A Re-Examination of Key Curriculum Debates and Directions in South Africa

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Summary

The key issue with which the South African debate around curriculum reform has been concerned, as has been the case in many countries around the world, is what should be at its core. There is agreement in this debate that the curriculum should deal with South Africa's apartheid legacy of exclusion and that it should prepare young people for the complexity of living in a new modern world order. There is little agreement, however, about what counts as valuable knowledge for meeting these purposes. In the process, as the new curriculum has been developed and revised, multiple schools of thought have emerged. Two, however, have taken clear form: social realism and social constructivism. The former took issue with what they described as post-modern relativism in the new curriculum. The target of their critique was the lost opportunity to affirm the importance of what they called "powerful knowledge." The new curriculum manifested a susceptibility, in its weak delineation of the boundaries of different disciplines, to the prominence of everyday knowledge. What children needed to learn was powerful knowledge that contained understandings of the deep grammars, restricted codes, and specialist areas of knowledge. In response, constructivists argued, through concepts such as "funds of knowledge," that South African children inhabited a world of multiple knowledges and that it was important that they were able to valorize the legitimacy of these knowledges, including indigenous forms, in their formal learning experiences. The debate is ongoing and reaches into the heart of policymaking in South Africa.

Keywords: curriculum, South African education, social realism, constructivism, powerful knowledge, funds of knowledge, curriculum studies

Introduction

The questions with which curriculum change in South Africa has grappled in the post-apartheid period have in both their practical and intellectual implications significance for curriculum discussions elsewhere in the world. Many issues have been raised in the South African debate. Most pertinent, for the purposes of this contribution, have been, on the one hand, South Africa's legacy issues of social justice and inclusion and exclusion, and on the other, the forward-looking questions of the fitness of purpose and the relevance of the curriculum for preparing young people for the multiple challenges they will confront as they

move into adulthood. Although new curriculum policy has absorbed much energy and generated a multiplicity of positions, how scholars of curriculum have addressed these questions has been underpinned by a consistent set of concerns and interests. These have ranged from concerns about how the intended curriculum is to take up reconciliation, human rights, social justice including gender equality and African values such as ubuntu, to the nature and decolonization of its subject matter and knowledge (Ahluwalia et al., 2012; Christie, 2010, 2020; Du Preez, 2014; Jansen & Christie, 1999; Le Grange, 2007, 2010; Pinar, 2010; Simmonds, 2014; Simmonds & Du Preez, 2017; Zembylas & Keet, 2018) They have also included concerns with the implementation of the curriculum (Blignaut, 2008, 2009; Chigonga, 2013; Clasquin-Johnson, 2011; Ismail, 2004; Khumalo, 2014; Kokela, 2017; Koopman, 2013; Lizer, 2013; Maimela, 2015; Mbatha, 2016; Molapo, 2016; Moodley, 2013; Phorabatho, 2013; Pillay, 2014; Poutiainen, 2009). Occasionally, researchers and scholars have looked at issues of design and policy (Bertram, 2008; Petersen, 1998; Thoms, 2009). An important not quite new but re-energized gloss to these debates has developed in response to global discussions about decoloniality and the decolonization of the curriculum. The work of Le Grange (2007) and Le Grange and Aikenhead (2017) is most pertinent here.

Prominent in recent discussions has been a debate centered on the notion of “powerful knowledge” advanced by scholars who have drawn on and applied concepts from Durkheim and Basil Bernstein to the study of curriculum in South Africa. The concern here has been to bring knowledge back in. In doing so, these scholars have focused on how knowledge works, and so have taken their impetus from Bernsteinian concepts of boundary, classification, differentiation, and specialization as they apply to the idea of knowledge (Young, 2007; Young & Muller, 2013). Although reservations and criticisms have been raised in the international context, the South African contributions are less well known (Deng, 2015; Deng & Luke, 2008; see also White, 2018; Whitty & Furlong, 2017), and this debate is the focus of this article. It is a focus also to be clear about the justification for giving it such prominence in this contribution, because it has currency in the policy community in South Africa in meaningful and practical ways. This may not be the case elsewhere in the world where similar debates and discussions are underway (White, 2018). It is also important to note a key feature of the debate in South Africa, and that is that, despite its relationship to power, there is little explicit debate and discussion about “powerful knowledge”—curriculum theorists have rather sought alternative approaches as implicit critique. For this reason, we highlight its explicit formulations.

