Why knowledge matters in education; an unfinished project

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Before I begin – I must ask you to forgive me- I am not following explicitly my tile in the programme-by the end of my talk I hope you will understand why. What I want to try and do is tell you about is how and why I believe that for all of us in education it is the knowledge that our students have access to, what it is and how they can best acquire it that matters – hence my revised title is '**why knowledge matters in education; an unfinished project'.**

My first reaction to being invited to address this conference was to regretfully refuse; despite working in a university for over 50 years, I have never considered myself a specialist in higher education studies and have only published two articles on universities; one in Spanish and the other was with my South African collaborator who is himself a HE expert, Joe Muller. However I was convinced by Didi Griffioen that did not matter as my audience would be interested in my work on the sociology of knowledge in education. I hope she was right.

So thank you Didi for persisting- I wish we had student accommodation in England as nice as the student hotel I stayed in last night.

I want to begin by saying that how to investigate knowledge in education is a far less straight forward problem than I thought when I started; in fact it is so implicit in any reference to education that it is very hard to focus on analytically and too easily becomes much more like information. Syllabuses and certificate specifications for example are usually lists of topics in different fields but if taken literally, the educational question about knowledge becomes one of memorisation and not understanding. Memorisation of facts,

even a quite sophisticated fact like a law or an equation and the rules for solving it are important but only part of what a subject teacher means by knowledge.

Acquiring knowledge in school or university is better expressed as 'developing a relationship to knowledge' but that is not an easy idea. If information is to become knowledge for a student, he or she at any age and however superficially at first, has to grasp that while Pythagoras's equation is a fact it is also part of a community of those who use, teach or create maths. Acquiring knowledge involves acquiring a new identity which one shares with other maths students, teachers and researchers yet a maths or any other text book does not tell you that and often nor does a teacher. I will come back to why knowledge turns out to be such a difficult idea later- so just bear these preliminary thoughts I mind.

The question of knowledge goes back along way for me- to when I was doing my masters degree in sociology and Basil Bernstein[1] whose work some of you will know, was my tutor. I could not think what to write my dissertation about- this was 1967 before he had published anything on the question of knowledge and the curriculum- and he said 'write about the curriculum' - there was virtually no literature in sociology journals or books on the subject at the time but he was not an easy person to say know to. To cut a long story short- I spent most of my dissertation trying to explain why the question of knowledge in education was so neglected in education (except by philosophers) - especially by sociologists-despite there hardly could be something more obviously 'social' in howitis produced than knowledge. Before he had read my dissertation or I had written anything for publication, Bernstein had offered me a job at the IOE, now part of UCL, where I have been ever since. He did not like my first book, Knowledge and Control, despite having a chapter in it, and at the time I could not understand why but on reflection, I very much doubt whether I would have got the job if the book before I was interviewed the job.

I will draw on my explanation of the neglect of knowledge and the curriculum in my dissertation because it is a good way of introducing the question of knowledge, and it came back to me when I looked at the conference programme-

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[1] The well known English Sociologist of Education and Professor for many years at the Institute of Education.

- The starting point of most Sociology of Education and educational research generally are three questions -slightly different for you who research in HE than for school researchers which I have been-
    - They took knowledge as given and focused more on who gets it- failures and successes, and what could be done about this failure by so many pupils ?
    - They asked how we could develop better ways to interest/involve them? As sociologists we blamed their homes, parents and society but did not have the theoretical basis for knowing how they could be changed

When I began studying sociology -no one was asking what education was that we all thought was a good thing- possibly because I like other university students had been at least relative successes at school.

- The second theme of my attempt to understand what a curriculum was and what became known as the New Sociology of Education linked these unasked questions to wider and more structural questions about the distribution of power. Much later this was to be expressed by the idea of the curriculum as representing 'knowledge of the powerful' (KOP) so the problem became a political one-and said little about education or what happened in schools. Some of us extended this idea of KOP from school-we mostly taught on teacher training or further professional development courses- to the whole educational establishment- including, of course universities.

- It took me a long time to realise that a focus on the curriculum as KOP was no improvement on 'the neglect of knowledge'- it appeared to explain educational failure and inequalities in terms of non-school factors without offering any alternative except to encourage teachers to give up teaching and pupils to take over the schools- tendencies which were symbolised at the time by Ivan Illich's slogan of de-schooling.

- one further point to recall from that period was that the idea of the 'curriculum as Knowledge of the Powerful' thesis chimed in well with often over -simplified versions of Marxism, coming, ironically from America, in the work of economists Bowles and Gintis, as well as from France and the more sophisticated theories of power such as those of Bourdieu and his theory of education as cultural reproduction.

