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Uljens, Michael

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On powerful knowledge as a policy concept and sociological theory

Michael Uljens 

Department of Educational Leadership and Development, Åbo Akademi University, Vaasa, Finland

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze Michael Young's and Johan Muller's revisit of the origins of the concept of powerful knowledge. The background and theoretical framing of the analysis consist in an ongoing debate regarding similarities and differences between Anglophone and German-Nordic approaches to frame teaching and pedagogical practice conceptually. The methodological approach applied is hermeneutical text analysis of significant contributions by Young and Muller. The result of the analysis focus four critical issues. Firstly, emphasizing the importance of an epistemological analysis of curricular knowledge, the social realist reasoning appears valid primarily within Anglophone education research. Secondly, powerful knowledge represents instructional reductionism, separating epistemological analysis from pedagogical reflection, unlike *Didaktik*, which treats them relationally, considering the educative dimensions of contents. Thirdly, in comparison with Durkheim's and Bernstein's theories, powerful knowledge seems more like a policy concept. Fourthly, as I appreciate Bernstein's theoretical approach to conceptualizing sociology of knowledge, I argue also that pedagogy or education requires a similar level of conceptual clarification. The conclusion of the article is that given that Education as an autonomous academic discipline, like sociology or psychology, Education requires an independent ontological and epistemological curricular base. Thus, education is not be reduced to a field of practical application, as is the case with Young and Muller.

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Introduction

This commentary engages with the papers by Michael Young (this issue) and Johan Muller (this issue) revisiting the origins of the concept of powerful knowledge, a key concept in the social realist theory of knowledge. In his contribution, Johan Muller evaluates Bernstein's perspective on curricular knowledge, highlighting distinctions between the concept of powerful knowledge and *Didaktik*. Meanwhile, Michael Young delves into his contemporary understanding of the Durkheimian sociology of education, as interpreted by Bernstein and traces the evolution of his thinking since the 1970s, which gives rise to the concept of powerful knowledge.

In this commentary, I examine key points presented by Young and Muller in their papers that reflect powerful knowledge and its origins. I address the following issues. First, powerful knowledge, as a clarion call to pay attention to knowledge as a forgotten issue, appears as valid mainly within the Anglophone tradition of educational theory and not so much within the *Didaktik* tradition. Second,

CONTACT Michael Uljens  michael.uljens@abo.fi  Åbo Akademi University, Strandgatan 2, 65100 VAASA, Finland

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the notion of curriculum covers only an epistemological analysis of any field of knowledge, and powerful knowledge has limited bearing for understanding and guiding teaching. Instead, for example, *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik*, in addition to emphasizing an epistemological analysis of the teaching contents, simultaneously asks about the educative qualities of the contents. Thus, *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* not only acknowledges the importance of subject matter analysis as such but also relates this organically to pedagogical reflection. From this perspective, social realism is of a limited value to teaching. The approach rather complicates these issues by separating the analysis of the content from pedagogical reflections into two separate spheres. Third, being primarily a policy concept, powerful knowledge represents a departure from the theoretical sociology advocated by Durkheim and Bernstein. Finally, appreciating the Durkheimian and Bernsteinian art of conceptualizing sociology theoretically, epistemological and ontological analyses are obviously a task also for education theory. However, such an analysis is not what powerful knowledge aims at.

Powerful knowledge as a regional ‘alarm bell’

Johan Muller begins by recognizing powerful knowledge as Michael Young’s ‘clarion call to the educational community’ that resonates with his concerns about what he perceived as an ‘epistemic amnesia’ surrounding the essence of the curriculum, namely knowledge itself. However, even as early as the 1980s, Lee Shulman and colleagues shed light on the concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK, Gudmundsdottir & Shulman, 1987; Gudmundsdottir et al., 1997; Shulman, 1986), a facet of teachers’ subject didactic knowledge. Shulman (1986) wrote: ‘the sharp distinction between knowledge and pedagogy does not represent a tradition dating back centuries, but rather, a more recent development.’ ‘This underscores the possibility that the powerful knowledge initiative might have primarily mirrored a domestic awakening in England. This interpretation receives support from the previous analysis of the tradition in the UK (Hamilton, 2000).

In many European countries embracing *Bildung*-oriented *Didaktik*, there was a certain contentment in acknowledging the heightened attention given to the role of contents. This growing focus on content developed parallel to and with a conservative ‘back to basics’ curriculum policy, corresponding to nationalist movements emphasizing the need for a ‘knowledge canon.’ Thankfully, Young and Muller observe how powerful knowledge came to be misused to support these conservative developments.

