Knowledge and the Curriculum in the Sociology of Education: towards a reconceptualisation

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ABSTRACT This paper argues that the question of knowledge needs to be reconceptualised if sociology is to make its potential contribution to current debates about the curriculum. It begins with a review of the dominant assumptions underlying contemporary curriculum policy: neo-conservative traditionalism and technical-instrumentalism. It then examines the relativist position on knowledge that follows from the postmodernist critiques that have recently come to dominate social theory, particularly in the sociology of education. The paper argues that, in different ways, each of these approaches avoids the question of knowledge and hence leaves unresolved epistemological and educational dilemmas. In the final section, the paper draws on recent research in the sociology of science to develop what is referred to as a social realist approach to knowledge and explores its implications both for the curriculum and the claims that we are entering a ‘knowledge society’.

Introduction

Politicians tell us that we are (or soon will be) in a ‘knowledge society’ and that more and more jobs require people to be ‘knowledge workers’. At the same time, government policy documents have been remarkably silent about what this knowledge is (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, 1999). Is it more of the old disciplinary knowledge or is it a new kind of trans-disciplinary knowledge that is more transient and local (Gibbons et al., 1994; Muller, 2000)? Answers to such questions should lie at the heart of the sociology of education, but are strangely absent there as well (Moore & Muller, 1999; Young, 2000a, b). In this paper we wish to achieve two things. First, we seek to clarify the nature of the problem and, second, we shall propose a way ahead for the sociology of education. In developing our argument, we will not only be examining the problem of knowledge in the curriculum, but also raising some concerns about how the sociology of education has tended to treat the issue of knowledge more generally. We will argue that contemporary trends in the sociology of education make it peculiarly
ill-equipped to meet the curriculum challenge posed by debates about the implications of globalisation (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998) and the massification of post-compulsory education (Scott, 2000) of the past decade.

We shall begin by describing and contrasting what we see as the two dominant (and contending) sets of assumptions about knowledge and the curriculum that are reflected in contemporary curriculum policy: ‘neo-conservative traditionalism’ and ‘technical-instrumentalism’. We then go on to examine the postmodernist critique of these assumptions that has been developed within the sociology of education (Hartley, 1997; Moore, 2000). Despite the critical stance of postmodernism, we will argue that all three positions exhibit some fundamental similarities. Each, in its own way, precludes a debate about knowledge as a category in its own right. It follows that what is lacking from current debates about the curriculum is precisely any theory of knowledge. It is here that the issue becomes most acute for the sociology of education. It is fair to say that postmodernist perspectives have become firmly entrenched, although not hegemonic, within the sociology of education (Hartley, 1997) and, furthermore, that their proponents adopt a critical position vis-à-vis neo-conservatism and instrumentalism (Griffith, 2000). In this respect, postmodernists hold in a contemporary guise the place formerly held, within the sociology of education, by progressivism and certain kinds of Marxist critiques. Although on theoretical grounds postmodernists reject both the essentialist model of the child held by progressive educationists and the economic determinism of Marxism, they continue to emphasise the ‘experiential’ basis of knowledge associated with progressivism and the view of academic knowledge as elitist and ideological that is found in many Marxist critiques. Furthermore, postmodernists have developed the relativism that is immanent in both Marxist and phenomenological theories of knowledge into a point of principle. Although in ideological terms postmodernism is critical of both neo-conservative and technical-instrumental views of the curriculum, we shall show that in relation to their assumptions about knowledge it is the similarities of the three approaches that are more significant than their differences. Furthermore, for reasons we shall develop in this paper, the relativising of knowledge claims associated with postmodernist critiques vitiates their ability to mount any effective advocacy of realistic curriculum alternatives.

The implication of this argument is that there is a potential fourth position (the one that we intend to develop) that brings knowledge itself back into the debate about the curriculum without denying its fundamentally social and historical basis. However, such a position requires the sociology of education to develop a theory of knowledge that, while accepting that knowledge is always a social and historical product, avoids the slide into relativism and perspectivism with which this insight is associated in postmodernist writings (for example, Usher & Edwards, 1994).

The issues, then, are threefold. First, we believe there are important developments in related academic fields (especially in the sociology and philosophy of science) that can be drawn on in developing the fourth position we referred to earlier. Second, although what counts as school knowledge will always be a contested issue, it is important that this should be seen as something more than simply a power play between contending social interests. Account needs to be taken of how knowledge is developed (and acquired) within particular epistemic communities or ‘cultures’ (Hoskyns, 1993; Collins, 1998; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Third, as we shall show, the outcomes of disputes about knowledge are not mere academic issues. They directly affect learning opportunities for pupils in schools and have wider consequences through the principles by which knowledge is distributed in society.
The Current Debate

