POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Reflecting on the nature of Curriculum Inquiry in South Africa 2010 – 2021

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Introduction

All South African academics acknowledge the urgency of creating a socially just education system that is a system that enables more equal participation and more equal outcomes for all. However, there are diverging discourses regarding the role of knowledge and the curriculum in achieving social justice. While Hoadley noted in 2010 that there was little critical engagement between scholars in these different discourses, there has been more engagement in the last decade. In addition, the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) was established in 2013 in an effort to create a unified research association and with it a Special Interest Group (SIG) for Curriculum Studies and a SIG in knowledge-building which reflects the variation in scholarly discourses. In the last decade, there has been further curriculum reform at school level, a strong drive for decolonising higher education alongside discourses which emphasise employability, generic skills and learner achievement. These historical and conceptual developments make a reflection on curriculum studies in South Africa timely. In this paper, I first provide an overview of the curriculum knowledge debates as reflected in the Special Interest Groups of the South African Education Research Association. Secondly, I describe some of the historical developments and discourses that are shaping the field of curriculum inquiry. Then I review some of the recent conceptual engagements by scholars regarding the knowledge and the knower mode (Fataar, 2016; Luckett, 2019a; Shalem & Allais, 2019; Soudien & Chisholm, 2021). In conclusion, I argue that conversations would be more

generative if scholars clarify the phenomena we are studying and worked to understand other theoretical perspectives.

Debates within the curriculum studies field since 2010

The debates and contestations in curriculum studies in South Africa seem well illustrated in two texts written for initial teacher education in the past 12 years. One of these is entitled *Curriculum: Organising knowledge for the classroom* (Hoadley & Jansen, 2009) and the other is entitled *Education Studies for Initial Teacher Education* (Ramrathan et al., 2017) which includes some chapters on curriculum (Du Preez, 2017; Le Grange, 2017). Both texts discuss different understandings of the official, enacted, hidden, and null curriculum as well as various approaches to curriculum development. They differ in that the first text includes curriculum as the organisation of knowledge, drawing on Bernstein's concepts of a performance and competence curriculum, while the second one draws on Pinar's reconceptualist understanding of curriculum and does not mention Bernstein as a curriculum scholar (Du Preez, 2017). These two textbooks are illustrative of the different understandings of curriculum studies in South Africa.

Pinar's reconceptualist understanding of curriculum is as an autobiographical, lived and storied practice (Pinar, 2012) within the field of multiple discourses and complicated conversations. Pinar uses the term *currere* to mean the course taken by the individual and 'the understanding of one's own story through academic study is at the heart of curriculum' (Le Grange, 2017, p. 120). This contrasts with other definitions of curriculum inquiry that have a stronger focus on knowledge, that it is the 'critical investigation of the processes involved in engaging with knowledge structures that have been designed for systematic learning' (Hugo, 2010,
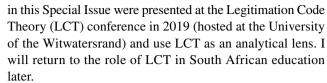
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p. 53) or that it is about 'theorising processes of knowledge production and organisation, or disciplinarity itself' (Parkes, 2018, p. 79). Curriculum scholars in this frame would argue that key questions for the field of curriculum are how knowledge is selected for inclusion and whose knowledge is selected. These selections of knowledge are not neutral but reflect the relationships of power and control in society, which is why they are so contested (Bernstein, 2000).

The reconceptualist understanding of curriculum as 'complicated conversations' informs the scholarship of the Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group (SIG), which was established in 2014 as a SIG of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA).[1] This SIG edited a special issue of the Journal of Education in 2018. The editors invited contributors to 'complexify, demystify, and disrupt discourses such as those surrounding internationalisation, indigenisation, decolonisation, Africanisation, and other related concepts as they relate to curriculum studies' (Ramrathan et al., 2018, p. 1). In a paper published in this issue, Le Grange (2018) argues that 'the field of curriculum studies in South Africa has been characterised by a focus on banal matters related to the national curriculum: the merits and demerits of outcomes-based education; findings of standardised tests; assessment; continuity and progression; classroom pedagogy; and so forth. The upshot of this is that the field has become hackneyed, unimaginative… I argue in this article that the concepts internationalising, indigenising, decolonising, and Africanising could be the impetus for the renewal of the field of curriculum studies in South Africa' (p. 4).

However, not all curriculum scholars would agree with Le Grange's argument. A SIG called 'Knowledge-building in educational practices' was established at the 2019 SAERA conference. While this SIG does not focus specifically on curriculum, it focuses on how knowledge works in professional and academic practices and eschews a 'generic skills' approach to education. The Editorial of the Special Issue edited by this SIG notes that 'Part of realising a more inclusive education system requires paying attention to knowledge-building in practices and intellectual fields'. The articles in this Special Issue make a case for research on knowledge-building that deepens our understanding of how to enable newcomers to develop specialised forms of expertise' (Rusznyak et al., 2021). Some of the papers published

in this Special Issue were presented at the Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) conference in 2019 (hosted at the University of the Witwatersrand) and use LCT as an analytical lens. I will return to the role of LCT in South African education later.

