

# 1.1 What are schools for?

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## **Introduction**

Every parent and teacher needs to ask the question ‘what are schools for?’ They are not, of course, the only institutions with purposes that we should question, but they are a special case. Like families they have a unique role in reproducing human societies and in providing the conditions which enable them to innovate and change. Without schools each generation would have to begin from scratch or – like societies which existed before there were schools – remain largely unchanged for centuries. There are, however, more specific reasons why it is important to ask the question ‘what are schools for?’ today. Since the 1970s, radical educators and many critical sociologists have questioned the role of schools and have seen them in largely negative terms. I shall argue that despite having an element of truth which we should do well not to forget, these critiques are fundamentally misconceived. More recently, John White, the philosopher of education, has offered a critical but explicitly positive answer to the question (White 2007). However, like the negative critiques, by failing to specify what is distinctive about the role of schools, he does not take us very far. I begin this chapter therefore by reviewing these two kinds of answer. I then go on to explore the implications of an alternative approach that locates schools as institutions with the very specific purpose of promoting the acquisition of knowledge.

For rather different reasons, the question of knowledge and the role of schools in its acquisition has been neglected by both policy makers and by educational researchers, especially sociologists of education. For the former, a focus on the acquisition of knowledge is at odds with the more instrumental purposes that are increasingly supported by governments. For many educational researchers a focus on knowledge masks the extent to which those with power define what counts as knowledge. However, there is no contradiction, I shall argue, between ideas of democracy and social justice and the idea that schools should promote the acquisition of knowledge.

## **The 1970s and 1980s critics of schools**

In the 1970s negative views of views of schooling came largely from the left and were given considerable support by researchers in my own field – the sociology of education. The idea that the primary role of schools in capitalist societies was to teach the working class their place was widely accepted within the sociology of education (Althusser 1971; Bowles and Gintis 1976; and Willis 1977). The few working-class students that did progress to university were seen as legitimating the fundamental inequalities of the education system as a whole. In the 1980s and 1990s this analysis was extended to refer to the subordination of women

and ethnic and other minorities. However, these analyses rarely went beyond critiques and presented little idea of what schools might be like in socialist, non-patriarchal, non-racist societies. Radical critics such as such as Ivan Illich (1971) went even further and claimed that real learning would only be possible if schools were abolished altogether.

### **The post-structuralist turn in the social sciences**

In the late 1980s and the 90s, under the influence of post-modernist and post-structuralist ideas and the collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe, Marxism and other grand narratives foretelling the end of capitalism (and even of schooling) lost their credibility. As a consequence, the critiques of schooling changed, but more in style than substance. They drew much on the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who grouped schools with hospitals, prisons and asylums as institutions of surveillance and control; they disciplined pupils and normalised knowledge as subjects. The difference between thinkers such as Foucault and the left-wing ideas of earlier decades was that the ‘post-Marxist’ theorists dispensed with the idea of progress and any idea of a specific agency of change such as the working class. For Foucault there was no alternative to schooling as surveillance – all social scientists and educational researchers could do was to offer critiques. He expressed this point in the following terms:

I absolutely will not play the part of one who prescribes solutions. I hold that the role of the intellectual today ... is not to prophesy or propose solutions since by doing so one can only contribute to the determinate situation of power that must be critiqued.

(Foucault 1991, quoted in Muller 2000)

It is not surprising, therefore, that these critiques were not listened to by policy makers – they really had little to say about schools, except to other social scientists.

### **Governments’ responses**

At the same time as the emergence of post-structuralist ideas, another set of ideas – neo-liberalism – came to dominate economics and government and, indirectly, education. Neo-liberals argued that the economy should be left to the market and governments should give up trying to have economic or industrial policies. The logic of this position was followed through with enthusiasm by governments of both main parties in the UK, with profound implications for schools. While ceding to the free market any role in the economy (with the exception of the control of interest rates), governments devoted their efforts to reforming the school system or improving ‘human capital’. New Labour went even further than the Tories; they argued that the market offered the best solution for improving the public as well as the private sector – and education in particular. This had two consequences that are relevant to the question ‘what are schools for?’ One has been the attempt to gear the outcomes of schools to what are seen to be the ‘needs of the economy’ – a kind of mass vocationalism. The control of much post-compulsory education and even some schools and local education authorities has been put in the hands of sometimes willing but often reluctant private employers. The other consequence has been to turn education itself into a market (or at least a quasi-market), in which schools are forced to compete for students and funds. I call this the *de-differentiation of schooling*. Schools are treated as a type of delivery agency, required to concentrate on outcomes and pay little attention to the process or content of delivery. As a

result, the purposes of schooling are defined in increasingly instrumental terms – as a means to other ends. With schools driven by targets, assignments and league tables, it is no wonder that pupils become bored and teachers experience ‘burn out’.