Recent curriculum policy has been driven by two competing imperatives or ideologies—one largely covert but embedded in the leading educational institutions themselves, and the other more overt and increasingly dominant in government rhetoric. The first is what we refer to as ‘neo-conservative traditionalism’. The idea of the curriculum as a given body of knowledge that it is the responsibility of the schools to transmit is as old as the institution of schooling itself. It is only articulated (for example, Woodhead, 2001) when it is felt that the traditional body of knowledge is being challenged. An example is in responses to proposals at various times in the past 20 years for the reform or even replacement of A-levels, which for neo-conservatives represent a ‘Gold Standard’ against which all other curricula must be evaluated. For them, real learning is still essentially the contemplative process that has its roots in the monastic tradition, and the role of the curriculum and its attendant examinations is to engender respect for whatever are the canonical texts. It is therefore not just the specific texts (for example, particular authors in the case of English) that are held to be of enduring value by neo-conservatives, but the relationship of deference to a given body of knowledge. In other words, what is important is the experience of submitting to the discipline of a subject and becoming the kind of person it is supposed to make you. In terms of the conventional knowledge-centred/child-centred and traditional/progressive dichotomies that have organised curriculum debates for so long, it must be stressed that neo-conservatism is not motivated primarily by ‘epistemological’ concerns. Rather, it is inspired by the view that the traditional discipline of learning promotes proper respect for authority and protects traditional values (for example, Scruton, 1991).

The disregard by neo-conservatives of the importance of specific knowledge is associated with a peculiarly English form of anti-intellectualism (Wellens, 1970) and a cult of amateurism and scepticism about expertise that still shapes the world view of the higher grades of the civil service and the top echelons of parts of industry and commerce (Wilkinson, 1970). The endorsement of the idea of the ‘civilised generalist’, which is expressed in the English Sixth Form curriculum that allows students to choose which collection of subjects to study, has led to the inclusion of an increasing range of ‘modern’ subjects. English Literature, Modern (sic) Foreign Languages, geography and science were included in the nineteenth century, and the social sciences later in the twentieth century (Young, 1998). However, this diversification of the content of the Sixth Form curriculum bears little relation to the transformations that have taken place in society or the actual development of knowledge itself. In the period of 50 years since A-levels were launched their basic structure has remained unchanged, while whole new fields of knowledge have been created and the economy and society as a whole has changed out of all recognition. Furthermore, the numbers of students taking A-levels has expanded 10-fold as most jobs for 16 year olds disappeared by the 1980s and the numbers continuing as full-time students doubled.

Those who Raymond Williams (1961) called the ‘industrial trainers’, but who we refer to by the broader term ‘technical-instrumentalists’, have consistently challenged the neo-conservative view of education. For them, the curriculum imperative is not educational in the traditional sense, but supportive of what they see as the needs of the economy. Most recently this is expressed in terms of preparing for the global and more competitive knowledge-based economy of the future (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, 1999). From this perspective, education, the curriculum and even knowledge itself becomes a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is the curriculum’s
role in making a particular ‘form of society’ that is stressed. Only secondarily is it seen as a maker of persons, and even then only to the extent that they exhibit the qualities of trainability and flexibility that it is assumed will be needed in the future ‘knowledge society’.

What has changed, even as recently as in the past 10 years, is the scope of these instrumentalist views of the curriculum and knowledge. Prior to the 1970s they were largely confined to vocational education and training (hence Williams’ term ‘industrial trainers’), although they were also reflected in the assumption that the 20% of each cohort who left school without any qualifications needed a more practically oriented, work-related curriculum. However, in the past decade, and particularly since the two reports by Lord Dearing on 16–19 qualifications (Dearing, 1996) and higher education (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997), instrumentalism, under the guise of promoting the employability of all students, has been extended to the academic curriculum for 16–19 year olds and even to the apex of academic learning—the universities. All students are now encouraged to mix academic and vocational subjects (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999) and all subjects taught at university from Fine Art to Pure Mathematics have to incorporate key skills and show their students how to apply their knowledge (Bridges, 2000). Subject specialists are increasingly expected to make explicit not only how their subject links with other subjects, but also how it facilitates team work, communications or number skills. Technical-instrumentalism also imposes on educational institutions a style of managerial regulation that is integrated with the broader apparatus of performance indicators, target setting and league tables (Beck, 1999). While the formalities of academic freedom in deciding the university curriculum are retained, cash-starved institutions are unavoidably influenced by the incentives of funds linked to such government objectives as widening participation and promoting employability.

The tension between the two models has influenced the development of the curriculum for more than a century. However, it is particularly in the past decade that technical-instrumentalism has provided the dominant rhetoric for change as well as contributing substantive elements of reform [1]. Both models operate ‘diagnostically’ by identifying deficiencies in existing educational arrangements. The traditionalists assert that the substantial expansion of post-compulsory education has only been possible-by allowing the standards of excellence that were established in the past (the ‘golden age’) to fall. In contrast, the modernisers claim that the uneasy compromise between pressures to expand participation and maintain standards has resulted in a curriculum that fails to fulfil the skill and knowledge demands of the emerging economy. In both models, a view of the curriculum is related to a particular historical narrative of social change (Moore, 2000).

With governments unable to resolve the tension between these two imperatives, it is not surprising that curriculum policy and its implementation is, at best, confused. Some schools and colleges are making a heroic effort to articulate a vision of a broader curriculum of the future, while others adapt as best they can to the vagaries of student choice and the idiosyncrasies of Higher Education admission tutors. Nor is it surprising that new divisions are emerging. In the most successful institutions, students are encouraged to take four or even five subjects, at least in the first year of their post-16 studies, and degree programmes are being enhanced in the leading universities. In contrast, students in less privileged institutions tend to face the new forms of generic and, some would say, ‘vacuous’ vocationalism such as key skills.