On the separation of epistemological analysis and pedagogical reflection

My second comment addresses the separation between epistemological and pedagogical analyses of the curriculum. According to Muller, neither reproduction theory and ‘postmodernist progressivism’ nor the liberal ‘reflective teacher’ approach theorize the pedagogic process itself. Obviously, this seems to be true for the notion of powerful knowledge as well. The social realist approach, as Muller argues, prioritizes an epistemological analysis of the teaching content, discipline or field of knowledge taught, emphasizing the conceptual structure of various disciplines, rather than analysing pedagogy as such. Instead, they are seen as two separate fields of inquiry. However, my concern is that while the social realists acknowledge the importance of analysing curricular knowledge, they seem to be content with stopping at this step (Rata, 2019). It offers prescriptions for teaching based on the unique character of each field of knowledge but falls short of reflecting what educative qualities this content may have with respect to the student’s growth as a subject and citizen. Prescribing what knowledge ought to be in the curriculum is complex and politically influenced. Such prescriptions are never based on an epistemic analysis of knowledge alone. Attention is also paid to how educational aims, or generic competencies, come across in different contents.

In other words, a major interest in powerful knowledge, and among social realists, seems to be an analysis of the conceptual structure of various disciplines, their core notions, their configurations of knowledge, and how different knowledge fields are hierarchically structured, or then less so. As

Muller clearly argues, 'Powerful knowledge ... belongs ... pre-eminently *before* the pedagogical cycle starts.' However, the main message is that this aspect of the social realist approach has bearing not only on the *selection* of teaching content but also on the *treatment* of it. It is easy to consider such an epistemological analysis as important, in its own right, beyond anything close to teaching. Yet, such an approach to conceptualizing knowledge is rather different from the one in *Didaktik*, inextricably connected with the pedagogical concerns of the curriculum. As Comenius already reminded us in *The Great Didactic*, it is important to proceed from the simple to the more complex (or to 'progressive levels of complexity'), to focus on the basic concepts and pay attention to the sequencing of content, i.e. what must be treated in the beginning, and what may come later on, etc (1967). Echoing Comenius, Klafki (1959, 1997), argued that while the selected content must be *elementary* or basic for the discipline or field of knowledge, it must also be *exemplary* for the knowledge field in question. In addition, the content must provide learners with the opportunity to understand *fundamental* phenomena (Klafki, 1959; Sjöström & Eilks, 2020). In this respect, the powerful knowledge engages in something that indeed has a long history in education.

To conclude, while powerful knowledge acknowledges the importance of a preparatory epistemological analysis of curricular knowledge, unfortunately, it is content with this step. What pedagogically comes out of all this are prescriptions, practical implications, or recommendations of how to proceed in teaching. Here, pedagogical reasoning is limited to a practical reasoning, rather than considered conceptual. The logical structure of the content is at the fore, rather than the learner's psychological or experiential structure. However, we should not downplay an analysis of the epistemological structure as such. It has its value. Also, a *Bildung* centred *Didaktik* (Rucker, 2023) and subject *Didaktik* analyzes the content. However, the *Bildung* approach argues, it is not valid to isolate the epistemic analysis from the pedagogic one. In addition, a *Bildung* centred approach to *Didaktik* adds a crucial perspective to the selection and treatment of teaching contents, by asking about the *educative* value of the contents and its treatment, given the learners previous experiences and aims of education (Rucker, 2023; Uljens, 2023). This educative value cannot, however, solely be derived from a pure epistemological analysis. Such educative teaching must relate to the learner's experiential world, as Ference Marton's phenomenographic *Didaktik* and related variation theory is an example (e.g. Kullberg et al., 2024).

Instructional reductionism vs. *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik*

The reasoning outlined by Muller represents a version of pedagogical or instructional reductionism. Reductionist approaches to teaching take their point of departure in either in the contents, learning psychology or ethics and politics. Instructional or pedagogical reductionism based on content, process and aims, all reduce pedagogical knowledge to a set of practical recommendations or prescriptions, derived from the conceptual structure of the contents, from learning theory or from ethics and politics. Instructional reductionism separates education from and subordinates education to these fields of knowledge. Such an understanding alone does not perceive 'education' as an academic discipline in itself.

