'Knowledge', curriculum and social justice

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Abstract

This article considers the place of knowledge in developing a socially just curriculum. It pursues the unusual route of a critique of Social Realism, a small but influential tendency in curriculum studies which claims that knowledge has been squeezed out by recent curriculum reforms and that there has been a descent into relativism. This paper shares the Social Realist view that 'powerful knowledge' is needed, and particularly by disadvantaged or marginalised young people. However, it critiques Social Realism's limited definition of 'powerful knowledge', arguing that for knowledge to be truly powerful, it must open up issues of power and inequality. It contests the Social Realist argument that critical pedagogy which begins from a subaltern stance is intrinsically relativist, arguing instead that alternative perspectives can help uncover concealed truths and break through hegemonic paradigms and ideologies. It argues that this is entirely compatible with a Critical Realist epistemology. Further, the paper presents reasons why a socially just curriculum needs to draw upon the vernacular knowledge of marginalised groups as well as the canonical knowledge of academic disciplines to produce truly powerful knowledge and a social justice curriculum.

Keywords: knowledge, Social Realism, relativism, standpoint, funds of knowledge, curricular justice, Critical Realism

Introduction

This article aims to develop an argument concerning the place of knowledge in a socially just curriculum. It does so by the unusual route of a critique of 'Social Realism' - a small but influential intervention into curriculum studies which has set out simultaneously to insist on a central role for knowledge and to oppose relativism. Among other arguments, this article pursues Social Realists' deployment of the term *powerful knowledge* by raising issues about power and inequality, and argues that a Social Justice curriculum must somehow combine an engagement with *both* key canonical knowledge *and* the vernacular culture of the learners' communities.

We have good reason to thank the Social Realists for seeking to raise the profile of knowledge in the curriculum debate. This was an essential challenge to the technical instrumentalism which had infected curriculum policy at various levels in England and some other anglophone countries, whereby, for example, universities are expected to demonstrate how each course provides employability skills and knowledge which leads to practical applications (Moore and Young 2001:

448). The marginalisation of knowledge affected secondary education in England under a neoliberal New Labour government through the promotion of low-level vocational courses from the age of 14, including their spurious 'equivalence', for accountability purposes, with higher grade GCSEs. Subsequently through legislation (Education and Inspections Act 2006) a vocational diploma from age 14 annulled students' entitlement to study history, geography, foreign languages, design and technology subjects and creative arts. The Social Realists, correctly in my view, rail against the way New Labour's neoliberal accountability machine ascribed equal value to Physics and 'Travel and Tourism'. More broadly, they complain that the current 'hyperaccountability regime' results in a 'narrowing or dessication of knowledge', teaching to the test, and 'expensive courses run by examiners providing tips to maximize their pupils' grades' (Young et al 2014: 130-1).

A central figure in the Social Realist turn is MFD Young, who four decades earlier had a leading role in what became known as the New Sociology of Education. His return to Knowledge has had some echoes internationally. Like Muller (2000), he had worked in post-apartheid South Africa where, partly due to poorly qualified teachers, an initial emphasis on cultural diversity degenerated into the accreditation of basic domestic skills such as 'driving a car, tying your shoelaces, cooking rice' (Hoadley and Jansen 2009:181, cited in Zipin et al 2015). Later, Elizabeth Rata (2012) condemned the cultural relativism infecting academic and professional bodies in New Zealand, seeing this as the substitution of cultural heritage experiences for reliable disciplinary knowledge.

The initial stimulus, a paper by Rob Moore and Johan Muller (1999) on the threat of culturalist relativism, led Young (2000; also Moore and Young 2001) to extend the discussion and eventually abandon the New Sociology of Education of the 1970s (Young 1971; Whitty and Young 1976; Young and Whitty 1977).

It would be an error to view Social Realism as a turning away from politically progressive aims and alignments. Unfortunately however, a lack of precision, indeed a tendency to conflate diverse arguments, has led to a situation in which the knowledge turn - 'Bringing knowledge back in' (Young 2008) - has opened up opportunities for the supporters of neoconservative curriculum reform, and most significantly through the 2014 revision of the National Curriculum for England led by Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education. It is certainly the case that Gove has used the Knowledge turn (both in its Social Realist and Hirschian versions) to design a curriculum which is overloaded with factual content and which places excessive and age-inappropriate demands on children. This does not, however, mean that Young and colleagues are politically aligned with Gove, and indeed Young, who has always located on the political Left, has sought to distance himself from this misuse of his work.

Although Social Realism is rather a small movement, with few signed-up advocates, its partial resonance with certain aspects of the New Right position, and its claim to promote a Social Justice orientation, make it an important theory to bring under scrutiny. Because Young has played a leading part in this small movement, as he did in the New Sociology, the present paper will inevitably use many quotations from his work; this will hopefully not be read as an argument *ad hominem*. It is the issues which are important, and the need to articulate principles for a Social Justice curriculum as part of a wider international debate.

Social Realism, social justice and critical thinking

The emergence of the Social Realist paradigm can be read as a reaction to some problematic tendencies in curriculum change in recent decades in some anglophone countries, particularly England, South Africa and New Zealand. This section will argue, however, that there is considerable confusion in the way the issue has been analysed, presented and polemicised.

Confusion arises particularly from Social Realism's construction of a composite enemy which elides 1970s progressivism with the neoliberal instrumentalism of recent decades. A diversity of phenomena and initiatives are bundled together, including vocationalism, an increasingly instrumental view of education, interdisciplinary studies, and the curriculum becoming 'open to leisure, sports and other community interests.' We are told that 'child centredness has replaced subject-centred teaching', though it is unclear when this happened and the school curriculum of countries subject to high-stakes accountability systems can hardly be characterised as 'child-centred'. Social Realists see themselves as combatting 'the relativism of much progressive skills-led educational thinking and its corollary that the curriculum should be based on pupil's interests' (Young et al 2014:165 and 168), yet the skills-led courses of recent decades are driven by neoliberal demands for more effective human capital production rather than progressive educators' sensitivity to children's needs. Indeed progressivism of any kind is currently in short supply.