Neither the neo-conservative nor the instrumentalist views have gone unchallenged by
social theorists. However, our argument is that, in failing to provide a way of discussing what must be central to any serious curriculum debate—the question of knowledge—the critiques from social theory fall into the same trap as the views they oppose. This is not as straightforward a point as it sounds because the critiques, increasingly from a postmodernist perspective, present themselves as treating the question of knowledge as central. They focus largely on the academic curriculum and claim that it relies on essentially arbitrary assumptions about knowledge and culture generally (Hartley, 1997). It follows, from their perspective, that in asserting the givenness of what they claim to have demonstrated is arbitrary, the curriculum is responsible for the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Starting from the assumption that all knowledge is embedded in the interests of particular groups of ‘knowers’, postmodernist critiques appear to provide powerful support for the cultural demands of subordinate groups, whether these are ethnic, gender or (although increasingly less frequently) social class based. However, by arguing that knowledge is inseparable from how it is constructed, they cannot avoid the conclusion that all knowledge, whether based on professional expertise, research or the experience of particular groups, is of equal value. It follows that, when the standpoint and interests of those producing the knowledge have been identified, all that needs to be said has, in essence, been said. Debates between postmodernists and those they critique become little more than arguments about whose experience should underpin the curriculum, and the purpose of social theory becomes the critical deconstruction of the dominant forms of knowledge associated with subjects and disciplines. If all standards and criteria are reducible to perspectives and standpoints, no grounds can be offered for teaching any one thing rather than any other (or, ultimately, for teaching anything at all)! It is not surprising that such theories, whatever their appeal to intellectuals, have made no contribution to curriculum policy. Worse than that, they have effectively marginalised the role of sociology in providing a theory for how we might think about knowledge in a ‘knowledge society’ and what the curriculum implications of such a theory might be.

Postmodernist ideas about knowledge have not only been the basis of critiques of traditionalist views of the curriculum; they have also been used to challenge the prevailing instrumentalism of current government policy and its rhetoric of performativity (Usher & Edwards, 1994). However, because they have no theory of knowledge as such, they can do little more than expose the way that curriculum policies always mask power relations. Furthermore, by depending on an irreducible notion of experience ultimately removed from any social context, they neglect the uneven distribution of the experiences that learners need if they are to acquire and make use of curriculum knowledge.

The Problems with Postmodernist Critiques of Knowledge

Why do postmodernist accounts of knowledge and the curriculum neglect the very problem that they set out to address? One reason is that in their critique of neo-conservatism and instrumentalism, they polarise the alternatives as if each position they critique did not itself have within it a kernel of truth. The neo-conservative position may be flawed, but it is not false. It reminds us that (a) education needs to be seen as an end in itself and not just as a means to an end (the instrumentalist position), and that (b) tradition, though capable of preserving vested interests, is also crucial in ensuring the
maintenance and development of standards of learning in schools, as well as being a condition for innovation and creating new knowledge. More generally, neo-conservatives remind us that the curriculum must, in Mathew Arnold’s words, strive to,

make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere! (Arnold, 1960, p. 70)

There are good reasons why we still want people to read Jane Austen’s novels, which are not weakened by the narrow community that she wrote about. Her novels are situated in time and context, but they are also timeless in the issues that they explore. One can make a slightly different kind of argument for keeping Newton’s laws of motion and Mendeleev’s Periodic Table on science syllabuses; both are examples of knowledge that remains powerful and transcends its origins in a particular social context. The problem with the neo-conservative position is that, like Arnold, it treats ‘the best’ as given and not the outcome, at any time, of wider social changes as well as internal debates within disciplines. Because neo-conservatives play down the social and historical nature of knowledge, they see no need for a theory about what should (and should not) be in the curriculum, whether it is particular novels or new subjects. For them, the canon of English literature and the traditional school subjects are, self-evidently, just there; they define what a curriculum is. The result is that actual curriculum changes are invariably ad hoc and pragmatic.

In opposition to neo-conservatism, instrumentalism reminds us that the curriculum has always been, albeit selectively, related to the economic needs of the country and the future employability of students, despite claims to the contrary by liberal educators. It also reminds us that schools and colleges are never as insulated from the rest of society as they are portrayed in the subject-based curriculum. The issue that instrumentalism does not address is the conditions that are necessary if knowledge is to be produced or acquired and why economic realities can never be the only criteria for the curriculum. In contrast, social theories of knowledge, whether humanist, Marxist, or more recently postmodernist, all make explicit the social and historical character of knowledge, and that knowledge is always, at least in part, ‘some people’s knowledge’. However, in making such features of knowledge explicit, these theories all too easily end up in claiming that knowledge is only ‘some people’s knowledge’—no more and no less.