Bildung-centred *Didaktik*, for example in Klafki's interpretation, similarly emphasizes the objective or the material side of the content, the concrete case, example or phenomenon studied. But, parallel to this, Klafki reminds that the selection also needs to be potentially relevant for the learner, given her experiences. What meaning may the selected content have for the learner now, and what meaning can the learner come to see in it? In addition, the approach asks not only how the selected content can contribute to the learning of some delimited and specific aspect of the world but also how this specific content is an example of something general. This approach also challenges the learner to work with and reflect on the meaning and value of the content to find out how she herself relates to this content. This aspect points at the learner's necessary own active treatment of and works with the content. Thus, in this view, teaching supports study activity, which may result in learning.

A *Bildung*-centred approach to pedagogical work emphasizes teaching as an intervention in the learner's own work with the content. Here, the teacher *summons* the learner to engage in the selected content, the complexity of which must relate to the student's previous level: too simple tasks do not challenge, while complex tasks endanger the potentiality of the process. Differently expressed, we ask about the *educative or pedagogical qualities (Bildungsgehalt)* of the selected teaching content (*Bildungsinhalt*). In the *Bildung* tradition, the point of departure is asking how we best may develop the learner's autonomy and her self-determined actions and orientation in and to the world. Consequently, the human being's anthropological indeterminateness makes education possible, while the aim to reach culturally productive freedom makes education necessary, as the individual is not capable of having that by mere participation in everyday life. This requires, however, a pedagogical influence that affirms autonomy as an aim, but it requires simultaneously a non-affirmative treatment of the curricular content (Benner, 2023; Rucker, 2023; Uljens, 2023).

In addition to viewing, learning the content as the aim of teaching, the *Bildung* tradition gives the content an instrumental function. In this perspective, the content receives a mediational role, allowing the learner to reach beyond the content itself. We then ask how the content may develop the learner's general capabilities, moral reasoning, critical thinking and capability to self-determined action (Deng, 2020). However, critical thinking, for example, can only develop in relation to certain situations, contexts and contents. Criticality means different things in different fields of knowledge. It is very hard to see how we may arrive at a more nuanced idea of how to pedagogically support students' domain-specific critical thinking by limiting our attention to an analysis of the curricular structure of given fields of knowledge.

In conclusion, Young and Muller emphasize a critical perspective, asserting that meaningful reflections on teaching require an understanding of knowledge and its logical structure. However, while an analysis of the conceptual structure of a disciplinary field can yield practical recommendations, it does not aim to produce any *theory of teaching*. Muller contends that didacticians play a crucial role in 'clarifying the process of transformation into learnable frameworks for optimal engagement by those students'. According to Muller, the perspectives of social realists and *Didaktik* focus on distinct yet complementary aspects—analysing disciplinary structures or curricular contents to identify pedagogical implications and, in more detail, determining methods for conveying and learning these structures. However, as demonstrated, given that the *Didaktik* tradition in itself encompasses what Young and Muller suggest, that is, the logical and epistemological analyses of the content as such, powerful knowledge does not contribute to anything that is not already covered by *Didaktik*.

On powerful knowledge vs. sociological theory

An additional aspect I wish to scrutinize pertains to the conceptual explanatory power of the social realist approach. I commend Muller for explicitly acknowledging, following Young, that the concept of powerful knowledge is more akin to a slogan than a fully developed concept. It serves as a reminder, in alignment with Young's perspective, that knowledge matters in teaching.

Young and Muller admire Durkheim's and Bernstein's theories. These theories successfully conceptualize complex processes indeed. Should not also pedagogical work in schools, being a most complex social and societal undertaking, receive a treatment at a similar level of conceptual sophistication? This is, however, not the ambition of social realists. But, I argue, the social realist approach also differs fundamentally from the *type* of theorizing represented by Durkheim and Bernstein.

In contrast to the policy-oriented instructional reductionism approach of powerful knowledge, grounded in an epistemological analysis resulting in *prescriptive pedagogy*, Durkheim and Bernstein present a non-prescriptive, descriptive-analytical framework focusing on the mechanisms of knowledge transformation processes. Durkheim's and Bernstein's approaches are based on the *ontological, epistemological* and *empirical* analysis of the phenomena they theorize. The distinction between

these and powerful knowledge lies in their methodological approaches, with Durkheim and Bernstein opting for a nuanced examination of the mechanisms involved rather than a prescriptive stance.

Thus, the Bernstein (1990, 2001) delineation of the three levels of 'the pedagogic device', as discussed in Muller's paper, exemplifies analytical and ontological reasoning. In Singh's (2002) view, the 'pedagogic device' is defined by Bernstein as the comprehensive set of rules or procedures guiding the transformation of knowledge into classroom discourse, curricula and online communication. Understanding the intricacies of this conversion process is pivotal for any theory, whether in general *Didaktik* or general pedagogy. Despite considerable variations in approaches, the process of transformation remains a central focus in educational theory. Hopmann (2003), for instance, categorizes curriculum discourses into political, administrative or 'programmatic' and 'practical' classroom discourses. Others, drawing inspiration from Vivien Schmidt's discursive institutionalism, offer additional, yet processual perspectives (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017).

