Policy and Practice of School Curriculum Reform

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序

　　"上海国际课程论坛"是教育部人文社会科学重点研究基地——华东师范大学课程与教学研究所倾力打造的"课程改革的国际交流平台",到2015年,已经举办了13届。借助这个平台,我们深入探讨国内外基础教育课程改革实践中存在的问题、困难和经验,交流国际课程理论研究前沿成果。经过多年的探索,逐步得到国内外学术界同仁的认同和支持,成为具有国际影响力的基础教育课程研究和实践领域的重要学术交流平台。

　　2015年11月举办的第13届上海国际课程论坛,以"学校课程改革政策与评论"为主题,围绕"学校的课程政策践行"、"跨文化课程研究与实践"、"学校课程政策的理论探索与国际比较"等专题展开学术研讨。来自英国、美国、澳大利亚、荷兰、日本、新加坡、香港、台湾等国家及地区,精研于教育社会学、课程政策、课程与教学等领域的专家与学者,以及来自全国十几个省市的150多位专家学者、教育行政部门领导、一线教育工作者参与了本次论坛。专家们基于自己的专业研究对学校课程改革政策问题进行了深入思考,从不同的视角重新审视了学校课程改革的相关政策问题,并以此为切入点展开了阐释,提出了疑惑,交流了观点,分享了经验。

　　为更好地推广本届学术论坛的成果,促进学校课程改革政策与评论的理论研究与实践探索,华东师范大学课程与教学研究所在征得作者同意的情况下,从众多会议论文中精选了部分论文集结出版。本书分为三个专题,大体呈现论坛结构的原貌。"学校的课程政策践行"关注学校层面的课程政策运作,"跨文化课程研究与实践"探索中外文化交流在课程领域的融会与碰撞,"学校课程政策的理论探索与国际比较"以更加理论性的视角,剖析与总结国内外课程政策理论与实践的经验。通过这三个专题,我们不但希望留存第13届上海国际课程论坛的思想精粹,更希冀于推动该领域更多元、更广泛、更深入的学术探讨与交流。

　　囿于编者的学术水平水限,以及出版时间仓促,本书难免存在错漏,恳请同行和读者不吝批评指正。

本书编者

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专题一

学校的课程政策践行

Researching the Curriculum: From Knowledge
of the Powerful to Powerful Knowledge

Michael Young

Introduction

The distinction in the title of this lecture refers to a radical shift in the focus of sociological research on the curriculum. In order to provide a context for understanding this shift, I will trace the changes in my own thinking about the curriculum from my first book *Knowledge and Control* which was published in 1971, to my 2007 book *Bringing Knowledge Back In* which will shortly be published in Mandarin, translated by Professor Xie of Tsinghua University.

While retaining a broadly similar assumption that all knowledge and hence all curricula are socially produced, the two books represent a radical change in my thinking about what "social" means and as a consequence, how the curriculum might be conceptualised and researched. The sub-title of my book *Bringing Knowledge Back In* — "From social constructivism to social realism" is somewhat misleading. Both books start with the basic sociological assumption that knowledge, as any other product or category, is socially produced. However, social constructivism which was popularised by Berger and Luckman's book *The Social Construction of Reality* and underpins the approach I take in *Knowledge and Control*, had a homogeneous concept of the social in common with most sociology of knowledge — it applied generally to any product or category we as humans produce. In contrast, social realism in common with the philosophical theory known as critical realism, recognises that reality is always stratified and that the starting sociological assumption for a sociological analysis is not that all knowledge is social but that knowledge being social in origin means that it is also differentiated. I will return to the implications of this shift for a sociological approach to the curriculum later in this lecture.