### **New goals for old?**

In seeking to reassert the distinctive purposes of schools, I want to consider two alternative answers to my starting question. The first can be found in John White’s recent paper for the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. It is called *What Are Schools for and Why?* (White 2007). No one could take issue with his claim that schools should promote human happiness and well-being. The problem is that such goals apply equally to all institutions (except perhaps prisons) and they say nothing specific about what schools are for and what distinguishes their role from that of other institutions. In his paper White is dismissive of the idea that subjects or disciplines might define the purposes of schools. He makes the curious argument that the subject-based curriculum was a middle-class device designed in the eighteenth century to promote the interests of the rising bourgeoisie of the time. It is inconceivable, he argues, that a curriculum with such origins could be the basis for schools for all in the twenty-first century. In my view his argument is deeply flawed for two reasons. First, as Baker and LeTendre (2005) have shown, the contemporary curriculum in the UK is remarkably similar to that found in most developed countries, despite their very different histories. Furthermore, the historical fact that this curriculum was developed by a particular fraction of the middle class in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century is no grounds for describing it as a middle-class curriculum. It would be equally flawed to describe Boyle’s law as a middle-class law on the grounds that Boyle was an eighteenth-century upper-middle-class gentleman! The particular historical origins of scientific discoveries are interesting, as are the historical origins of scientific laws; however, these origins have nothing to say about the truth of a scientific law or about the merits of a particular curriculum.

My second reason for rejecting White’s argument is that it does not address the question why parents, sometimes at great sacrifice, especially in developing countries, have historically tried to keep their children at school for longer and longer periods. Nor does it tell us what parents expect as a result of these sacrifices. Despite asking the question ‘what are schools for?’ White also ends up, like the government and the post-structuralists, in de-differentiating the goals of schools. As a result we have surveillance for Foucault, employability for New Labour and happiness and well-being for John White. I certainly prefer the last but it is hardly a guide for those responsible for the curriculum.

Let us go back to Foucault for a moment. When he puts schools in the same category as prisons, asylums and hospitals, he misses both the history of the political struggle over mass schooling and what is distinctive about schools. I want to focus briefly on the first of these points and develop an argument about the implications of the distinctive purposes of schools.

### **Struggles over the purposes of schools**

The historical struggle over the purposes of schooling can be seen in terms of two tensions. The first is between the goals of *emancipation* and *domination*. Since the Chartists in this country in the nineteenth century and more recently in the case of Bantu education in South Africa, dominant and subordinate classes have attempted to use schools to realise their widely different purposes. One only has to remember that Nelson Mandela was a product of

the schools for Africans that predated Bantu education to be reminded that even the most oppressive school systems can be used by some as instruments of emancipation. The second tension is between the question ‘who gets schooling?’ and the question ‘what do they get?’ The struggle over schools in this country has, with a few exceptions, taken the second question as given and focused on the first. The terms in which each of these questions has been debated have of course changed. The ‘access’ question began with the campaign for free elementary schooling in the nineteenth century, led to struggles over the 11-plus and selection and now is expressed in terms of the goals of promoting social inclusion and widening participation. Interestingly the idea of a struggle over access has been replaced by a largely top-down approach associated with government policies for ‘widening participation’. Debates over the question ‘what do they get?’ also go back to the Chartists in the nineteenth century and their famous slogan ‘really useful knowledge’. This was an attack on the domination of the curriculum by Scripture. The Chartists’ idea was revived on the left in the 1970s but such questions are far less widely debated today.