I almost gave up sociology of education and got involved in vocational education and training and the extraordinary popularity among policy makers of competence theories. I have to thank two experiences that led me back to sociology and the question of knowledge in education.

- one was a series of trenchant criticisms- by the philosopher Richard Pring and the sociologists Rob Moore and Joe Muller- of my early work and its social constructivist theory of knowledge. Instead of making knowledge the central education issue which was what I had hoped to do- it denied the possibility of any more truthful knowledge. As one critic put it – my first book should have been titled not Knowledge And Control but Knowledge out of Control.

- The second experience was in the early 1990's – I was invited to work with the democratic unions in SA after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the legalisation of the Communist Party and the ANC. It was at the height of Thatcherism in England and the opportunity to work with and not just against a government(initially those who were to become the government) was an opportunity that reformist academics rarely get. The problem was the legacy of apartheid and 18 racially divided educational systems with the white minority deciding everything for the Black majority. In that context my social constructivist critique seemed like a liberation theory - it would free teachers to collaborate with pupils in real learning. It is easy years later to see the naivety of this- and they have made slow but real progress since. However at the time curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and examinations were all associated with racial domination- and those of us working in or with the democratic movement had nothing to offer except supportive critique.

To cut another long story short – I went back to the UK and realised we needed a better theory -of knowledge, and of schooling and as I shall come to, education generally including universities. We needed a social theory of knowledge that recognised its objective character and that to recognise it was socially constructed not given and fixed, did not mean it could not be objective. But that was not all- knowledge is always knowledge *of a reality* external to its production. And as a former chemistry teacher, this was a crucial point for me – teachers don't just teach, they teach something, and learners learn something – how could

we think about this dual process? Having studied sociology I was led back to Durkheim who I had not looked at for 25 years – in particular his wonderful book The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Durkheim was not interested primarily in knowledge but in how to think about humans as social animals unique in many ways – one of which was that even the aborigine societies he studied, the clans separated how they made sense of the world into two quite distinct forms- what he called the sacred and the profane. What Durkheim realised was that this was a universal feature of all societies and it was this idea that gave me a quite fresh insight into the question of knowledge and more broadly of schooling.

Very briefly, what Durkheim found was that the clans he studied distinguished between the knowledge they acquired *through their experience-* which he called *'profane knowledge'* – of what to eat, what materials to build shelter from and which animals were dangerous, and what he called the *sacred knowledge* which answered questions that their experience could not answer- such as who they were, how were they different from other clans and most fundamentally, what would happen when they died –the sacred for them was a primitive form of religion. Durkheim's point for us was not what they believed- he was a Jew who rejected any religious belief, but what was distinctive about the **structure of this religious knowledge and practice –** how did it differ from profane or we might call common sense or everyday knowledge. He argued that it differed in 4 ways:
- It was not based on experience
- It was shared by specific communities
- It was stable and difficult to change
- It was produced by specialised ritual practices

He summarised his insight by referring to these early totemic forms of religion **proto sciences**. The structure of their religious knowledge became, as societies became secularised, the basis of the sciences and indeed all intellectual thought. A theory quite opposite to that of Marx for whom religion was the 'opium of the people' and got in the way of science and truth.

For us who work in education, whether schools, colleges or universities, this idea has even greater significance- and that maybe why Didi thought my work might be of interest to you.

This is where the way Basil Bernstein's extension of Durkheim becomes important- in three ways.

The first is that Durkheim's sacred/profane distinction is underpinned by the importance he gave to the idea of boundaries in the way societies are organised. I remember resisting this idea when Bernstein tried to convince us of its importance - I was hooked on the idea that the primary social relation was 'power' and not classification-as a radical young sociologist, I thought it was power relations wherever they appeared that were the problem- my naïve vision at the time was not so different from that of many progressives- it was of a society and an education system with no power relations! However, as I came to realise, the problem with the concept of 'power' is that it too easily becomes a zero/sum game of dominator/dominated. It can neglect how power relations presuppose the classifications that Durkheim identified among the primitive clans - as humans and as babies we begin by classifying things - this is particularly important for us in education and in no way limited to the school curriculum.

Bernstein distinguished two kinds of boundaries; **external boundaries** between school knowledge modelled on the sacred and everyday knowledge modelled on the profane and was the work of teachers which he described as framing.
the **internal boundaries** between subjects and disciplines that make up the curriculum he referred to as classification.