The second problem with postmodernist theories is that they imply that social theories of knowledge inevitably lead to relativism and the denial of any possibility that knowledge can be objective. Arguments about relativism have dominated and distorted debates about knowledge in the sociology of education since the 1970s (Moore & Muller, 1999) in ways that have seriously impeded the development of a theory that might address the many urgent curriculum issues. Most social theories of knowledge have remained at too high a level of abstraction to have any clear curriculum implications, and if not, as in the case of some forms of Marxism and feminism, they have made unsupportable claims about the links between knowledge and particular social interests. In this paper, we shall propose a ‘social realist’ view of knowledge derived from Durkheim (1995) and developed more recently by Collins (1998) and Alexander (1995). In contrast to postmodernist theories, these writers argue that it is the social nature of knowledge that in part provides the grounds for its objectivity and its claims to truth. In the final section of the paper, we shall discuss the implications for curriculum debates of such a social realist approach to knowledge and how it might take us beyond both the prevailing orthodoxies of neo-conservatism and instrumentalism as well as their postmodernist critics.
The Epistemological Dilemma

In developing an alternative to relativism, we begin by noting the peculiarity that anyone should hold such a position in the first place. In the academic community, objections to relativism are long established and widely known (Gellner, 1974, 1992; Fay, 1996; Harre & Krausz, 1996). Furthermore, at a common-sense level, it is inconceivable that advocates of relativism could actually live their personal lives as relativists. They may celebrate the uniqueness of individual standpoints in theory but, at the same time, in their everyday lives they cannot avoid making assumptions that transcend the uniqueness of particular standpoints. The question remains why, particularly in the sociology of education, has the appeal of relativism persisted [2].

Relativism has taken different forms in the sociology of education. As a methodology, it refers to the critical questioning that is a feature of the beginning of any enquiry. What distinguishes its use in the sociology of education is its role in questioning the form and content of the curriculum, the taken-for-granted assumptions that it makes about what counts as knowledge and, therefore, the society that supports those assumptions. However, relativism is never just a methodological strategy. Invariably, theoretical claims are made about the social basis of knowledge as well as political claims about the consequences of particular theories of knowledge in terms of wider questions of power and inequality. By arguing that all knowledge derives from partial and potentially self-interested standpoints, relativism can be seen as a superficially powerful basis for challenging what are assumed to be the repressive and dominant knowledge forms of the existing curriculum. Relativists attack the claims to objectivity of dominant forms of knowledge and, by implication, defend the ‘voices’ that are denied or hidden. It is this combination of the methodology and politics of relativism that goes some way to accounting for its appeal. However, its actual political and educational significance outside the field of sociology of education has been minimal. This relates to the theoretical weaknesses of relativism, especially in its most recent postmodern form. By polarising dominant knowledge forms against ‘silenced’ others, postmodernism achieves its radical objective of not having to refer to any established traditions of academic debate; all academic theories, by definition, exclude ‘silent’ others. However, in dismissing other theories rather than entering into a dialogue with them, postmodernism precludes the possibility of an alternative theory of knowledge, except one that reduces all knowledge to statements about knowers (Maton, 2000). Debates about knowledge for postmodernists become forms of attack and defence between oppressors and oppressed (or rather those claiming to defend their interests). At the same time, by privileging the exclusiveness of particular experiences, they deny to oppressed communities the possibility of knowledge that goes beyond their experience and might play a part in enabling them to overcome their oppression.

This trend to dichotomise has, we would argue, a deeper basis in what is sometimes referred to as the ‘linguistic turn’ in social theory. Language is treated not as an aspect of social order or as a useful metaphor for characterising aspects of social relations, but as the only way we have of representing social relations (Gellner, 1992). From such a dichotomising perspective, dominant knowledge (such as that inscribed in the curriculum) requires the exclusion of the knowledge of ‘others’. It follows that the only task of social analysis is to ‘name’ the producers of the dominant knowledge (Moore, 2000) [3].

A number of commentators have noted that, in their critique of knowledge, postmodernists invariably characterise it as ‘positivist’ (Alexander, 1995, chapter 3) [4]. The typical version of positivism that is attacked is one that locates truth outside society and
presents it as accessible through a ‘neutral’ language that is a direct representation of the external world. The postmodernist view of the inseparability of knowledge and knowers is then used to challenge the claims of the natural sciences that they can provide access to a truth that is outside society and history. The implications of this polarisation between postmodernism and a positivist view of science is termed by Alexander ‘the epistemological dilemma’, which he summarises as follows:

Either knowledge ... is unrelated to the social position and intellectual interests of the knower, in which case general theory and universal knowledge are viable, or knowledge is affected by its relation to the knower, in which case relativistic and particularistic knowledge can be the only result. This is a true dilemma because it presents a choice between two equally unpalatable alternatives. [However] The alternative to positivist theory is not resigned relativism and the alternative to relativism is not positivist theory. Theoretical knowledge can never be anything other than the socially rooted efforts of historical agents. But this social character does not negate the possibility of developing either generalised categories or increasingly disciplined, impersonal and critical modes of evaluation. (Alexander, 1995, p. 91)

We endorse Alexander’s view that there is an alternative to this polarisation and will explore it in some detail later. Next however, we turn to other problems of postmodernism as a critical social theory and, in particular, its concept of knowledge.

