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## **Is powerful educational knowledge possible?**

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## **Is powerful educational knowledge possible?**

### **Abstract**

This paper asks if powerful educational knowledge is possible, by examining the character and constitution of educational knowledge and its means of acquiring 'power'. In disciplines or fields that might be termed 'applied' or 'professionally-orientated' the characteristics of powerful knowledge are constituted in ways that often differ from purer disciplinary forms, opening up new constraints and tensions. It is argued here that to profile the character of educational knowledge it is important to make the distinction between knowledge *about* education and knowledge *for* educational practice, and to conceptualise the potential relations and tensions between the two. It is also important to acknowledge that 'powerful' actors do not often ascribe educational knowledge with power, and often have views of education held in opposition to those involved in educational knowledge production. These factors, combined with weak conceptualisations of educational professionalism and practice, pose considerable difficulties for the development of powerful educational knowledge.

**Keywords:** powerful knowledge; disciplinarity; education studies

## **Introduction**

The concept of 'powerful knowledge' as outlined by Young and Muller (2013), Wheelahan (2007) and Young (2008, 2013) has important implications for the curriculum of all forms of education. Powerful knowledge is 'reliable knowledge' that aims to achieve 'truth about the world we live in and to what it is to be human' that is nevertheless 'always fallible and open to challenge' (Young 2013, p. 107). It has 'generalising capacities' and is 'differentiated from the experiences that pupils bring to school or older learners bring to college or university' (2013, p. 108). Importantly, it is produced in 'specialist knowledge communities' which have 'rules', 'concepts' and 'boundaries' (2013, p.108), and therefore constrain what counts as valid knowledge. It is suggested that powerful knowledge should be prioritised in the curriculum because it offers students the capacity to move beyond their everyday experience (Wheelahan, 2007, Young, 2013), to hypothesise, conjecture, and to evaluate knowledge claims (Young & Muller 2013) and to participate fully in society (Wheelahan, 2007). This suggests that forms of curriculum that are 'aims-based', 'skills based' or 'outcomes based' are problematic in that they prioritise something other than the acquisition of these forms of knowledge, and are vulnerable to politicisation and instrumentalism (Wheelahan, 2007; Beck, 2013).

The powerful knowledge thesis has been employed in analysis of (inter alia) the school curriculum in History (Ormond, 2016) and Geography (Lambert, 2011), and to critique competency-based vocational education (Wheelahan, 2007). Whitty (2010) has highlighted the pedagogic challenge of making powerful knowledge meaningful to pupils of all backgrounds, while Beck emphasises the 'self-referential' nature of disciplinary discourse as a potential problem for relating powerful knowledge to students' experiences (2013, p.187). There have been few direct criticisms of the concept, although White (2012) has expressed reservations about its epistemological grounding, while Zipin, Fataar and Brennan (2015) suggest that a focus on powerful knowledge is problematic for social justice. Roberts, having examined various claims for powerful knowledge in Geography, prefers to emphasise that knowledge (in human geography at least) is only 'potentially powerful' (2014, p. 205), requiring pedagogisation to realise its power for pupils. Clegg (2016), with a greater focus on higher and occupationally-orientated education, raises questions about what counts as powerful knowledge through a discussion of traditions and movements external to disciplinary or subject communities.

While much has been written previously about powerful knowledge in various curriculum subjects, there has been little discussion of powerful *educational* knowledge (at least in accordance with the terms used by Young and Muller (2013)). Such powerful educational knowledge can be understood as knowledge constituted through a ‘field’ or ‘discipline’ of Education, and organised in some sense ‘systematically’ (Winch, 2010) to better understand education. Marshall (2014) has provided some discussion, illustrating its potential importance for teacher education by focusing on the work of Durkheim. Through engagement with powerful educational knowledge Marshall suggests that teachers become equipped to ‘critically weigh the educational achievements of the past’, ‘see themselves as both responsible and active agents within a deeply seriously social enterprise’ and ‘to engage meaningfully with formulation of educational change’ (2014, 275-7). However, Marshall’s (2014) argument raises a number of further questions. While the study of Durkheim’s sociological thought on education may offer much, such approaches are very far from central concerns within the current teacher education curriculum in the U.K. (Whitty, 2014) or indeed in many other countries (Tatto, 2006) where there are pressures to reduce disciplinary content. This pressure to marginalise certain forms of knowledge in the teacher education curriculum can also be seen as related to uncertainties around the value of educational research (Furlong, 2013). Indeed, much educational knowledge production increasingly occurs outside of the boundaries of disciplinary and professional communities (Furlong, 2013; BERA/UCET, 2012).