This article elaborates on the contours of this South African debate and contextualizes and outlines the positions of its protagonists, arguing that they all bring to the discussion important insights. One of those insights, flowing from the broad agreement between them, is a commitment to the development of curricular interventions that are attentive simultaneously to social justice and the processes involved in the learning experience. Knowledge in and of the formal, specialized curriculum is important, but so too are strategies and approaches that seek to enable access to it. The curriculum discussion, this article seeks to emphasize, is not, as it has been elsewhere, simply an argument between conservative realist postures loosely associated with authoritarian behaviorism, and progressive constructivist positions associated with ideas of justice and freedom.[1] The agreement is grounded in a broad desire for developing learning modalities motivated and animated by the value of equality but take as their starting points different knowledge traditions in education (Whitty & Furlong, 2017). Another insight which comes out of the debate comes out of their

disagreement. There is disagreement between them about understanding what counts as powerful knowledge as well as about what constitutes the social—how to understand and explain the nature of the society that they are trying to equalize and the knowledges that find expression in it.[2] What constitutes equality is an extremely contested idea. In this argument one sees how the complexity of this idea is grappled with.

This debate here is centrally about the sociology of learning. It is about human subjects in a learning space—who they are—and the cognitive modalities they enact in each other's presence—what and how they teach and learn. In contention in this sociology of learning is the question of the modern South African subject. Who is this subject? When the subject is made the object of analysis in their learning ecology, how might they be made sense of? How might that subject be engaged for policy purposes as a learning and self-aware subject? To what in the struggle for equality does this learning subject have an entitlement? The debate, it is suggested, has relevance beyond the South African context. It is about the rights human beings have to the knowledges that surround them—the different knowledge capitals—as they make their way through the learning experience. It has relevance for current global discussions about decoloniality, "southern theories" of knowing, and many other issues related to knowledge and learning. The focus of this discussion is on approaches to the social.

The Backdrop to the Debate

The debate over the curriculum in South Africa has taken its urgency from the ongoing challenges that the South African education system has faced over time. When the new democratic government came into power in 1994, it was confronted with a broken and divided system. The curriculum itself was marked by a history of "adapting" what White students learned to what Black students were taught because of the latter's assumed lower social and political status in life. The assumption underlying the differentiation of curricula and standards by color and ethnicity was that they should prepare people for different positions in life (Reilly, 2016). Its legitimation came through Christian National Education (CNE) for schools and Fundamental Pedagogics for teachers trained in universities and colleges. The ideology of the superiority of White over Black was pervasive and structured into the funding of schools and the nature of their curricula. CNE deliberately prepared White children (and their teachers) for domination and Black children (and their teachers) for subservience. Despite perceptions that the liberal universities were immune from Fundamental Pedagogics and that they offered a valiant resistance to it, whereas Afrikaans and Black universities meekly obeyed its dictates, it was pervasive in all universities. The pockets of opposition that did emerge did so late and were not universally present across liberal universities' education faculties, which were divided in their opposition to apartheid. With the exception of selected individuals, these universities remained in many ways complicit in the apartheid project through consultancy services, for example, to the Bantustans (Chisholm, 2018; Enslin, 1984; Gluckman, 1981; Randall, 1988).

Apartheid curricula were underpinned by their unequal resourcing. Despite significant increases in funding for Black education after the 1976 youth revolt, as late as 1994, when the system had already begun reforming, two and a half times more was spent on a White than on a Black child (Fiske & Ladd, 2004, p. 44). White learners thus had access to better schools, teachers, and textbooks, whereas Black learners were taught in run-down schools by largely

underqualified teachers with few or no resources. The situation was exacerbated in secondary schools: in the early years of apartheid, the focus had been on massification through primary schooling based on employing female teachers at lower levels of pay and relocation of secondary schools, teachers, and higher education for Africans in the Bantustans. A funding formula adopted from the 1920s for African schooling was based on a fixed and unchanging amount supplemented by African taxation—it resulted in an intolerable squeeze on secondary schooling in both urban and rural areas during the 1970s and explosive conditions throughout South Africa during the 1980s (Delius, 1990; Hyslop, 1990; Lekgoathi, 2007; Ngubentombi, 1984). Faced with inadequate conditions as well as poorly trained teachers, many with only primary school qualifications, students resisted across the country. The curriculum was central to this resistance from 1976 to 1990, and its purposes in ensuring and achieving superiority and inferiority highlighted across and in every act of opposition. The National Education Coordinating Committee, formed in the mid-1980s to coordinate the internal opposition movements of school and university students, teachers and youth, made curriculum resources a central plank of its engagements with the apartheid state.