The legacy of earlier debates can be seen in two contrasting concepts of education that underlie present-day government policies. One might be called ‘education as outcomes’. In this approach to education policy, teaching and learning become dominated by the setting, assessing and attaining of targets and the preparing of students for tests and examinations. Less visible is a very different idea of education that still finds expression in the idea of subject syllabuses. It is the idea that the primary purpose of education is for students to gain access to different specialist fields of knowledge. The idea of education as the transmission of knowledge has, with some justification, been heavily criticised by educational researchers. However, my argument is that these criticisms miss a crucial point. They focus on the mechanical one-way and passive model of learning implied by the ‘transmission’ metaphor and its association with a very conservative view of education and the purposes of schools. At the same time, they forget that the idea of schooling as the ‘transmission of knowledge’ gives transmission a quite different meaning and explicitly presupposes the active involvement of the learner in the process of acquiring knowledge. The idea that the school is primarily an agency of cultural or knowledge transmission raises the question ‘what knowledge?’ and in particular what is the knowledge that it is the schools’ responsibility to transmit? If it is accepted that schools have this role, then it implies that types of knowledge are differentiated. In other words, for educational purposes, some types of knowledge are more worthwhile than others, and their differences form the basis for the difference between school or curriculum knowledge and non-school knowledge. What is it about school knowledge or the curriculum that makes the acquisition of some types of knowledge possible? My answer to the question ‘what are schools for?’ is, therefore, that schools enable or can enable young people to acquire the knowledge that for most of them cannot be acquired at home or in the community, or, for adults, in workplaces. The rest of this chapter is concerned with exploring the implications of this assertion.

### **What knowledge?**

In using the very general word ‘knowledge’ I find it useful to distinguish between two ideas – ‘*knowledge of the powerful*’ and ‘*powerful knowledge*’. ‘Knowledge of the powerful’ refers to who defines ‘what counts as knowledge’ and has access to it. Historically and even today when we look at the distribution of access to university, it is those with more power in society who have access to certain kinds of knowledge. It is this that I refer to as ‘knowledge of the powerful’. It is understandable that many sociological critiques of school knowledge have

equated school knowledge and the curriculum with ‘knowledge of the powerful’. It was, after all the upper classes in the early nineteenth century who gave up their private tutors and sent their children to the Public Schools to acquire powerful knowledge (as well, of course, to acquire powerful friends). However, the fact that some knowledge is ‘knowledge of the powerful’, or high-status knowledge as I once expressed it (Young 1971, 1998), tells us nothing about the knowledge itself. We therefore need another concept in conceptualising the curriculum that I want to refer to as ‘powerful knowledge’. This refers not to whose has most access to the knowledge or who gives it legitimacy, although both are important issues; it refers to what the knowledge can do – for example, whether it provides reliable explanations or new ways of thinking about the world. This was what the Chartists were calling for with their slogan ‘really useful knowledge’. It is also, if not always consciously, what parents hope for in making sacrifices to keep their children at school; that they will acquire powerful knowledge that is not available to them at home.

Powerful knowledge in modern societies in the sense that I have used the term is, increasingly, specialist knowledge. It follows therefore that schools need teachers with that specialist knowledge. Furthermore, if the goal for schools is to ‘transmit powerful knowledge’, it follows that teacher–pupil relations will have certain distinctive features that arise from that goal. For example:

- they will be different from relations between peers and will inevitably be hierarchical;
- they will not be based, as some recent government policies imply, on learner choice, because in most cases, learners will lack the prior knowledge to make such choices

This does not mean that schools should not take the knowledge that pupils bring to school seriously or that pedagogic authority does not need to be challenged. It does mean that some form of authority relations are intrinsic to pedagogy and to schools. The questions of pedagogic authority and responsibility raise important issues, especially for teacher educators, which are beyond the scope of this chapter. The next section turns to the issue of knowledge differentiation.

### **Knowledge differentiation and school knowledge**

The key issues about knowledge, for both teachers and educational researchers, are not primarily the philosophical questions such as ‘what is knowledge?’ or ‘how do we know at all?’ The educational issues about knowledge concern how school knowledge is and should be different from non-school knowledge and the basis on which this differentiation is made. Although the philosophical issues are involved, school/non-school knowledge differences raise primarily sociological and pedagogic questions.

Schooling is about providing access to the specialised knowledge that is embodied in different domains. The key curriculum questions will be concerned with:

- (a) the differences between different forms of specialist knowledge and the relations between them;
- (b) how this specialist knowledge differs from the knowledge people acquire in everyday life;
- (c) how specialist and everyday knowledge relate to each other; and
- (d) how specialist knowledge is pedagogised.

In other words, how it is paced, selected and sequenced for different groups of learners.

Differentiation, therefore, in the sense I am using it here, refers to:

- the differences between school and everyday knowledge;
- the differences between and relations between knowledge domains;
- the differences between specialist knowledge (e.g. physics or history) and pedagogised knowledge (school physics or school history for different groups of learners).

