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# Knowledge, culture and the curriculum in Britain, 1944 to the present

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## Abstract

The school curriculum is a vital battlefield on which versions of the 'good society' are fought over. For much of the past five decades, the educational left has been losing that battle. Optimistic calls for a curriculum to support a 'common culture' fragmented in the face of economic, social and cultural changes. This article charts debates about curriculum and culture, focusing on the work of the sociologist of education Michael Young, who spent his academic life at the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). It surveys the educational arguments of the New Left in the 1960s, the turn towards knowledge and control and neo-Marxism in the 1970s, the failed modernisations of the 1990s and the influence of postmodern culture on curriculum and school subjects. Finally, it assesses recent moves to reassert the importance of knowledge over skills and processes. The crisis in curriculum is reflective of

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wider crises in British society, and, it is suggested, Young offers a guide to what comes next.

**Keywords** curriculum; school knowledge; capitalism; Michael Young; postmodernism

## Introduction

The most persistent dilemmas in educational debate in this century have been concerned with kinds of knowledge. In terms of school or university curricula, in relation to reorganization and democratization of provision, in connection with the educational ideas of every variety, there has emerged the question of access to knowledge, to the most appropriate knowledge, to one curriculum or another ... The school curriculum has been seen, rightly, as a vital battlefield on which competing social and cultural ideals wage war. (Silver, 1980: 109)

This article surveys the vital battlefield of the school curriculum in England. Its central figure is Michael Young, who, in 2021, celebrated 53 years at the IOE. Young's career commenced in a momentous year – 1968 – and this points towards the political import of his work. Young has been a lifelong member of the Labour Party, and this indeed has explained his academic interests in the disappointments of the New Left after 1956 (Young, 2009). For those on the broad educational left, it is sobering to observe that those political disappointments have formed the backdrop to debates about the curriculum. Thinking about Michael Young's work necessarily involves thinking about a succession of failed modernisations, the role that education has played in social and cultural change, and the prospects for alternative futures.

Young's work is the starting point, but this article takes us into conversations with other figures (many of whom also worked at the IOE) and other debates and developments. This is not surprising, since one person cannot possibly hold all this together. If we think about the changes taking place between 1968 and 2022, and how these have shaped – at different times and in different ways – curriculum arguments, we can discern at least seven major shifts. These are:

- secularisation and the death of Christian Britain
- the changing class relations
- the transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial society
- the loss of Empire and the rise of a multiracial society
- the transformation of gender relations: changing women, changing men
- the postmodernisation of culture
- the green transition.

These interrelated shifts in economy, politics and culture have all found expression in curriculum arguments at various times, and they are listed here to set down what has been going on. They will appear throughout the article. Before we go any further, though, we must define how the term 'curriculum' is used in this article.

In British curriculum studies, the term tends to be used quite pragmatically (how to select and organise content) or theoretically (as in the idea that the curriculum contains ideology). Taken together, and viewed in a longer-term perspective, curriculum is closely associated with culture, itself one of the most complex words in the language (R. Williams, 1976). Fred Inglis (1985: 142) captures the idea: 'The curriculum should be understood as an ensemble of stories told by one generation to the next about what the possibilities are for the future and what it may be going to be like to attempt to live well at the time.'

The story told to generations of British children for much of the twentieth century was one of a prosperous and fair-minded society based on hard work that had managed to harness natural resources, feed itself and make a successful transition to an industrial society based around large towns and democracy. This was the story of a nation that was able to go out and forge relations with other nations, and to offer others a model of civilisation (Thomas, 2018). According to this story, Britain was, give and take, a harmonious society where classes and regions all contributed to the common wealth. To this basic structure, other subplots were added, for instance, that the wealth of the nation allowed it to solve the worst excesses of the industrial revolution, and that the benevolent state responded to pressure

to provide welfare. Each subject of the curriculum told its own part of the story. Subjects came and went. Those that remained changed, especially their content and methods. Curriculum change tended to be piecemeal: religious education learned to accommodate changing patterns of faith as it became religious studies (Copley, 2005); history adjusted to tell stories 'from below' or to narrate a four nations approach (Cannadine et al., 2011); and so on.

Such 'narrations of the nation' are political. They can be, and are, contested. There are struggles over which aspect of the story to emphasise, and none of this is smooth and consensual. As Inglis (1985: 142) notes, 'different world-pictures are fought over'. At times of social confusion, the battle over knowledge and the curriculum becomes intense, and all that was solid in the curriculum starts to melt. The advantage of taking a 'big picture' approach is that it allows us to see the key moments when curriculum shifts. We should not assume that what is taught in schools is the most important aspect of a nation's life, or that changing the curriculum means that we can change society. However, to study a nation's curriculum is to get a sense of the issues that preoccupy it.