Social realism signally misrecognises the increasing state domination of the curriculum in many countries, making the bizarre claim that:

> Since roughly the 1980s educationists in various guises as teachers, teacher educators, advisers and consultants have become the dominant influence in national curriculum formulation. (ibid:165)

At this point, it is worth considering the nature of the earlier 'New Sociology of Education' in which Young was a key player but which he has now rejected. The problem of conflation and ill-

prepared generalisation was a problem even then, as Richard Pring's (1972) critique of the 1971 edited collection (Young 1971) shows. In that essay, Pring raised demands for clarification, based on a powerful plea for philosophical *realism*. Pring asked just *how much of* knowledge can be ascribed to sociological influences and whether this applies to *all* disciplines equally: are mathematics and science 'human constructs in *the same sense* as the legal apparatus is a human construct?' Pring argued that not everything can be ascribed to the 'social distribution of power' since reality places constraints on the human freedom to construct an explanation:

> That we distinguish between cats and dogs may be due to certain social conditions; that we can so distinguish has something to do with cats and dogs. (ibid: 188)

Furthermore, he warned that we must distinguish between the social conditions under which knowledge is *produced* and its *truth value*.

> The valid canons of scientific method... transcend the idiosyncrasies of particular individuals and social contexts... The particular direction science has taken bears some relation to the social condition (the consequence of the armaments or space race, for example) and the very scientific theories propounded might bear some relation to non-scientific facts (as in the suppression of evidence). But such considerations in no way affect the validity of what is said in science and the possibility of having one's results validated by other scientists, irrespective of their social condition. (ibid: 190-1)

Young now accepts these arguments but at a cost. Despite some caveats, Social Realism shows little interest nowadays in social and cultural influences on canonical knowledge. Whereas the New Sociology of Education was excessively 'constructivist' in rejecting canonical knowledge in the 1970s, Social Realism is too ready to accept an imposition by central government of canonical texts and truths.

This paper intends to clarify some of the sources of confusion in Social Realism in order to develop a more secure understanding of *Knowledge* as an organising concept in curriculum studies and curriculum change. There is a danger that 'knowledge' can be a feel-good word which operates ideologically because it is difficult to oppose. At the same time, I will try to avoid any polemical attack based on limited citation, caricature or guilt by association. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to write a comprehensive review of all Social Realist texts, and there are inevitably paragraphs and texts where views are moderated or even contradicted. Rather the focus will be on certain key themes, using a selection of examples and quotations which represent an enduring position in Social Realism.

The relativist threat to Knowledge

One important strand of the Social Realist case is that the belief in objective knowledge has been eroded and that relativism is systematically undermining truth. Although this argument was first raised with some caution, it has become increasingly confused and strident.

Moore and Muller's concerns (1999) broadly targeted the danger of relativism from the New Sociology of Education along with sociologies of natural science research after Kuhn, a feminist emphasis on voice and perspective, and postmodernism in general. The root problem was labelled 'voice discourse', identified as exaggerating the importance of the *knower* as against the *knowledge*:

> The discourse of 'voice' is identified with a position that has recurred periodically since the early 1970s, which reduces knowledge to experience in order to de-legitimise rational, epistemologically grounded knowledge forms and truth claims that are represented as expressing no more than the 'standpoints' and 'interests' of 'dominant' social groups. (Moore and Muller 1999:189)

This text sutured 'voice' with an emphasis on learning through *experience*, and with the error of valuing vernacular knowledge as highly as academic knowledge (profane vs sacred in Durkheim's terms (1983)). A decade later, Moore's 2009 book *Towards the sociology of truth* discussed these issues in great depth and detail.

Subsequent papers (Young 2000; Moore and Young 2001) extended and clarified the accusation of relativism; the latter paper began to apply it to both neo-conservative and technical instrumentalist influences on curriculum formation in Britain, with an insufficiently clear distinction between the two. At this stage the discussion of the influence of social elements on knowledge formation is balanced and illuminating, leading to the balanced conclusion that:

- Relativism *does not necessarily* follow from a 'social' theory of knowledge.

- A social theory must recognize that *some* knowledge is objective in ways that transcend the historical conditions of its production (e.g. Euclid's geometry and Newton's physics). (Moore and Young 2001:453-4)

Further, in an argument against 'standpoint theory', Moore and Young argue convincingly (453) that *knowledge* must not be reduced to *experience*, and that unless we accept concepts and categories which transcend experience, research will only lead to 'non-generalisable findings and localised curricula'.

Subsequently however, Young has made more sweeping claims, in terms of

- the risks of relativism

- the dangers of making space for vernacular knowledge in the curriculum

- a general decline in knowledge within formal learning

- the kind of curriculum reforms which produce a threat to knowledge

- the political source and orientation of this threat

- a suggestion that 'educationalists' are collectively opposed to knowledge.

To illustrate these arguments, consider the following quotations from a speech for the Cambridge Assessment Network (Young 2014, my italics).

> If all knowledge is situated, this leads to a relativism which rejects the assumption of their being *better* knowledge in any field that could or should underpin the curriculum.

> There were a string of curriculum developments somewhat *euphemistically titled* Mathematics for the Majority, and Science and Geography for the 'young school leaver'. The knowledge base of traditional subjects was weakened so that more practical, work-related and community oriented activities could be included which it was hoped to interest the so-called 'non-academic' child.

> The central role of knowledge in education has *undoubtedly declined* over the years.

> A '*fear of knowledge*' has come to pervade much thinking in the educational community and more broadly the thinking of those on the Left involved in education.

> Why are educationalists not fighting for that entitlement to knowledge for all but *actually opposed to it*?

