

Book Review - In defence of knowledge

Young, M. and Muller, J. *Curriculum and the specialization of knowledge*. Routledge (2016).

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Michael Young and Joe Muller's *Curriculum and the specialization of knowledge* collects eight years of their co-operative theorising into one volume. The book systematises and rewrites the papers into a satisfying whole that grapples with the current state of curriculum studies and the sociology of education. It contains critique and new moves forward in equal measure. At the heart of the book lies a defence of knowledge as worthwhile in its own terms, and not just any old knowledge, but knowledge that specialises, differentiates, innovates, improves the world, liberates minds, increases life opportunities and equality, produces good citizens, and advances democracy. Knowledge provides a win-win scenario – it is both intrinsically wonderful and it results in all sorts of economic, social, political, cultural, and individual goods. The problem is that this magnificent force is hamstrung on two sides – those who wish to stultify knowledge by making it about learning the traditions in an out-of-date way; and those who wish to relativise knowledge into a warm soup where everyone has a valid standpoint that is gratefully slurped by all and sundry. Young and Muller chart a middle line between traditional knowledge and relativism, holding to specialisation and differentiation as their two guiding lights into a present and future world that valorises knowledge.

Young and Muller are, in essence, updating the radical enlightenment project for a new generation (Israel, 2001, 2006, 2011). Around three hundred years ago, a massive struggle between traditional religion and the forces of reason played out. We celebrate key philosophers engaged in articulating how reason rather than faith should be at the core of how we live our lives. Read through Young and Muller and you will find references to Cassirer, the great historian of the enlightenment and updater of its legacy for the early twentieth century. Brandom's early twenty first century book *Articulating Reasons* (2001) also finds its place – but you will have to be attentive, because Young and Muller are not philosophers – they are sociologists of education. So rather than Spinoza, Cassirer, and Brandom, you will find extended discussions of Durkheim and Bernstein. Rather than intricate discussions about how

specialisation and differentiation work as concepts you will find how specialisation and differentiation play out in education, work, and society. Young and Muller chart how knowledge and reason have changed and evolved in the twentieth and the twenty-first century – and their key insight for education is that the change has to do with specialisation and differentiation.

To understand and elaborate on specialisation, Young and Muller turn to Durkheim, Vygotsky, and Bernstein. Durkheim showed us how to socialise reason without losing its power. Durkheim's great master was Kant (one of the original philosophers of the Enlightenment). Like Kant, he deeply respected reason, but unlike Kant he did not want to leave reason either in the mind or in some kind of transcendent space – Durkheim embedded reason in social reality. Durkheim opened out for the modern age the social realist grounding of specialised knowledge with the key insight that it revolved around the division of labour. As traditional societies became more and more complex, they shifted away from a mechanical type of solidarity where everyone held similar beliefs and learnt similar practices. It became increasingly difficult to deal with evolving complexity in societal development through traditional practices of induction into adult life. Education had to start specialising the consciousness and bodies of the young to make sure that they could do different specialisations at higher and higher levels of difficulty. As humanity evolved so education had to keep track, and it did so through specialisation and differentiation. Not only did education have to ensure that higher levels of complexity were reached to cope with the massive spurt in economic, scientific, social, and technical development; but also it had to do so in a differentiated way, because there was not enough time to specialise everyone in everything. Different learning pathways to different occupations had to be developed that continuously adjusted to increasing skill and knowledge levels. Jobs became professions, work became specialised, longer and longer periods of study and induction were needed to induct the young into increasingly differentiated and complex careers that demand expertise and professional judgement.

For sociologists of education dedicated to the social justice cause of improving the lot of the disadvantaged, the key issue becomes how education can address inequality. One clear route is to fight for the disadvantaged gaining increased access to, and improved throughput in, specialised and differentiated knowledge. To sidestep or oversimplify this hard ascent through genericising and/or relativising knowledge is to do a disservice to the

disadvantaged and to reduce the powers education has. Generic forms of knowledge have their uses and advantages, but to substitute generic for specialised is like trying to deal with the world's assorted illnesses with aspirin. It might ease the pain but will not get to the specifics of the issue. Relativised knowledge can be useful as both entry point and contextual relevance, but to substitute relativism for differentiation is like trying to deal with the world's increasing complexity by holding hands and listening to everyone's standpoint. It's a start but the real work lies in tackling a complex problem using multiple skill sets of different people working together – differentiation and specialisation in unity. Much of *Curriculum and the specialization of knowledge* involves Young and Muller fighting hard for these powerful types of knowledge against relativism, genericism, and traditionalism.

Evolving complexity not only demands specialisation and differentiation, but also innovation. New levels are pushed for and reached, often not by increasing complexity but by finding new and innovative solutions that open new pathways – new pathways that then also specialise and differentiate. Young and Muller stand for knowledge that specialises, differentiates, and innovates against forces that push towards genericism, relativism, and traditionalism. It's a clarion call to academics, parents, teachers, and curriculum developers to stand up for the following manifesto (Young and Muller, p.150):

1. Knowledge is worthwhile in itself. Tell children this: never apologise that they need to learn things.
2. Schools transmit shared and powerful knowledge on behalf of society. We teach what they need to make sense of and improve the world.
3. Shared and powerful knowledge is verified through learned communities. We need to keep in touch with universities, research and subject associations.
4. Children need powerful knowledge to understand and interpret the world. Without it they remain dependent on those who have it.
5. Powerful knowledge is cognitively superior to that needed for everyday life. It transcends and liberates children from their daily experience.