Postmodernism reduces knowledge to a simple monolithic form that is then held to be hegemonic. However, as Collins (1998) argues in his encyclopaedic The Sociology of Philosophies, it is only rarely and under exceptional conditions that the certainty of knowledge is hegemonic in any intellectual field. He shows that intellectual fields are typically structured by competing traditions and positions, and that the dominance of one is only ever partial and transient. Indeed, for Collins, the reality of competing traditions is one of the conditions for the objectivity of knowledge. In contrast, postmodernism polarises present and absent meanings, leading to an inevitably schematic and partial view of knowledge. The manner in which postmodernists typically equate science with positivism, despite the fact, at least in its cruder forms, positivism has never been widely accepted as a theory of science, is an example of this. Philosophers such as Toulmin, as well as sociologists, have, since the 1970s, shown that locating knowledge socially does not lead to the abandonment of truth and objectivity. It is in these developments that we can find a way out of Alexander’s ‘epistemological dilemma’.

Our argument so far has been that in reducing knowledge to particular standpoints, postmodernism follows a reductive logic that polarises dominant knowledge against absent or silent voices that it excludes. It then goes on to treat this exclusion as mirroring the inequalities of power in the wider society. However, this reduction of knowledge to standpoints has a number of implications for the ability of sociology to contribute meaningfully to curriculum debates. Four such implications are worth discussing.

The genetic fallacy. If knowledge is reduced to the conditions of its production, it is denied any intrinsic autonomy either as a social institution in its own right or in terms of the application of independent truth criteria that might be applied to curriculum debates.

Oversimplifying intellectual fields. If knowledge is reduced to the standpoint of a social group, the complexity of positions within any field at any point in time is neglected. Dominance and exclusion are at best very partial categories for curriculum analysis and inevitably neglect questions about why any knowledge is or is not included.
Reducing knowledge to experience. Standpoint analysis reduces knowledge to what is known by different groups, the power relations between them and their different experiences. Thus, we are left with a sociology of knowers, which says little about knowledge or the curriculum itself.

Denying the possibility of categories that transcend experience. Equating knowledge with the experience of knowers means that research can lead only to non-generalisable findings and localised curricula.

It is not difficult to see the problems that are left for sociology as a basis for a critical theory if the logic of the postmodernist argument is accepted. It can be critical only in the limited sense of identifying possible interests behind claims to disinterestedness. We do not reject the possibility that claims to knowledge and objectivity may be linked to social interests (the history of educational testing is but one well-known example). The problems arise when knowledge is taken to be ‘always’ and ‘only’ identical with ‘interest’. If this is accepted, there are only interests and no good grounds for preferring one interest to another. It is a form of ‘criticism in the head’ or ‘in the armchair’—a kind of academic radicalism of no consequence to anyone else. No wonder there have been suggestions, however misguided, to transfer resources for educational research away from academics. If all knowledge is from a standpoint and there are no standpoint-independent criteria for making judgements, appeals in terms of ‘social justice’ or the ‘common good’ become no more than other standpoints. Similarly, peer reviews for preserving objectivity and standards become no more than a form of professional hegemony. The view taken in this paper is that the objectivity of peer reviews has a social basis in the codes, traditions and debates of different intellectual fields that give it a degree of autonomy beyond the personal and professional interests of any particular group of academic peers. Postmodernism, as we have argued earlier, is trapped in its insistence that objectivity can only be supported by the untenable and a-social claims of positivism.

The Educational Dilemma

The problem faced by the sociology of education is twofold. First, at least in the past decades, most attempts to address the knowledge question have been by postmodernists, with the consequences we have already described. Second, attempts to develop a sociology of education that gives knowledge its central place in the curriculum easily slip back into the discredited neo-conservative traditionalist position discussed earlier in this paper. This is what can be termed the ‘educational dilemma’—either the curriculum is a given or it is entirely the result of power struggles between groups with competing claims for including and legitimising their knowledge and excluding that of others. This can be seen as a more specific example of the ‘epistemological dilemma’ (Alexander, 1995) to which we referred earlier. It is in pointing to a way of resolving both dilemmas that we turn to what we have referred to as a ‘social realist’ approach to knowledge.

Towards a Social Realist Approach to Knowledge

The argument so far can be summarised as follows.

(1) Relativism does not necessarily follow from a ‘social’ theory of knowledge. On the
contrary, a social theory can be the basis for claims to truth and objectivity by identifying the distinctive ‘codes and practices’ through which they are produced.

(2) A social theory must recognise that some knowledge is objective in ways that transcend the immediate conditions of its production (as in Euclid’s geometry or Newton’s physics).

(3) A social theory that seeks to link knowledge to social interests has to distinguish between two types of interest: the ‘external’ interests, which reflect wider divisions in society; and the ‘internal’ interests, concerned with the production and acquisition of knowledge itself. Plagued by the assumption that it is always dealing with ‘external’ interests and their basis in the wider society, the sociology of knowledge has, until recently, given little attention to forms of ‘internal’, or as we shall suggest ‘cognitive’ interest (we will further develop this point later).

(4) In contrast to postmodernist theories, with their tendency to use dichotomous categories such as dominance and exclusion, a more adequate social theory must treat knowledge as ‘rarely if ever’, monolithic. This points to the importance of detailed historical and ethnographic studies that can make explicit the contested character of intellectual fields (Toulmin, 1996; Collins, 1998).