There are various confusions and conflations here:

a) Any understanding of social influences on the generation of knowledge is assumed to open the floodgates to relativism.

b) Progressive curriculum reforms introduced to prepare for the raising of the school leaving age to 16, and to *improve* their access to academic subjects as part of the comprehensive school reform, are elided with a more recent neoliberal vocationalism.

c) Left academics are collectively blamed for *neoliberal government* policies which excluded roughly half of 14-16 year olds from a broad and balanced curriculum.

There is no attempt to examine or justify empirically the claim that the inclusive curricular projects of the early 1970s did actually dilute or abandon the disciplinary knowledge base, nor indeed do we

find a detailed scrutiny of the recent vocational qualifications in schools, some of which may have had a stronger knowledge component than others.

Standpoint theory and relativism

A particular target of Social Realism has been 'standpoint theory', identified with Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway. This is seen as quintessentially relativist, in that it substitutes beliefs deriving from partial / personal experience for impartial / objective truth. It can however be argued that this is a misreading of standpoint epistemologies.

The 2001 paper by Moore and Young, discussed in the previous section, raises questions which sociology of knowledge must take on board, particularly when applied to natural sciences. The authors distinguish between two different senses of contextual influence, the immediate activities of scientific production and the impact of 'external' interests. Whilst acknowledging that the historical conditions of scientific production might have some influence on the process of scientific discovery, they insist that this does not invalidate its product.

Although this is largely true, there are significant silences in the text. It lacks strong examples of where social forces may affect conclusions, eg the influence of pharmaceutical companies on drugs trials, the underfunding of some areas of research, or the tendency of many scientists to regard scientific research as simply technical and without social implications. A realist sociology of knowledge should be able to recognise that such forces can distort knowledge without the critique collapsing into relativism.

The Social Realist argument is substantially built on the conviction that emphasising the *standpoint* of theorists and researchers leads to relativism. Zipin, Fataar and Brennan (2015) provide an important counter-argument. They share Haraway's (1988) view that

> ways of seeing/knowing 'realities' are always partial in being positional; we see from somewhere (standpoints), not everywhere.... However, standpoint theorists see partialities of epistemic perspective as grounded in *ontological* gravities of historically materialised social structures, which are neither infinite nor equally weighty. Hence, partialities are not a matter of 'anything goes'; standpoint theorists thus refute notions that their approach is 'relativist'. Rather situated perspectives represent *partial objectivities* of insight into social-ontological realities. It is then possible to pursue a robust social *science* that triangulates partial perspectives via methodologies of 'power-sensitive conversation', yielding 'stronger objectivity' than the 'God trick' (Haraway 1988) of supposed objectification from a dis-interested universal perspective. (Zipin et al p15)

Drawing on Harding, they argue that accounts written from a particular perspective provide not only a local or personal knowledge but shed light on society *as a whole*.

> These accounts are not fundamentally about marginal [partial] lives; instead they start off research from them; they are about the rest of the local and international social order. The point... is not to generate ethnosciences, but *sciences* – systematic causal accounts of how the natural and social orders are organized. (Harding 1992:582-3, my italics).

Gail Edwards (2014:169) extends this by arguing that 'social realists [mistakenly] take standpoint theory to be synonymous with "voice discourses" and postmodernist irrealism'. She argues, by contrast, that standpoint theory is entirely compatible with realism, and in particular with the theory of Critical Realism (ibid:172seq). This is an important challenge, given that Social Realists have recently sought to co-opt Critical Realism to their position. (This question will be discussed in detail later, in the section *Scholarly communities and reliable knowledge*.)

The privileging of propositional knowledge

One area of congruence between Social Realism and the current version of National Curriculum in England revolves round the emphasis on propositional knowledge, which is privileged over more experiential modes of learning. This emphasis entails the divorce of cognitive from ethical / political and aesthetic aspects of knowledge. Although Young allows a role for personal / vernacular experience in the learning process, he seeks to delegitimise it as an appropriate aspect of the school curriculum. In other words, he accepts vernacular experience as a route towards 'real knowledge' but not as a fitting object for curricular attention.

Gail Edwards' (2014) argument, by contrast, bridges between curriculum and pedagogy, showing that vernacular experience and culture is a valid aspect of curriculum, whereas the Social Realists repeatedly seeks to relegate the use of vernacular experience to classroom pedagogies. They see vernacular experiences as devices to assist the transmission and acquisition of canonical knowledge but not as a source of important knowledge or as the object of academic analysis.

Implicit in the Social Realist argument is a reductive understanding of 'pedagogy', using the word as synonymous with teaching techniques (cf more European understandings, as explained by Alexander 2000:551 or Wrigley 2003:127-8). Conversely, curriculum is implicitly reduced to a set of content when learners and context are left out of consideration.

Some significant problems in the Social Realist position and its privileging of abstract knowledge come into view when we understand knowledge from a materialist perspective. A materialist philosophy (Eagleton, 2016) regards cognition as inseparable from bodily and social existence, and

rejects attempts to relegate aesthetic or ethical dimensions of our engagement with the world to an inferior position. An overemphasis on abstract formulations over lived experience actually distorts and diminishes both poles of knowledge (i.e. its abstract representation and its lived experiential aspect), disrupting the dialectical activity of learning. The interrelationship and balance between abstract concepts and lived experience or activity is a crucial issue in curriculum design.

This is a matter of pressing contemporary relevance. The danger of over-privileging the abstract is clearly visible in the Gove revision of England's National Curriculum (Wrigley 2014:36). Of critical importance, the officially approved mode of early literacy teaching, namely a dogmatic and exclusive deployment of synthetic phonics, divorces phonic decoding from meaning-making and the enjoyment of books. This is pointedly satirised by Mike Rosen:

> We at Ruth Miskin Academy are pioneering Miskin Kick Score Incorporated where in the first year you play Un-Football, by playing without the ball. (Rosen 2012)

The assumption running throughout the National Curriculum document for primary English is that children will not be able to speak or write competently without a prior acquisition of elaborate rules. (This, of course, requires hundreds of detailed regulations, eg 'If the root word ends with –ic, -ally is added rather than just –ly except in the word publicly.')