Thus it seems that the key debates in curriculum studies could still be described very broadly in the 'knowledge' and 'knower' terms that Hoadley used in 2010 in her chapter of Pinar's (2010) edited book that brought together six South African curriculum scholars to provide a critical review of the South African curriculum context. Within the critical curriculum studies approach, she argued that one set of scholars is located in a 'knowledge' mode where the focus is more on epistemic relations, while another set of scholars takes a 'knower' orientation to curriculum knowledge. She describes these as follows: 'In the knowledge mode, we will find an emphasis on specialised procedures and on an object of study. In the knower mode, the emphasis will be on the social attributes of the subject' (Hoadley, 2010, p. 131). In the next section, I interrogate the different epistemologies that inform these perspectives and also focus on the historical developments in school curriculum reform and higher education over the past decade.

Debates about knowledge

Shalem and Allais (2019) argue that the contestations in South Africa about knowledge, curriculum and their role in supporting or ameliorating both educational and societal inequality are reflected in two influential perspectives within the sociology of knowledge. One is a realist view of knowledge, which argues that knowledge must be evidence-based, generalisable and revisable. From this perspective, social justice is supported by a curriculum that is ordered by disciplinary knowledge and has clear sequencing of conceptual ideas, a pedagogy that is visible and evaluative criteria that are explicit. While learners' experiences are important to facilitate understanding, they should not be foregrounded. A second perspective highlights the social origins of knowledge and argues that the selection of knowledge into the curriculum must reflect learners' experiences and foreground the contestations and pluralism in knowledge. Proponents argue that a Funds of Knowledge approach gives priority to the 'use-value in learners' lived social-cultural spaces' (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 26).

A social realist position was offered by Young and Muller (2010) as a third way between the under-socialised positivist epistemologies that define knowledge as sets of verifiable propositions and methods that do not consider the social context and the over-socialised epistemologies which reduce knowledge to the identification of 'knowers and practices' (pg. 14). They suggest that social realism

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[1] SAERA, which was established in 2013, 'represents a historic attempt to bring together education academics and researchers from all over South Africa into a unified educational research organization'. The website notes that 'SAERA's establishment follows three years of extensive consultation between a broad range of educational academic organisations with the intent of bringing together academics from different organisations, with their roots in the racialised academic traditions of the pre-democracy period.' (saera.co.za).

stakes a middle ground which understands knowledge as an object with its own properties and powers that are about not only social relations but are still emergent from social practices. However, in some recent debates, social realism is not presented as a 'third way' but is viewed in dichotomy with the 'knowledge and social identity view' (Fataar, 2016; Shalem & Allais, 2019).

The social realist call to 'bring knowledge back in' (Young, 2008) has been influential in the making and re-forming of curriculum in South Africa and in critiquing both the post-1994 school curriculum and National Qualifications Framework. South Africa's curriculum reforms in the 1990s were aligned with global trends of learner-centred, constructivist pedagogy with a focus on generic skills and learning outcomes that were pegged on national qualification frameworks (Christie, 1997). The assumption was that these skills could be developed with any kind of knowledge. However, scholars from a social realist perspective critique outcomes and generic skills as an organisational principle for curricula, arguing that a narrow focus on demonstrable skills makes invisible the knowledge that underpins this 'know how' (Allais, 2006; Wheelahan, 2010). They argue that abstract and theoretical knowledge is important because it enable learners to think beyond just one specific context.

The first school post-apartheid curriculum reform, C2005, was underpinned by principles of integrated knowledge, progressive pedagogy and outcome-based assessment. Researchers in the knowledge mode argued that outcomes are not a good organising principle for a school curriculum, because they do not give learners access to the way in which disciplinary concepts are organised and related, particularly when concepts need to be acquired in a particular sequence to develop understanding (Muller & Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 1999). They argued that schools need to give learners access to 'powerful knowledge,' described as being specialised, conceptually coherent and differentiated from learners' experienced and local knowledge (Young, 2008). The Ministerial Task Team which reviewed C2005 recommended that a revised curriculum should stipulate knowledge and conceptual coherence more clearly (Department of Education, 2000). However, outcomes remained as an organising principle (Chisholm, 2005) which meant the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) retained the uneasy marriage of progressive pedagogy and behavioural outcomes until 2011. Outcomes were finally removed from the school curriculum in the revision known as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). The Ministerial Review Committee (Department of Education, 2009) established to review the implementation of the NCS invoked the social realist argument that an underspecified curriculum does not enable all learners to access formal school knowledge. The committee recommended that there be one coherent curriculum document per subject that clearly specifies the content, concepts and skills to be taught and assessed (Hoadley, 2018).