To some who still identify with the idea that there is no "reality" that we classify, represent, make inferences about, the idea that reality is *social constructed* takes the form of a belief or even a dogma. For them, the shift to social realism can seem like a conversion. I shall try to show that the shift has more rational elements than conversions usually imply. On a personal level the shift has been a struggle and has led to the loss of friends and much criticism; however it is a shift I could not have avoided. I don't claim that the educational problem of

"what do we teach", which is reduced by social constructivism's relativism by "its up to you", is solvable in any definitive way by a social realist theory of knowledge. However I do want to suggest that it is the basis for exploring questions that have been long avoided by sociologists of education. That said, it is worth stressing that I am not proposing an either/or. I think the questions raised by a focus on knowledge — our knowledge about knowledge as it were — is important, both theoretically and practically for teachers. That does not mean, however, that questions of the wider distribution of power should be neglected.

The change in my thinking about knowledge and the curriculum is expressed in the title of this lecture *From "knowledge of the powerful" to "powerful knowledge"*. The idea that the school curriculum represents *"knowledge of the powerful"* was where I began as a sociologist of education. I will come back to this distinction. At this point two important points are worth making. "Knowledge of the powerful" directs our attention to the knowers and the problem in a society when the curriculum makes too sharp a division between those who know and those who rely on others knowing. In contrast, "powerful knowledge" directs our attention to the knowledge and what it does for those who acquire it.

A bit of autobiography

My first degree was in natural sciences and I became a teacher without any prior study of education. I began my studies of sociology while teaching chemistry in a secondary school but with no specific focus on education. Sociology in England in the 1960s, when I was a part time student, was no more than a fledgling research discipline, largely dependent on American scholars, such as Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton and C. Wright Mills. Research in the sociology of education had a distinctive English focus on social class inequalities. It developed from the pioneering work by Floud and Halsey on the social class distribution of educational opportunities. Given this experience of studying sociology, I was surprised when Basil Bernstein, who was my MA tutor, proposed that the curriculum could be my dissertation topic. Where could I begin? What was a "sociological approach" to the curriculum? This was the late 1960s before Bernstein began his research on the curriculum. What I learned from Bernstein, as an MA student, was that a sociological approach to education needed to move beyond a focus on the distribution of opportunities, important though that is. What I have since realised was that a focus on distribution restricts the sociology of education to how education reproduces the inequalities of the wider society. It is not that such an approach is wrong but that it takes for granted the education that is unequally distributed rather than making the education itself topic

for research.

My first university appointment was at the University of London Institute of Education, not in a Department of Sociology. Questions about the curriculum were assumed to be epistemological and therefore the province of the philosophers. As a sociologist, interested in how the curriculum distributed knowledge according to the social class position of pupils, this presented a challenge. It was in attempting to counter what I saw as philosophy's inappropriate dominance over curriculum issues, that I was led to search for an alternative approach to the sociology of education that recognized the extent to which the distribution of knowledge in curricula might be understood as an expression of power relations. The result, with implications I did not recognise at the time, was my first book *Knowledge and Control*. It included chapters that drew on structuralism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology (each of which, as I realised later disagreed profoundly with each other). It was a heady and far from coherent mix. However, what the chapters had in common is that they all raised questions about knowledge and the curriculum. It was the book's politicized version of the social construction of knowledge and its message to teachers that they could "change reality" for their students that made it popular — at least with teachers and students, if not with irate Professors of Sociology!

What I did not grasp at the time was that the book's radical social constructivism did not lead to a sociology of the curriculum but at best to a sociology of power — albeit a sociology of power without a theory. This gap was quickly filled by the Marxism of Bowles and Gintis in the USA, and Louis Althusser in France. This led to the polarization of thinking about the curriculum into the extremes of a Marxist theoreticism which tries to explain how capitalism was going to collapse and a phenomenological reductionism which tried to all social phenomena to everyday life with neither saying much about education. Geoff Whitty, whose work some of you will know, and I, together with critical curriculum theorists, such as Michael Apple, Philip Wexler and Henry Giroux in the USA, tried to draw these two traditions together. However, the ideological cleavages within both the political Left and the sociology of education together with government determination to assert more control over teacher education proved too powerful and work on the sociology of the curriculum became fragmented and almost lost altogether.