This paper asks whether powerful *educational* knowledge is possible and examines its character and constitution, opening up a debate that has hitherto been marginal in discussion of powerful knowledge. It is argued here that educational knowledge comes both in ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ disciplinary forms, inviting scrutiny both of the ‘socio-epistemic formations’ in which this knowledge is constituted and the relations between and within them. Using Bernstein’s sociology of knowledge and the work of Whitty (2006) a distinction is made between knowledge *for* education (KFE), and disciplinary based knowledge *about* education (KAE). It is argued that there are barriers to the development of powerful educational knowledge, and these are exacerbated by weak forms of professionalism and limited conceptions of educational practice. Furthermore, it is noted that, to use the other part of Young’s ‘dyad’ (Beck, 2013), ‘powerful’ groups in society do not support the development of ‘power’ in educational knowledge, and thus either seek to undermine or disregard much systematically constituted educational theory and research.

## **The characteristics of powerful knowledge**

Young and Muller suggest that powerful knowledge is ‘systematically revisable’, ‘emergent’, ‘real’, ‘material’, ‘social’, and produced in ‘particular socio-epistemic formations’ (2013, p. 236-8), which can be considered contemporaneously as disciplines (Muller, 2009). Powerful knowledge secures a form of objectivity and transcendence due to ‘criterial or disciplinary norms’ (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 238) that establish knowledge validity within the body of knowledge of that discipline. The existence and enactment of these norms is, however, dependent on both (i) a shared commitment to ‘truth’ and to ‘truthfulness’ across a disciplinary community (Young & Muller, 2007), and (ii) ‘rules of solidarity’ (Young and Muller 2013, p. 238) that are observed, not necessarily uncritically, within that community. The realist position of Young and Muller posits all knowledge as fallible, but identifies the knowledge adjudged by disciplinary communities to be the ‘nearest we have to truth at any time’ (2013, p. 236), and thus as ‘powerful’. The power of this knowledge is in its capacity to enable disciplinary or ‘disciplined’ (Bridges, 2006) conversations about what is or what could be real. Without a disciplinary community collectively attempting to achieve best available explanations for physical phenomena scientific inquiry is compromised. Equally, it could be argued, without empirically-grounded explanations for the social phenomena that constitute contemporary society we have no means of conceptualising alternative societal models.

What could be underplayed in accounts of powerful knowledge associated with particular disciplines is the importance of the specificity of given disciplinary knowledge structures and the disciplinary processes that enable that structure to form and iterate. A reading of the Bernstein work (1999, 2000) that informs the powerful knowledge thesis, suggests that knowledge attains the character of its power by virtue of its relationship to other knowledge within a disciplinary structure (Muller, 2009, 2014). Bernstein’s vertical discourse can be read as disciplinary knowledge, with that vertical discourse then separated into ‘hierarchical’ and ‘horizontal’ or ‘segmented’ knowledge structures (1999, p.161). The hierarchical include the physical sciences, while the segmented category includes maths, the social sciences and even specialised craft knowledge (Bernstein 1999; Gamble 2004). Segmented/horizontal knowledge structures are characterised by having discrete ‘specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation’ (Bernstein 1999, p. 162), amounting to a set of distinct methodological orientations and theoretical perspectives (i.e. in Sociology Bernstein suggests ‘functionalism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, marxism’ (1999, p.162)). The knowledge structures can be distinguished further in terms of the strength of their grammar, or in other

words their extent to which they possess the ‘conceptual syntax capable of ‘relatively’ precise empirical descriptions’ (164) that enable cumulative development of disciplinary knowledge. ‘Economics, linguistics and parts of psychology’ have strong grammars, whereas sociology and cultural studies are examples of weaker grammars (164).

One might be forgiven for assuming that disciplinary based powerful knowledge is a set of interrelated propositions assembled as a coherent knowledge structure. However, this is only one element of powerful knowledge, as understood with reference to the Bernstein (1999) discourses. As Muller (2014) identifies, drawing on Winch (2010), the curricula associated with Bernsteinian vertical discourse is as much about specialised ‘know-how’ that allows the making of inferences and the assessment of new claims to knowledge as it is about propositional knowledge. It is the social enactment of these forms of know how, and the processes that make inquiry systematic, that constitute the discourse that enables the development and iteration of the knowledge structures that comprise disciplines (Muller, 2014; Winch, 2010; Bridges, 2006). As Young and Muller (2013) emphasise, there are particular forms of sociality that characterise powerful knowledge, which might be thought of as forms of *disciplined* sociality (Bridges, 2006). Disciplines provide ‘discipline... to intellectual enquiry’, entailing a commitment to the ‘systematic and sustained’ pursuit of knowledge within ‘communities of arguers, enquirers and critics’ (Bridges, 2006, p. 263-4).

