

# Powerful knowledge and the curriculum

## 1. Background – what are schools for in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

- **Theoretical origins**
  - Emile Durkheim
  - Basil Bernstein
  - Lev Vygotsky
- **Sociology of education**
  - from 'knowledge of the powerful' to 'powerful knowledge'
  - from knowers to knowledge/ from 'who decides?' to 'what is decided?'
  - from critique to alternatives
- **Policy debates**
  - Beyond the Future 2( knowledge as a social construct)/ Future 1( knowledge as given') debate
  - Future 3 – what is school knowledge?
- **What is curriculum theory?**
  - Curriculum theory and its loss of object
  - curriculum as a form of specialized knowledge
  - knowledge as the topic for curriculum theory
  - the distinctiveness of curriculum and pedagogy

## 2. The structure of powerful knowledge

- It is differentiated from everyday experience ( Bernstein's horizontal and vertical discourses)
- it is specialised by boundaries ( Bernstein's hierarchical and segmented knowledge structures)
- it is discipline-based or discipline-based multi-disciplinary
- it is located within 'communities of specialists'
- it is context -independent not context dependent

## 3. Powerful knowledge' and the school curriculum

- School(or curriculum) knowledge is that knowledge which cannot be acquired acquire in most workplaces, homes and communities
- It is conceptual and linked to other subject concepts not contexts
- Subjects are the most reliable way of acquiring powerful
- subjects are re-contextualised' from disciplines
- re-contextualisation can be 'pedagogic' or 'official'
- recontextualisation involves the pacing, sequencing and selection of knowledge in supporting conceptual progression

- Subjects boundaries provide the basis for the identities of pupils as learners and the identities of teachers as members of a profession
- Acquiring subject knowledge involves knowing that( the concepts of a subject) and 'knowing how'( being able to use concepts in describing/analyzing specific cases)

#### **4. The purposes of powerful knowledge**

- It provides a basis for generalisations and imagining real alternatives
- It is a resource for asking questions- (in Bernstein's terms 'thinking the un-thinkable' or the 'not yet thought')
- It is:
  - (a) the source of new knowledge ( disciplines)
  - the most reliable basis we have for acting on/transforming the world( Bernstein's regions)
  - access to the 'best knowledge we have in any field of enquiry

#### **5. Some problems with powerful knowledge as a curriculum criterion**

- conceptual problems- the problem of power.
- availability of specialist teachers
- tendency for science subjects to be a standard
- the balance between official(government) and pedagogic re-contextualisation
- the balance between curriculum and pedagogy in relation to slow learners
- The generic skills debate
- The question of choice – modularization and conceptual progression as curriculum strategies
- When should conceptual knowledge begin?

A pedagogic strategy that starts in the subjective world of human experience cannot give epistemological access to complex systematic knowledge (Bernstein)

- Slow learners
- The specialization dilemma

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