Bernstein himself published important papers on curriculum and pedagogy in the 1980's and 1990's, which might have been the basis for a renewal of the sociology of the curriculum. However his work was disregarded until almost two decades later, except by a small group,

largely based in Chile, Portugal and South Africa.

Several developments led to my attempt to go back to the question of knowledge and find a better approach to the curriculum as a key issue for the sociology of education.

My most important experience was my time as an educational consultant in the early 1990's in South Africa. Nelson Mandela was released and the South African Communist Party and the ANC were legalised in 1990. This meant that the democratic movement and, after 1995, the elected ANC Government were faced with replacing the existing apartheid curriculum which was not only racist, but heavily top down — giving no autonomy to teachers. What I began to realise was that while a curriculum theory based on social constructivism as represented by *Knowledge and Control* was good at criticising the apartheid curriculum — it offered no basis for developing an alternative. It was a case of what I later described as a theory representing the curriculum as "knowledge of the powerful" — it focused on the power of the knowers not the knowledge. In South Africa at the time the slogan (and the solution) was "popular education" — in other words "the people must decide". However "the people" knew nothing about the curriculum and to involve specialists, and not just sympathetic radicals, must have seemed too much like re-inventing apartheid with new faces.

The government and their advisers basically did two things which many in SA now recognise were disastrous. First, they picked up an idea that originated in the USA, which you may have come across in China — it was known as an outcomes-based curriculum. This assumed that it is possible to specify in broad terms the outcomes of an education system and these outcomes would not only be a guide for teachers in what to teach, but also be the basis for assessing what pupils knew. The second thing they did as a way of showing they had got rid of the hated apartheid system was to free teachers from any prescription except a set of very general outcomes. The teachers, especially the teachers in Black schools who had had little if any professional education did not know what to do and the schools slid into chaos. I saw for myself in South Africa the tragic consequences of introducing a curriculum policy that failed to take seriously the question of access to knowledge as the key role of schools in any society. Of special significance for me, was that the new curriculum, that did not specify knowledge requirements, was based on a critique of knowledge that was not so different from the social constructivism that I had developed twenty years earlier in *Knowledge and Control*. Fortunately for South Africa, there were educational intellectuals who persuaded policy makers to call a halt the madness of a curriculum that did not specify knowledge and since then there have been a succession of important revisions; they have a long way to go.

The lesson that I learned that shaped my future thinking about knowledge and the curriculum was that while one needs experience of the kind I had in South Africa, real learning leading to real alternatives can not rely on experience alone; it needs a theory that can provide the basis for an alternative.

When I returned to England from South Africa in 1999 I read a paper by two colleagues who I have since worked closely with — Rob Moore and Joe Muller. It shook me. Here were two highly respected sociologists arguing that the logic of my book *Knowledge and Control*, which had established my reputation as a sociologist of education, had precisely the opposite effect to that which I had intended. Their highly abstract paper was in effect explaining what had happened in South Africa. Instead of making the case for knowledge **as a source of freedom**, my first book had made the case, at least as it was interpreted, that we must **free pupils from knowledge**, especially disadvantaged pupils, This was exactly what happened with the introduction of the outcomes-based curriculum in South Africa that did not specify knowledge.

A major aim of Moore and Muller's paper was to demonstrate that the logic of social constructivism leads to a critique of all knowledge and hence to relativism that makes envisaging any alternative impossible. It was to explore such an alternative that treats knowledge as both social and real as well that lead to my book *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. Real knowledge or as I came to refer to it, "powerful knowledge" is social but it is also independent of its social basis — not by being a dogma or part of a tradition but by being constantly open to challenge according the the norms and rules of specialist disciplinary communities, increasingly global in scope. This conclusion led to a sociological approach to the curriculum which took knowledge seriously as the "powerful knowledge" that schools can provide access to; whether they do or not and for what proportion of their students will depend on their priorities and those of the society of which they are a part. I will return to this distinction between **knowledge of the powerful** and **powerful knowledge** a little later. However, I want before that to refer briefly to another development which has shaped my recent work on knowledge and the curriculum.