The task of the post-apartheid government was accordingly to create the conditions for all children to learn in opportunity-enriched and affirming ways. It introduced a raft of new policies and procedures aimed at overturning apartheid in policy and practice. One of its first tasks was the drafting of a new curriculum. Under great social pressure, an approach was borrowed, a framework elaborated and implemented in 1996–1997 (Spreen, 2004). The haste with which outcomes-based education (OBE) was introduced, and its failures, are dealt with in greater detail here. Suffice it to say that although the curriculum was gradually revised, its early incarnations, inspired by constructivism, provided the rationale and foundation of the social realist critique of constructivism and approach to curriculum in South Africa and elsewhere today. To social realists, much of the constructivist thrust of this early curriculum shared important elements with earlier notions of “adapted” education, invisible to its proponents. To alter the first post-apartheid curriculum, the symbol of the achievement of power over apartheid education, no matter what its weaknesses, required a strong rationale, and this was provided in the social realist approach, its early genuflections to Gramsci being later displaced by those to Durkheim and Bernstein. Other policies were introduced to address social and economic inequalities impacting on access to schooling and the curriculum. Racial inequalities in spending were erased, and the majority of the country’s children gained access to places in the schooling system, a process facilitated by the introduction of school meals. (Jones, 2013, p. 6). However, wider economic and social inequalities continued to impact on ways in which communities could mobilize resources to supplement school resources (Fiske & Ladd, 2004).

The constructivist critique of the revised 2011 curriculum and its social realist rationale derives from the ongoing failures to achieve the desired equalization of learning outcomes, a goal and its failure heightened by international testing and ranking systems. Reflecting a widespread impatience with and intolerance for the failure of the system to change, social commentator Nathaniel Lee recently observed:

> In the area of education, our rulers have sought to render our children as guinea pigs to experiment with some of the most misguided policies in an effort to eradicate the vestiges of apartheid education. As a result of poor planning and situational analysis, our education has not only been left in a mess, but is itself a mess. The effort to discard the legacy of apartheid has left us with a situation where pupils, having completed primary education cannot master the basic scholastic skills of reading and writing.
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> (Lee, 2018, p. 6)

Indicators of the "mess" to which Lee refers are conspicuous in conventional metrics such as performance results on standardized tests (Grant, 2013, p. 14) but are evident also in a range of other indicators. With respect to the former, learner attainment in assessments such as the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), conducted over five cycles between 2003 and 2015, has been consistently poor. The most recent TIMSS report found that 61% of South African leaners at the grade 5 level did not "exhibit the minimum competency levels required for basic mathematic knowledge in Grade 5 as defined by the international component of the study" (Isdale et al., 2017, p. 21). Similarly, Fleisch (2018, p. 24) concludes in his recent review of findings from a range of standardized tests on reading that "South African schoolchildren are performing well below their international counterparts and below our own curriculum benchmarked expectations." He adds that "the ubiquitous inequality problem, the bimodal pattern of achievement, closely tracks relative wealth and poverty" (p. 24). Other less instrumental indices include assessments of the physical environments in which learning takes place and of the capacity of the system to nurture in young South African learners a sense of their rights and responsibilities with respect to themselves and to others (De Lannoy et al., 2015). With respect to the question of social cohesion and education, a focus of many formal interventions at the national level, a study by Sayed et al (2015, p. 58) showed that the process of bringing South Africans from different backgrounds together was a distinctly elite experience. They came to the conclusion that "only the wealthiest schools have a mix of different learners" (Sayed et al, 2015, p. 58). More than 10 years later, these trends remain in place (Leoschut & Burton, 2006; Sayed et al., 2015, p. 59; Yutar, 2006, p. 5). The experience of crime and violence is a "common occurrence" for 41.4% of 12- to 22-year-olds in the country (Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017, p. 1). Gender-based violence, including bullying and rape, among both students as well as students and teachers, is an important dimension of this crime (Bhana, 2005; de Lange et al., 2012). Why this is so has been the subject of considerable discussion. Policy makers, academics, and the general public have repeatedly taken a position on why the situation is as it is (see, e.g., Soudien et al., 2017). These continuing inequalities and their social manifestations at all levels impact on the success of the curriculum and provide the spur to the constructivist position on curriculum in South Africa today.