The digested read of this article is this: in Britain, since the Second World War, the curriculum question – what is to be taught – has remained open. This is, in part, because the question of what the nation needs to know has been the subject of continued, and sometimes intense, debate. This, itself, is a reflection of the continuing crisis of British modernity – the question of how Britain is to make sense of its changing place in a global economy. In what follows, I attempt to set out some key moments in this long and continuing story, and try to suggest where we are now. As the article unfolds, it focuses on key publications in Michael Young's writing. I use books he has published for two reasons. First, it is these that have been most widely read and used by teachers and school leaders concerned with the school curriculum. Second, these major book publications have appeared at key moments of economic and political change – for example 1971, 1976, 1998, 2008 – and therefore suggest that it is possible to read Young's work in the context of the changing shape of capitalism in Britain (J. Morgan, 2018).

## Beyond 1945

On the eve of the Second World War, Britain remained sharply divided along traditional class lines in terms of access to political, educational and cultural power (McKibbin, 1998). The war provided an opportunity for renewal, to build a modern democracy based on shared values and ideas of progress (K. Morgan, 1989). Education was central to this. The crucial arguments about schooling in the 1945–65 period were about access to schooling for hitherto excluded working-class children. In a society experiencing rapid shifts in culture and communication, the question of what was taught in schools – the curriculum content – came to the fore.

The early post-war school curriculum reflected the tastes and preferences of elites. It comprised the subjects set out in the Secondary Regulations of 1904 (Goodson, 1998). The private schools maintained their role as 'engines of privilege' (Green and Kynaston, 2019) and provided the curriculum 'model' for the grammar schools. Secondary modern schools, which catered for those students expected to leave at the earliest opportunity, had a more basic offering. The school leaving age was raised to 15 in 1948, but the programme of school building was slow, and there were teacher shortages (Addison, 2010).

Concerns about the extent to which educational access was available reflected a wider debate on the left about the failures of the Labour Party to bring about significant change. As the party lost successive elections in the 1950s, a division opened up between those who saw the opportunity for slow and gradual improvement based on the idea that a new capitalism was in the making and those who questioned the assumptions of welfare capitalism. In *The Future of Socialism*, Crosland (1956) argued that the old capitalist class no longer had control of the means of production, which was now in the hands of a new managerial class, and that the economy was fundamentally shifting, with opportunities for consumption and affluence. Writers associated with the first New Left contested this. Modernisation had not led to vast improvements for the majority of working-class people. Indeed, the new affluence threatened to erode working-class culture and community (Hoggart, 1957).

In *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams (1961) argued that the curriculum was a selection from the culture, and charted the various traditions that shaped the curriculum. He looked forward to a common culture in which all social classes could participate. The New Left was keen to acknowledge – and challenge – the ways in which the new 'mass society' was shaping culture. Stuart Hall's (1958) 'Absolute beginnings', published in the *Universities and Left Review*, charted the emergence of a spirited

and lively youth culture in post-war Britain. Hall showed how teachers in the contemporary schools system had limited capacity to engage with young people and their experiences, but remained hopeful that an approach to teaching might develop that could recognise what was positive about those cultural experiences and provide young people with a training in critical literacy. Hall (1958: 20) and colleagues looked to a common culture, available to all and modified by the experiences of different social groups, as 'the only guarantee we possess of a genuinely democratic society'.

What is significant here is how the curriculum was regarded as a means of overcoming long-standing and deep-seated class divisions in Britain. From this period, two other contributions to the New Left's analysis of education and the curriculum are notable. First, Juliet Mitchell's (1965) 'Women: the longest revolution', directly addressing Williams's argument, showed how class-based education is also shaped by gender. Working-class girls faced a double oppression, with limited subject choices and options. Second, Quintin Hoare (1965: n.p.) provided a vigorous attack on the 'weak reformism' of the Labour Party, which, he argued, 'has at no time offered a global challenge to the present system'. Significantly, he pointed to how Labour had 'never attacked the vital centre of the system, the curriculum, the content of what is taught'. These two papers point to important ways in which the curriculum was to become central to debates about socialism and education. Hoare (1965) argued that a theory of education is central to any socialist theory, and that in Britain there was just one body of work in the field of education that was 'genuinely revolutionary' – that produced by Basil Bernstein. Bernstein's work was crucial because it suggested that class divisions are consolidated at a more intimate level than was usually imagined by the sociology of the time. Hoare is referring to Bernstein's studies in sociolinguistics that pointed to the ways in which working-class language was devalued, but this also chimes with Bernstein's later insight that the struggle over the curriculum is a struggle over the type of society. It is in the processes of the school and classroom that social class is reproduced. This is the fundamental insight that informed the work surrounding Michael Young's (1971) famous book *Knowledge and Control*.