This development has been a consequence of two General Elections in the UK, in 2010 and 2015 that were won by the Conservative Party. The new governments reversed many of the previous Labour Government's education policies which had put their emphasis on improving access and widening participation without paying much attention to what the access was to. In contrast, the governments from 2010 stressed the idea of a traditional curriculum based on "academic subjects for all".

This raises the question whether placing knowledge at the heart of the curriculum is more

than an old conservative educational ideology. I have found myself at the centre of a political debate in England as well as in South Africa, where placing access to powerful knowledge as the central pedagogic issue for all is rejected by the majority of educationists as backward looking, old fashioned, and discriminating against disadvantaged pupils by forcing them to submit to a curriculum which is completely alien to them. On the other hand denying some pupils access to knowledge by providing programmes that do not lead to that knowledge could be seen, and that is how I see it, as a policy that will inevitably perpetuate social injustice.

It is these political developments that led me to return to a largely neglected strand of the sociology of knowledge with roots in the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. In the next section therefore, I want to address two issues.

1. What is this Durkheimian sociology of knowledge and why is it so relevant to thinking about the curriculum?

2. How does it lead to the concept of powerful knowledge as a curriculum principle and as an analytical concept for further research?

Emile Durkheim's legacy

The idea of "powerful knowledge" and its potential for curriculum research and policy and owes a primary debt to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and how his work has been interpreted by the English sociologist Basil Bernstein. Durkheim made two conceptual breakthroughs. The first was in how he conceptualised the sociology of knowledge. He recognised that human beings are not only "social" beings but also — and which for Durkheim is the same thing — "differentiating" and "classifying" beings. In particular, we not only differentiate our knowledge from the world of which we have experience, but we differentiate types or fields of knowledge as well. His second breakthrough derived from his analysis of religion in primitive societies. He identified two quite separate forms of knowledge in these societies. One he termed "**sacred**", equated with religion in primitive societies, the sacred did not rely on peoples experience or specific contexts but on ways of conceptualising the basic questions that all human beings face — who we are? What we are here for, and what happens when we die? Sacred knowledge that answers such questions has a stability that relies on being shared is resistant to any externally induced change which would undermine its purpose. The second type of knowledge he termed **profane**; this referred to the knowledge people acquire from their experience in order to survive. In primitive societies this meant access to food and shelter. Profane knowledge was always open to change and experience when new sources of food or

shelter are found. Durkheim was not interested in the specific meanings of these different forms of knowledge but in their structure. Whereas profane knowledge is tied to specific contexts and always changing — where the plants or animals are, for example, sacred knowledge had a stability that is independent of contexts or people's experience.

Durkheim's conceptual innovation was to recognise that this structural difference between context-dependent profane meanings and context-independent sacred meanings is not specific to primitive societies but is a feature of all societies. This was why he referred to the religions of primitive societies as "proto-sciences". It was the context-independence of the early religions that made them the basis on which the sciences and all speculative thought developed in later societies as aspects of the sacred became secularised. It is easy to forget that before the 17th century all scientific enquiries were part of a search for God.

It was Basil Bernstein who recognised the importance of Durkheim's insight for analysing the curriculum and the purpose of schools. He formalised the context dependent/context independent distinction as the difference between horizontal and vertical discourses and argued that this could explain why we have schools and why every country in the world in the last century is at some stage of expanding their schooling both in terms of the numbers attending and the period of school attendance. Schools are — or should be — institutions which transmit context-independent meanings that with the exception of religion are not available to children in their families, per groups or communities. It follows that pedagogy is the process by which a pupil's context-dependent meanings — her/his pre- and out of-school experiences become transformed through access to context-independent meanings expressed in the curriculum. What Durkheim and Bernstein's analyses did was to provide a basis for transforming both the sociology of education and curriculum theory. Instead of a focus on how schools reflect or reproduce the social relations of the wider society — the focus of the sociology of education for Bernstein is on the education system itself. How is knowledge produced by specialists, and increasingly by research transformed so that it can be transmitted. He refers to this process as re-contextualisation and began to suggest how it might be investigated. This leads to the question "what is this recontextualised knowledge?"