Approaches to the role of the curriculum vary. The debate ranges from those who see the structure and content of the curriculum itself as being the source of the problem (Spamer, 2018, p. 11),[3] to those who seek to strengthen the curriculum's knowledge dimension (Bharath & Bertram, 2018), to those who argue for pedagogies that will enable access for students in impoverished environments (Fataar, 2012a, 2012b), to those who question what "powerful knowledge" actually means in the context of the persistent evidence that schooling and curriculum have not translated into more equal outcomes (Allais, 2014; Vally & Motala, 2014), to those who question the binaries implicit in the definition of "powerful knowledge"

and its applicability to knowledge construction and learning experiences beyond the schoolroom (Cooper, 2020). The critique of powerful knowledge has also, as indicated earlier, drawn strongly on decoloniality (Christie, 2020). Evocative as this new element is, it is still in its infancy. Before the debate is examined further, it is necessary to describe the policy directions that have provoked the debate.

The Post-Apartheid Curriculum

The initial impetus for the first post-apartheid curriculum of 1996–1997 came from a variety of sources, among these being a desire to set in place a new body of values and to overcome, through new knowledge and skills, the stultifying rote-learning practices that research had shown to be dominant in many classrooms. In its outcomes-based manifestation, this new approach appeared as an essentially learner centered. This orientation, as Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008) observe, is in keeping with what has happened elsewhere in the world and particularly in the African context. The direction being taken in South Africa, however, was more complex. Although learner-centeredness was a major motif of the South African curriculum between 1997 and 2011, strong competency-based elements were added to it, and, in the most recent iteration of the reforms in 2011, performance-based elements as well (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008, p. 197; Chisholm & Wildeman, 2013). The outcome, as a result, was a hybrid curriculum, which, in much of its presentation and vocabulary, was focused on the needs of the individual learner. In this sense it was a response to the deliberately restrictive policies of the apartheid era, which obstructed individual talent and ability. Its competence-heavy inflection and its more recent performance-directed overlay, however, qualify the degree to which it can be classified as a pure learner-centered curriculum. Specifications of competence and performance, in their presentation as desirable performative outcomes, have introduced into the framework features that are behaviorist in their form.

Where did these features come from? They took their stimulus from the country’s immediate political context: the transition into democracy, the global shift toward neoliberalism, and general trends in the educational discussion as well as a loss of faith in constructivist approaches to curriculum. The learner-centered element arose as a direct response to behaviorist theories of learning that had come to dominate in educational thinking up until the 1960s. To behaviorism’s ideas of “operant conditioning,” the idea that people responded to stimuli, it brought forward concepts such as self-efficacy and self-regulated learning. These ideas were attractive to South Africans. But urgent, too, for South Africans, against the apartheid experience that saw Black people being deliberately denied opportunity, was the upskilling of people. Scholar activists in the labor movement were insistent that the new curriculum should have a skills-based focus. The curriculum, as aresult, was framed with strong performance-based stanchions. This framework, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), was adopted from experiences in countries such as Australia and overlaid onto the curriculum a strong competence and performance frame (Allais, 2014; Jansen, 2004; Spreen & Vally, 2010).

Holding these approaches together, even the competency and performative ones, was the discourse of constructivism. Constructivism, as an explanation of how learning worked, presented itself as a powerful overarching philosophy for the reforms. It took its legitimacy

from its explicit opposition to, on the one hand, Christian National Education (CNE) authoritarianism, and, on the other, behaviorism. Its attraction to South Africans was its identification with the political project of the progressive movement in education (Prickel, 2015, p. 6). Critical in this discourse was the social context.[4] South Africans believed that they were socially constructing an alternative society. Education would be central in this project.