## Knowledge and control

In *Knowledge and Control* Young (1971) assembled a series of papers originally presented at the British Sociological Association conference in Durham in 1968. That date is significant. The long post-war boom that had funded educational expansion was ending. The rate of profit was falling, and the record of the Labour governments was being closely scrutinised (R. Williams, 1968). Writers in the New Left insisted on the totality of social process. They were interested in how economics, politics and culture fitted together (Anderson, 1968).

When it came to education, the New Left stressed that schooling and the content and form of the curriculum cannot be analysed without reference to the society of which it is part. This was the fundamental insight of early work in the 'New Sociology of Education', which held that the continued failure of working-class children in school could not be understood by correlating measures of social deprivation. Instead, the challenge was to make problematic much that was taken for granted in schooling and education. Thus, if working-class children fail in school, it is important to look inside the 'black box' of the classroom to understand how educational processes operate.

The importance of seeing education as part of a social totality is clear in Young's (1971: 40) seminal contribution to *Knowledge and Control*, which called for studies that attempt to relate the 'principles of selection and organisation that underlie curricula to the institutional and interactional setting in schools and classroom and to the wider social structure'. The challenge was how to do this, since, 'we do not know how the relations between the economy and the educational system produce different degrees and kinds of stratification of knowledge' (Young, 1971: 40). The chapters in *Knowledge and Control* represented the variety of methodological approaches that reflected changes in academic sociology at the time, as the discipline sought to come to terms with the realisation that the post-war dream of an ordered and functional society had failed to materialise (Harris, 1992).

At this point, overt politics were downplayed. Young's own contributions to *Knowledge and Control* avoided left political discussions (there are non-committal references to Perry Anderson and Raymond Williams). The target was to interrupt mainstream approaches to the study of education. Bernstein had been important in showing that there was a pattern to individual educational failure. It was this that Young took up, and he suggested that the explanation lay with the structure and organisation of knowledge.

*Knowledge and Control* cast a long shadow over curriculum debates in Britain. This has something to do with its timing. Simon During (2010: 96) has argued that the moment of 'theory' in Britain was 1968 and a response to 'the crisis of socialism under welfarism'. The same is true of 'curriculum theory' in Britain, and *Knowledge and Control* was the first coherent response to the apparent failure of post-war educational change. It recognised that patterns of selection and transmission of knowledge were part of the process through which a class-based society was reproduced. However, at this point, the concepts through which to make sense of continuing educational inequality were unavailable. These would soon follow, with the publication (in English) of Louis Althusser's (1971) famous essay on ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) and the concept of hegemony associated with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Between the publication of *Knowledge and Control* in 1971 and Young and Whitty's *Society, State and Schooling* in 1977, these concepts – ideology and hegemony – transformed curriculum debate on the educational left.

*Knowledge and Control's* central claim was that school knowledge is not a neutral representation of reality, but is selective and represents the world views and interests of the powerful. This resonated with educational activists, as the assumptions of 'liberal' education were challenged from both the right and the left. By the 1970s, there was a strong counter-reaction to the educational reforms of the post-war period. Critics on the right argued that comprehensive schooling and the expansion of higher education had lowered academic standards, and produced a crisis of authority.

For the left, the curriculum debate centred on questions of class, the state, ideology and hegemony. Musgrove (1979) offers a precise date for this – the publication in 1972 of Herb Gintis's critical review of Ivan Illich's (1969) *Deschooling Society*. Previewing the argument he was to make a few years later with Samuel Bowles (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), Gintis (1972) stressed the correspondence between the needs of capital for a credentialed labour force, adding a US dimension to Althusser's (1971) ISA essay. These ideas filtered into educational debate in Britain as the social consensus crumbled, and are indicative of a distinct 'Marxist turn' in educational studies, culminating in Dale et al.'s (1976) characterisation of liberal education in the Open University reader *Schooling and Capitalism* (see Hammersley, 2016; J. Morgan, 2020). It is significant that both Bernstein's and Young's work, perhaps against their own inclinations, began to incorporate Marxist concepts during this period (Sharp, 1980). Feminist and anti-racist activists also drew on the idea that school knowledge reflected the interests of the powerful (Barrett, 1980; Coard, 1971). The point is that, for the educational left, the school curriculum – the subjects taught in schools and their content – became the object of political struggle.