This mistaken view of the relationship between symbols and activity was clearly exposed by philosopher Gilbert Ryle in *The concept of mind*:

> The chef must recite his recipes to himself before he can cook according to them; the hero must lend his inner ear to some appropriate moral imperative before swimming out to save the drowning man; the chess-player must run over in his head all the relevant rules and tactical maxims of the game before he can make correct and skilful moves... (Ryle 1949:31)

This does not mean that reflecting on principles and ideas is irrelevant, but rather locates reflection as a moment within practice:

> Certainly we often do not only reflect before we act but reflect in order to act properly. The chess-player may require some time in which to plan his moves before he makes them. Yet the general assertion that all intelligent performance requires to be prefaced by the consideration of appropriate propositions rings unplausibly... Efficient practice precedes the theory of it. (ibid:32)

A recurrent trope in Social Realist texts is the insistence on a radical divorce between academic and everyday knowledge, as exemplified in the following quotations (Young et al 2014):

- We do not make schooling compulsory for all 5 year olds just to extend their experience. (p31)

- If education is to be emancipatory... it has to be based on a break with experience. (p88)

- The curriculum should exclude the everyday knowledge of students.'(p97)

Even though a space is left for everyday knowledge as a useful tool in classroom teaching, the above quotations beg various questions in their ambiguity: whether schools might *partly* exist to *extend* students' experience; whether it is possible or worthwhile to develop an *intellectual and critical* perspective on everyday knowledge (wonderfully exemplified by Noddings in her book of 2006). Although these statements have a common sense appeal, the negative implications have to be considered: a curriculum which excludes students' everyday knowledge might be anything but emancipatory. Fortunately Lambert's contribution to the same book (Young et al 2014: 159-187) develops a more integrated and inclusive position, arguing that disciplinary concepts and methods *can* be used to organise, build upon and enrich everyday experience.

> Bernstein did not dismiss the everyday, but saw that it is the very interchange between expert or disciplinary discourses and 'common-sense' or everyday knowedge that is pedagogically powerful (ibid:163).

The dialectic of experience and abstraction

The privileging of propositional knowledge, discussed above, is accompanied by a neglect of the interrelationship between sensory experience and abstract concepts. Rather than using scientific concepts as a tool to develop, and sometimes challenge, situated understandings which emerge from students' everyday life, Social Realism calls for an abandonment of lived realities.

Powerful knowledge, for Social Realists, is seen almost entirely in terms of abstract concepts. We see this clearly in the following geographical example about cities which I quote at length:

> Subjects bring together 'objects of thought' as systematically related sets of 'concepts'. Sometimes, these concepts have referents outside school, in the environment of the pupil's life, in a city like Auckland, for example. However, pupils' relationships with Auckland as a 'concept' should be different to their relationship with their 'experience' of Auckland as the place where they live.

> It is important that the pupils do not confuse the Auckland that the geography teacher talks about with the Auckland in which they live. To a certain extent, it is the same city, but the pupil's relationship with it in the two cases is not the same. The Auckland where they live is 'a place of experience'. Auckland as an example of a city is 'an object of thought' or a 'concept'. (Young 2010:25)

The argument is not simply that there are different ways of knowing a city, but that school knowledge should be limited to analytic concepts, and is superior to vernacular knowledge.

> If pupils fail to grasp the difference between thinking about Auckland as an example of the geographers' concept of a city and their experience of living in Auckland, they will have problems learning geography, and by analogy, any school subject that seeks to take them beyond their experience. For example, the teacher might ask her class what the functions of the city of Auckland are. This requires that the pupils think of the city in its role in government and business and not to just describe how they, their parents, and their friends, experience living in the city. (p25-6)

These explanations and examples are most revealing. The emphasis is on distinguishing concepts from experience, rather than relating them. Instead of using concepts to shed new light on the cities of our vernacular experience and to give us new ways of understanding the forces which affect phenomena, the Social Realists' desire is for abstract concepts to replace our rich experience, which is more or less discounted. If, on the other hand, we take a Critical Realist position on knowledge (Bhaskar 1978), we can appreciate the importance of digging below the surface, of demonstrating to students that the way they perceive phenomena might not capture the underlying forces which are at work, that these forces might not always be active or visible, that everyday experience is not always the best guide to understanding the structures that impact on our lives, and so on. Such powerful learning depends on bringing abstract knowledge and situated experiences into play with each other, rather than separating them and neglecting one pole of the dialectic.

As Margaret Roberts (2014:197) points out, the key characteristics of cities cannot be reduced to universalistic generalisations but are highly contextualised. Furthermore, a *social selection* is at work here, in the authoritative view that the true functions of the city are 'government and business' rather than the homes and lives of the students' families. Social Realism, in effect, *does damage to knowledge* in its attempt to make a binary separation of abstract concept from vernacular experience, and to valorise the former while de-valuing the latter. This is a deeply reductionist view of knowledge.

The contribution of everyday knowledge and experience to scientific understanding

The case for validating everyday experience and perspectives in the formation of powerful academic knowledge has been argued within various fields and traditions during the past century, some of which are drawn upon in this section. Vernacular knowledge has been central to the growth of critical perspectives in literature and the humanities, underpinning works which are now regarded as academically authoritative. It also underpins Vygotskian psychology, which emphasises the processes whereby concepts inherited from our culture illuminate and reshape young people's

understandings, giving rise to the rich intellectual tradition known as Cultural and Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). It is worrying, therefore, to see a devaluing of vernacular experience and perspectives in the name of 'powerful knowledge', and ironic that critical scholars are cited as if they provide a support for this.