The claims for powerful knowledge suggest that disciplinary communities are central to providing the conditions for the disciplined husbanding and ongoing challenge and revision of established knowledge. What Young and Muller (2013) term the ‘internal material cultures’ of disciplines may be better sustained and protected in disciplines with ‘purer’, more tightly bounded identities (Bernstein, 2000; Becher, 1994; Muller, 2009), where the ‘internal’ is not defined by, and can be protected from, the ‘external’ (‘the world’ or the ‘profane’ in Durkheim’s (1912/2001) terms). Such disciplines can be said to sustain high levels of control over their internal problematics and processes (Muller, 2009), and were described by Bernstein as ‘singulars’ (2000, p. 52). Thus the pure disciplines of the physical sciences or humanities may achieve a level of consistency on their procedures of inquiry and processes for establishing knowledge validity, and have minimal need to account for the views of those ‘external’ to the discipline. What counts as a valid explanation in such disciplines is relatively clear, and it is defined by those internal to the discipline. A type of ‘solidarity’ is achievable in such disciplinary communities. It is possible to dispose of redundant knowledge that no longer offers insight or meets disciplinary criteria, and to recognise the significance of newly

validated claims to knowledge. The emphasis on solidarity does not mean ‘consensus’, however. Rather it suggests the potential for robust academic debate – indeed it is the existence of a material culture which comprises criterial rules of engagement which enables a productive debate to take place. The members of the disciplinary community ascribe to its procedures and criteria and are thus able to interpret, support, and refute each other’s arguments.

Knowledge progression within such disciplines can be understood through an examination of the relationship between what Bernstein (2000, p. 132-3) terms the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ languages of description (Moore & Muller, 2002; Hordern, 2016a), or the process of advancing conceptual progression through empirical corroboration and/or exemplification. Disciplinary community members conversant with the existing body of knowledge, and its unanswered questions, stimulate research activity, the results of which are then made sense of within the context of that existing knowledge. Each body of disciplinary knowledge is thereby iterated by forms of research that are probing meaningful questions within a rule-bound context (Hammersley, 2005a). Yet this system can only operate with a set of constraints, subject to the engagement of community members, that define validity and guide the iteration of the body of knowledge.

However, in those disciplines that are more ‘applied’, ‘professional’ or ‘occupational’ the ‘internal material culture’ of the disciplinary community is complicated by an imperative to take account of practices external to the discipline. The processes by which knowledge is recognised as valid for the disciplinary body of knowledge must take account of the extent to which that knowledge furthers insight into the practices with which that discipline is concerned. The discipline exists for a worldly purpose; it exists to provide knowledge for the development of occupational expertise, or for an industrial or technological field (Bernstein, 2000; Young & Muller, 2014). These ‘regions’, as Bernstein (2000, p. 52) terms them, must both ‘face inwards’ and also ‘outwards towards the external field of practice’, and ‘their contents are likely to be dependent on the requirements of these fields’ (55). Therefore, their ‘internal material cultures’ are prone to involve voices that are to some extent ‘external’ to the immediate concerns and cultures of the discipline. The practitioner or industrial perspective is thus significant, whether it be in medicine, engineering, social work or education.



Furthermore, how this ‘external’ perspective is organised and relates its demands to disciplinary knowledge is also significant (Hordern, 2016a), which suggests that the purpose and constitution of professional associations or other representative bodies are significant influences on what is identified for the occupational knowledge base. A diversity of perspective may lead to interesting debate around imperatives for knowledge production and about knowledge redundancy. It may be more difficult to establish procedures that all disciplinary participants agree on in an applied discipline – hence solidarity and disciplinary norms may be more weakly established. Additionally, where there are requirements to maintain the currency of knowledge in response to new forms of technology or industrial or societal change the disciplinary community must perform functions that are additional to those in the ‘purer’ singular disciplines above. In addition to systematically revising the knowledge base to take account of new knowledge claims, the disciplinary community must continually refresh the purpose of the discipline – as social and technological change occurs the discipline must iterate. What it means to be an engineer, doctor, social worker or teacher in 2017 are rather different to 50 years ago, and this is due to factors that are only under the partial control of the disciplinary community.

Therefore what eventuates as ‘powerful regional knowledge’ must meet criteria that are not solely ‘internally’ determined by the disciplinary community. To put it another way, the community has less control over what emerges as powerful knowledge than it would in a purer discipline, and yet it must identify this knowledge and pass judgement on it, if it seeks to maintain a coherent body of powerful knowledge. It is possible that some specialised powerful knowledge may emerge through practice that is underpinned by disciplined forms of knowledge (i.e. medical advances or engineering innovation may emerge partially through practice contexts). The disciplinary community must, ideally, take steps to ascertain the claims of such forms of knowledge and ensure that what is being produced adds something worthwhile to the existing knowledge base. Engagement with knowledge production in practice is thus important for an applied discipline or ‘region’, but this should not neglect the obligation to ensure that knowledge is processed according to ‘criterial or disciplinary norms’ (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 238).