What then did this curriculum intervention look like? It had two parts, a prescribed curriculum that sat visibly on the schooling system, and a qualifications framework, a much less obvious structure, on which the curriculum rested and which provided the curriculum with the formal criteria necessary for its specification.

The prescribed curriculum made its first appearance in 1997 with the introduction of a brand new approach to education—Curriculum 2005. It was revised in 2002 leading to the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS) and again in 2011 with the introduction of a new curriculum called the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). The first two iterations of the curriculum were based on an outcomes-based approach that placed emphasis on integration and learner-centeredness in contrast to the apartheid government's rote learning approach. The third iteration, the CAPS, contained a shift toward a performance-based curriculum focused on content to be covered. Provincial approaches sought implementation through tightly structured lesson plans, instructional materials, and teacher coaching, of which the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy was the best known, implemented, and researched (Fleisch, 2018).

The platform on which the prescribed curriculum rested, the second element, was the NQF (RSA Department of Education, 1995a, 1995b). This framework, overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), provided the rules for vertical and horizontal portability of qualifications and skills within the system. The idea behind it was to open up and democratize learning pathways for the country's socially and educationally diverse population. It supplied the educational and training system with the language, concepts, and regulatory frameworks necessary for its operation. Central in this operation was the opportunity for learners to move in both vertical and horizontal ways within the system.

Strongly rooted in the "knowledge" tradition, Allais's work on competence-and standards-based curricula flowing from the NQF argues that these resulted in the "trivialization" of knowledge. Knowledge is trivialized through the fragmentation and atomization of knowledge that specification of standards and outcomes entail, falsely promising that education can solve economic and employment problems and enabling the weakening of state educational provision in favor of "outsourced" providers (Allais, 2014). For Allais, the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of this and other NQFs are rooted in neoclassical market-based educational strategies and human capital theory, child- or learner-centered education, and the application of objectives-based learning in the 1950s, "mastery learning" in the 1980s, and scientific management techniques to the curriculum in the early 20th century. In each case a curriculum was developed based on lists of activities apparently existing in the real external world, on the basis that the academic curriculum was out of touch with reality and elitist, and did not enable an adequate linkage of education to the labor market. In each case, the curriculum so developed collapsed under its own weight of increasingly detailed lists of activities and was later reinvented anew to address the same problems originally identified, thus going through an endless cycle of repetition. Learner-centered ideas were sometimes in

alignment with such ideas and sometimes not, but, like the scientific, objectives-based, mastery learning approach, promised an education that was not based in knowledge, but derived from the real world. Knowledge in this view simply needed to be transformed into doable educational or curricular activities to ensure that children become better fitted to their world.

This architecture, in terms of the two elements described, took its inspiration from a combination of factors external and internal to South Africa. From the outside four interconnected influences were evident: globalization, the changed focus of aid agencies to development assistance, changes that were taking place in the world political environment, and the spilling over of new pedagogical ideas from the United States and Europe (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008, p. 198). Key multilateral organizations, such as UNICEF, and the world's major donor agencies were supportive of this development. Inherent in the development, which appealed to many African governments, were ideas about the rights of the child. These ideas were captured in a number of conventions to which many African countries signed up: the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the World Declaration on Education for All of Jomtien in 1990, and the Dakar Accord and Millennium Development Goals of 2000. Internally, South African policy makers had to respond to decades of Christian National Education (CNE) and the urgency of being seen to advance the need for instituting a new democratic learning culture in its schools. From the inside, the emphasis on children's rights, as Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008, p. 199) argued, "chimed" with the social, political, and economic goals of the new government. It addressed the immediate need for improving schools politically and educationally: "the epistemological idea of learner-seemed to fit well with development ambitions." It resonated, moreover, with much of the spirit of the anti-apartheid resistance movements and their educational experiments both in South Africa and in the postcolonial environments of many countries where the South African (and Namibian) liberation movements found refuge. Examples of these experiments were the South African Committee for Higher Education Trust (SACHED), which provided a platform inside South Africa for innovative pedagogical work, and the Education with Production movement in Botswana, which was constructed on learning through doing.