I have tried to address this question through the concept of "powerful knowledge" as a way of conceptualising the purposes of the curriculum and knowledge that curricula should but often do not does make available to students. So, as a way of summarising the implications of shifting our analysis of the curriculum from knowledge of the powerful to powerful knowledge, I address the questions: what are the structural features and purposes of powerful knowledge?

What is powerful knowledge?

Powerful knowledge is:

- differentiated from the knowledge we acquire through experience;
- specialised in different fields known we refer to as "disciplines" which are not only "bodies of knowledge" but communities of specialists who share and debate a common set of rules and norms about what knowledge is;
- expressed in the school curriculum as **subjects** which are bodies of "pedagogised knowledge" that are **recontextualised** from disciplines but take account not only of knowledge but of of how knowledge is acquired;
- School subjects are also bodies of knowledge and "communities of specialists" but specialists not in knowledge itself but in how it is transmitted and acquired;
- Powerful knowledge is in principle always open to question but only rarely are questions raised from outside the specialist communities who share the rules for identifying "better" knowledge from "worse";
- Powerful knowledge is usually acquired in formal educational institutions that are removed from the everyday experience of pupils. They have teachers with specialist subject knowledge and knowledge about how students best acquire powerful knowledge.

What are the "powers" and "purposes" of powerful knowledge?

- It can (in the case of the natural sciences) predict and explain reliably an increasing range of phenomena.
- It is the basis of technologies that enable us to act on and transform the world and produce new products.
- Because it is not tied to specific contexts, but to the rules and norms agreed specialist communities, it can be the basis for generalising from particular cases and envisaging alternatives.
- In the case of the humanities (music, arts, literature, etc.) they represent "powerful" knowledge but are not the basis for generalising about particular cases or making reliable predictions.
- The humanities are "powerful" in enabling students to see how their lives, their decisions and their judgments have a history and are part of what it is to be human in all societies. Humanity, for example, the plays of Shakespeare written 400 years ago and the works of Confucius and Aristotle written 2,500 years ago enable us to see our

actions as part of humanity at all times and that there are ethics like Kant's "treat others as you would expect them to treat you" that are universal and not specific to any one author or one society or period of history.

- Because "powerful knowledge" is not tied to particular contexts, it enables those who have access to it to "envisage alternatives"; this applies particularly to the social sciences even if what these alternatives are may vary between different national traditions. In Bernstein's words they are resources for thinking the un-thinkable, and the "not yet thought".

Concluding points

I have outlined some of the ways in which education through giving access to "powerful knowledge" is emancipatory by freeing students of any age from the givenness of their experience. This can lead those with power consciously or unconsciously to limit this access. I would like to finish by raising a few questions around the theme of the curriculum as a form of specialised knowledge that I and my South African colleague Johan Muller are working on.

Specialisation, or the social division of labour as Durkheim expresses it, is usually understood in terms of changes in the occupational structure of societies. However, it also applies to how fields of knowledge become more specialised and is at the heart of the production and transmission of knowledge.

As a historical process it is therefore crucial to any analysis of the curriculum which can be understood as a specific form of knowledge that is specialised for the purposes of transmission.

Durkheim understood specialisation as a normal and progressive element of social change although he recognised that it can take pathological (or negative forms). He referred to what has since become the most well known pathological form of the division of labour as "anomie" (this means lacking the rules connecting the specialised knowledge to our knowledge as a whole). This is when different specialists lose any sense of how what they do are part of broader social changes.

In the case of education, as knowledge becomes more specialised, the **curriculum** problems of transforming knowledge generated by research into the subjects of the school curriculum and the **pedagogic** problems that teachers face of engaging pupils with knowledge that seems increasingly divorced from their experience become more acute and can easily lead to new inequalities.

Treating the curriculum as a social and historical process of specialisation points to a whole