Much of what has been written about powerful knowledge focuses on curriculum knowledge, with limited discussion of how the disciplinary norms and knowledge production processes that characterise Young and Muller’s (2013) discussion impact on the development of knowledge power. It could be assumed that the character of disciplinary knowledge translates

unproblematically into curriculum knowledge, whether that be in higher education, vocational education or schooling. And yet, what comprises the history curriculum in a school, or the sociology curriculum in a university, is subject to a range of macro and micro-political factors (Bernstein, 2000; Shay, 2016), not to mention logistical constraints (i.e. staffing and funding). Disciplinary knowledge is clearly not the same as the curriculum knowledge derived from that discipline (Muller, 2009; Bernstein, 2000). The disciplinary knowledge (in its systematically revised and revisable form) is recontextualised (selected, appropriated and transformed) to meet curriculum imperatives (Bernstein, 2000, p. 33; Barnett, 2006). And how this process of recontextualisation occurs is important for understanding what aspects of powerful knowledge reach pupils in schools and students in higher education (Hordern, 2016b). However, without the disciplinary conditions for the production and iteration of powerful knowledge, or the assembly of powerful knowledge from a range of disciplinary sources to meet the problems of practice, there is little prospect for its development in curriculum.

### **Knowledge about and for Education: constraints on knowledge power**

Education, education studies or educational science is a discipline that is researched and taught in higher and professional education, including in programmes of initial and continuing teacher education and for other educational professionals (Furlong, 2013), and is therefore at least partially shaped by its involvement in preparing practitioners. Educational knowledge in such a conception is often valued in terms of its practice utility, including for better understanding of that practice and for making well-grounded educational judgements. Yet, Education has strong disciplinary traditions and problematics that are not concerned primarily with knowledge for professional work or practice (Furlong, 2013; Lawn & Furlong, 2009). Here knowledge is valued primarily for its disciplinary contribution, for its reference to internally-generated disciplinary problematics. Whitty (2006, p. 172) makes the distinction between ‘studies for education’ and ‘studies of education’. The ‘studies for’ are ‘consciously geared towards improving policy and practice’ while the ‘studies of’ are ‘basic research and scholarship’ in which researchers ‘are not necessarily under an obligation to make their research explicitly useful’ (2006, 172-3). While the ‘studies for’ may be thought of as educational knowledge or ‘educational research’ in Whitty’s (2006) terms, the ‘studies of’ are knowledge *about* education or ‘education research’. This distinction opens up questions about

(i) the extent to which these two forms of knowledge, and the socio-epistemic formations that underpin them, are clearly distinct; (ii) the relation between these two forms of knowledge and how they may influence each other; and ultimately (iii) how such forms of knowledge can thereby acquire ‘powers’ and become ‘powerful’ in the terms outlined by Young and Muller (2013). The distinction also establishes education as a discipline that may have both ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ elements, and potentially therefore a diversity of ‘internal material cultures’ (Young & Muller, 2013).

The ‘foundation disciplines’, comprising the philosophy, sociology, psychology and history of education, became seen during the twentieth century as the core of a disciplinary-based approach concerned with producing knowledge *about* education in the U.K and the United States (Judge, Lemosse, Paine & Sedlak, 1994). A profile of contemporary foundation disciplines might also include the economics of education, comparative studies of education, and a host of modern traditions that have emerged from cultural and literary studies (Lawn & Furlong, 2009). Such disciplinary approaches to education tend to be part of, or draw substantially on, the broader ‘rule-governed’ disciplinary communities of which they are a part (Bridges, 2006; Muller, 2009). The philosophy, history or sociology of education are philosophical, historical or sociological in the procedural rules and tests of knowledge validity that they employ. The problematic with which they are concerned as a disciplinary community is substantively generated within the sub-branch of the discipline, and in various ways is related to the internal problematic of the broader ‘parent’ discipline. The extent to which the sub-branch of the discipline can be seen as having its own distinct problematic and command of its own internal discourse varies between the foundation disciplines (McCulloch, 2002), and this affects both its relation to its ‘parent’ and to the other education-related foundation disciplines. For example, sociology of education, in the UK at least, appears to have developed a distinctiveness and separateness that perhaps reflects the size of its academic community (Lauder, Brown & Halsey, 2009), while philosophy and history of education maintain an identity more closely entwined with their ‘parent disciplines’, albeit concerned to contribute fully to the study of education (Oancea & Bridges, 2009; Goodman & Grosvenor, 2009). Differences are also found in disciplinary structure - sociology is characterised by a proliferation of specialised languages and methodological approaches (Bernstein, 1999), whereas philosophy and history may experience greater constraints through sets of established procedures of enquiry that may constitute an inherently stronger grammar. Psychology of education, on the other hand, appears to be more distinctly part of

the psychology discipline, with research capacity increasingly housed in psychology rather than education departments (Crozier, 2009).

