

Symposium: How can powerful knowledge be relevant in 2025?

Organiser: Sirpa Tani, University of Helsinki, Finland

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General abstract

The concept of powerful knowledge has been actively discussed during the last two decades, first in Anglophone sociology of education and later also in continental subject didactics. The concept was introduced to argue for the need to bring knowledge back into educational discourses framed by skills talk. The role of school subjects has been central for powerful knowledge, as the subject boundaries have been conceived as necessary for learning specialised knowledge that can expand students' worldviews beyond their everyday experiences. The symposium summarises the potentials of the concept of powerful knowledge in the educational discourses today. Also, the critique that the concept has received is addressed and answered, if possible. The symposium attempts to clarify what are the special powers of the concept of powerful knowledge. Is it still relevant in 2025, and for what kind of use particularly in the continental educational discourses it is needed?

Powerful knowledge and a Capabilities curriculum: A UK perspective

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Abstract

A general election in the UK in 2024 resulted in a change of government and with it a review of the national curriculum. Whilst subjects still retain their place in schools, there is a contention over the priority given to rigorous subject knowledge and to more generic child centred competencies.

This part of the symposium will report on recent research (Bustin 2024) which asked over 200 teachers working in their subject teams across three different schools to articulate the educational purpose of their subject beyond the sitting of exams to gain qualifications. Despite teaching the same subject in different schools, there was often a difference in the way that teachers valued

their subject in the curriculum. The framework of ‘powerful knowledge’ (PK) from the ideas of Michael Young (2008) and others was used to analyse and discuss the ways teachers spoke about the value of their subjects. Whilst PK can be helpful for many subjects, such as the Sciences, it is perhaps less helpful for Arts subjects.

A way forward in the discussion is to look at how subject knowledge can be ‘empowering’ for students. The study of subjects can enable students to gain ‘capabilities’ to see the world in new ways, derived from the work of Amartya Sen (e.g. 1999) and others applied to education (e.g. Walker & Unterhalter 2007). Rigorous subject teaching can lead to the development of a set of knowledge derived educational capabilities. These could include capabilities associated with students finding new ways to make sense of themselves and the world; capabilities of assessing competing claims to truth; capabilities of critical thinking; and capabilities associated with development of student agency. Rigorous subject knowledge, taught by subject specialists, is the key to enabling this curriculum vision.

Keywords: powerful knowledge, capabilities, curriculum ideologies

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Powerful knowledge as a guideline for teachers’ recontextualisation?

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Abstract

The power of powerful knowledge is linked to the possibility to think differently and question the truths imposed from above. In other words, the power of PK relates to ‘power to’ instead of ‘power over’, where the over refers to domination and social control (Talbot 2023). The school subjects can provide epistemologically valid and systematic knowledge that can make it possible to ‘think the unthinkable’ and hence construct a ‘power to’ approach to knowledge (Hardman et al., forthcoming).

Knowledge can go astray for many reasons, such as political pressures affecting the curriculum or society, learning materials, or unwise pedagogical decisions by the teacher. To this end, we aim to combine Basil Bernstein's idea of recontextualisation to North European didaktik tradition. Bernstein's thinking complements the didaktik tradition by emphasising the role of knowledge, values and ideologies in these choices. The didaktik tradition, on the other hand complements Bernstein's thinking by, for example emphasising the role of the teacher in choosing teaching content. This presentation discusses how to access the power of subject-specific knowledge in teaching. We utilize empirical data in building our theoretical argument.

Recontextualisation is guided and affected by value choices. This "struggle over consciousness" (Bernstein 2000) determines the outcomes of the recontextualisation process. Bernsteinian tradition as well as the *Bildung* tradition share the idea that it is not up to the adults of today to determine what future adults should do with knowledge (Puustinen et al. 2024; Willbergh 2015). These aims, we suggest, make the powerful knowledge a strong candidate for a guiding principle of recontextualisation. To this end, we argue that understanding the mechanisms of recontextualisation at different levels allows teachers to critically evaluate ideological emphases, value-based goals of education, and transient pedagogical fashion flows, which can hinder the epistemic power of subject-specific teaching.

Keywords: recontextualisation, powerful knowledge, teacher knowledge

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Review of critique of powerful knowledge: Making essential remarks or missing the target?

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Abstract

Since its inception around 2007, the concept of powerful knowledge has received both keen interest and harsh criticism. During the last decade, the concept has been influential particularly in the sociology of education, curriculum studies, and lately in subject didactics (see Muller 2024). A central aim of powerful knowledge has been to emphasize the role of knowledge in education. According to Young and Muller (2016), if it is possible to differentiate better knowledge from worse, it is just that all young people have access to the best possible, reliable knowledge, usually produced by scientific disciplines. Powerful knowledge has been an attempt to describe what kind of powers all young people can gain when they have access to specialized disciplinary knowledge.

This presentation conducts an integrative literature review of the critique of powerful knowledge (Torraco 2016). It identifies different kinds of critiques and aims to distinguish essential remarks from critiques that go off target or can be responded to with the idea of powerful knowledge itself. It is hoped that some unnecessary contradictions could be dismantled, and crucial points could be taken seriously when powerful knowledge thinking is progressed.

Some of the critics include Young himself (Duoblys 2022), who has acknowledged powerful knowledge more as a slogan than a scientific concept. Other critiques include the claim that powerful knowledge has its focus on knowledge itself, thus missing the questions of the purpose of education. It has been accused of ambiguous theorization. The concept has been criticized for both being overly political and for neglecting the political, especially the colonial nature of knowledge. It has been interpreted as a return to old-school pedagogical practices, reducing the task of schooling to the transmission of knowledge. Further, powerful knowledge has been criticized for overlooking other knowledge than scientific knowledge, including young people's experiences and knowledge in the arts and humanities. These and other critiques will be analysed in the presentation.

Keywords: powerful knowledge, integrative literature review, critique of critique

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