



# Historicizing the new sociology of education and considering its continuing impacts

Bob Lingard<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 30 September 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

**Keywords** Sociology · Education · Continuing impact · Knowledge

## Introduction

*Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education*, edited by Michael F.D. Young<sup>1</sup> in 1971, was at the time very influential in the sociology of education and has had continuing impact. The collection came out of conversations between Young, Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu at the 1970 British Sociological Association conference held in Durham. The collection argued the necessity of making stronger links between the sociology of education and sociology per se, as well as linking the sub-discipline with broader sociological theories. In his introductory essay, Young makes the related point that sociologists of education should make, rather than simply take, the problems in education as constructed by educators. Until that time, the sociology of education focused largely on inequalities of opportunity, particularly for working-class kids. The dominant frame was that of political arithmetic pursued by sociologists such as Floud and Halsey (e.g. Floud et al., 1956). Jackson and Marsden's (1962) ethnographic *Education and the Working Class* was another central text. This approach tended to take schooling for granted and sought explanations for inequality in pathologies putatively associated with the culture of working-class life. This spawned cultural deficit approaches which were subsequently challenged by cultural difference approaches. Compensatory education programs in England, the USA and Australia at the time took such sociology of

education as their *raison d'être* and worked with and across the cultural deficit/difference divide.

The challenge proffered by the chapters in *Knowledge and Control* was to argue that school curricula, the social organisation of knowledge, along with pedagogies and evaluation practices, were factors in why working-class students were not as successful at school as middle-class ones. School knowledge and its message systems, as they were called by Bernstein, were seen to be important factors in reproducing inequalities, but also in broader processes of cultural reproduction, thus the sub-title of *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education*. In subsequent writing, Young has described the focus of the collection and his contributions to it as arguing that school knowledge was the knowledge of the powerful, a factor in the class-based inequalities in educational outcomes.

Perhaps the most famous and ongoingly influential essay in the collection was Basil Bernstein's (1971a) 'On the classification and framing of educational knowledge'. The opening of that contribution encapsulated, in a sense, what was to be the empirical focus of this new sociology of education. Here, Bernstein observed, 'How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control' (p. 47). This emphasis on school curricula as a selection of knowledge, organised in a particular way, and taught and evaluated in distinctive ways has been central to the ongoing influence of the new sociology of education. Furthermore, Bernstein noted that changes in any of these should be a focus of sociological analysis, another reason for the continuing influence of the concerns of the new sociology of education. Bernstein's distinction between collection codes and integrated codes as forms of the social organisation of knowledge in schooling has also had continuing influence.

<sup>1</sup> In this collection, Young referred to himself as Michael F.D. Young to distinguish himself from the other Michael Young (later Lord Young) who was the author of the influential satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, published in 1958.

✉ Bob Lingard  
Robert.Lingard@acu.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education,  
Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, Queensland,  
Australia

There were two chapters by Pierre Bourdieu in *Knowledge and Control*: ‘Intellectual field and creative project’ (1971a) and ‘Systems of education and systems of thought’ (1971b), the titles of which reflect their sociology of knowledge approach. This sociology of knowledge interest related closely to the curricula knowledge focus of Young’s collection and also connected sociology of education to broader sociological concerns. These were, perhaps, the earliest of Bourdieu’s works published in English and his work from that time has continued to be very influential in the sociology of education.

In what follows, I look at the intertextual family of *Knowledge and Control*, which constituted the new sociology of education, referencing texts which complemented and extended the focus of *Knowledge and Control*. I then recontextualise this broader construction of the new sociology of education to the present moment and conclude in a brief summative statement of the ongoing contributions of the new sociology of education.