While the particular configuration outlined above relates primarily to the U.K. and to a certain extent the U.S.A (Judge et al., 1994), it is important to note that traditions may differ elsewhere. In Germany, for example, the disciplinary study of education has historically been rooted in a tradition of philosophical reflection on the nature of pedagogy and the purpose of education (Biesta, 2011). This has given rise to an institutional strength in higher education that has not been enjoyed by the study of education in the U.K. (Furlong, 2013; Schriewer and Keiner, 1992). Whereas in France, the study of education has historically been seen as part of social science, and thus knowledge *about* education is produced primarily within those disciplinary structures rather than within a distinctively educational formation (Schriewer and Keiner 1992; Judge et al., 1994).

However, there is acknowledgement that the foundation disciplines are subject to particular pressures that might not be felt by other parts of their parent disciplines. While their core rationale is to produce knowledge *about* education, they have, to a greater or lesser extent at various times in recent history, underpinned or strongly influenced preparative programmes for education professionals (Furlong, 2013; Judge et al., 1994), and critically engaged with contemporary educational reform, and thus their claims have often become politically sensitive. The foundation disciplines may also be seen as responsible for sustaining certain forms of educational theory (i.e. progressivism, constructivism) which are in tension with more instrumental visions of educational purpose. Such theories have been subject to considerable criticism from outside the academic community for their perceived ideological bias (Gove, 2013), undermining disciplinary educational knowledge. Thus discussion of knowledge *about* education is often intertwined with political and public discourse about what knowledge is needed to improve educational policy and practice.

The development of a coherent unitary discipline focused on generating knowledge about education is seen as highly problematic, at least in the U.K. (Lawn & Furlong, 2009). It could be argued that this is primarily because of the differing knowledge structures of the foundation disciplines, the development of multiple specialised theoretical perspectives (i.e. in sociology of education) and due to disagreements on what counts as a valid relationship between internal and external languages of description within disciplines (Hordern, 2016a). Moreover, the development of traditions in the sociology of education which possess

fundamentally different epistemological and ontological underpinnings means that it is quite possible for disciplinary knowledge to be produced that sits directly in opposition to Young and Muller's (2013) 'real' and 'emergent' characteristics of powerful knowledge.

Postmodernists or post-colonial writers are highly unlikely to ascribe to the Durkheimian thesis of knowledge differentiation that underpins Young and Muller's (2013) work, as in such schools of thought disciplinary knowledge structures (representing the 'sacred' (Durkheim, 1912/2001)) have been exposed as part of the collapse of metanarratives that had previously provided a form of illusory epistemological order (Lyotard, 1984). In such traditions perceived attempts to 'silence' personal or community knowledges by asserting the importance of forms of 'conceptually pure' knowledge are deemed oppressive (Giroux, 2004, p. 37-38). The principal tensions that characterise disciplinary debates across the humanities, social and physical sciences are thus played out within the study of education, but the structure of the disciplines that comprise that study does not encourage a community of arguers to develop and resolve debates. And this fragmentation is compounded by the widespread political and public interest in education.

Yet much educational research starts from problematics that are located in a policy or practice domain – the rationale for the production of such knowledge emerges from a policy problem, a political development or a practice concern. Such knowledge *for* educational practice may or may not acknowledge or make use of the disciplinary sources discussed above. Research in these domains may seek to use disciplinary knowledge about education in an ornamental or piecemeal way, in efforts to provide status to the knowledge produced. Or, alternatively, research activity may deliberately eschew disciplinary knowledge about education, dismissing it as ideological (Gove, 2013), 'partisan' (as outlined by Hargreaves, 1999, p. 242) or methodologically unsound and insufficiently 'evidence-based' (i.e. Goldacre's (2013)). Internal disciplinary problematics and the sustenance of a community of arguers become secondary concerns in this view. By definition the primary reference for the research problematic is external to the research community, so the obligation to shape research trajectories to take account of the interests of others working in the same field is limited, even though such research may gain readership and influence through relation to previous studies. Solidarity may emerge through researchers working together over periods of time on similar initiatives to improve policy or practice, but without a shared problematic or disciplinary boundary there is no underpinning 'material culture' that holds them together indefinitely.