Young has a tendency to co-opt established theorists to the Social Realist camp, one of whom is Vygotsky. In the process, Vygotsky's dialectical thinking is flattened to a one-sided emphasis on scientific concepts (see Roberts 2014:190-2). Gail Edwards, staying faithful to Vygotsky's struggle to interrelate propositional and experiential aspects of knowledge, argues that learners' tacit understandings cannot be cast aside:

> While a curriculum syllabus may neglect situated 'know-how' because of its irreducibility to propositional knowledge, a background of tacit understanding is nonetheless essential for rendering declarative propositions intelligible. Learners can attend only from a tacit framework that integrates the perceptual and linguistic; in so doing, they seek to cope with reality. (Edwards 2014: 172)

This goes beyond the pedagogic process. Everyday experience cannot be relegated to classroom tactics but is fundamental to curriculum, both in terms of social responsibility and epistemology. Here, Edwards connects to the notion of 'standpoint', viewed as threatening by Social Realism, and argues for a richer understanding of the dialectic between the knower's standpoint and authoritative knowledge:

> Standpoint theory, when understood as a rejection of neutrality but not objectivity, leads to a view of working-class children's knowledge not as inherently inferior, but as partial. Their knowledge reflects a structural reality within which others may be differently located. Thus, their everyday knowledge is a necessary starting point for enquiry that should lead to a higher reflexive consciousness of their standpoint within the wider world – that is, to strong objectivity. Standpoint theory thus does not reduce knowledge to the knower. On the contrary, it acknowledges the dialectical transaction between subjectivity and objective reality. (ibid: 182)

It is not difficult to recollect examples of 'subaltern' perspectives and standpoints which have shed new light on a field of academic study: Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City (1973),* Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) to name a few. The socialist perspectives of Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson, Stephen Rose – and indeed Vygotsky - have helped reshape their academic fields, not just as canonical content but in terms of disciplinary procedures. The *Alternative Shakespeares* volumes (Drakakis 1985; Hawkes 1996) bring together multiple new insights on this most canonical of authors: the perspectives of

female, gay, black and postcolonial critics may be 'partial' but they are not peripheral, trivial or unfaithful to the Shakespeare texts. 'Standpoint' cannot simply be written off by casually mentioning the Lysenko scandal (eg Young 2000).

Margaret Roberts (2014) shows not only how children's 'own personal geographies of place, space and environment' (p192) provide a foundation for acquiring systematic geographical knowledge, but that experience-related concepts are central to building the school curriculum: more concrete concepts such as beach, weather, the geography of food lead into more general or abstract ones such as settlement or urbanisation (p193). Her argument is that Social Realism is making a false dichotomy between everyday experience and disciplinary concepts:

> The issue for me is not whether the school geography curriculum should develop students' knowledge beyond their existing experience. I know of no geography curriculum for any age group based entirely on students' everyday knowledge. The issue is about whether a geography curriculum document setting out what students are required to study should exclude, as Young suggests, students' everyday knowledge. (193)

Furthermore, she demonstrates that academic Human Geography in universities is deeply rooted in experience (eg the geographies of food, human settlement, youth culture, migration, p195). Moreover academic geography draws on diverse perspectives, questions and methods to theorise them (ibid: 197).

Social Realism, by contrast, insists on a sharp division between (abstract) school knowledge and (concrete) external reality (Durkheim's *sacred* and *profane)*. Their argument is that profane knowledge is disorganised and unsystematic, thus necessitating a divorce between (plebeian) realities and reputable knowledge. Social Realists insist, therefore, on the insularity of academic knowledge.

Vygotsky's distinction between *scientific* and *spontaneous* (everyday, common sense) concepts is inappropriately co-opted into this argument. This, according to Edwards, is a misreading:

> Unlike the social realists, Vygotsky's theory of development posited a dialectical, transactional relation between these (Vygotsky 1987)... In curriculum terms, Vygotsky's account is not a rejection of pupils' standpoint or historically embedded knowledge. Rather, it is to recognise that pupils' everyday knowledge is a necessary but insufficient starting point because it transforms scientific thinking, and *vice versa*. (Edwards 2014:181)

Zipin, Fataar and Brennan (2015:20) concur that this is a 'highly dubious reading of Vygotsky'. For Vygotsky, there is a reciprocal and dialectical relationship. Spontaneous concepts, derived from

unschooled experiences, form the foundation for *schooled* scientific concepts; scientific concepts then provide new structures of relationship to the phenomena we experience in our everyday lives.

> Is there no educational merit to Vygotsky's idea that scientific knowledge, interacting with everyday knowledge in school curriculum, offers power to systematise and clarify learners' spontaneous conceptions, while learning also gains substance and vitality from those spontaneous conceptions emergent in practical engagement with life-worlds? (Zipin 2015: 21)

The lifeworld of the student cannot be relegated to an instrumental role, but is itself important. This is a curricular issue, and not simply a matter of effective class teaching, as Luis Moll (quoting Vygotsky) insists:

> Ultimately only life educates, and the deeper that life... burrows into the school, the more dynamic will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greater failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the... [life] world as is a fire without oxygen, or as breathing in a vacuum. The teacher's educational work, therefore, must be inevitably connected with his [or her] creative social and life work. (Vygotsky 1997:345, quoted by Moll 2014:121; cited in Zipin et al 2015:23)

Moll's position is that 'the relationship between everyday and scientific concepts is reciprocal'. In other words, 'they mediate each other'. Moreover, scientific concepts 'need vital connection to everyday concepts in order to sustain meaningful significance' (summarised in Zipin 2015:23-4).

The reduction of knowledge to abstract 'scientific concepts' stripped of experience or activity proves a major obstacle when Social Realists consider the realities of school curriculum. It has a seriously limiting effect even on traditional versions of school curriculum. Thus Rata (2012:136) describes music education predominantly in terms of the acquisition of theoretical concepts, misunderstanding much about appreciation, performance or learning an instrument.

