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On the Powers of Powerful Knowledge

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Introduction: Knowledge in question

The primary aim of this chapter is to make a positive case for the idea of ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2009; 2013) as a sociological concept and as a curriculum principle. We seek to clarify its conceptual bases and to make its meaning, and the arguments it implies, less ambiguous and less open to misunderstanding. This will enable us to suggest some of the research and policy options that it opens up.

It is an appropriate time for such a task as the concept has been called on in a growing number of academic, practitioner, and policy contexts in England and elsewhere. In academic contexts it has become the subject of sometimes-acrimonious debate. Among philosophers, it has been discussed unfavourably by some (White, 2012) and, though less directly, favourably by others (Cigman, 2012). The concept has also been favourably drawn on by researchers in the teaching of history and geography (Counsell, 2011; Firth, 2011; Lambert, 2011), among teachers in a number of broader-based fora and in academic contexts in a number of countries outside the United Kingdom – in particular New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and Portugal. In policy contexts, it has been acknowledged as influential by the Expert Panel of the English National Curriculum Review (Department for Education, 2011) and by the South African Review Task Team of the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education, 2009). Finally, John Beck, so far the only sociologist to comment directly on the concept, raises a number of related issues in Chapter 4 of this volume that we only touch upon here.

We begin this chapter by making some brief comments about the specific origins of the contemporary usage of the concept from our
perspective. We make this proviso because the two words ‘power’ and ‘knowledge’ are too general, too evocative, and open to too many diverse meanings for them not to have been used together in other ways and at other times. The concept, as recently used, has its origins in the history of our discipline – the sociology of education – and in changes in the way some of those in the discipline have approached the curriculum and the question of knowledge. However, it is not, we shall argue, a narrowly discipline-specific concept. It is best understood as derived from what, despite its older roots, is a relatively new way of thinking sociologically about knowledge (Collins, 1998) and stands in contrast to more traditional sociologies of knowledge which have tended to associate the sociality of knowledge with bias. More specifically, it has focused on the social basis of academic disciplines, subjects and the curriculum itself, that are found in schools, vocational and technical colleges, as well as universities and programmes of professional education (see, for example, Moore, 2007; Wheelahan, 2007; Young, 2008b; Muller, 2009; Wheelahan, 2010; Case, 2011; Beck, 2012b; Rata, 2012b). It emphasises how the sociality of knowledge underpins its emergent ‘objective’ character and thus avoids slipping into the relativism that has plagued many other sociological approaches to knowledge.

The idea of ‘powerful knowledge’ owes a primary debt to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, probably the first sociologist of education, and his assumption that we are not only ‘social’ beings but also – and which is for Durkheim the same thing – ‘differentiating’ and ‘classifying’ beings. In particular, we not only differentiate our knowledge from the world of which we have experience, but differentiate within knowledge as well. That knowledge is social for Durkheim meant that it takes its meanings from us as social beings in identifiable and challengeable ways, but in ways that are quite unlike those associated with our everyday experience and opinions.

We also differentiate knowledge from our opinions and experience because it explicitly recognises, even if we do not always know how or why, a relationship to a reality that is independent of us. Quantum theory is the most reliable theory of the physical world there has ever been and in that sense it is as near as we have got to physical reality. At the same time physicists do not know quite why it gives us such reliable predictions. Physics, like any powerful knowledge, presupposes that the natural world is real and that current knowledge is the nearest we get to what that reality is. At the same time, quantum theory is probably the knowledge most at odds with our everyday understanding: it tells us that the particles that constitute matter are in many places at