### The new sociology of education: *Knowledge and Control* and its intertextual family

A series of other publications in the sociology of education subsequent to the publication of *Knowledge and Control* might also be seen to constitute the new sociology of education. These include Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) neo-Marxist, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, which argued for a correspondence between kinds of school of knowledges and pedagogies and the types of backgrounds and futures differently classed students were headed for. They documented the reproduction and legitimation of inequalities through schooling through the correspondence principle. Jean Anyon’s (1981) work in the USA developed this further in relation to school curricula and pedagogies. Bourdieu and Passeron’s *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977 in English) provided a complementary account of schooling, inequality and cultural reproduction to that of Bowles and Gintis. Michael Apple’s (1979) *Ideology and Curriculum* also added a neo-Marxist frame to the concerns of *Knowledge and Control*. Bernstein’s *Class, Codes and Control Volume 1* (1971b, 1975) extended his argument outlined in *Knowledge and Control*. A further neo-Marxist development in the sociology of education from these structuralist, reproduction accounts of Bowles and Gintis and Bourdieu and Passeron was Paul Willis’s (1977) *Learning to Labour*, which was derived more from a cultural studies approach and which attempted to demonstrate some agency in the processes of class reproduction in schooling. Willis documented how working-class lads learnt to get working-class jobs. Angela McRobbie’s feminist work, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991) developed from an influential working paper published in 1978. It was framed by Birmingham

cultural studies, specifically the work of Stuart Hall, and critiqued the masculinist assumptions in Willis’s analysis and provided a much-needed feminist account of schooling for girls. Miriam David’s (1980) *The State, the Family and Education* was another significant feminist extension of the new sociology of education.

I would suggest that all this work has had ongoing significance in the sociology of education. For example, Michael Apple’s *Ideology and Curriculum* was published in a fourth edition in 2019. The work of Young remains influential but beyond the framework of school knowledge as simply the knowledge of the powerful, as does that of Bernstein and Bourdieu. Feminist sociology of education has also remained very important and been reworked through new theoretical frames (poststructuralism, new materialism) responding to the ever-changing nature of the social.

### Recontextualising the new sociology of education to the present moment

If we take Michael Young’s *Knowledge and Control* collection as the foundational text of the new sociology of education, we can see a sociology of education dominated by male sociologists. Nell Keddie’s (1971) chapter was the only one by a woman in the collection. Keddie, in her opening paragraph, well and succinctly encapsulated the focus of this new sociology of education. She noted how, to that point, sociology of education had explained school failure in terms of students’ ethnic and/or social class backgrounds. In contrast, the new sociology of education focused on processes within the school and the ‘social organisation of curriculum knowledge’ (p.133). Today, there is a much stronger presence of female sociologists of education in the field which reflects its institutional location in Schools of Education and in teacher education programs.

*Knowledge and Control* functioned implicitly within a methodological nationalism, assuming education systems and education policy were under the sole jurisdiction of the nation state or sub-national units (states, provinces, local authorities) within the nation. Think here of one of Bourdieu’s chapters in the collection, ‘Systems of education and systems of thought’, which links school curricula to broader national cultural features, specifically in France, but with implications for other national contexts. Today, such systems and policies have been affected by international organisations, international large-scale assessments such as PISA and TIMSS and PIRLS, and by the broader processes associated with globalisation precipitated by the end of the Cold War and the related emergence of a global economy.

The national focus of *Knowledge and Control* was basically on Global North nations but Young, in the introduction to the collection, acknowledged this shortcoming.

Additionally, Robin Horton's (1971) chapter, 'African traditional thought and western science' went some way towards alleviating that shortcoming.

Bernstein's educational knowledge code of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation has been recontextualised and reframed by globalisation and, with the economisation of education policy and related new public management, education accountability has seen high stakes testing drive the other message systems (curriculum and pedagogy) of the educational knowledge code. Bernstein's chapter noted how these always sit in a symbiotic relationship with each other, changes in one, of necessity, affecting changes in the others. Furthermore, think of the effects within national schooling systems, particularly in the Global South, of the UN's SDGs and of the OECD moving into curriculum with its Learning Compass in relation to Global North nations. Think of many nations now stressing global citizenship in national curricula. However, the relations between global, national and sub-national levels continue to morph over time, for example consider the impacts of Trump's America First and the UK's Brexit and the rise of ethno-nationalisms. Changing spatialities and temporalities carry significant implications for the sociology of education and mean the necessity of the rearticulation of the concerns of *Knowledge and Control*. In addition to the ever morphing national and global impacts in schooling systems, there are also now topological relations which cut across national borders in different ways. Think here of the OECD's PISA for Schools, where schools in one location are compared with those in another locale in another nation.

