School knowledge

The idea that both in the selection of content and in its structure, knowledge in schools or as expressed in the curriculum is different from the knowledge people draw on at work, in the home and in everyday life is as old as the institution of schooling itself. However, it was only as recently as the 1970s that the specific concept *school knowledge* was coined within the sociology of education as a way of challenging the taken for grantedness of the distinction between school and non-school knowledge within the curriculum. It was argued at the time that school/non school knowledge differences masked powerful but unspoken interests and had distributional consequences in terms of educational opportunities for different social classes. From this type of 'sociological' perspective the 'schooling' of knowledge was not the benign outcome of an evolving tradition, as most educationalists assumed, but the result of an unconscious and sometimes conscious exercise of power.

Despite the universalising claims made for schooling in democratic countries, it is difficult to deny that school knowledge represents a particular view of the world that is more likely to be explicit in subjects like history and English literature than in the natural sciences (although recent efforts to introduce creationism into school biology provides an exception to this trend). The questions 'whose literature?', 'whose history?' and even 'whose science?' inevitably followed the idea of school knowledge together with the idea that a more 'democratic' schooling of knowledge could be achieved that took into account the perspectives of subordinate and previously neglected social groups. However, the curriculum implications of these apparently emancipatory possibilities of the critique of 'school knowledge' turned out to be less straightforward than had been hoped. Although the curriculum could be transformed, at least in theory, into a site of wider political struggles, the substantive issues of 'what to teach?' and how to distinguish school from non-school knowledge remained. The most extreme argument was that school knowledge should reflect the experiences and interests of local and in particular cases, indigenous communities. However, it did not take long for it to be recognised that a locally-based curriculum would be likely to disadvantage working-class and ethnic minority pupils even more than the curriculum that was being replaced. The consequences of such well intentioned ideas have been well documented by educational researchers; perhaps the most well known case is the 1970s programme known as *Mathematics for the Majority (Spradberry 1976: Dowling 199)*. Without some criteria for distinguishing school from non-school knowledge that do not rely solely on answers to the question 'whose knowledge?' or who the pupils or teachers are, the sociology of school knowledge had little to offer teachers.

In addressing the issues raised by the sociology of school knowledge, I find it useful to distinguish between two ideas- ***Knowledge of the Powerful*** and ***Powerful Knowledge***. The former refers to who gets the knowledge and what they use it for. Even today, it is those with more power in society who not only have a greater sense of ownership of school knowledge but have far greater access to it. It is not surprising that many sociological critiques of school knowledge have treated school knowledge as almost synonymous with

Knowledge of the Powerful. However in these critiques school knowledge is associated with groups of knowers: those with the power to define what counts as knowledge. We learn nothing about the nature of the knowledge itself. We need, I suggest, another concept that I will call *powerful knowledge* to refer to what the knowledge can do. I am thinking, in particular, of the kind and reliability of the explanations that it provides. This was what the Chartists in the 19th Century were seeking with their famous slogan 'really useful knowledge'; it was a critique of a curriculum based largely on the scriptures. It is also, if not always consciously, what parents hope that their children will acquire at school; powerful knowledge that is not available at home. Powerful knowledge is most straightforwardly equated with the sciences; however a modern curriculum has to recognise the importance of a range of different kinds of knowledge offering explanations and understandings with different levels of reliability. If we accept the distinction between 'powerful and 'non-powerful (or powerless) knowledge, how school and non-school knowledge are differentiated is a crucial educational issue.

Powerful knowledge in modern societies is increasingly specialised and divided up into domains or fields. School knowledge, therefore, must be concerned with (a) the differences between different forms of specialist knowledge and the relations between them; (b) how this specialist knowledge differs from the knowledge people acquire in everyday life; (c) how the different domains (sciences and humanities) differ; and (d) how specialist knowledge is 'pedagogised'; in other words how it is paced, selected and sequenced in curricula for different groups of learners. Differentiation, therefore, in the sense I am using it here, refers to:

- the differences between school and everyday knowledge;
- the differences between knowledge domains, and how far they are expressed in different subjects like physics and history;
- the differences between specialist knowledge (e.g physics) and pedagogised knowledge (i.e.school physics for different groups of learners).