> Unlike the largely tacit and context bound process of learning folk music or playing in a garage band for example, the 'curriculum' for formal instrument learning is most often sequential and underpinned by abstract theoretical concepts which necessitate the explicit guidance of a teacher. (Rata 2012:136, citing McPhail, 2011)

Rata has a valid argument that concepts structure content, help learners to see beyond the particular, and indeed *make children intelligent*, but the overwhelming impression is that the experiential / phenomenal aspect of knowledge has marginal significance. This one-sided understanding aligns with the neglect, in the current English assessment and accountability system, of practical and

creative subjects (eg the so-called Ebacc which is limited to traditional academic subjects). The overloading of explanations, or more frequently rules, and the marginalisation of experiences might result not in a stronger conceptual framework, but in a dessicated knowledge - fragments of inert facts (see Wrigley 2014:33-6). This does not amount to *powerful* knowledge.

Concepts, and their systematic relationship within particular disciplines and subjects, should never be marginalised in curriculum design. This should not, however, lead to the opposite error of seeing knowledge as solely cognitive. There is a pedagogical / psychological need to move backwards and forwards between experience and abstraction (see the above discussion of Vygotsky; also, for example, Rogoff and Lave 1984; Wenger 1998:134-5; Salomon 1993; Engeström et al 1999). Further, this is also an epistemological issue. Bruner (1986:11seq) describes two 'modes of thought' which are 'irreducible to one another'; ignoring one at the expense of the other will 'inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought'. He contrasts the 'paradigmatic or logical-scientific' mode with the narrative mode, showing that both provide important ways of seeing and understanding the world, neither more superficial than the other. Similarly, Wertsch points out the dangers of overprivileging the voice of 'decontextualised rationality' (Wertsch 1990). Wulf (2005) regards mimesis as indispensable in developing an understanding of the world, as well as identity formation. Even stronger arguments conceptualise 'situated cognition' (Robbins and Aydede 2009) rooted in a non-dualistic ontology in which the psychological and the somatic are inextricably interwoven (eg Bateson's 'ecology of mind', 1973; Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, 1962; Mead's biosocial 'pragmatism' 1934).

Scholarly communities and reliable knowledge

At this point, it is important to consider what forms the basis for reliable knowledge. The emphasis placed by social realists is on the academic community. I wish to argue, in this section, that this is insufficient, before proceeding to argue that distinctions between depth and surface knowledge are underwritten by epistemic principles and processes, not just the collective of individuals charged with carrying them out.

In the Social Realist argument, the abstract vs concrete binary in forms of knowledge (discussed above) is matched by an equally strong binary between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' in terms of the human *sources* of knowledge. For Social Realism, both these binaries are rooted in Durkheim's (1983) distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane' (see Young 2008:40-5) as expanded by Bernstein (1999, summarised Young 2008:209-12). The former is privileged in both pairs, and scientific activity is regarded as the historical successor to 'the sacred'. This gives rise to another set of problems in the Social Realist position.

The primary guarantee of truthfulness, in the Social Realist view, is the 'sociality' of the sacred:

> Although knowledge is a social and human product, it is its *sociality* that gives knowledge an objectivity beyond the social processes associated with its acquisition and production. (Young 2008:38)

The second guarantee, accompanying this, is its divorce from everyday material activity, and indeed from the empirical:

> The sacred was a collective product of a society, and not related directly to any real world problems. (ibid:147)

Needless to say, everyday common-sense 'horizontal' knowledge is also communal in its production and sustenance, as indeed social realists acknowledge. The key point, for them, is the particular sociality of academic research communities.

The Social Realist tenet is that the particular social arrangements of academic research lead to reliable truth.

> The objectivity of knowledge is in part located in the social networks, institutions and codes of practice built up by knowledge producers over time. It is these networks of social relations that, in crucial ways, guarantee truth claims...Specialist forms of social organization remain the major social bases for guaranteeing the objectivity of knowledge. (Young 2008:31-2)

Though 'guarantees' is moderated down in some other texts, consensus within scholarly communities is still regarded as the best assurance that we can have.

There is a deep fallacy here. Arguably, just like natural scientists around the world, the global research community of Catholic theologians engaged in explicating and refining medieval canonical texts have claims to well-established methods and collaboration, but this does not necessarily lead towards reliable knowledge which elicits the same trust as scientific knowledge. We should also recollect, at this point, the hegemonic consensus which existed among scholars in the early decades of the 20th Century concerning the virtues of Empire and white superiority, linked to innate genetic IQ, eugenic social beliefs, and so on (Chitty 2007). This suggests that it is not scholarly community as such which leads to the kind of knowledge which reliably reflects reality and guides action: there is need for a particular epistemic approach.

As Edwards points out:

> What is to prevent any epistemic community (re)producing a consensual but entirely false account of the world? How are pupils to be protected from a biased curriculum that discriminates against some groups? (Edwards 2014:179)

This is less applicable to natural sciences, but hidden ideologies may be at work even there, for example the tacit assumption that scientists do not need to raise ethical questions about how science is used or become concerned about the world their science describes.

We should not underestimate the importance of academic disciplines and communities in their search for truth, but they do not *guarantee* it; they are often limited by their paradigms (see Wrigley 2013) and can and should be questioned from within and without.

Just as scholarly communities are not always a guarantee of reliable knowledge, we might also consider whether there are other networks outwith the academy which exercise a rigorous and fruitful search for knowledge: vernacular traditions of craftsmanship or indeed international Marxism, for example. Neither of these communities of knowledge and practice distance themselves from mundane realities, but in their different ways seek to transcend them.

To be fair, Social Realists express an expansive view of epistemic communities which goes beyond local or national collections of scholars. Maton and Moore (2010) write of the special 'capacity for intellectual fields to build powerful and cumulative knowledge over time' (p6) and of a 'coalition of minds extending across time and space'. Moore cites Bourdieu's assertion that 'A scientist is a scientific field made flesh' (Bourdieu 2004:41, cited Moore 2009: 131) and that a 'twenty-year-old mathematician can have twenty centuries of mathematics in his mind'.