Bernstein's (1990) pedagogic device, lauded by Singh (2002) as 'a model for analyzing the processes by which discipline-specific or domain-specific expert knowledge, is converted or pedagogized to constitute school knowledge'. Three hierarchically ordered rules govern this conversion: distributive rules that regulate power relationships between social groups, recontextualizing rules that guide the delocation, relocation and refocusing of specific pedagogic discourse, and evaluative rules that constitute specific pedagogic practices (ibid. p. 573). In light of this comprehensive approach to theorizing curriculum work, it becomes evident that the slogan of powerful knowledge falls short compared with such analytical depth.

I also observe a certain incongruence between Michael Young's powerful knowledge concept and his favourable treatment of Durkheim. Much like Bernstein, Durkheim offers a comprehensive conceptual system or theory that addresses the challenges arising from the transition between pre-modern and modern societies. In the former, societal cohesion is based on given moral rules (mechanical solidarity), and education predominantly focuses on socializing individuals into these established norms. In contrast, modern societies witness a constant renegotiation of moral rules, and the future is radically open.

Durkheim recognized the necessity for a new form of 'organic' solidarity that aligns with the differentiation of labour and the emergence of individualism. A society characterized by a high degree of collectivity is not only a facility but also a necessary condition for the flourishing of individuality. This demonstrates how collectivism and individualism are interconnected. Durkheim argued that a high degree of individualism could only thrive in a society with a substantial degree of interdependence or collectivism. Michael Young acknowledges Durkheim's viewpoint, particularly the argument that this new form of solidarity demands a public education system. Young aptly notes that 'organic solidarity, based on people's interdependence would not just evolve but needed the active support of the growth of public education, and the expansion of state institutions that were not tied to particular interests'. This indeed points at a fundamental starting point for theorizing education when moving from a pre-modern to a modern society acknowledging the pivotal role of the autonomous state as a condition for autonomous citizenship.

In Young's interpretation, Durkheim emerges as a thinker who shares an intersubjectivity-oriented explanation of how the individual becomes aware of herself as a self-determined cultural being. Young encapsulates Durkheim's perspective by stating, 'we are born with both the capacity and necessity to be social' emphasizing that individuals satisfy their needs by actively participating in society, contributing to its transformation and asserting that individuality and a sense of self do not originate innately but result from social interactions. This viewpoint is traceable back to the critical ideas developed by J. G. Fichte in response to Kant's concept of the subject's a priori awareness of moral laws. Fichte, departing from a transcendental notion of subjectivity, formulated the notion of mutual recognition of each other's freedom and the other's summoning of the self, leading to the individual's awareness of herself as free. This empirically developed (a posteriori) sense of the self as

free inherently involves moral reflection. Thus, awareness of the subject's freedom in inter-subjectively mediated (Uljens, 2023).

I am not myself aware whether Durkheim was familiar with the early German modern education theorists, such as Fichte, when advocating for sociology as the new science to investigate human sociality. In any case, he implicitly grapples with the educational dilemma of modernity. Durkheim's challenge revolves around fostering a sense of solidarity among individuals, cultivating a shared understanding of the world while concurrently nurturing a unique, individual self and cultural identity.

Now, let us delve into the crux of the matter. In Young's treatment of Durkheim's sociology, it proves challenging to see how the evolution of Durkheim's scientific approach to the sociology of knowledge, contributes to powerful knowledge. Although Durkheim, according to Young, viewed tradition neither as something unalterable to be preserved (as posited by the Right) nor something to be criticized and obliterated (as assumed by many on the Left), it appears that Young's scientific endeavour is considerably influenced by political motivations. In the eyes of Bernstein, who developed a systematic approach for identifying stages and mechanisms, Young's contributions in the 1970s were more akin to a publicly oriented *political initiative* than *academic sociology*, in the sense of Bernstein and Durkheim.

In his paper, Young chronicles a gradual shift in his focus from the 'voice of pupils and their teachers' to the 'voice of knowledge', implying a refocusing from sociological analysis centred on knowers to an emphasis on knowledge itself. This shift essentially posited that a 'curriculum for all pupils' must be grounded in academic subjects. Such exclusive grounding of one's point of departure in knowers or in knowledge again reflects a kind of reductionist orientation. Rather than adopting an either-or type of reasoning, what is being overlooked is an understanding of the pedagogical relationship as a relation between the voices of pupils, the voice of teachers and the voice of knowledge, as a contextually framed triad.