Currently there is little obligation in much publically funded educational research to engage with internal disciplinary problematics, undermining the potential for cumulative forms of knowledge. In the U.K. government funded research exists to identify ‘what works’ and to ‘help schools, colleges and employers to maximise their impact’ (DfE, 2016a, p. 36), and ‘so we’ (the government) ‘can improve our evidence base’ (p. 37). The UK Department for Education sponsors a wide range of research that ‘aims to provide high-quality evidence to inform policy development and delivery’ (DfE, 2017) and therefore any contribution to a disciplinary body of knowledge may be considered secondary or irrelevant to objectives – it is evidence that relates to the policy problem that is seen to count (Hammersley, 2005b; Biesta, 2007). Equally, there is much practitioner research that dismisses the notion of contributing to a coherent internal disciplinary culture. The work of Whitehead (1989), for example, opposes requirements to validate theories developed by practitioners according to disciplinary-based criteria; it is incumbent on each individual to define her or his validity, leading to the disappearance of the disciplined community of arguers. Such research, echoing Carr (2006), suggests that the processes of knowledge production and iteration or what might be called established educational theory are often a hindrance to the development of a rich understanding of practice.

It seems reasonable to argue that education (al) knowledge is diverse and multi-faceted, meeting imperatives that are both more purely ‘academic’ and more professionally or practice-orientated (Whitty, 2006; Furlong, 2013). Prospects of disciplinary solidarity and coherence, and therefore the prospects for ‘power’ are challenged both by (i) the fragmented nature of the foundation disciplines at least in the Anglosphere and (ii) stakeholders external to the discipline who seek to advance particular forms of educational knowledge and practice to suit particular visions of what education should be. While it is possible to identify forms of knowledge about education, traditions or key thinkers in educational theory which may be thought to contribute ‘powerful educational knowledge’ (i.e. Durkheim (Marshall, 2014), Vygotsky, or Dewey to give a few examples), it is difficult to see the discipline of education gaining coherence around agreed problematics or disciplinary approaches to knowledge production. There are, in effect, substantive differences amongst education researchers around method and procedure, and indeed around a set of core defining concepts and problematics, to an extent that is unlikely in ‘purer’ disciplines such as history, physics or philosophy.

## **Powerful educational knowledge and knowledge of the powerful**

However what Lawn and Furlong (2009) describe as disciplinary ‘projects’ are not only shaped by the nature of their communities and problematics. Social and institutional conditions also matter, and here also educational knowledge faces difficulties. As Beck (2013) identifies, while there has been much attention paid to ‘powerful knowledge’, less has been given to the other half of Young’s dyad, ‘knowledge of the powerful’, which relates to the ‘knowledge authorised by those in power’ (Young, 2010 in Beck, 2013) and draws the focus onto ‘those who had the power to define the curriculum’ (Young, 2013, p. 104). Certain forms of powerful knowledge are indeed recognised by those in power, most obviously the knowledge of the physical sciences, humanities and high status professions (Gove, 2013; Gibb, 2016). Young (2008) points out that elite groups ensure that they have access to forms of knowledge that they recognise as strongly conceptual, as they are fully aware of the importance of this knowledge for maintaining privileged positions within society and the labour market. Thus, the schools attended by the elites and those aspiring to upward social mobility focus on a traditional subject-based curriculum (Young, Lambert, Roberts and Roberts, 2013), in addition to subjects such as economics and politics. As these privileged groups progress into higher education many tend to concentrate in universities where subjects offered in their schools can be studied at undergraduate level (Ball, Davies, David and Reay, 2002), while others study Law or Medicine to access these elite professions (van De Werfhorst, Sullivan & Cheung, 2003). Subject choices are inevitably framed by the knowledge that ‘certain sorts of institutions and courses will be populated by certain sorts of students’ (Ball et al. 2002, p. 60).

The study of education is, however, not generally offered in the school curriculum except perhaps as part of a sociology course, and is not generally known to attract high levels of applicants from the more privileged classes at undergraduate level in higher education (Ball et al., 2002), partly perhaps because of the status of the teaching profession in the UK and the USA. The ‘powerful’ in effect do not see educational knowledge as offering ‘power’. Education is not a traditional discipline and it does not offer a route to an elite profession but rather to teaching in the primary phase of the state system, at least in the U.K. There is no coherent ‘knowledge of the powerful’ about education in terms of disciplinary or disciplined knowledge. Instead, the ‘powerful’ voice opinions about education that seem to disregard or dismiss much of the knowledge produced within the education discipline (i.e. Gove, 2013; Gibb, 2016), resorting instead to selectively highlighting studies which appear to support

their policy preferences or arguments about the nature of educational research. They *are* seeking to ‘authorise’ forms of research knowledge, and the processes of educational research (Gibb 2016) – but the (lack of) ‘powerfulness’ of that knowledge is not a criterion considered in the process of authorisation.

