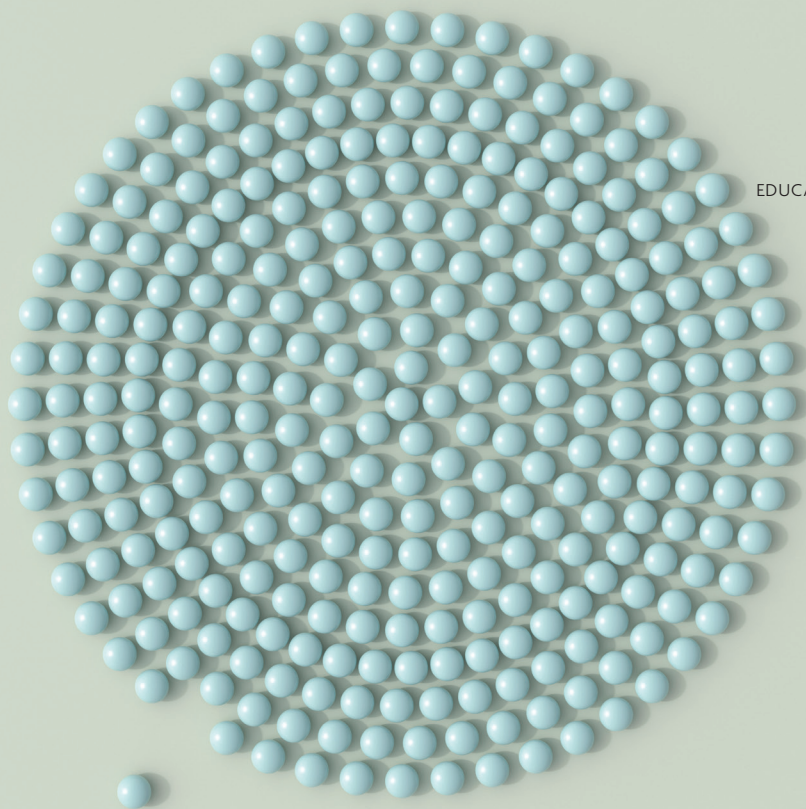




MICHAEL YOUNG
PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY OF
CURRICULUM, DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION, PRACTICE AND SOCIETY,
UCL IOE, UK



A knowledge-led curriculum: Pitfalls and possibilities

The breakthrough in my thinking about the curriculum came when I tried to answer the question that I now think every generation should ask: ‘what are schools for?’ (Young, 2011). I was deeply dissatisfied with most of the answers that my discipline, the sociology of education, gave; they were almost invariably trapped by one kind of functionalism or another. Those inspired by Marxism saw the curriculum as an instrument for the reproduction of capitalism’s social inequalities, whereas mainstream functionalists treat it as an instrument (albeit often not a very efficient one) for providing modern economies with the skills and knowledge they are thought to need; neither say much about the curriculum. David Baker (2014) provides an excellent critique of both.

Encouragingly, thinking about the curriculum is beginning to break out of this trap and to focus on the curriculum itself. This comes not only from the sociology of education – Moore (2008) and Young and Muller (2017) among others – but from head teachers

(Roberts, 2014; Knight, 2018), subject leaders and teacher educators (see the contribution from Christine Counsell in this issue of *Impact*). In other words, this fresh thinking about the curriculum is coming from curriculum leaders reflecting on their experience of schools. They have recognised, to paraphrase Bill Clinton, that ‘it’s the knowledge, stupid’. After all, what else could schools be for if it was not to provide access to knowledge that children would not have if they were forced to rely, as most were prior to the 19th century, on their families, communities and workplaces?

Unsurprisingly, the question of knowledge in the curriculum turns out to be far from straightforward, and not all head teachers and MAT (multi academy trust) CEOs (chief executive officers) are as wise as Carolyn Roberts (2014), Christine Counsell and Oli Knight (2018). Many who endorse the importance of a knowledge-rich curriculum are seduced by the good intentions of ED Hirsch and his lists of ‘what every child should know’ (Hirsch, 2004). They interpret this



as meaning ‘get the content right and all will be okay’ and, as a result, the vital and difficult role of teachers in what David Lambert calls ‘curriculum making’ (Roberts, 2014) gets lost and teachers become little more than transmitters of knowledge. This has a number of consequences.