6. Shared and powerful knowledge enables children to grow into useful citizens. As adults they can understand, cooperate and shape the world together.
7. Shared knowledge is a foundation for a just and sustainable democracy. Citizens educated together share an understanding of the common good.
8. It is fair and just that all children should have access to this knowledge. Powerful knowledge opens doors: it must be available to all children.
9. Accepted adult authority is required for shared knowledge transmission. The teacher's authority to transmit knowledge is given and valued by society.
10. Pedagogy links adult authority, powerful knowledge and its transmission.

A call as powerful and clear as this serves as a rallying cry, but it also inspires passionate resistance. Zipin, Fataar, and Brennan (2015) have critically responded with a call for a deeper understanding and immersion into ethical, contextual and cultural forces that nourish and embed knowledge within the soil of relevance and locality. Although this critical debate is useful for setting up academic lines of engagement, it is often about emphasis rather than contradiction. Young and Muller recognise the value, import and richness of the everyday and the local; only they strongly see how powerful knowledge emerges from this soil and grows upwards on limbs the learners can climb. Muller specifically engages with the complex intersection of the moral and the epistemological in Chapter 11 (*The promise and pathos of specialized knowledge*). On the other side, Fataar, Brennan, and Zipin see the importance of powerful knowledge but want to ensure the soil it grows from is the richest and most fertile soil ever, to the point where they can't see the tree for the soil, nor can they see the light from the top branches because they are immersed in dark pedologies [sic] of the soul. My complaints are different.

When I used the term 'manifesto' I was partly alluding to Marx's *Communist Manifesto* – a powerful, intelligent and intellectually sophisticated call to arms. But behind the *Communist Manifesto* lies *Capital*, the sustained theorisation of the commodity form of Capitalism. Where, in the book, lies a sustained theorisation of specialisation, differentiation and innovation of

knowledge? This complaint is partly unfair, as the book combines articles written over an eight-year period. It is also unfair because sociologists of education tend to take a look at the social construction and impact of forces, rather than the force in its own right, even more so when applied to education. But writing at the same time as Durkheim was Spencer – the great theoriser of specialisation and differentiation within society, education, and knowledge (see Spencer’s highly readable three volume set *The Principles of Sociology* written between 1882 and 1898). Writing at the same time as Bernstein was Luhmann – the great systems theoriser of evolving complexity and differentiation within social processes (see Luhmann, 1977 for an introduction). Both Spencer and Luhmann engage with the intricate specifics of how evolving complexity results in the specialisation and differentiation of society and knowledge and the role education plays in this. I missed this intricate level of theorisation – what Karl Maton would call Semantic Density. Collaboration between authors often brings out their mutual strengths, but sometimes can obscure individual abilities in the process. Excellent overviews and maps of a terrain are outstanding strengths of both writers, but some of the detailed engagements and theorisation characteristic of Muller’s earlier book are less evident.

My second complaint is not with the call to powerful knowledge but the range of forces increasingly sapping its energies (Hugo, 2016). Here I am not thinking of genericism, relativism, or traditionalism, rather a world of increasing inequality, global warming, and technical innovations that are stripping humanity’s claim to expertise and professional judgement. The more unequal the world gets, the less power education holds to address inequality – the knowledge of the powerful trumps powerful knowledge. Global warming is and will result in massive disruptions that will make the long and difficult road to powerful knowledge even harder for the poor and disadvantaged. Artificial intelligence and robotics will increasingly strip humanity of the privilege of working, throwing millions into a strange new world we barely understand. It is this difficult, dangerous world that the clarion call to powerful knowledge needs to be placed within, and it is this world that I only found glimmers of in the book.

But when I stand back from the book, what stays with me longest is simply how enthralling it is. The writing is continuously lucid – never shrinking from the difficulty of the debate but always putting it in the simplest way to catch the complexity. The range of theorisation and theorists used is impressive, and never used to just show off. Each theorist is carefully chosen to illuminate

specific problematics and there is not a single case I found where the theorist was not apt. This is exceptionally hard, as anyone involved in doctoral supervision knows. How many of us can find the right theorist to deal with a specific problem research throws up? How many of us can use theory diagnostically? How many times do we grope through the data, often turning to theorists who we know, but who do not deal with the issue, or to a new theorist who we think can help, but turns out to be a waste of precious time? How many of us read new theorists and enjoy their ideas, but cannot fully see how they apply to education? Not Muller and Young. These are expert theorists, diagnostic theorists, able to decide at the edge who and what to use to see further. It is one of the most valuable and difficult skill sets for intellectuals – it is why such intellectuals deserve respect, admiration and applause when they perform such a service for us with levity and lucidity. We call such a skill Wisdom – and it is in ample supply in this book.

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