Schools are of course not always successful in enabling pupils to acquire powerful knowledge. It is also true that schools are more successful with some pupils than others. The success of pupils is highly dependent on the culture that they bring to school. Elite cultures that are less constrained by the material exigencies of life are, therefore, not surprisingly, far more congruent with powerful knowledge that is relatively independent of specific contexts, than disadvantaged and subordinate cultures. This means that if schools are to play a role in promoting social equality, they have to take the knowledge base of the curriculum very seriously, even when this appears to go against the immediate demands of pupils and sometimes their parents. For children from disadvantaged homes, active participation in school may be the only chance that they have to acquire powerful knowledge and move, intellectually at least, beyond their local and particular circumstances. It does them no service to construct a curriculum around their experience and, as a result, leave them there.

The most sustained and original attempt to conceptualise school knowledge is that developed by the English sociologist Basil Bernstein (1925-2000). Bernstein begins by distinguishing between the ***classification of knowledge*** (or the degree of insulation between knowledge domains) and the ***framing of knowledge*** (the degree of insulation between school knowledge and the everyday knowledge that pupils bring to school). Secondly, he proposes that ***classification*** can be 'strong' when domains are highly insulated from each other, as in such cases as physics and history, or 'weak' when the boundaries are blurred, as in social studies or general science programmes. Likewise, ***framing*** can be *strong* when school and non-school knowledge are insulated from each other, or *weak* when the boundaries between school and non-school knowledge are blurred, as in the case of many programmes in adult education and some curricula designed for less-able pupils. In his later work, Bernstein moved from a focus on relations between domains to the structure of the domains themselves by introducing the concepts of ***vertical*** and ***horizontal*** *knowledge* structures. This distinction refers to the way that different domains of knowledge embody different ideas of how knowledge progresses. In vertical knowledge structures – Bernstein's example is physics - progress takes place by moving to higher levels of abstraction (for example from Newton's laws of gravity to Einstein's theory of relativity). In horizontal knowledge structures, like the social sciences and the humanities, knowledge progresses by developing new languages which pose new problems. Bernstein's concepts provide us with a language for thinking about different curriculum possibilities and their implications. His second crucial argument is the link he makes between knowledge structures, boundaries and learner identities. His hypothesis is that strong boundaries between knowledge domains and between school and non-school knowledge play a critical role in supporting learner identities and, therefore, are a condition for learners to progress. Boundaries here refer to ***relations between contents*** not the ***knowledge contents*** themselves. Two further points are worth making about knowledge boundaries. Firstly, although strong boundaries have traditionally been expressed in disciplines and subjects, this is a historical fact and not necessarily the only form that strong boundaries can take. Secondly, acquiring powerful knowledge can not only involve the maintenance of *boundary maintenance* but the opportunities for *boundary crossing* and the questioning of learner identities .

In the 1970s and 1980s the sociology of school knowledge focused on the differentiation of school from non-school knowledge largely as an expression of power relations(for example, see Young and Whitty(1976). While not dismissing the importance of this view, this essay has argued that the forms that this differentiation can take are equally important if schools are to enable pupils to acquire knowledge that they would be unlikely to have access to at home or in the community. I have suggested that understanding the differences between school and non-school knowledge needs to begin with the ideas of the English sociologist Basil Bernstein, who conceptualised this differentiation in terms of the concepts ***classification*** and ***framing***. Contemporary forms of accountability are tending to weaken the boundaries between school and non-school knowledge on the grounds that they inhibit a more accessible and more economically-relevant curriculum. The issue that

Bernstein's analysis raises is that to follow this path may be to deny the conditions for acquiring powerful knowledge to the very pupils who are already disadvantaged by their social circumstances. Resolving this tension between political demands and educational realities is, I would argue, the major educational question for our time.

See also: Bernstein, Basil; curriculum; school; school culture; sociology of education; subjects

Further reading

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MICHAEL F.D. YOUNG
Institute of Education, University of London and Department of Education, University of Bath