Underlying these differences is a more basic difference between two types of knowledge. One is the *context-dependent* knowledge that is developed in the course of solving specific problems in everyday life. It can be *practical* – like knowing how to repair a mechanical or electrical fault or how to find a route on a map. It can also be *procedural*, like a handbook or set of regulations for health and safety. Context-dependent knowledge tells the individual how to do specific things. It does not explain or generalise; it deals with particulars. The second type of knowledge is *context-independent* or *theoretical knowledge*. This is knowledge that is developed to provide generalisations and makes claims to universality; it provides a basis for making judgements and is usually, but not solely, associated with the sciences. It is context-independent knowledge that is at least potentially acquired in school, and is what I referred to earlier as *powerful knowledge*.

Inevitably schools are not always successful in enabling pupils to acquire powerful knowledge. It is also true that schools are more successful with some pupils than others. The success of pupils is highly dependent on the culture that they bring to school. Elite cultures that are less constrained by the material exigencies of life, are, not surprisingly, far more congruent with acquiring context-independent knowledge than disadvantaged and subordinate cultures. This means that if schools are to play a major role in promoting social equality, they have to take the knowledge base of the curriculum very seriously – even when this appears to go against the immediate demands of pupils (and sometimes their parents). They have to ask the question ‘is this curriculum a means by which pupils can acquire powerful knowledge?’ For children from disadvantaged homes, active participation in school may be the only opportunity that they have to acquire powerful knowledge and be able to move, intellectually at least, beyond their local and the particular circumstances. It does them no service to construct a curriculum around their experience on the grounds that it needs to be validated, and as a result leave them there.

### **Conceptualising school knowledge**

The most sustained and original attempt to conceptualise school knowledge is that developed by the English sociologist Basil Bernstein (Bernstein 1971, 2000). His distinctive insight was to emphasise the key role of knowledge boundaries, both as a condition for the acquisition of knowledge and as embodying the power relations that are necessarily involved in pedagogy. Bernstein begins by conceptualising boundaries in terms of two dimensions. First he distinguished between the *classification* of knowledge – or the degree of insulation between knowledge domains – and the *framing* of knowledge – the degree of insulation between school knowledge or the curriculum and the everyday knowledge that pupils bring to school. Second, he proposed that classification of knowledge can be *strong* – when domains are highly insulated from each other (as in the case of physics and history) – or *weak* – when there are low levels of insulation between domains (as in humanities or science curricula). Likewise, framing can be *strong* – when school and non-school knowledge are insulated from each other, or *weak*, when the boundaries between school and non-school knowledge are blurred

(as in the case of many programmes in adult education and some curricula designed for less able pupils). In his later work Bernstein (2000) moves from a focus on *relations between* domains to the *structure of the domains* themselves by introducing a distinction between vertical and horizontal knowledge structures. This distinction refers to the way that different domains of knowledge embody different ideas of how knowledge progresses. Whereas in vertical knowledge structures (typically the natural sciences) knowledge progresses towards higher levels of abstraction (for example, from Newton's laws of gravity to Einstein's theory of relativity), in horizontal (or as Bernstein expresses it, segmental) knowledge structures like the social sciences and humanities, knowledge progresses by developing new languages which pose new problems. Examples are innovations in literary theory or approaches to the relationship between mind and brain. Bernstein's primary interest was in developing a language for thinking about different curriculum possibilities and their implications. His second crucial argument was to make the link that between knowledge structures, boundaries and learner identities. His hypothesis was that strong boundaries between knowledge domains and between school and non-school knowledge play a critical role in supporting learner identities and therefore are a condition for learners to progress. There are, however, a number of distinctive aspects to how Bernstein uses the idea of boundary, all of which can be traced back to Durkheim (Moore 2004). First, boundaries refer to *relations between contents* not the *knowledge contents themselves*. Second, although strong boundaries have traditionally been expressed in disciplines and subjects, from Bernstein's perspective, this is a historical fact, and the disciplines and subjects that we know are not the only form that strong boundaries can take. Third, strong boundaries between contents will have distributional consequences; in other words they will be associated with certain inequalities of outcomes. Fourth, whether it is associated with creating new knowledge (in the university) or extending the acquisition of powerful knowledge to new groups of learners, innovation will involve crossing boundaries and calling identities into question. In other words school improvement from this perspective will involve both stability and change, or, in the terms set out in this chapter, the inter-relation between boundary maintenance and boundary crossing.