One is that the importance of knowledge is increasingly dominated by political priorities (see Gibb, 2017). Gibb (and Gove before him), for example, uses the issue of knowledge as a basis for criticising the left-wing ‘education community’. They have extended this critique into policy by adding knowledge content to examination syllabuses in the hope that this will lead to higher levels of performance. Predictably, this has added pressure on schools, their teachers and pupils to focus more on examination outcomes and less on the pedagogic strategies that might facilitate better access to knowledge; this performance-driven approach is similar to the ‘state theory of learning’ that Hugh Lauder (Daniels et al., 2011) described.

Another consequence is the forms of discipline and pedagogy found in growing numbers of free schools and academies adopting a knowledge-led curriculum.

They are well described by George Duoblys, himself a teacher in one of these schools (Duoblys, 2017).

So does this mean that the rediscovery of ‘access to knowledge for all’ as the primary purpose of schools is little more than a slogan? I sincerely hope not. Improving real educational opportunities for all is always going to be a slow and difficult process, because it is not just about what goes on in the classroom but also involves changes in society as a whole. On the other hand, the idea of ‘knowledge for all’ and not just ‘for the high achievers’ does offer quite a fresh perspective on the curriculum and the question ‘what are schools for?’.

In the second part of this editorial I want to make two suggestions. One is that while the goal of ‘access to knowledge for all’ is important, it must be understood as a vision of the future for schools and not associated with immediate outcomes. While it cannot be adopted like a new marking scheme or a change in the timetable, it can lead teachers to think about their role in new ways. The starting assumption of such a vision is that we are all born with a ‘desire for knowledge’, as the psychologist Jacques Lacan put

it. At the same time, some children may lose much of this desire by the time they reach secondary or even primary school. However, it does not mean that they are ‘less able’ or ‘non-academic’.

It follows that it is important for schools to distinguish between ‘access to knowledge for all’ as a long-term curriculum vision and what can be achieved in the short term. A knowledge-rich curriculum is a theory, in the normative sense; it defines what it is to be a teacher and the purpose of schools. Unless all understand this, whether or not we are classroom teachers, it can become little more than a way of putting all the responsibility for the failure of too many pupils on teachers or on what is assumed to be their lack of motivation and aspirations.

Why does the way schools are organised matter?

There are two distinctive features of schools that it is worth thinking about, one external and one internal. Their external feature is that they are separate from the communities where their pupils come from. This is true for every school, whether it is an elite fee-paying school where parents pay for their children to be boarders or a school established to serve a local community. Much educational policy aiming to benefit low-achieving pupils has been based on the assumption that this separation has negative consequences for them and needs to be overcome. However, these boundaries have a purpose; they did not develop arbitrarily. I want to reverse the argument and suggest that the separation of children from their everyday experience is, at least potentially, a condition for them to acquire knowledge beyond that experience. It is, in effect, a fundamental condition for them to acquire new knowledge. This is not to dismiss the everyday experience of pupils; it is a vital resource and needs to be taken account of by all teachers. It is to state that for a curriculum to rely on the experience of pupils alone limits what they can learn to that experience.

The internal structure of schools refers to the hierarchy between teachers and pupils and the structure of the curriculum, which, as pupils grow older, increasingly takes the form of specialised subjects. Whereas the teacher/pupil hierarchy has parallels in parent/child relationships, the curriculum, which divides teaching and learning into distinct knowledge domains, is unique to schools (and other educational institutions). It is this structuring of

knowledge independently of the experience of pupils that offers the possibility for pupils to think beyond their experience and enable them, as the sociologist Basil Bernstein put it, ‘to think the unthinkable and the not yet thought’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31).