Viewed with a wider lens, this was part of a historic shift in the role of the state and the 'liberal welfarist' ideology held by many public sector workers, including teachers (The London–Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). From the mid-1960s, British capital was changing. Its rate of profit was declining, and it sought to find new ways to accumulate profits. The crisis was resolved structurally through amalgamations and mergers, rationalisation of production to realise economies of scale, an increase in the technological component of capital and relocation overseas. These strategies had effects on people living in Britain. Most notably, in calls for a reduction in public expenditure, but also in calls for workers to work harder, to meet the needs of industry or the economy that was presented as synonymous with the national interest.

As Salter and Tapper (1981) argued, this was nothing less than a shift in the ruling elite ideology. The idea of liberal education had taken root and flourished in the relative prosperity of the post-war economic growth, but as growth slowed, 'the manpower ideology' took hold. The University, it was said, promoted values and attitudes opposed to enterprise and industry. Although in the early 1970s governments still sought the expansion of higher education, students were encouraged to base their subject choices on the value added to future careers. However, such moves to bring education into line with the economy could only work if there was a similar culture shift in the upper years of secondary schooling, and this was reflected in the arguments leading up to the Great Debate and Prime Minister James Callaghan's Speech at Ruskin College in October 1976.

These arguments about knowledge, education and the state animated Michael Young's work in this period, notably in two collections edited with Geoff Whitty. Whereas Young's writing on school knowledge in the early 1970s had focused on the phenomenological questions of how groups 'collectively order their world and produce knowledge' (Sharp, 1980: 81), he increasingly came to see the curriculum as a political construction. When *Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge* was published, Whitty and Young (1976: 2) acknowledged that to think that teachers critically examining their own practices would lead to systemic change was 'ludicrously naïve'.

This was not to say that what went on in schools and classrooms was unimportant, but that 'the practices which keep society going and hide the ideological dimensions of the prevailing notions of knowledge from public view take place within a context as wide as capitalist society itself' (Whitty and Young, 1976: 2). Whitty and Young's introductory essay for the book not only warned against the idea that everything that happens in schools is a reflection of capitalist political economy, but also stressed the limits to schooling's autonomy. This point was made even more strongly in *Society, State and Schooling* (Young and Whitty, 1977), a collection from which the optimism found in *Knowledge and Control* is distinctly lacking. This mirrored the political shifts of the time. It was clear that, in order to reshape the aims and purposes of schooling, the capitalist state was prepared to intervene at the very level of the curriculum – what is taught and learned in schools and classrooms. As Young and Whitty (1977: 1) commented, 'One of the most striking features of the world of education, compared with that of only ten years ago, is the sudden disappearance of the overwhelming assumption that schooling is a "good thing"'.

### A left modernisation?

Young and Whitty's (1977) comment proved prophetic. For the next decade and a half, the educational left was on the defensive, seeking to find answers to the collapse of the social democratic consensus (CCCS, 1981). The economic recession of 1979–81 was a pivotal moment. Britain saw the loss of manufacturing jobs, the re-emergence of the north–south divide, growing chasms between the constituent nations of the UK, and urban unrest in the inner areas of large cities. Youth unemployment and the broken transmission from school to work meant education was part of the crisis. Within less than a decade, 'learning to labour' (Willis, 1977) had become 'schooling for the dole' (Bates et al., 1984).

Thatcherism posed challenges for the educational left. There was a wide range of responses. One was the continued belief in the value of the common school based around comprehensive education, and the view that the general election defeat of 1979 was a temporary setback, and that normality would resume as Conservative policies proved unpopular. Other commentators grasped the deeper significance of the changes and acknowledged that things were changing, that social democracy was past its limits and that new responses were required (Donald and Wolpe, 1983).

It is clear that an older version of socialist education was under threat as British capitalism experienced a deep-seated crisis. Teachers in school – at the 'chalk face' of the curriculum – faced a rapidly changing market culture. For many, the struggle was to maintain control over their work, and resist moves towards the centralisation of the curriculum (Helsby, 1999). The National Curriculum was seen by many on the left as an imposition, a reactionary move to hark back to former national glories, an attempt to take Britain back to the future or even a 'curriculum of the dead' (Ball, 1993). For many left critics of the National Curriculum, school subjects were a symbol of tradition, opposed to change. However, conservatism was itself riven by internal arguments between traditionalists and modernisers, especially when it came to technology and the vocational curriculum (Robins and Webster, 1989). The working out of this tension in the 'Long Decade' (1979–97) of Conservative rule would eventually give rise to optimistic accounts of the 'learning society' and 'left modernisation'. By the mid-1990s, educational commentators on the left felt confident enough to speculate on 'education after the Conservatives' (Hatcher and Jones, 1996).