Moore and others make important and convincing arguments about the powerful workings of scientific communities and networks, and the rigour which comes from scholarly scepticism, empirical testing of hypotheses, and the norms of publication and peer review. The individual subjectivities of researchers are subsumed under the need to secure reliable knowledge.

> It is a deep-seated part of intellectual structures that questions are asked, debates take place; polemics and denunciations also often occur... (Collins 2000:28, cited Moore 2009:131)

The underlying principle is that 'all knowledge is *fallible* and open to revision' (Moore 2009:136) However, if this applies to details it must also apply to entire paradigms and models of reality. It follows that truth building cannot simply be grounded in the smooth running of an academic community, even in the natural sciences - and intellectual fields such as anthropology or literature are likely to be even more turbulent and contested. (See Zipin et al 2015:13-14 for further discussion.)

Critical Realism, ontology and critical thinking

In line with the problem discussed above, we find a misunderstanding of the term Critical Realism, deployed by Social Realists since around 2008 to strengthen their case. Crucially, trusting in the scholarly community as the guarantor of truth – or at least as good as we can get – is *not* what

Critical Realism is about. Critical Realism is essentially a recognition that science (natural but also social) seeks to dig below the surface of appearances and identify the underlying forces or depth-structures. These forces are real but not always operative, being sometimes immobilised by other forces or working in unfavourable environments, and even when operative may not be clearly visible. The rigour of scientific procedure may be important in moving us reliably from perceived phenomena to underlying entities or forces, but it is reality ('depth ontology'), not the sociality of knowledge production, which defines Critical Realism.

Critical Realism, in both natural and social sciences, is based on a non-identity of reality and appearances. As Marx pointed out (1894, ch48):

> All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.

That does not mean that we can somehow turn our backs on 'profane' appearances. Theory is needed to penetrate beyond the empirical and the actual to the real (Bhaskar 1978), but without empirical procedures of perception, investigation and verification this can open a door to fantasy. The Social Realist account that *separating* intellectual thought from mundane reality helps pro penetrate beyond common-sense appearances to the forces operating underneath shows a limited grasp of the Critical Realist project.

A more accurate understanding of Critical Realism would steer the school curriculum towards more critical pedagogies. Whereas Lambert (2014:165) emphasises the need for university disciplines to influence school subjects via exam boards, a Critical Realist would wish to initiate students into the art of seeing 'below the surface'. Gail Edwards argues that the capacity to critique should be an essential part of school curriculum.

> Any school curriculum must be designed to require pupils' evaluation of knowledge since they must engage critically with pre-existent structures. Given pupils' standpoint, or structural location, neutrality in knowing is impossible because the objects of their knowledge include the value-laden social structures and conventions of which they are a part. (Edwards 2014:173)

Rather than being a threat, she insists that standpoint is a vital lever towards truth.

> In the interests of strong objectivity, then, the experiences of a subjugated group within a particular social structure is a necessary starting point for interrogating reality in as much as this group is likely to pose questions that cannot arise in those groups whose lives are structured from a position of material advantage. This is *not* to say that the perspectives of working-class pupils are necessarily valid or objective accounts; rather, it is to say only that

a critical engagement with reality must take the perspectives and differential power relations within different structural locations *into account* on the journey towards stronger objectivity in knowing. (ibid:174)

Powerful knowledge?

Social Realists make great rhetorical play of the phrase 'powerful knowledge', yet it is by no means clear why it is powerful, how it exercises or mobilises power, or whom it might empower. Does it, for instance, support the less powerful against the more powerful, or simply increase the power of the already powerful? What activity is needed to mobilise its power? Does some knowledge deserve the description 'powerful' simply because it is sanctioned by established academic disciplines and communities? Perhaps 'powerful' is simply being used in the technical or instrumental sense of 'more useful' or 'more effective'.

Whilst Social Realists do acknowledge the influence of social structure and culture on knowledge formation and distribution, this is downplayed, with unexpected silences at critical moments. Young (2014), for example, though criticising Michael Gove's nostalgic conservatism, carefully avoids criticizing the limited English Baccalaureate (Ebacc), which famously disregards examination success in the arts or technologies.

One struggles to find an acknowledgement that the curriculum is a *selection* from culture (Williams 1961:66seq), nor an elucidation of the criteria that we should apply to *selecting,* other than trying to keep up with university-based research. We are left with generalised appeals to 'the best that has been thought and said' (Arnold 1869), powerful knowledge as the means to 'develop conceptual thought', and a dogmatic insistence that vernacular knowledge should have no place in the school curriculum.

As Social Realism has moved nearer to discussing the actual curriculum of schools and school systems, this problem has become more acute. In the New Zealand context, for instance, Elizabeth Rata is sharp in her condemnation of the official status given to the Maori heritage – and some of her examples of 'Maori science' or 'Maori mathematics' do suggest serious distortion, subjectivism and relativism (Rata 2012:105seq). She has little to say, however, against the dominance of White majority values. It is a fair and perceptive summary that postmodernism has buried class analysis (ibid:89), as many socialists would agree (eg Callinicos 1990; Eagleton 1996); however the suggestion that 'disciplinary knowledge' is necessarily progressive and that 'objective knowledge' enables us to 'think the unthinkable' by transcending the world of our own experience (ibid:96) is unsupported by argument or exemplification.

Rata praises British Prime Minister David Cameron's attack on multiculturalism (ibid:98) with no recognition of how this fits into his government's wider political direction. Even Herder, cited as the historical originator of culturalism, is seriously misrepresented in Rata's accusation that he wanted 'to fix people in primordial bonds of kinship' (ibid:105). (Her source Steven Lukes (2003:15) explicitly rejects such a one-sided interpretation.)

Young even tries to co-opt Raymond Williams, a remarkable move given Williams' seminal curricular idea of the 'selective tradition' (Williams 1961:68). This is particularly ironic given that the New Left critique of the established canon, in various fields, magnified by the student revolts of the late 1960s, provided a forceful impetus for the New Sociology of Education to question the doxa of established school curriculum. (This transfer of understanding did not only occur via educational sociology, of course; much of the debate was located in communities of subject specialists among teachers and university lecturers. See, for example, Medway et al 2014.)

