in other words, those in positions of power define the curriculum for elite schools to suit their children's needs and in effect (if not explicitly in intention) to discriminate against the rest. This focus on elite schools is important, but it is necessary to distinguish elite schools from elite curricula; the former focuses on unequal access, the later claims that knowledge itself can be reconstructed—that, for example a non-elite state school should teach different physics to a private school. This is a point I will return to in the concluding section. This is the un-resolved dilemma of all social constructivist approaches to the curriculum.
  7. Or at least one that gives their children the best chance to achieve high grades and progress to a top university.

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## Appendix: A knowledge-driven school

In the teeth of structural change, we remember our role as society's educators and guardians of the young. While Teachers' Standards are expectations of our professionalism, what of our purpose? We are the people who offer powerful and shared knowledge to the nation's children. That knowledge comes from centuries of learning, and from the 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.