In the run-up to taking power in 1997, New Labour had little to say about curriculum matters, and was largely content to follow Conservative policies. It certainly had little appetite for radical conceptions of curriculum reform. However, the size of its majority, the sense that there was a possibility of modernisation, and the forces unleashed by social and cultural change, ensured that alternative analyses were possible. Most importantly, New Labour seemed to have a theory of how society was changing, based on the idea that tumultuous shifts in the political and economic landscape posed challenges and, at the same time, afforded opportunities (Leggott, 2005). For many on the educational left, there was a historic opportunity to bring about a long-awaited modernisation of the educational system. Devolution for Scotland and Wales offered the possibility for divergent paths in terms of national curricula.

An influential analysis – which stressed the importance of economic change – came from a small group of 'left modernisers' who made the argument that advanced Western economies were in the process of entering a new mode of accumulation. As Brown and Lauder (1992: 1) stated, 'The social and economic world has been transformed in a number of significant ways during the closing decades of the twentieth century.' This entailed a shift from a mass-production Fordist economy to a post-Fordist one

based around flexible specialisation and small-batch production. This presented a chance to reorganise education systems so that there was a closer correspondence between the economy and schooling. The goal was to shift from a low-skill, low-trust system in which the majority of working-class children left school with few formal qualifications to a high-skill and high-trust system that would overcome the traditional academic and vocational divide (Brown and Lauder, 2000). In this vision, schooling would provide both the human capital and the social cohesion required for a modern, social democratic society (Avis et al., 1996).

Michael Young's (1998) *The Curriculum of the Future* contributed to this debate on educational modernisation. It followed the analysis of the 'left modernisers' that the economic shifts taking place in late capitalism provided the possibility for different ways to organise knowledge and to overcome the historic and socially constructed academic–vocational divide. *The Curriculum of the Future* reflected Young's earlier concern with educational access that animated debates in the New Sociology of Education, but added some important dimensions. First, it was much clearer in its assessment that educational inequalities result in part from the long-term development of the UK state and its failure to modernise. This was reflected in the academic–vocational divide. Second, there was greater focus in *The Curriculum of the Future* on the nature of the economy. The changes taking place in production offered the chance to rethink what was taught and how knowledge was organised. Mass production had led to what Young (1998: 77) called 'divisive specialisation', mirrored in a curriculum divided between 'academic' and 'vocational' routes, and highly segregated subject specialisms. The embryonic economic 'new times' held the prospect of 'connective specialisation', which 'refers explicitly to the interdependence of different specialists and contrasts with the insularity of traditional subject specialists'. Finally, changing the curriculum would require political commitment, and Young's work sought to intervene in policy debates (reflecting his institutional location in the Post-16 Centre at the IOE).

Young worked closely at this time with Ken Spours, who has continued to display a Gramsci-inspired 'optimism of the will' around 'left-modernisation' (COMPASS, 2018). Young himself raised some doubts about the prospects for significant change, and New Labour's economic strategy relied on the expansion of credit to fuel economic demand, while simultaneously continuing the neoliberal economic model. It presided over growing levels of inequality (Elliott and Atkinson, 2007).

## New Labour and postmodern knowledge

The essays for *The Curriculum of the Future* took shape as New Labour prepared for government. It reflected a moment of guarded optimism. This section explores the changes that took place in the New Labour years, leading to the next crisis of capitalism, and the publication of Young's (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. The cultural corollary of post-Fordism was postmodernism (Harvey, 1989). Although this term has lost its resonance – few people identify themselves as postmodernists now (see Jeffries, 2021) – it appealed to many on the educational left for its progressive potential. Indeed, postmodernism first appeared as a term in the lexicon of the British left-intelligentsia in the 1980s. It was an acknowledgement that the post-war consensus had begun to crumble, and that the New Right had fared better in responding. Most importantly, it offered the possibility to overthrow tradition (and its associated elitism) and older, fixed social patterns, in order to revel in the opportunities to forge new, more flexible identities (Hall and Jacques, 1989). This 'postmodernisation' extended to the curriculum.