The Debate

Although the temperature of the curriculum discussion remained moderately vigorous over the whole period of the intervention, it twice reached high levels of intensity. The first such time was when Curriculum 2005 was unveiled. On that occasion, in March 1997, Jonathan Jansen (1997) wrote a popular piece called "Why OBE Will Fail," which generated a great deal of controversy. The second time, a more sedate but significantly more important moment, saw the country's leading sociologists of education taking issue with each other. It began with Wayne Hugo and Volker Wedekind (2013) critiquing the persistent constructivist elements of the more recent iterations of the curriculum. Lew Zipin et al. (2015) responded to this. In the process an important discussion was opened up about knowledge selection in the curriculum. Not directly participating in the debate, but bringing to bear on it a view of the politics of knowledge selection, thus raising the issue of the epistemological versus the social aspects of the discussion, were Carrim and Taylor (c.2009).[5]

Central in the discussion was the learner-centered element of the curriculum and the issue of the recognition that should be accorded to the everyday knowledges of the learners. Before focusing on the debate, the research is examined here. In close studies of middle- and working-class schools, Hoadley (2007) and Reeves, and Muller (2005), writing from within the Bernsteinian tradition, for example, have distinguished between elaborated middle-class and restricted working-class codes of learning to show that the pedagogical codes structuring teaching in middle- and working-class schools, and underlying dominant curriculum policy, have fatal consequences for teaching and learning. In this approach, pedagogies associated with outcomes-based and learner-centered education focus on context-dependent meanings and everyday, familiar knowledge and blur the boundaries between disciplines in contrast to discipline-based knowledge that emphasizes context-independent meaning and unfamiliar, school, and specialist knowledge.

In this almost essentializing construction of “knowledge” and pedagogy binaries along class lines, outcomes-based pedagogies demonstrate a low degree of teacher control over the selection, pacing, sequencing, and evaluation of knowledge, whereas discipline-based pedagogies show strong control. These are invariably associated with black and white schools. Outcomes-based or learner-centered strategies (in Black working-class classrooms) focus on the particular and concrete, on practical knowledge in which rules and criteria of learning are unclear and implicit in contrast to those pedagogies (employed in White or mixed middle-class schools) emphasizing general, abstract, and conceptual knowledge in which the rules and criteria are clear and explicit. Opportunity to learn is also differentiated between those schools and pedagogies where the pacing is fast and those where they are slow, where instruction is engaged or disengaged, pacing is differentiated and individualised or homogenised, localized and integrated. In short, the “elaborated middle-class code” is one in which the knowledge is explicit, abstract, unfamiliar, foreign, general, universal, discipline-specific, thematized, continuous, procedural, esoteric, and clearly expository; knowledge in the “restricted working-class code” is implicit, local, familiar, concrete, integrated, fragmented, and weakly expository (Hoadley, 2007, 2008). There is no room in this conception for complexity, hybrid pedagogies, mixes of strategies employed by teachers, or possibilities for “contingent constructivism” (Barrett, 2007; Vavrus, 2009)

Defending this approach, Hugo and Wedekind (2013) have argued that the ordering principles at play in processes of knowledge selection were critical. These principles, in deference to everyday knowledge, were subordinated in the curriculum, including the CAPS. Learner-centeredness, a form of political correctness, inhibited the obligation policy makers had to stipulate more clearly what should be in the curriculum. Specialization, they argued, required the capacity to recognize and understand the specific sets of skills, knowledges, or dispositions—the ordering principles—in an educational encounter. Invoking Durkheim to explain the idea of specialization, Young and Muller (2010, p. 121) drew a distinction between “sacred” and “profane” knowledges—the “sacred” as “an internally consistent world of concepts and the ‘profane’ as a vague and contradictory continuum of procedures and practices.” Hugo and Wedekind describe the “sacred” in the following way:

> An ordering principle accords higher and lower states of worth, it has its own forms of dignity, its own types of subjectivities, its own types of objects, its own pleasures and sacrifices, its own tests as to what works and what does not, its own forms of evidence and modalities of knowledge . . . the nature of specialisation has its own logic . . . these principles are not found in fully articulated and rigorously worked out forms in the local community . . .
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> (Hugo & Wedekind, 2013, pp. 171–173)

For scholars such as Carrim and Taylor, a major problem in the work of the social realists is a misconceived epistemological relativism inherent in constructivism. According to Muller, the approach that had been adopted in the NQF and its Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF)—was an "accession to political modernity" (Carrim & Taylor, c.2009, p. 21). Carrim and Taylor show how several of these scholars have taken issue with what they describe as "radical forms of post-modern voluntarism," based on "the idea that knowledge and truth are relative and that school knowledge has no basis for superiority over any other kind of knowledge" (p. 21). On this basis, Carrim and Taylor argue, Muller et al. have reasserted the importance of boundaries between different forms of knowledge and the recognition that different forms of knowledge required particular conditions for their acquisition, transmission, and production.