The main empirical focus of *Knowledge and Control* was on knowledge and curriculum with some neglect of pedagogy and assessment. However, Bourdieu's chapters did link pedagogic styles and systems of thought. Subsequently, pedagogy and assessment have become major foci within the sociology of education.

Changing contexts since the publication of *Knowledge and Control* have witnessed more diverse theoretical frameworks within the sociology of education. Post-colonial theory has emerged, including Global South knowledges and a rejecting of a conception of Global South nations as simply empirical sites of the application of Global North theory and, as such, expanding the analytical frameworks in the field. Decolonising frameworks have also been important here as well as in respect of Indigenous education. More diversity in national populations has seen the rise of anti-racism literature. I am thinking here, for example, of the important work in the sociology of education today of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Dave Gillborn and Kalwant Bhopal. Feminism has continued its influence and has also morphed and changed over time with Judith Butler's work and that of Nancy Fraser having considerable impact. Similarly, queer theory has challenged much of the heteronormativity of the

sociology of education and its theorising. Indigenous knowledges have also had impact with a focus on decolonising approaches. The climate crisis has also precipitated a concern with sustainability in the sociology of education. Various strands of poststructuralism have been very important in the sociology of education, including the work of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari. More recently in the sociology of education, there has been Deborah Youdell's work (Youdell & Lindley, 2019) on persons as socio-biological beings. As well the rise of brain science, the science of learning and the concept of epigenetics (the plasticity of the brain) have also had some influence on the field.

Interestingly, Bourdieu's work (two chapters in *Knowledge and Control*) continues to be important in the sociology of education as any reading of recent numbers of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* would well illustrate. Perhaps this is because of his rejection of both theoreticism and empiricism and openness towards rearticulation of his thinking tools. His rejection of a researcher stance of epistemological innocence is also significant here. As well, in his late work, he focused on the impacts of globalisation and neoliberalism. Bernstein's famous essay in *Knowledge and Control*, 'On the classification and framing of educational knowledge', remains influential. In the opening, he notes that changes in the educational knowledge code (curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation) 'should be a major area of sociological interest'. This has been the case with the rise of national curricula and national testing in many nations in the context of a human capital framing of education policy.

Contemporary digital disruption has also provided a boon to new approaches in the sociology of education (see Gulson et al., 2022). AI, machine learning and computer adaptive testing have all sparked new approaches in the sociology of education with implications across Bernstein's three message systems.

## Conclusion

At the time of publication of *Knowledge and Control*, there was much less state regulation of teacher education and the curricula of these programs than is the case today. Indeed, in Australia for example, strengthened state regulation (both national and state level) of teacher education has seen an institutional weakening of the place of sociology of education in teacher education degrees. When I first taught in universities in the mid-seventies and through until the early eighties, I taught compulsory sociology of education courses across all years of the B.Ed teacher education degree. This is no longer the case, with sociology of education in a much weaker institutional position in university Schools of Education than was the case when *Knowledge and Control* was published. This is also the case in England.

In the English context in the early 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher attacked the sociology of education being taught in universities with a special attack on Roger Dale, Geoffrey Esland and Madeleine Macdonald's (later Arnott) *Schooling and Capitalism: A Sociological Reader* published by the Open University Press in 1976. With more government control over teacher education programs in England, the institutional security of the sociology of education was also weakened. One upshot was the move by many sociologists of education to refocus on education policy, the way the state was now steering schooling systems. The prestigious *Journal of Education Policy* came into being in that context. Think of the work of the eminent sociologist of education, Stephen Ball, whose work cuts across policy and more traditional concerns of the sociology of education. A continuing focus on curricula in the sociology of education raised the interesting question of whether curriculum could be or should be regarded as an important education policy, whereas curriculum had been, to that point, a separate focus of the sub-field of curriculum studies.