If we accept Durkheim's argument about the different structures of knowledge, then we have a plausible account for why in the 19th century industrialising societies started to expand schooling for all. It was because knowledge that took learners beyond their experience could be acquired in schools and universities with curricula based upon the shared values of increasingly specialised communities and not on a child's experience. We call this knowledge located in universities where new knowledge is produced, disciplines, and the knowledge located in schools where knowledge is transmitted, subjects- and obviously they must be closely related. If they are not, as for many children still, especially in developing countries, we leave them with only their experience. We thus have the beginning of a theory of the curriculum and it is interesting that although this has been

largely developed in relation to the role of subjects in schools, Bernstein used it in a more general way which applied as much to universities. The difference, and why the whole field of curriculum tends to be school focused, maybe that school teachers are confronted more with failure by some pupils and so are more willing to question the basis of their curriculum than university teachers- but that is something which needs discussing. In his last work Bernstein discussed how school subjects were 'recontextualised' from university disciplines.

The second important theme which applies equally to universities as schools that we can draw from Durkheim, though he did not use the term, is specialisation or as he referred to it- as the social division of labour – a process that applies as much to occupations and occupational sectors as to fields of knowledge. Durkheim saw specialisation as a progressive force- in terms of leading to greater equity and to the development of new knowledge; but he also recognised that it could take pathological forms and lead to fragmentation. It is one of the least developed of his ideas; he was more interested in its wider societal implications of specialisation than in the narrower educational issues and took a different view than other social theorists of his time of the wider problem of social order. The dominant view at the time, especially in France, was that specialisation was a threat to social order and that society – this was the end of the 19th century - could only be prevented from collapse and chaos by a dictatorial or at least authoritarian form of government. Durkheim was worried about anti-democratic trends, but argued that fragmentation and chaos was only one outcome of specialisation- there were conditions-and he mentioned a strong mediating role for the state and the professions, in which specialists- whether occupations or specialist communities of enquiry like disciplines, became increasingly **inter-dependent** and reliant on each other. There are signs of this in the new forms of inter-disciplinary research that have developed recently in fields like climate change- but Durkheim had a grander but perhaps over-optimistic that this interdependence might be the basis of what he called organic solidarity.

There is much more I could say about Bernstein and Durkheim's ideas; Bernstein is not easy even for those of us whose mother tongue is English. I will refer briefly to two examples. My colleague Joe Muller and I edited a book about Expertise and Professional Knowledge which drew on his ideas about how combinations of disciplines transform fields of practice as

different as health and engineering and contrasted them with the problems faced by professions like teaching which have no agreed knowledge base. Research on professional education has a parallel with research on teaching- it has neglected the question of knowledge almost entirely. My second example from the work he was doing shortly before he died in 2001 focussed more directly on the curriculum of schools and potentially of universities. He distinguished between what he called vertical and horizontal knowledge relations- typical examples of the former being the natural sciences and the latter the humanities and arts. His criterion was how they approached the progress of knowledge. Whereas in the natural sciences knowledge progresses through abstraction to greater generalisations, new thinking in the arts and humanities do not lead to progress in the sense of more generalisable knowledge, but to new ways of imagining what can be produced – as in music, art and literature. He was ambiguous about the social sciences which he saw as tending to face in both ways, some modelling themselves on the sciences and others on the humanities.

I would like to end by saying a little about my current work on knowledge in schools and suggest that it might learn from as well as be useful to those researching in applied fields of study in higher education. In the book I wrote with my colleague, David Lambert **Knowledge and the Future School** we introduced the concept of **'powerful knowledge'** as a curriculum principle that in the terms I have used today, puts more emphasis on the 'sacred school subject knowledge than on the 'profane'- as represented by the knowledge students bring to school based on their experience.

This idea of powerful knowledge as a curriculum criterion or principle has been used, by researchers, government and increasingly in schools, and its implementation has led to some criticisms. Since the publication of the book, I have become aware of three problems the idea of **'powerful knowledge'** raises when applied to the school curriculum; I will discuss each briefly:

- *The inherently contradictory nature of the concept of power especially when associated with knowledge*

- *The inadequate model of curriculum that it has relied on*

- *The tendency of schools to neglect the interdependence of curriculum and pedagogy*

Firstly, let us turn to the inherently contradictory nature of power and its problems when used to describe knowledge: In everyday speech we use 'power' in two quite different ways – these are sometimes referred to as **'power over', or 'power over others** and **'power to'** **in the field under enquiry, do or think new things**.