The responses to these social realist (SR) positions were significant. While acknowledging SR's emphasis of the importance of specialized knowledges, Zipin asked:

> Is there no educational merit to Vygotsky's idea that scientific knowledge, interacting with everyday knowledge in school curriculum, offers power to systematise and clarify learners' spontaneous conceptions, *while learning also gains substance and vitality from those spontaneous conceptions emergent in practical engagement with life-worlds?*
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> (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 17)

The problem with the view of SR, Zipin et al, continued, was the suggestion that "'spontaneous concepts' would profoundly contaminate 'real science' learning." This view, they insisted, had "significant ethical tonalities" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 18). The tonalities flow from SR's implicit characterization of everyday knowledge as inferior and even dangerous.

Carrim and Taylor (c.2009, p. 25) further argued that "for Muller the problem with . . . the NQF and 'integrating' the academic and vocational . . . is conceptually flawed and cannot be successful until such epistemological and educational conditions are taken into account seriously." Carrim and Taylor concur with Muller that the NQF failed to recognize the complexity of knowledge boundaries, but took his explanation of how the idea of boundaries could be approached as toward the social rather than the epistemological. In Muller's critique, the NQF made the presumptive mistake that a degree of commensurability existed between knowledge forms. Carrim and Taylor's rejoinder was that this characterization set up a "straw person." It "overly stat[es] the use of such 'post-modern voluntarism'" (p. 29). The boundaries, he argued, drawing on Bernstein, should not just be understood as "voluntarist" social constructs about epistemology but should also be seen as "the divisions of labour of educational knowledge.… "the knowledge that is considered 'to be public', the 'selection' of

the type of curricula to be constructed and the ‘organization and distribution’ thereof are about power and ‘the principles of social control’” (p. 29). The discussions, said Carrim and Taylor, were not just about the relativism framing the NQF’s epistemological assumptions; they were about “the lack of acknowledgement of the material conditions that characterize South Africa’s social formation and that due to this there is a lack of meeting the prerequisites of establishing an integrated type of curriculum” (p. 30). In this argument, the complexity of the country’s social formation is the issue.

There is an implicit and under-articulated statement in all these criticisms about what is at stake: the question about the kind of modern society South Africa should become. In Muller’s view there is no longer a question about a debate, either for the country or for education practice. That question has already been worked out in the unambiguous virtue of “powerful knowledge.” The task for the country is to focus on the acquisition and retention of this “powerful knowledge.” Carrim and Taylor are not in disagreement with Muller about the kind of knowledge that will best serve the future, but they make clear that a social process—that of “social formation”—is necessary for getting to Muller’s point. They emphasize that what the country is going through is an accession to modernity itself:

> The project of modernity within South Africa is by no means complete . . . Developing the skills base of the human resources . . . is not one of the things that can be “leap-frogged” . . . The acquisition of knowledge in modernist boundaries remains necessary . . . for participation in an interdisciplinary “networked” arena of the global order.
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> (Carrim & Taylor, c.2009, p. 33)

A more recent intervention in the debate has come from an entirely different angle, that of knowledge traditions within worker education in South Africa. In her analysis of the nature of and changes in worker education over the last 50 years, Cooper (2020) provided a sustained critique of the notion of “powerful knowledge” and its imputed binary distinctions between various kinds of knowledge, such as between abstract and everyday knowledge, conceptual and relevant knowledge, high- and low-status knowledge, formal and informal knowledge, codified and experiential knowledge, and systematized and commonsense knowledge. Through a close analysis of knowledge in worker education traditions in South Africa, she argues that these binaries cannot be sustained, that theoretical and experiential knowledge can be combined, and that the purposes and uses of knowledge are critical in defining their power or otherwise (Cooper, 2020).