Michael Young has substantially modified his position on knowledge and school curricula since the publication of *Knowledge and Control*. While he once saw school knowledge as the knowledge of the powerful, accepting more of a social constructivist view of knowledge (at least of school knowledge), he has subsequently adopted a social realist approach to knowledge and, instead, now views the school curricula as, of necessity, including the powerful knowledge associated with the disciplines (e.g. Young, 2005, 2010). He now sees such powerful knowledge in the curriculum as central to socially just schooling. This development has meant the ongoing significance around knowledge and school curricula in the sociology of the curriculum, issues raised by the new sociology of education. One what might see this as a legacy of the now aged new sociology of education. Young's current stance regarding knowledge also raises social justice issues again, of productive pedagogies and pedagogical links between local horizontal knowledges, students' background knowledges and the vertical knowledges of the disciplines.

The sociology of education has probably become more aligned with sociology per se, as desired by *Knowledge and Control*, and the theoretical and methodological approaches within the field have been very much diversified to account for the rapidly changing nature of the social. Yet, sadly, it seems that the institutional strength and security of the sociology of education in universities, in Australia and England at least, seem to be weaker than they were at the time *Knowledge and Control* was first published.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11(1), 3–42.
- Apple, M. W. (1979). *Ideology and curriculum*. Routledge & K. Paul.
- Bernstein, B. (1971a). On the classification and framing of educational knowledge. In M. F. D. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education* (pp. 47–69). Collier-Macmillan ADD.
- Bernstein, B. (1971b). *Class, codes and control* (Vol. 1). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, codes and control* (Vol. 3). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. (1971a). Systems of education and systems of thought. In M. F. D. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control: New directions in the sociology of education* (pp. 187–209). Collier MacMillan.
- Bourdieu, P. (1971b). Intellectual field and creative project. In M. F. D. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education* (pp. 161–188). Collier MacMillan.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture: Sage studies in social and educational change* (Vol. 5). Sage Publications.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Basic Books.
- Dale, R., Esland, G., & MacDonald, M. (Eds.). (1976). *Schooling and capitalism: A sociological reader*. Routledge & Kegan Paul for the Open University Press.
- David, M. (1980). *The state, the family, and education*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Floud, J. E., Halsey, A. H., & Martin, F. M. (1956). *Social class and educational opportunity*. Heinemann.
- Gulson, K., Sellar, S., & Webb, T. P. (2022). *Algorithms of education: How datafication and artificial intelligence shape policy*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Horton, R. (1971). African traditional thought and western science. In M. F. D. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education* (pp. 208–266). Collier MacMillan.
- Jackson, B. & Marsden, D. (1962). *Education and the working class: Some general themes raised by a study of 88 working-class children in a northern industrial city. Revised edition*. Pelican Books A811. Penguin.
- Keddie, N. (1971). Classroom knowledge. In M. F. D. Young (Ed.), *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education* (pp. 133–160). Collier MacMillan.
- McRobbie, A. (1991). *Feminism and youth culture: From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"* (2nd ed.). MacMillan.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Saxon House

- Youdell, D., & Lindley, M. (2019). *Biosocial education: The social and biological entanglements of learning*. Routledge.
- Young, M. F. D. (Ed.). (1971). *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education*. Collier-Macmillan.
- Young, M. F. D. (2005). *Bringing knowledge back in: From social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*. Routledge.
- Young, M. F. D. (2010). The future of education in a knowledge society: The radical case for a subject-based curriculum. *Pacific-Asian Education*, 22(1), 21–32.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.