Despite Young's altered focus and Bernstein's critique, the underpinning policy interest persisted. The impression is that Young expected that the idea of powerful knowledge would gain political support. At least, we see more political and less academic concerns. Moreover, Young's self-criticism pinpoints implementation issues, suggesting a more pragmatic approach, acknowledging that a curriculum based on academic subjects could be a long-term principle for all schools, rather than an immediate possibility. This admission sounds more like the conclusion of an impatient politician than that of a researcher. Regardless, it is evident that this way of reasoning has strayed significantly from the type of theorizing about the sociology of knowledge developed by Durkheim and Bernstein.

However, the significance of Young's earlier stance lies partly in its contribution to unveiling the ideological dimensions of power embedded in knowledge construction. To comprehend how knowledge operates pedagogically in emancipatory ways concerning the learner's experiential world, a comprehensive theory of *education* is imperative. This crucial aspect was overlooked in the book authored by Lambert and himself (Young, Lambert, Roberts & Roberts, 2014). How curriculum knowledge becomes part of pedagogy and ultimately part of the thinking of pupils was at the fore. In simpler terms, while education theory and *Didaktik* do encompass curriculum knowledge or content knowledge, the Young, Lambert, Roberts & Roberts (2014) book explored something that, in principle, education theory covers.

Educational theory and sociological theory

To conclude, what Bernstein's sociology and developments thereof offer should not be disregarded by educationalists. The question is rather how to best utilize sociological insights in education. The epistemological analysis of knowledge is obviously valuable in its own right and is obviously not dependent on any theory of education. To my mind, sociological reasoning plays a pedagogically productive role especially when considered as an extension or

development of an educational theory. Instead of viewing pedagogical analysis as practical implications based on ethics, politics, curriculum knowledge, organization theory, religion, psychology or culture, we must demand educational theory to produce a genuine theory of education, on its own terms. In academia, ontological, epistemological and axiological analysis of any discipline is a core question. Then, having such a point of departure, we may very well carry out a more detailed analysis of more specific issues. In my *School Didactics and Learning* (Uljens 1997), I tried to carry out such an analysis between learning psychology and *Didaktik*. So, instead of separating the psychology of learning and pedagogical practice, reducing reflection on teaching to practical implications and recommendations based on learning theory, I first outlined a model of school didactics focusing on the content centred and contextually framed teaching-studying-learning process. In a second step, theoretically framed by *Didaktik*, I carried out an analysis on the pedagogical implications of cognitive learning theory. In the same vein, I think it makes better sense to take the point of departure in some theory of education, capable of clarifying this phenomenon, and subsequently, and framed by this education theory, continue by pursuing a more detailed analysis of, e.g., curriculum knowledge, moral and ethical questions, students' life-world, technological aids, organizational issues, leadership and governance etc.

A reductionist approach, which develops pedagogical theory based on other disciplines, prevents the possibility of developing a pedagogical or educational theory in its own right. Without such theory, there is no discipline of education, and consequently no professional language for teachers. In the Anglophone tradition, it is common not to consider *education* an academic discipline of its own, but rather as a 'field of research', based on foundation disciplines (psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy of education). Schwab reminded of this problem in 1969 (Schwab, 1969), but the need for such a language was pointed out already by Schleiermacher in his lectures from 1826 (Mielitynen & Uljens, 2023).

It is a bit puzzling that the social realist approach, so strongly emphasizing the epistemic structure of a discipline or field of knowledge, does not represent any ambitions itself to reflect *education or pedagogical work* theoretically. More precisely, I greatly value Muller for underscoring the social realist interest in analysing the conceptual structure of a given field of knowledge or curricular knowledge. However, while the concept of powerful knowledge emphasizes how important it is to pay attention to the curricular content, a similar ambition must, I think, also guide us when exploring education. Pedagogy is not to be reduced to a question of applying insights from the epistemological analysis of the curriculum. Perhaps, I should state it clearly that the reasoning above is obviously not a critique of the concept of powerful knowledge, as the social realist approach itself has limited its validity, not aiming at explaining education. Rather, my point is, in the same way as Durkheim and Bernstein focus on the nature of sociological knowledge, we need to continue to develop the language of education.

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ORCID

Michael Uljens  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4172-1117>

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