Conclusion

Taking these framings of the debate, it is suggested here that the discussion struggles to come to grips with the actual sociology of the country. It is about the social makeup of the country—what Carrim and Taylor (c.2009) call “the social formation.” The question concerns the key issues of what is to be brought into the curriculum; who participates in the imagination of “the what”; and, just as crucially, the conditions for managing the discussion about the modalities for integrating the diverse funds of knowledge that are present in the learning environment.

Drawing on Bernstein (1996), Carrim and Taylor (c.2009, p. 39) are helpful methodologically in thinking about how to work with the challenges thrown up in identifying what is to be integrated and on the basis of which stake-holding groups. Carrim and Taylor accomplish this through recovering Bernstein's discussion of an integrated code and the difficulties that arise in managing processes of integration. These difficulties include specifying what is to be assessed, the form of assessment and the place of specified competencies in such assessment. Carrim and Taylor (c.2009, p. 39) quote Bernstein, who says "without clear criteria of evaluation, neither teacher nor taught have any means to consider the significance of what is learned, nor any means to judge the pedagogy."

It is here, we suggest, that the challenge to inclusiveness in the curriculum lies. Although the social realist terms of address usefully draws attention to the reality that there are important learning acquisition and reproduction features in different forms of knowledge, this approach does not speak clearly enough to the challenge of what teachers do in a world of multiple knowledge systems, multiple cultural landscapes, and multiple authorities, with their own logics for arriving at "truth" and how relationships between discrete worthwhile forms of knowledge are managed. Here it might also be useful to draw on notions of "teaching as a reflective practice," notions that respect the entirety of the relationship between the teacher, student, and knowledge, rather than only one element of this triad, as is the case in the South African curriculum debate (Hopmann, 2015; Westbury et al., 2000). It is for this reason that the debate opened up by Christie's (2020) work is timely. Fataar (2020, para. 18), in a review of *Decolonising Schools*, draws attention to the social relations between teachers, students, and the knowledges that are in circulation around them, and appeals for the development of an approach that avoids relativism and essentialism. He has in mind relevance, preparing young people for the workplace, and social justice but also the difficult question of the nature of the social environment. This is the difficult but, for South Africa and the world, critical point at which the South African discussion finds itself.

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Notes

1. See, for example, the debate in the United States around the positions of scholars such as Hirsch (2001, p. 24) and his critics such as Coles (2014) Hirsch said

We inventoried the knowledge that is characteristically shared by those at the top of the socio-economic ladder in the United States. . . . People who have called this approach a collection of mere facts or labeled it Eurocentric and elitist have not bothered to find out just what is in the Core Knowledge sequence. . . . [it] is the result of a long process of research and consensus building." Coles (2014, para. 4) described this curriculum as "a hegemonic vision produced for and by the white middle class to help maintain the social and economic status quo. It deliberately fails to consider the values and beliefs of any other particular race, class or gender."

2. The "social" as a term of description refers to society and its organization. In current South African discussions, its focus falls on race, class, and gender. This point of departure is useful but is not sufficient for this contribution. This contribution expands the meaning of "social" to include the different kinds of learning identities social subjects bring to the social experience of learning.

3. Spamer (2018, p. 11) remarked: "Na sewe jaar moet dié kurrikulum nou ernstig heroorweeg and die vraag gevra word of hierdie polities korrekte nasional kurrikulum wel opvoendkundig verantwoordbaar is" ("after seven years the question must be asked of this politically correct curriculum if it is educationally responsible").

4. As Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008, p. 198) explain, while there are similarities between learner-centeredness and child-centeredness and outcomes-based education, child-centered education is a fundamental reaction to behaviorism. Learner-centeredness has been influenced by child-centeredness but is informed by a different set of epistemological assumptions. Learner-centered education "can be argued to be input-related, whereas outcomes-based education is output related. Learner-centered education is more focused on teaching and instructional quality, whereas outcomes-based education is more focused on the quality of assessment."

5. A number of other scholars' work is relevant for this discussion (Carnoy et al., 2012; Christie, 1996; Crouch & Vinjevold, 2006; Geyser, 2000; Grant, 2013; Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Muller & Hoadley, 2018; Jansen, 1998; Spaull & Jansen, 2019; Muller, 2000, 2006; Soudien, 2013; Taylor, 2009).

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