Really powerful knowledge: a curriculum for Social Justice

The relationship between 'powerful knowledge' and social power is not clarified. Furthermore, Social Realism seems to place enormous emphasis on dangers arising from subaltern contributions, but seriously underplays those emanating from the economically and socially powerful. (See also Zipin 2015.)

There is some value in the insistence that a return to Knowledge works in favour of social justice, given that it is socially marginalised young people who are most likely to be offered low-level vocational skills and denied access to such subjects as history. We should take seriously Haberman's (1991) warning that young people growing up in poverty are fed a 'pedagogy of poverty' consisting of decontextualised exercises, undemanding closed questions and a dearth of ideas. In terms of *distribution* then (Fraser 1997) the Social Realists are correct. It is in terms of *recognition* that the problems emerge: the curriculum fails to reflect the lives of large sections of the population (Zipin et al. 2015:28-32).

To follow Fraser's thinking, this also becomes a barrier to *participation*, as disadvantaged students make less sense of content which belongs to someone else's cultural capital and are unable to engage. A dramatic example of this was provided by the reading tests imposed on England's 11-year-olds in 2016, which confronted children with a text (Standards and Testing Agency 2016) about a *garden party* in a *mansion* with its *own lake*; the main characters row out to find a *monument to one of their ancestors*. The gulf was so great between the lifeworld of the child and the world of the text that large numbers of children were simply mystified by the text and could not begin to tackle the detailed questions.

At its best, the concept of 'powerful knowledge' is articulated by Social Realists with the intention of empowering young people to predict, explain, and envisage alternatives (Young et al 2014:74). However, the criteria used to select it (distant from everyday experience, systematic, specialist) are insufficient to identify knowledge which might actually give people power.

Lambert (2014:177) proposes as selection criteria that such knowledge must be 'outside the direct experience', 'developed by the wider disciplinary communities', 'develop systematicity in our thinking plus a deepening and broadening of our perspectives', be 'conceptual' and may often take the form of 'systems and models', including maps. Some of these are useful criteria in fending off a debasement of school knowledge, but they are not sufficient as a basis for curriculum design.

We might contrast 'powerful knowledge', as used by Social Realism, with the notion of 'productive pedagogies' (Lingard 2014) developed out of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study. (Here, 'pedagogy' is used in a broader sense which includes curricular considerations.) The Queensland research showed that, despite an ethos of care for students,

> pedagogies of indifference failed to work with and across... differences [ethnic, gender, etc] but also failed to make a difference in their lack of both intellectual demand and connectedness to the world. (p193)

Lingard also speaks of 'pedagogies of the same' – the standardised technicist learning found in high-stakes accountability regimes. Productive pedagogies, on the other hand, require both a seriousness in presenting key concepts and challenging ideas, *and* a commitment to respecting the lives of diverse students: there is no contradiction between the two. It is this unity-in-contradiction that must be upheld if we are seriously committed to powerful knowledge in the interest of social justice.

Productive pedagogies, or *pedagogies of difference,* do not neglect the cognitive development of disadvantaged students. Citing Bourdieu, it is:

> absolutely necessary to give priority to those areas where the objective is to ensure that fundamental processes are thoughtfully and critically assimilated. These processes – the deductive, the experimental, the historical as well as the critical and reflective – should always be included (Bourdieu 1990:309, in Lingard 2014:196)

However, social justice also demands critical social understanding, albeit of a more grounded kind, than much 'critical pedagogy' (ibid 197), and a 'culture of respect for the history, the language and culture of the peoples represented in the classroom' (Rose, 1995:414). In summary, productive pedagogies require:

- intellectual quality

- connectedness

- supportiveness

- working with and valuing of difference (Lingard 2014).

Conclusion

The demand for *intellectual quality* (i.e. the first criterion of productive pedagogies, above) cannot just sit by itself. Indeed, without the other dimensions, it collapses into formalism, resulting in knowledge which is not only difficult – and some knowledge *is* hard to acquire - but inaccessible, irrelevant and disengaging.,The result might not be intellectual quality at all, but a substitution of regulations for theory, algorithms for problem-solving, and an arid abstraction rather than the rich knowledge which is imbricated with rich experience. These are the qualities which characterise the current English National Curriculum (see Wrigley 2014), despite the claim to privilege 'knowledge' and indeed the occasional rhetorical appeal to 'powerful knowledge'. Raising intellectual demands has become a crude target-setting exercise, which places inappropriate pressures on children who are too young to bear them. Whether or not we agree with Young's formulation 'bringing knowledge *back in'* (we might ask: was it ever absent?) there is currently a strong need to bring the *child* back in (Wrigley 2016).

The social realist aspiration for knowledge of high intellectual quality ultimately begs the question: knowledge about what? Social Realism provides only a formal guidance on which knowledge to select for the school curriculum. It neglects the democratic need for critical literacy – a capacity to question. Critical epistemic practices provide a vital key to a high quality of understanding of everyday situations, as demonstrated by Noddings' exemplary book 'Critical lessons' (2006) with its chapters about parents, homes, work and war.

All students need knowledge which is powerful enough to challenge the distorted understandings of reality carried by 'common sense', but also – and this is indeed a challenge - some of the hegemonic orthodoxies accepted by academia. This process of critique may require us to mobilise students' lifeworld knowledge, and help them to articulate an understanding which draws critically on their particular standpoints. Their everyday knowledge then becomes

> a necessary starting point for enquiry that should lead to a higher reflexive consciousness of their standpoint within the wider world – that is, to strong objectivity (Edwards 2014 :182).

Our curricular aim should be not only to satisfy everyone's entitlement to Knowledge, but the capacity to apply it to significant matters in the interest of democracy and social justice. This would be truly powerful knowledge.

Acknowledgement

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