## Conclusions

This chapter has argued that whatever their specific theoretical priorities, their policy concerns or their practical educational problems, educational researchers, policy makers and teachers must address the question 'what are schools for?' This means asking how and why school have emerged historically, at different times and in very different societies, as distinctive institutions with the specific purpose of enabling pupils to acquire knowledge not available to them at home or in their everyday life<sup>1</sup>. It follows, I have argued, that the key concept for the sociology of education (and for educators more generally) is *knowledge differentiation*.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of knowledge differentiation implies that much knowledge that it is important for pupils to acquire will be non-local and counter to their experience. Hence pedagogy will always involve an element of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to, over-evocatively and I think misleadingly, as *symbolic violence*. The curriculum has to take account of the everyday local knowledge that pupils bring to school, but such knowledge can never be a basis for the curriculum. The structure of local knowledge is designed to relate to the particular; it cannot provide the basis for any generalisable principles. To provide access to such principles is a major reason why all countries have schools.

The concept of *knowledge differentiation* sets a threefold agenda for schools and teachers, for educational policy makers and for educational researchers. First, each group (separately

and together) must explore the relationship between the purpose of schools<sup>3</sup> to create the conditions for learners to acquire powerful knowledge and both their *internal structures* – such as subject divisions – and their *external structures* – such as the boundaries between schools and professional and academic ‘knowledge producing communities’ and between schools and the everyday knowledge of local communities.

Second, if schools are to help learners to acquire powerful knowledge, local, national and international groups of specialist teachers will need to be involved with university-based and other specialists in the ongoing selection, sequencing and inter-relating of knowledge in different domains. Schools therefore will need the autonomy to develop this professional knowledge; it is the basis of their authority as teachers and the trust that society places in them as professionals. This trust may at times be abused; however, any form of accountability must support that trust rather than try to be a substitute for it.

Third, educational researchers will need to address the tension in the essentially *conservative* role of schools as institutions with responsibility for knowledge transmission in society – especially as this aspect of their role is highlighted in a world increasingly driven by the instabilities of the market. However, ‘conservative’ has two very different meanings in relation to schools. It can mean preserving the stable conditions for acquiring ‘powerful knowledge’ and resisting the political or economic pressures for flexibility. A good example is how curricular continuity and coherence can be undermined by modularisation and the breaking up of the curriculum into so-called ‘bite-sized chunks’. The ‘conservatism’ of educational institutions can also mean giving priority to the preservation of particular privileges and interests, such as those of students of a particular social class or of teachers as a professional group. Radicals and some sociologists of education have in the past tended to focus on this form of conservatism in schools and assume that if schools are to improve they have to become more like the non-school world – or more specifically the market. This takes us back to the tension between differentiation and de-differentiation of institutions that I referred to earlier in this chapter.

This chapter has made three related arguments. The first is that although answers to the question ‘what are schools for?’ will inevitably express tensions and conflicts of interests within the wider society, nevertheless educational policy makers, practising teachers and educational researchers need to address the distinctive purposes of schools. My second argument has been that there is a link between the emancipatory hopes associated with the expansion of schooling and the opportunity that schools provide for learners to acquire ‘powerful knowledge’ that they rarely have access to at home. Third, I introduce the concept of *knowledge differentiation* as a principled way of distinguishing between school and non-school knowledge. Contemporary forms of accountability are tending to weaken the boundaries between school and non-school knowledge on the grounds that they inhibit a more accessible and more economically relevant curriculum. I have drawn on Basil Bernstein’s analysis to suggest that to follow this path may be to deny the conditions for acquiring powerful knowledge to the very pupils who are already disadvantaged by their social circumstances. Resolving this tension between political demands and educational realities is, I would argue, one of the major educational questions of our time.

## Notes

- 1 If set in a broader theoretical context this chapter can be seen as locating the role of schools in the links between modernisation and social justice.
- 2 In beginning with a *theory of knowledge differences* and not just the fact of differences, the concept of *knowledge differentiation* is quite distinct from (and a critique of) the superficially similar idea that there are different types of knowledge.
- 3 Here, ‘schools’ is shorthand for *all* formal educational institutions.

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## Reflective questions

- 1 How far do you think that the primary purpose of schools is to provide the conditions for pupils to acquire knowledge that takes them beyond their experience?
- 2 The purpose of schools has always been a ‘contested idea’. Discuss.
- 3 The distinction between theoretical and everyday knowledge is the starting point of any curriculum. Discuss.

## Further reading

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