An example of the former is how in education the curriculum can be seen by some as dominating students and limiting their freedom. This has led to movements for creating curricula that emphasise children as creators of their own meanings. In contrast, the idea of 'power to' (or 'to think about new possibilities'. Then it reminds us of thinkers like Paulo Friere and idea of *education as emancipatory*; this places almost too much responsibility on the learner and gives very little no space for the role to the teacher. It is not surprising that student teachers can become confused- especially when power is linked to knowledge.

The second issue relates to the incompleteness of the model of powerful knowledge as a curriculum principle. Since I wrote the book **Knowledge and the Future School** with David Lambert I have come to realise that there are two ways in which our concept of a curriculum was inadequate and perhaps explains why in the blogs and twitter comments, my name is often linked with ED Hirsch- **especially his early book sub** -titled - **what every child should know**, despite very sharp differences sharp differences between us in the definition. Hirsch focuses on lists of concepts and a subject structure with clear boundaries between the subjects; these are sequenced to guide learner progress. Sequence and coherence of topics are important elements of a curriculum, but they can mask another feature of curricula- the extent to which a knowledge-based curriculum is a **high resource curriculum**, especially but not only in relation to human resources- specifically co-existence.

- Curriculum subjects are the 'communities of specialists' I referred to at the beginning. They share ideas and values with specialists in other schools, with disciplinary specialists in universities and increasingly, internationally. They meet at conferences and publish in journals as ways of collectively evaluating ideas and improving what their subject can offer.

- Perhaps the strongest point to make is that if a school lacks the funds to recruit qualified specialist teachers in all subjects' it will be impossible to claim to have a knowledge-based curriculum as more than something on paper. For example, I know of an example of a school where physics had to be taught by a teacher with only a Physical education degree. Resources on which a knowledge-based curriculum depends extend to specialist accommodation, like studios and workshops and specialist land facilities for sports-and of course the support that schools with a high proportion of middle class pupils get and take for granted from families. These points may appear obvious but when considering the annual examination results, the ranking of schools becomes understood as much an expression of inequalities in per student funding of the two and the private/state divide as it is evidence of the ability of pupils.

My third point is the extent to which a knowledge based curriculum can play down the interdependence of curriculum and pedagogy- this is a point that applies to our book except for the chapter by David Lambert which introduces the idea of teachers as 'curriculum makers'.

It is important for a school or a university to stipulate the knowledge in the curriculum- but on its own, this tends to leave knowledge as more like information and the curriculum as a store of codified knowledge. The knowledge in a curriculum can remain inert until it becomes part of the process of recontextualisation – between groups of teachers, and between teachers and their students as neophyte specialists acquiring and making sense of sequences of subject concepts in the different ways.

Cognitive scientists have become popular among teachers with an emphasis on memorise what physycholosts and others know. They emphasise the importance of acquiring and memorising bodies of subject knowledge for later use. However a focus on memorisation as I touched on earlier does not necessarily encourage students to develop a relationship to knowledge that leads them to new questions. For understandable reasons, a school adopting a knowledge -led curriculum with weak students and teachers lacking confidence in their subject can spend too much time on testing whether students have memorised the

knowledge of previous years. The difficult task for teachers with pupils with a diversity of learning needs is how to base the curriculum on pedagogised knowledge and developing a knowledge-led pedagogy. This not to discourage memorisation which is an integral part of successful learning but to insist that it is not an end in itself- students must learn that memorisation is a step to acquiring new knowledge. Because universities in most countries are selective and not 'open access', university teachers do not face the acute problems that confront many school teachers. Nevertheless the issues particularly the theory/practice question and the balance to give to disciplinary and practical knowledge remain. As an example we might take teacher education in England as an example of weakening access knowledge by students and the virtual disappearance of disciplinary knowledge and its replacement by work based learning in vocational programmes.

To conclude- schools, colleges and universities are the only institutions in modern society which specialise in the transmission, and in the case of universities, the production and use of knowledge. If schools aspire knowledge that has to be the best knowledge we have and gain access to contemporary debates and how they are being challenged, somehow this Socratic right must be reachable by all growing learners, it places a big responsibility on teachers. Pedagogy, as the theory and practice of teaching, is in my view always an authority relationship and always based on a boundary between the 'sacred' role of the teacher and the profane role of the learner – or, to express it differently, between the everyday experience of students and the specialised knowledge of teachers. Learners knowledge and motivation is important- it is the resource that as teachers we rely on- however it can never on its own, be the goal or be on the curriculum.