The political thrust of much recent social theory has assumed that (a) the social interests underpinning knowledge can be equated with wider inequalities of social class and more recently of gender and race, and that (b) social interests are typically distorting and involve the introduction of bias in directions that need to be opposed. Our argument does not deny the possibility of social interests introducing bias and unequally distributed disadvantage. However, it would not assume that this was inevitable in either the production or the acquisition of knowledge, or that such ‘external’ interests were necessarily involved in defining what counts as knowledge in a particular intellectual field. With these provisos in mind, this section of the paper will describe the elements of a social realist theory of knowledge and the manner in which it might resolve the epistemological and educational dilemmas we have outlined. In the final section, we will give an indication of its possible implications for current debates about the curriculum. In particular, we seek to provide an alternative to the reductionism and ultimately inconsequential social critiques of postmodernism. Essentially, this means developing a knowledge-based model of the curriculum that is an alternative to neo-conservatism. Such a model would need to interrogate the knowledge structures and contents of the curriculum in a way that acknowledges their social basis and their capacity (or lack of capacity) to transcend it.

In their various forms, reductionist sociologies of knowledge produce critiques of knowledge by describing it in terms of interests and perspectives. Schmaus has pointed out that this assumes that cognitive goals do not enter into the explanation of actions and beliefs. ‘Interest theories’, he argues, are unable to recognise ‘intellectual desires and motivations as being on a par with desires for power, prestige, money or sex …’ (Schmaus, 1994, p. 262). He goes on to question the view that subscribing to a cognitive goal always reduces to belonging to a social group. He argues that knowledge relies on its own forms of collective social formation that are not just a reflection of some other social relations of power (Schmaus, 1994). The crucial point is not necessarily to give cognitive interests primacy, but to recognise that they are also social in character and have their own constitutive principles of autonomy from other social interests. As Schmaus says in relation to science (although the implications of his point are much wider):

like any other social institution, [it] is defined in terms of the norms and values
that govern it. To the extent that science aims at the growth of knowledge, it is characterised by cognitive norms and values. Cognitive values specify the aims of science, while cognitive norms specify the means to achieve these goals. Both cognitive values and norms range widely. Cognitive values may include everything from a scientist's position regarding the ontological status of unobservable entities to the desire to solve a specific set of problems or to explain a particular set of facts. Cognitive norms may range from rules governing the forms of persuasive argument that can be brought in defence of one's theory in a journal article to procedures for manipulating 'inscription devices' in the laboratory. To say that such cognitive factors should play a role in the sociology of scientific knowledge is not to say that all scientific activity must be explained exclusively in terms of cognitive factors. There is no question that scientists can and have been influenced by many non-cognitive interests. However, it does not follow from this fact that cognitive goals must always be reduced to non-cognitive goals and interests. (Schmaus, 1994, p. 263)

As Schmaus goes on to stress, he is not implying there is only one social form that these cognitive values and norms can adopt; scientific communities can adopt a wide variety of forms. His crucial points are (a) the arbitrariness of excluding of cognitive interests by adopting reductive sociological approaches, and (b) that cognitive interests are embedded within specific forms of social life or collectivities with their own distinctive 'associational codes' (Ward, 1996). To assert that all knowledge is socially produced and historically located, as is agreed by virtually all schools of thought, no longer provides epistemological demarcation criteria for identifying what is 'social'. Only positivists and their postmodernist critics insist that for knowledge to be knowledge it must be outside history, although of course they then draw precisely opposition conclusions as to its actual possibility.

The exclusion of cognitive interests by standpoint and interest theories involves their 'replacement' (Mills, 1998, p. 402) by other interests that the theories are prepared to acknowledge, e.g. the sectional interests of power and domination. This replacement renders invisible the social form of the 'knowledge producing' or 'knowledge transmitting' communities as distinctive specialist collectivities; they are seen simply as homologues of some other social relationship (such as those between ruling and ruled classes, men and women, black and white, etc.). This reduction masks the possibility of an asymmetry between cognitive and other interests, whereby the social construction of knowledge is collectively realised through certain necessary practices and social relations that transcend other interests with values, norms and procedures of their own. However, from a social realist point of view, epistemological demarcation criteria are not concerned with distinguishing the social from the non-social in knowledge claims. They are concerned with investigating the distinctive forms of social organisation whereby powerful codes and procedures for the production and acquisition of knowledge have been developed that are increasingly global in scope (Ziman, 2000). These codes and procedures are reflected in research traditions and curricula, and inherit and are shaped by a legacy of divisions and inequalities that are becoming more acute, especially on a global scale. They exhibit an inertia and resistance to change, which are only partly cognitive in origin. However, they can in no meaningful sense be reducible to the interests of any particular social class, gender, national or ethnic group. It is precisely the relationship between these collective codes of knowledge production (research), knowl-
edge acquisition (teaching and learning) and changes in the societies in which they are located that should form a major focus of study for the sociology of education.