Curricula like the RSA’s Opening Minds (<http://www.rsaopeningminds.org.uk>), with the best of intentions, have focused on helping low-achieving pupils by breaking down the boundaries between academic subjects and the knowledge that pupils can acquire outside school. However, much research has emphasised that it is these subject boundaries and the specialisation of knowledge that they are associated with that are a condition for pupils to progress and acquire new knowledge. This is not to deny that many pupils, especially those from disadvantaged homes, feel alienated from the curriculum or that overcoming disaffection will be far more difficult in schools recruiting a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged communities. The problem is both a curriculum and a pedagogic one, which some schools adopting a knowledge-rich curriculum are beginning to address, but it is also a political problem that reflects wider social inequalities. It is perhaps best understood as a product of our reluctance to recognise the extent to which pupil failure is a problem of the **distribution of resources** in society as much as, if not more than, it is a problem of **distribution of abilities**.

High-resource and low-resource curricula

The government has attempted to break with the assumption that only some pupils can acquire knowledge through academic subjects. They have assumed that the curriculum model associated with the most high-performing schools – selective schools with fee-paying students – can be a model for all schools. However, what the government fails to acknowledge is that the curriculum found in public schools like Eton, Winchester and St Paul’s (to name three at random), which enable most pupils to gain high grades in 11 or 12 GCSE subjects, is a high-resource curriculum. The high level of pupil fees enables such schools to include material resources such as grounds, buildings and equipment, and human resources such as class sizes, specialist subject teachers and extra-curricular facilities in sports and arts that would be unthinkable in a typical state-funded school. Furthermore, there is the hidden ‘cultural subsidy’ that middle class, fee-paying pupils

› bring with them.

This is not to dismiss what knowledge-led curriculum schools are trying to do. It is possible that these schools will achieve good or even excellent examination results. However, it is to suggest that unless there is some move to equalise resources, the private school curriculum model is likely to have negative consequences for state-funded schools with far fewer resources. Such schools could be (or already may be) forced to adopt forms of discipline and pedagogy that bear little relationship to those found in the schools on which their curriculum is modelled.

Is there another way?

The common goal of ‘knowledge for all’ in all schools undoubtedly represents an important break with the past; however, in its present form it splits the curriculum from its costs, and inequality may even increase, especially when per-school funding is cut. Just think of the costs of basing not only the curriculum model but also the resource model of state schools on the public schools. It is ironic that the idea of an academic curriculum for all, at least up to the age of 16, has arisen from the political right wing, given their ambiguous relationship with the expansion of educational opportunities. In the past, this was often justified by the assumption, hardly mentioned today, that educational inequality is justified by the distribution of abilities.

Why the ‘knowledge issue’ has arisen only on the political right is not easy to explain; however, it is highlighted by the almost total avoidance of the recent debate about ‘a knowledge-rich curriculum’ by the Labour Party. It may be a product of two

deeper confusions. One is about the unrecognised two faces of formal education’s ‘conservatism’. Formal education is intrinsically ‘conservative’, through the process by which one generation passes on what it knows to the next. However, a mistake sometimes made by ‘progressive’ educationists in particular is to equate this with the conservatism of using education to preserve privileges (such as those of the fee-paying public schools). The other possible cause of progressive educators being seen as almost anti-knowledge is that we have no history of pedagogic theory in England, with the consequence that good teaching is understood as child-centred and an emphasis on knowledge is seen as ‘back to Gradgrind’. What this fails to recognise is that the elite (except in unique cases such as Summerhill) never endorse a child-centred approach for their children. As a result, far too many working class children are denied access to the knowledge that the middle class take for granted, and any emphasis on ‘knowledge’ is easily interpreted as a form of control and not as a source of emancipation – when, of course, it is potentially both. There are signs, and not only in this issue of *Impact*, of new thinking that combines a pedagogy that *engages students* with a curriculum based on the *disciplinary knowledge*. This is an important development. However, the gains will be isolated, and even short-lived, unless the political problem of an unequal distribution of resources is addressed. **i**

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