The post-war decades had a distinctive 'modern' look and feel. The backdrop was the new spaces that were the foundations for the making of modern Britain: New Towns, council estates, roads and motorways, industrial estates and shopping centres. There were established patterns of living and working based around the community and the locality, and a broadly shared experience of television and holidays. There were recognised and accepted ways of growing up (often along predictable lines of gender) and making the transition to adulthood and the world of work (also gendered).

The school curriculum reflected this 'modern' structure of feeling, and, at its best, was successful in evoking a common experience while allowing for degrees of difference and class and regional variations. Thus, at its high point, the curriculum supported the idea of a broadly Christian nation, although one that was learning to come to terms with the meanings of decline in church attendance and the rise of a multifaith society (Brown, 2006). Subjects such as geography narrated the story of the gradual domination of nature by humans in the form of development, and history the triumph of democracy over fascism and communism. Science – aided by new laboratories and apparatus funded through educational expansion – presented itself as the means of improving life for people both at home and

abroad. The curriculum continued to offer strong messages about gender roles, notably in the form of 'boys' and 'girls' subjects, and was based on a liberal notion of 'good' culture (in English, art, music) that appeared to some as unreflective of a society that had become increasingly multicultural (DES, 1985). The assumption that underpinned the curriculum was that economic growth and prosperity would continue and spread. Citizenship, always too formal a concept in a nation that lacked a written constitution, was expressed through the pastoral curriculum, which taught a story of morality and tolerance.

In the face of economic and cultural change, these patterns began to shift. The old patterns of industry began to crumble and new shopping malls and privatised estates took their place. There were new forms of masculinities and new femininities, and sexual identity was more fluid (Weeks, 2007). A market culture offered new ways to imagine one's future roles. The school curriculum was one site where these changes were contested, not least in the renaming of subjects (home economics versus domestic science or food technology, the rise of business studies and so on), changes in the nature of subjects (for example, towards new individual-oriented sports in PE) or new subjects of the self (for example, the growth of psychology). 'Traditional' school subjects registered change. Thus, in English there were important debates about the texts that comprised the canon, and how these reflected the experience of a multicultural society, as well as arguments about the relationship between English and media studies. Religious studies saw moves to teach a multifaith curriculum and the rise of spirituality education. Music witnessed the same struggles over the status of Western classical music and popular music. In science, environmental risks were acknowledged through moves to teach 'public understanding of science'. Some history curricula took on demands to teach local narratives and four-nations history, and to recognise Black History Month. New themes emerged, such as the focus on creativity and personalisation. There was also a focus on the moralisation of the school curriculum, which led some commentators to complain that the school curriculum had become a vehicle for New Labour's ideological projects around sustainability and health and well-being (A. Williams, 2008; Hayes and Ecclestone, 2009).

In the early 2000s, some educators expressed their concern that the question of knowledge (curriculum content) seemed to be of secondary importance in discussions of educational change. The socialisation function of schooling seemed to dominate over its transmission role. Policy focused on National Strategies that were generic (literacy, numeracy, thinking skills and so on), and these dominated teacher education programmes (Moore, 2006). There was also a focus on pedagogy – especially in terms of 'learning how to learn' and the emergence of competences, and the personalisation of learning. Such changes in the status of knowledge were reflective of changes to economy and society. This was a consumer's world, underpinned by continued economic growth and continuous educational 'improvements' (Hartley, 2012).

*Bringing Knowledge Back In* was Michael Young's (2008) attempt to come to terms with these developments. If the earlier *Curriculum of the Future* (Young, 1998) had been cautiously optimistic about the 'knowledge economy', the puzzle was now on how there was so little discussion of what knowledge is required in the new economic conditions. *Bringing Knowledge Back In* was a theoretical contribution that sought to explore 'the spaces that are still available for scholarship and research in educational studies that are not directly related to particular policies and practices' (Young, 2008: xv). The theoretical perspective was social realism. However, the title resonated with those educators who were concerned about moves to reduce the significance of knowledge in the curriculum, and Young's status as a key figure in debates about the school curriculum guaranteed that his ideas were sought after and listened to by school leaders and teachers. Thus, a follow-up book *Knowledge and the Future School* (Young and Lambert, 2014) continued the concern with policies and practices. Young and Lambert (2014: 12) argued that, for many in education today, 'knowledge is an uncomfortable word'. For some teachers, knowledge is 'elitist and has conservative connotations', and school subjects are regarded as suspicious because they are associated with 'authority' and can seem irrelevant to the lives of students growing up in a fast-changing world.