A social realist approach to knowledge can avoid Alexander's 'epistemological dilemma' by arguing (in contrast to positivism and postmodernism) that the social character of knowledge is an indispensable basis for its objectivity rather than the condition that makes this objectivity impossible (Shapin, 1994; Collins, 1998). More generally, the social realist view of knowledge has implications for our understanding of the idea of a 'knowledge society'. As we have argued, neither neo-conservative traditionalism, technical-instrumentalism nor postmodernism involve, in any proper sense of the term, theories of knowledge. Consequently, knowledge is precisely the central category that is missing from debates about the knowledge society and its educational implications [5]. In this paper, we have stressed (a) the intrinsically social and collective character of knowledge production, (b) the complexity of intellectual fields and the processes of knowledge production and transmission, and (c) the asymmetry between cognitive and other interests that are involved in knowledge acquisition and production. Together, these issues bring the question of knowledge into focus in such a way that it becomes central to the future of knowledge societies and the relationship between the social organisation of knowledge and social formation more generally (Young, 1998, chapter 1; Moore, 2000). This in no way denies that the production and transmission of knowledge is always entangled with a complex set of contending social interests and power relations. However, broad social trends that encompass both the emergence of what Castells (1998) calls a 'networked society' and the persistence and in some ways extension of structured inequalities always have to be seen in interaction with the social configurations of knowledge production itself (Ward, 1996). It is only when the cognitive interests involved in the production and transmission of knowledge are given the importance they warrant that a social theory of knowledge can avoid an all too often facile reductionism. The two goals of a social realist theory are (a) to properly reveal the manner in which external power relations might be affecting knowledge both in research and the curriculum and how, and (b) to explore how the forms of social organisation that arise from 'cognitive' interests may themselves shape the organisation of society itself.

The Curriculum Implications of a Social Realist Approach to Knowledge

Following writers such as Ward (1996, 1997), Shapin (1994), Collins (1998) and Alexander (1995), we have argued that 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 and give the knowledge that is produced its emergent powers. The structure of these networks has changed in increasingly complex ways as part of the overall transformation of societies during the past two centuries, and any attempt to depict these changes is in danger of oversimplification. What follows can be no more than a tentative and provisional way of suggesting how such changes may have effected the production and transmission of knowledge.

We note that, with the massive expansion of knowledge in the nineteenth century, networks of knowledge production began to expand and cohere as disciplines, relatively insulated from each other (Hoskyns, 1993; Collins, 1998, Chapters 10, 12). We further note that this process was paralleled by the emergence of the subject-based school curriculum as a key context for the socialisation of young people (Young, 1998). What is less widely acknowledged is that the expanding public legitimacy and objectivity of
knowledge was underpinned by what Ward (1996) refers to as ‘codes of association’. These ‘codes’ were enshrined in institutions such as the university subject departments and specialist professional and academic organisations concerned with knowledge production, and also in the school subject associations concerned with what counted as school knowledge and how it was assessed (Layton, 1984). Despite significant expansion and diversification over the past century, these specialist forms of social organisation remain the major social bases for guaranteeing the objectivity of knowledge and the standards achieved by an increasing proportion of each cohort of school students.

It is not surprising that the subjects and disciplines of the curriculum as the dominant form of the social organisation of knowledge should have been contested. On the one hand, they have been taken as a given and underpinned the neo-conservative defence of the traditional curriculum. On the other hand, their emergence and expansion was undoubtedly associated historically with profound inequalities in the access to education of different social classes that were in part a legacy of previous eras. It is this association between academic specialisation and social inequality that has provided the basis for the radical attack on the subject-based curriculum. From the point of view argued in this paper, such an attack is mistaken. There are no grounds for claiming that the historical association of the two patterns, curriculum specialisation and inequality, has a causal explanation. On the contrary, the forms of social organisation underpinning the production and transmission of specialist knowledge did not develop in a vacuum, and the ahistorical view of knowledge associated with neo-conservatism is equally untenable. It is challenged, however, not for primarily epistemological reasons, but by technical-instrumentalism that takes issue with its resistance to change linked to its uncritical deference to traditional authority. The neo-conservative model is increasingly seen as (a) too slow in the production of knowledge, (b) too inefficient and too elitist to ensure that the majority of the population gain the skills and qualifications they need, and (c) too out of touch with the increasingly competitive global society in which we find ourselves (Gibbons et al., 1994, 2000). As a result, the universities are under pressure to move away from a reliance on disciplines towards more ‘connective’ transdisciplinary models of knowledge production [6], and schools are expected to shift from a curriculum based on subjects to one based on modularity, the mixing of academic and vocational studies, and generic skills (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999).

This conflict between the neo-conservatives and instrumentalists can be seen as one between different modes of knowledge production and curriculum organisation along the following dimensions.