It was hoped that strengthening the sequencing and progression of knowledge in the formal curriculum would signal a productive way forward for teaching and learning in schools. The implementation of CAPS was accompanied by the state strengthening monitoring of assessment outcomes and teachers' curriculum coverage and pacing (Bertram et al., 2021). It seems that the unintended consequence of strong pacing and monitoring is that some teachers interpret the CAPS in quite technical ways and do not make the underlying disciplinary structure clear to learners or show how the concepts are related to each other or to learners' experiences (Bertram et al., 2021; Naidoo, 2019; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2020). This underscores what we know: that the enacted curriculum and the experienced curriculum can be very different from the vision of the official curriculum (Blignaut, 2009).

Developments in the field of higher education have been influenced by different discourses to schooling. The imperative to decolonise the university and the university curriculum was given momentum by the wide-spread student protests in 2015 and 2016 (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020; Jansen, 2019; Le Grange, 2016; Luckett & Shay, 2020). While initially these protests were around fees as an exclusionary barrier to accessing higher education, they also developed into a critique of the institutionalised whiteness and coloniality of the university (Hlatshwayo, 2021). Black students believe that they are excluded and marginalised from the university both by high fees and by the institutional practices and Eurocentric epistemologies that do not afford them recognition (Fataar, 2018; Luckett & Naicker, 2016). There is little agreement about exactly what a decolonised curriculum means, with some scholars arguing for epistemic rupture where dominant ideas are completely replaced, and others arguing for a re-centring and re-prioritising by engaging with the world and word from the perspective of Africa and the Global South (Hlatshwayo, 2021). Generally speaking, the decolonial scholarship is located in a 'knower' mode which foregrounds the subjective experiences and identity of the knower. Much of the scholarship around decolonising the higher education curriculum engages with high level philosophical and meta-epistemological theorising (Hoadley & Galant, 2019) which is not easy to apply to the practical questions of curriculum development and knowledge selection.

Another development in HE scholarship in the past decade has been a strong take-up of the concepts of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) as a lens to interrogate curriculum and pedagogy (Wilmot & McKenna, 2021). Wilmot and McKenna suggest that the reason for this is that LCT provides analytic tools to analyse knowledge and attends to the 'knowledge blindness' within much of HE research since it

is premised on a realist account of knowledge. LCT provides a set of analytic tools to answer questions about how disciplines structure knowledge and what kinds of knowledge and knowers are legitimated in different knowledge practices. Teachers in higher education have found the specialisation and semantic dimension useful tools for researching in a wide range of fields, like academic development, law, teacher education, political science, chemistry, engineering, African philosophies and doctoral writing, to name a few (Wilmot & McKenna, 2021). Many studies focus on pedagogy and learning, but there are some scholars who use LCT to question the legitimacy or hegemony of bodies of knowledge selected in HE (Luckett, 2019b) or the ways of being that are legitimated in particular disciplines (Dube, 2021).

Bridging the gap?

There have been at least four recent scholarly engagements on the contestations between the knowledge mode and the knower mode which I present here. In different ways, these scholars approach the question of how and if these discourses can come together in productive ways or if these are dichotomous and polarised concepts. The first two texts support social realism as the 'third way', while Fataar sees social realism as under-socialised, and Chisholm and Soudien argue that it does not take learning and teaching into account.

Luckett (2019a) approaches the knowledge issue from the perspective of academic development in historically white universities. She argues that we must avoid two extreme positions, namely, when 'powerful knowledge' will not reflect on its social emergence and when the knower mode reduces all knowledge to social position and social identity. She advocates that a way forward is for scholars to agree that 'social identity is salient to epistemic judgement, but at the same time to reject social identity on its own as sufficient grounds for making a knowledge claim' (p. 55). She suggests that concepts from social realism such as contextual and conceptual coherence (Shay, 2012), and epistemic and social relations (Maton, 2014) may be useful ways of moving forward. I suggest that like Muller and Young (2010), she is supporting social realism as a third way between an under-socialised epistemology that under-plays the social emergence of knowledge and an over-socialised one that valorises social identity.