*Knowledge and the Future School* clarified and popularised the notion of what Young and Muller (2010) called 'three futures' for educational knowledge, and advocated for the teaching of 'powerful knowledge'. The wider import of the book was its challenge to school leaders to refocus their attention on the question of knowledge and curriculum – in other words, to pose the question of 'what are schools for'. As such, it served to return debate about the curriculum to the types of questions posed in earlier times by commentators such as Young, Silver and Inglis – what is the relationship between knowledge, curriculum and culture?



*Bringing Knowledge Back In* (Young, 2008) and *Knowledge and the Future School* (Young and Lambert, 2014) have prompted an important set of debates about knowledge and the curriculum in Britain. I think it is possible to identify four ways in which Young's arguments are evident.

First, there was the initial 'shock' of Young's volte-face on the question of knowledge. This is unsurprising. *Knowledge and Control* (Young, 1971) was the key text in the educational movements of the 1970s, and the assumption that knowledge is power was widely accepted by many progressive educators. It chimed well with social movements and spawned a whole series of ideology critiques. It also supported the notion of teachers' agency – 'radical' teachers could see themselves as agents of change. Indeed, Rob Moore (2004) argued that epistemological relativism was the default position for educational progressives. Therefore, for an important curriculum theorist such as Young to revise his position seemed to strike at the very heart of the educational left. Even Geoff Whitty (2018), Young's long-time colleague and friend, wondered aloud whether Young had become too entangled with the educational right. Indeed, some politicians and political groups have used Young's ideas as part of a call for a return to traditional 'knowledge-rich' curricula, and have latched on to Young's argument that school subjects provide the best vehicle for delivering a curriculum with high levels of epistemic quality (Claxton, 2021). Once again, the focus on school subjects sits oddly with much of the thinking of the educational left, which has tended to favour forms of 'integration' and 'interdisciplinarity'.

Once this initial furore subsided however, a second, more reflective phase opened up in the interpretation of Young's recent work, which reflects efforts to clarify different forms of knowledge, particularly around 'powerful knowledge' and what a curriculum based on 'Future 3' type knowledge might look like (Young and Muller, 2010). This work has occurred within school subjects such as geography, history, science and English (Chapman, 2021; Eaglestone, 2020). This has been accompanied by interest in the role of teachers in curriculum making (for example, Deng, 2020).

At its best, this curriculum-making work begins to make links with what I see as a third strand evident of Young's call for a renewed focus on 'what school is for'. Asking this question immediately takes us to wider questions about access, political economy, and social and cultural change, and reminds us that, considered as a whole, Young's work has enabled reflection on these. One of the aims of the present article is to locate Michael Young's work within a wider set of debates about the radical tradition (Inglis, 1982). His turn towards Durkheim suggests the importance of seeing education – and thus, knowledge and curriculum – as a means of maintaining social integration, at a time when much of the radical left seeks to 'deconstruct' the curriculum so as to effect social change. While Young has avoided providing detailed 'blueprints', his work encourages analysis of the aims or purposes of the curriculum. For instance, posing the question of 'what school is for' takes us into the realms of the climate crisis (what forms of knowledge are required and how can school subjects contribute), what access to knowledge and qualifications means in an economy that is increasingly divided, and where the 'limits to growth' are being reached.

Fourth, the final area where Young's recent work has caused controversy relates to arguments about the status of knowledge in relation to global shifts in knowledge production (for example, Connell, 2019). For some, 'powerful knowledge' – produced and refined in universities – is knowledge that is invariably tainted by its association with Western imperialism. Thus, for some educators, the insistence that school knowledge is specialised knowledge that has qualities not available through the 'everyday knowledges' possessed by communities and students is seen to downplay the 'epistemic violence' of academic knowledge production (Sriprakash et al., 2022: 53).

The years since 2008 have seen increased focus in educational debates about the question of knowledge. Of course, much work seeks practical solutions to the curriculum problem. However, Young's work insists that the curriculum is part of a contest over the meaning and direction of social and cultural change. When the world changes, the 'ensemble of stories' that makes up the school curriculum is subject to change.

## The vital battlefield

After the global financial crash of 2007–8, a new phase opened up in British politics. New Labour was discredited, and the door opened for a phase of austerity and fiscal conservatism (Gamble, 2012). The international order proved resilient as attempts were made to stabilise the global economy. However, the economic recovery has been partial and weak – the slowest recovery in the period since 1945 – and

living standards for the majority have stagnated, even inequality in wealth and income have reached levels not seen since the early years of the twentieth century (Piketty, 2014).