- From insulation to connectivity between disciplines and subjects, and between knowledge and its application.
- From the separation of general and vocational knowledge and learning to their integration.
- From specialisation and linear sequencing as a curriculum principle to genericism and modularity from hierarchical to facilitative approaches to pedagogy

Neo-conservatives tend to endorse the first of each of these options and take for granted that knowledge is best produced and transmitted through insulated, specialist, linear and hierarchical modes. At the same time, they neglect the political and economic changes that are calling into question these principles as well as the inequalities of access and outcome that are associated with them [7]. The technical-instrumentalists, on the contrary, support moves towards more connective, integrated, modular curricula and more facilitative approaches to pedagogy. Unlike the neo-conservatives, they are well
aware of the changing global economy and its implications, and they interpret knowledge and learning needs from what they hear from employers who call for a more skill-based curriculum (Royal Society of Arts, 1998). However, unlike the neo-conservative model, their curriculum proposals have no social basis to draw on that is equivalent to the traditional networks and codes of practice such as the subject associations. As a result, their curriculum proposals tend to provoke doubts about standards and whether real learning is taking place. From the social realist perspective argued for in this paper, both are mistaken. Whereas the curriculum of the past (Young, 1998, 1999) that is defended by neo-conservative traditionalism takes no account of the changing social context within which the curriculum is located, the new curriculum that is likely to emerge from Curriculum 2000 neglects the extent to which the capacity of any curriculum as the basis for acquiring knowledge in any field depends on the social networks, trust and codes of practice that give it an objectivity and sense of standards. Whereas the old curriculum was undoubtedly elitist, its critics, both instrumentalists and postmodernists, focus only on its elitism and resistance to change. They fail to recognise that the social organisation of subjects and disciplines transcended its elitist origins as a basis for the acquisition and production of knowledge. Without networks and codes of practice, the emerging curriculum for 16–19 year olds will be little more than a pragmatic modification of the neo-conservative model. At its best, the new curriculum continues to be underpinned by existing social networks of subject specialists associated with the old curriculum but which extend their activities to include the newer forms of assessment and modular programmes. The traditional groupings of subject specialists that have maintained standards have been extended in some cases by new types of specialist teacher networks, such as those established for the Youth Award. At its worst, elements of the new curriculum, as in such examples as vocational A-levels and key skills, exemplify all the dangers of relying on the specification of learning outcomes that are not underpinned by any social network of expert practice [8].

Postmodernist critiques point to the voices that are silenced in the new curriculum model, as in the old. However, this is an example of the limitations of a dualist critique discussed earlier and does little more than demonstrate that some kind of silencing (or expressed less emotively, adaptation) will be a feature of any curriculum. The issues of what kind of adaptation of learners best promotes learning and what kind of learning is most important are not addressed. In re-emphasising that both the emergent properties of knowledge and its wider social basis have to be taken into account, a social realist approach to knowledge offers a possible way forward for the sociology of the curriculum.

**Conclusion**

The social realist approach that we have argued for recognises the ‘social’ character of knowledge as intrinsic to its epistemological status because the logical reconstruction of truth is always a dialogue with others set within particular collective codes and values (Collins, 1998). This has important implications, then, for avoiding the ‘educational dilemma’ posed by the alternatives of traditionalism and instrumentalism, and their (‘progressive’) postmodern critics. For example it provides the grounds for:

- avoiding both the ahistorical givenness of neo-conservative traditionalism and a reliance on such notions as relevance or the experience of the learner in decisions about the curriculum;
- maintaining an autonomy for the curriculum from the instrumentalism of economic or political demands;
assessing curriculum proposals in terms of balancing such goals as overcoming social exclusion and widening participation of the ‘cognitive interests’ that are involved in knowledge production and transmission;

reorienting debates about standards and knowledge in the curriculum from attempts to specify learning outcomes and extend testing to the role of specialist communities, networks and codes of practice

From a sociological point of view, these four implications of a social realist approach to knowledge take it beyond the alternatives posed by the two orthodoxies and their postmodern critics that we discussed earlier, and brings knowledge back into curriculum debate as the historically located collective achievement of human creativity.

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NOTES

[1] This rhetoric has become even louder and more pervasive since the election of the New Labour government in 1997, as is apparent from even a cursory reading of recent Green and White papers.

[2] The debates about relativism can be traced from the misplaced conclusions drawn from Kuhn’s (1970) The Structure of Scientific Revolutions and the influence of forms of phenomenological idealism in the 1970s, to the feminist and multicultural theories that have emerged since the 1980s (Moore & Muller, 1998).

[3] Robert Hughes (1994), in his excellent book, The Culture of Complaint, gives examples of the way that authors can be dismissed by postmodernist writers as simply ‘dead white males’ without any intellectual engagement with what they are actually saying.


[5] As Knorr-Certina (1999) comments, central to a knowledge society must be the ‘epistemic cultures’ that constitute it.

[6] Gibbons et al. (1994, 2000) coined the terms Mode 1 and Mode 2 to characterise this shift from the traditional disciplinary basis of knowledge production to the emerging ‘transdisciplinary’ approaches that involve university specialists forming partnerships with business and community interests. While suggestive of some of the challenges that universities face in managing their research priorities, Gibbons’ analysis avoids the epistemological issues that we are concerned with—as is made very clear by Muller (2000) in his latest book.

[7] It is a common-sense recognition of the educational merits of the neo-conservative model that is expressed in what is referred to as ‘academic drift’ as more and more students opt for traditional academic courses, and employers, despite their official support for vocational qualifications, invariably select their own employees on the basis of academic qualifications.

[8] An important sociological issue beyond the scope of this paper is to account for the enormous and uncritical public and political support for the idea of generic key skills, when all the evidence from Youth Training Scheme, Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education and General National Vocational Qualifications suggests that such an approach is fundamentally flawed.

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