What effect does the lack of ‘powerful’ support have on the prospects for the development of power in educational knowledge? There can be no doubt that the recent ‘rapid decline’ in resources to support disciplinary knowledge production (i.e. research funding) undermines the position of education as a discipline in higher education (Furlong, 2013, p. 91-93). The institutional position of education within higher education is also weakened by the lower numbers of academic staff considered by their institutions to be research active than in other social science and humanities disciplines (BERA/UCET, 2012, p. 13). The inclusion of large numbers of staff from practitioner backgrounds who enter academia as a second career could also be seen as a challenge to disciplinary solidarity and the development of a ‘community of arguers’, although this may also have benefits for the inflow of new ideas to challenge received wisdom. Overall, education as a discipline has few obvious influential advocates either within academia in other disciplines, or outside academia in politics or business.

However, despite these institutional challenges, it may be possible to identify strategies by which the ‘power’ of educational knowledge can be advanced, even if this power is constrained by the socio-epistemic context in which the education discipline finds itself. It seems unlikely that a strategy of aiming to replicate the structures of the ‘purer’ disciplines, which experience a degree of internal control and a ‘boundedness’ not applicable to education (Bernstein, 2000; Muller, 2009), could bear fruit. There may be value instead in reconsidering the disciplinary problematic, aiming to define a set of principal educational concerns and questions to which research might meaningfully relate to, a hub around which knowledge can accumulate. Furthermore, identifying how the character of the production and recontextualisation of powerful knowledge (i.e. disciplined sociality, systematic revisability) can be sustained and defended seems important, in the face of political challenges to the validity of educational knowledge. Arguably, the ‘community of arguers’ needs to be conceived as open to all educational practitioners, in a manner that might learn from the experience of medicine, but to do so meaningfully needs to offer those practitioners opportunities to contribute to an accumulating knowledge base, which again requires criteria, constraints and judgements about validity and purpose.



## **Some scenarios for (powerful) educational knowledge**

Following the distinctions made above it is now possible to outline possible scenarios for the relations between disciplinary-based knowledge about education (KAE) and knowledge for education (KFE) in the potential constitution of powerful educational knowledge (PEK)

The first scenario sees KAE as distant and disengaged from forms of KFE (i.e. those that relate more closely to the workings of policy and practice). The concerns of disciplinary-based KAE become increasingly ‘pure’, ‘self-referential’ (Beck, 2013), and connected to their ‘parent’ disciplines. KFE, on the other hand, is not linked to KAE and therefore those involved in producing KFE are not easily able to generate disciplined sociality or an internal material culture that could validate and iterate a body of powerful educational knowledge. There are, in effect, no grounds for criterial rules or traditions for those interested in KFE to rely on. This leaves considerable opportunities for non-disciplinary concerns to dominate what counts as valid educational knowledge, and it could see the increasing encroachment of organisations outside of higher education on educational knowledge production. KFE can thus relate directly to contemporary practice or policy concerns without disciplinary ‘interference’ and troublesome grammatical requirements (Bernstein, 2000). Government moves towards deprofessionalising teaching could stimulate such developments, by suggesting that teaching no longer requires a systematic knowledge base. Concurrently, some universities may see advantages in divesting themselves of education departments (Whitty, 2014), or merging their remnants into those of other ‘purer’ disciplines, perhaps to echo the social science model that developed historically in France (Judge et al., 1994). KAE and KFE therefore go their separate ways – effectively this is the end of education as a discipline, and powerful knowledge is sustained only in social scientific work carried out in other disciplines

A second scenario, a variant on the first, sees KFE as dominating KAE, pulling all research inquiry into education away from disciplinary routes to focus more extensively on the ‘effectiveness’ of policy initiatives and practice problematics, or to developing a particular form of educational practice. The consequence is a challenge to disciplined sociality, the systematic revisability of knowledge and to the internal material culture of the study of education – the prospects for developing ‘powerful’ knowledge about or for education are significantly constrained. KAE is significantly weakened, and may dissolve into its parent disciplines. This scenario may emerge in contexts in which funding for educational research becomes increasingly tied towards meeting objectives specified by external agencies

(including arms of government) who expect particular results from the research. Thus educational researchers may increasingly find their time occupied with seeking funding, or progressing lines of inquiry, in forms of research that do not need to acknowledge a broader 'community of arguers' as the audience for the research becomes external to the discipline. While there may be merit in engaging with these external audiences, to move towards a research dynamic that is driven specifically by external objectives is likely to undermine the internal material culture of a research community. While the higher education research community may, at first glance, look as if it produces powerful knowledge by engaging in research funded by external bodies and government (and therefore perhaps deemed valid), its capacity to deepen its conceptual core, its 'internal language of description' (Bernstein 2000) is compromised.