It may be too early to predict the long-term impact of these developments. Although there was much commentary about the end of neoliberalism, neoliberal culture seems to be alive and well. The year 2016 may come to be remembered as a turning point; with the Brexit vote and the election of US President Donald Trump, this seemed to be a vote against globalisation, a politics of resentment fuelled by economic and cultural grievances. For their part, young people are urged to 'keep calm and go to college'. In a world where resources are ever more limited, the plan is to delay transition to the adult world, and gaining educational qualifications becomes more important than ever.

In 1968, when Michael Young set out on his long career at the IOE, the educational left was concerned with questions of access and opportunity. The focus was on the extent to which a period of educational expansion had promoted social mobility and led to a fairer society. The 'rediscovery of poverty' in the mid-1960s, and evidence of continued working-class educational failure, shaped discussion of schooling and the curriculum. This was underpinned by the idea of 'affluence', which ought to have provided equality of opportunity. The sociology of education had barely registered the implications of second-wave feminism and how changing gender norms were reshaping the practices of classroom and curriculum. Similarly, there was little acknowledgement of how Britain's preferred solution to post-war labour shortages – the migration of workers from the 'New Commonwealth' and Pakistan – were impacting on ideas about the multicultural society. The curriculum debates of the time were also shaped by the emergence of mass communications and a confident commercial culture. The question of how schools and teachers could relate to changes in youth culture and wider social change was prominent. Importantly, however, it was assumed that there would be progress and continued economic growth, and that there existed the possibility of a common culture. The questions that drove educational debate were concerned with how the curriculum could respond to the needs of a modern, urban industrial society.

In 2022, the vital battlefield of the curriculum looks very different, although certain 'fronts' remain open – access and opportunity – with arguments about aspiration, the class ceiling, social mobility and the myth of meritocracy (Exley, 2019; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Littler, 2017). The New Left's concern with class has become more complicated, with recognition of the intersections of gender, race and class. Indeed, the post-war period increasingly looks like an extraordinary time, one in which the gaps in wealth and income were narrowing. The current period is one of widening inequality. Instead of climbing the social ladder, 'numerous young people are sliding down it into precarity, insecurity and debt' (Pickard, 2019: 7).

The New Left's worries about consumption, the effects of television and advertising seem quaint when compared with the mediatised communication landscape inhabited by today's youth. However, important questions of literacy and knowledge remain, although it is hard to imagine serious debate about how schools might contribute to a common culture. The prospects for a national curriculum based around shared values seems a long way off. Indeed, the opposite seems to be the case, with increasingly vocal calls to ask 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' there are calls for a reappraisal of the legacy of Britain's imperial past (Elkins, 2022).

Perhaps, most importantly, the optimism that underpinned the project of schooling and the curriculum is harder to sustain. A broader argument concerns the state of the post-Brexit economy, the possibility for a Green New Deal and ways to finally overcome the division between 'head, hand and heart' (Goodhart, 2020) that has, some argued, halted Britain's economic renewal (Hamilton-Paterson, 2018). This radicalism is also evident in the student climate strikes that are a response to what is seen as 'foot-dragging' by older generations in relation to climate change. The desire to offer students a voice, to have their say on the crucial issues that affect them and their futures, leads some educators to see curriculum work as a form of activism (Brennan et al., 2021). Recent moves by the Conservative government to introduce climate change education in schools is indicative of how the content of the curriculum shifts is responsive to societal shifts.

Finally, it is unclear how these economic and social forces might combine with the shock of the global pandemic and the unfolding events in Russia and Ukraine. Even before Covid-19, many young people faced gloomy economic prospects. It is likely that there will be intense social contests over the shape of any recovery, whether this be about the balance between public and private interests in the economy, the types of economic activity that are valued or the use of time (Blakeley, 2020).

## Final note

In a discussion of the early stages of Michael Young's career, Rachel Sharp (1980: 76) offered this assessment:

Young's sociology of education is self-consciously moral and political. Its social roots are to be located in the late 1960s, in Britain's growing economic, social and political problems, illustrated at both the political level by the crisis in social democracy and within theory by the growing criticism of a reformist approach to educational issues ... The crisis increasingly brought the subject of the curriculum to the fore.

It should be apparent that the crises that gave rise to Young's work have not been resolved. This means that the question of the school curriculum remains the subject of intense debate, a vital battlefield. Although the prospects for socialist education have remained bleak, there remains an urgent need to engage teachers, students and the wider society in the question of how to bring knowledge back in in ways that promote progressive economic and social change. As British capitalism seeks to restructure in response to yet another crisis (Anderson, 2020), Michael Young's continued willingness to be part of these debates stands as a model of committed scholarship. The modest contribution of this article is to place his work in an account of economic, social and cultural change.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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