Similarly, Shalem and Allais (2019) argue that the notion of knowledge as real is not necessarily in opposition to acknowledging its social nature. They do not wish to merge the two polarities but to show that the notion of robust bodies of knowledge is not necessarily in opposition to the idea that knowledge production and selection is shaped by powerful structures. Social realism acknowledges that knowledge

has 'its own properties and powers that are emergent from, but irreducible, to social practices' (Maton & Muller, 2007). Shalem and Allais provide three case studies of economics, education studies and history to show how the production of knowledge in each field emerges from social practices and thus influences curriculum knowledge selection. For example, in history, knowledge selection may be made using principles particular to the discipline but also needs to take into account the social purposes of the subject, which will be particular to a nation at a particular time (Bertram, 2019; Yates, 2018). A productive way forward would be for SR scholars to show more transparently how both knowledge and curricula are emergent from social practices.

In a chapter entitled 'A re-examination of key curriculum debates and directions in South Africa', Soudien and Chisholm (2021) claim that debate between social realism and social constructivism is centrally about the 'human subjects in a learning space' or the sociology of learning (but they do not define exactly what this is). Thus they shift the curriculum debate away from knowledge to the subject who is learning. They conclude that SR does not address 'the challenge of what teachers do in a world of multiple knowledge systems, multiple cultural landscapes and multiple authorities' and argue that researchers need to engage with the relationship between the teacher, learner and knowledge and not only focus on knowledge.

Fataar (2016) describes the social realist knowledge mode, which in his view is an under-socialised view of knowledge, as the 'hegemonic theoretical orientation in our educational discourses, theorising and research'. He argues that this perspective focuses exclusively on the internals of education and recontextualisation of knowledge within the fields of the pedagogic device and does not take into account the 'role and position of the social/subjective in education'. By social/subjective, Fataar refers to the complex processes by which human beings transact their lives. He argues that there must be a role for the social/subjective in educational theorising and research in South Africa, because making 'powerful' knowledge accessible to all does not focus sufficiently on recognition and participation of all learners. It focuses only on what Fraser terms 'redistributive justice' (Fraser, 1997). Luckett and Shay (2020) make a similar point in the context of higher education.

Fataar suggests that the question of pedagogical justice means that we must engage with the ethical purposes of education and think about how the resources that learners bring with them to school can be scaffolded onto the school code. He and colleagues argue that 'well-selected life-world knowledge offers depth and vitality to schooled thinking and learning' and that curriculum knowledge selection must be informed by both epistemological and ethical purposes (Zipin et al., 2015). Scholars in the knowledge mode do not reject incorporating appropriate life-world knowledge into

the classroom but argue that it should be used as a scaffold to accessing school knowledge, as the endpoint of schooling is acquiring specialised knowledge (Hoadley, interviewed by Galian & Carvalho, 2021). As a way forward, Fataar suggests conversations between scholars in these 'incommensurable discourses' that focus on the purpose of schooling and that engage more deeply with the question of how knowledge can bring about social justice.

Concluding thoughts

I have provided an overview of historical and conceptual developments in the curriculum field, which have included a new revision of the school curriculum, growing calls for decolonisation of curriculum, the establishment of SIGs within SAERA, and the growth of LCT as an analytic lens for researching knowledge and knowers. It is clear that the debates between scholars in the knowledge mode and the knower mode are ongoing, but there are small steps which indicate that some scholars are grappling with how we may engage these discourses more generatively.

I conclude with two reflections on moving forward. Firstly, I believe that contestations are exacerbated by scholars mis-reading the inflexibility of the other's principles. For example, Chisholm and Soudien mis-represent the social realist perspective when they write that it has no room for 'complexity, hybrid pedagogies or mixes of strategies'. In fact, the Bernsteinian tradition of classroom research advocates a mixed pedagogy, where teachers make professional judgements regarding how to work with productively with everyday and disciplinary knowledge and when to strengthen or weaken evaluative criteria and pacing (Hugo, 2013). Scholars draw on a range of theories and theorists (such as Bernstein, Maton, Pinar, Mbembe) that create silos of thinking. For conversations to be productive, scholars need to be prepared to understand various positions more deeply.

Secondly, conversations in the field would be facilitated if scholars made it clearer exactly what is the phenomenon they are engaging with. There is often a slippage between pedagogy and knowledge, which are not the same thing. Often pedagogy is proffered as a solution to a knowledge problem (see for example Vandeyar, 2020), without a clear explanation of how the relationships between knowledge and pedagogy are understood.

Scholars agree that the field of curriculum studies in South Africa is fragmented (Hoadley, 2010; Ramrathan et al., 2018; Shalem & Allais, 2019). However, there is also agreement that we all want a more socially just education system. We do need to engage more robustly about the role of knowledge and curriculum and education in achieving this, but at the same time we also need to tackle the structural social and economic issues of patriarchy, gender-based violence, unemployment and poverty that exacerbate unequal opportunities and unequal outcomes.

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