A third scenario places KAE at the core of KFE, suggesting that all 'applied' knowledge production in education needs to relate to a set of 'powerful' educational concepts and traditions, husbanded by that KAE. However, this requires not just a particular orientation in terms of KFE, but also a form of KAE that is geared to producing and iterating those educational concepts. This is not to suggest that KAE should relinquish its links within disciplinary parents, and the particular material culture of that discipline, but it would need to establish a degree of autonomy. It requires the development of educational concepts through engagement between the KAE and the problematics of educational practice, leading to a form of Powerful Educational Knowledge (PEK). This scenario suggests that it is essential for a discipline such as education, concerned as it is with important human practices that are arguably central to all societies (Biesta, 2011), to exert some authority over how that educational practice is defined and perceived, including by the wider public. This suggests education as an 'interested discipline', that is 'based on a particular value-laden interest', just as medicine has an 'interest in health' and Law in justice (Biesta, 2011, p. 188). However, as education is as much a public as it is a private activity in contemporary society, authority over definitions of educational practice can only be secured with the consent of that society and its (elected) representatives, who may wish to prioritise a different set of educational (or non-educational) concepts for education. Such consent across society in respect of education is more characteristic of Germany and countries influenced by similar educational traditions (Biesta, 2011; Schriewer & Keiner, 1992). The question now is whether that consent around education is increasingly breaking down in the face of PISA-inspired concerns, and what this will entail for the structure of education as a discipline (Ertl 2006).

The concept of pedagogy is a credible example of the struggle to foreground an important educational concept in England, and thus the difficulties with securing the third scenario as a route to powerful educational knowledge. Despite considerable research and argument suggesting that pedagogical relations are fundamental educational concerns, and are central to conceiving the purpose of education (Alexander, 2004; James & Pollard, 2011), the notion is marginalised in teacher education (and in political discourse about education) in England. Pedagogy is absent in the English DfE teachers' standards (DfE, 2011) and in policy documents which prioritise 'excellence', 'standards' and systemic change (DfE, 2016b), statements which conceive education primarily as a vehicle for 'economic productivity' rather than for 'social cohesion', and for individual achievement rather than 'individual development' (James & Pollard, 2011). The connection between pedagogic practice and the development of the individual in society, encapsulated in Bernstein's (2000, p. xx-xxi) pedagogic rights of 'enhancement', 'inclusion' and 'participation', thus seems antithetical to the essence of much educational reform in England today.

### **Concluding remarks**

Without the constraints provided by a disciplined conception of knowledge development, the prospects of a more coherent, and therefore more powerful, form of educational knowledge are constrained. Yet the powerfulness sketched by Young and Muller (2013) also depends on certain socio-epistemic, and indeed institutional conditions, which are at risk in the applied discipline of education (Furlong, 2013). Professionally or occupationally orientated disciplines are, arguably, shaped by the socially and politically important practices that they provide knowledge for, and are therefore inherently involved in enhancing the quality of those practices. Professional disciplines such as medicine, architecture and engineering have strong ownership over the definitions of their own practice and the qualifications of their practitioners, whereas in nursing, social work or education the ownership of the definition of the practice is much more contested (Friedson, 2001). It is important to note here the significance of the relationships between professional associations and higher education (i.e. in medicine and engineering) for the control of the quality requirements of practice and licence arrangements for practitioners (Hordern, 2014). This contrasts with teaching or early years education, in England at least, where practitioners are subject to external regulation

over which they have no control, and higher education is at risk of marginalisation (Whitty, 2014; Hordern, 2016c).

Furthermore, while the argument for a form of educational study that is always ‘interested’ in the practice of education is compelling (Biesta, 2011), it locates education in a particular place amongst other disciplines in the university. It brings educational disciplinary knowledge inevitably into an engagement with other stakeholders in educational practice(s), whose views of educational purpose may not align easily with educational researchers, but who may offer new and vital perspectives which keep educational knowledge ‘powerful’ for practitioners. And yet this engagement is challenged by the conditions required for achieving knowledge power and the logistics of developing a community of arguers who adhere to some form disciplinary sociality – something of a catch 22 situation which leaves such a discipline in constant flux and demands special capacities. In the end, achieving and sustaining powerful educational knowledge that puts knowledge *about* education at the heart of the pursuit of knowledge *for* education requires a political project involving forms of engagement with society, and probably also its (elected) representatives, that would not be required of the ‘purer’ disciplines.

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