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## WHY CONCEPTS MATTER, WHAT CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IS FOR, AND THE CASE OF KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATION

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*ABSTRACT: The concept of 'knowledge' is central to education, particularly when it comes to the school curriculum. This paper makes the case for engaging in conceptual analysis, and in particularly conceptual engineering, in educational studies. Conceptual engineering emphasises analysing concepts with their purposes in mind. To illustrate the importance of this sort of conceptual analysis in education, I track the educational impact of three concepts of knowledge: (1) the traditional philosophical concept of knowledge as justified, true belief; (2) Michael Young's concept of 'knowledge of the powerful'; and (3) Young's concept of 'powerful knowledge'. I argue that knowledge as justified, true belief is too abstracted from educational purposes to provide much guidance for curriculum planning. Young's 'knowledge of the powerful' prioritises the social role that knowledge can play over its value to individual students. Finally, 'powerful knowledge' is too unclear to provide appropriate guidance to policy makers and practitioners. By examining the interactions between these concepts of knowledge and historical policy and practice in education, I conclude that the focus of conceptual engineering on clarity about the purposes of education is central to good conceptual analysis.*

*Keywords:* Powerful knowledge, curriculum, philosophy of education, conceptual engineering, conceptual analysis

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Educational concepts play an important role in educational studies. Educational concepts roughly correspond to terms or words pertaining to education. They include terms such as 'schooling', 'teaching', 'learning', 'intelligence', 'critical thinking', 'education', and the topic of this paper: 'knowledge'. Different analyses of concepts provide different ways of understanding these terms. How these terms are understood alters what happens in educational settings.

The concept of knowledge provides a case study into the practical importance of concepts in education. Three concepts of knowledge will be explored to make a case for why conceptual analysis is important. These are (1) the traditional philosophical concept of knowledge as justified, true belief; (2) Young's concept

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of knowledge of the powerful; and (3) Young's concept of powerful knowledge. All of these concepts have played an active role in shaping curriculum policy and practices in schools. An interplay can be seen between conceptual work and real-world educational consequences which demonstrates why good conceptual analysis is central to educational matters and ought to play a role in educational studies.

For example, the concept of 'knowledge' is prominent in contemporary debates about the curriculum in England. In 2009, the Education Secretary in the United Kingdom, Michael Gove stated that education ought 'to ensure that the acquisition of knowledge within rigorous subject disciplines is properly valued and cherished' (Gove, 2009, p. 17). Subsequently, a 'knowledge rich curriculum' movement associated with popular ResearchEd conferences has risen to prominence. This is also reflected in school OFSTED inspections which now emphasize knowledge and curricula. These factors lead to schools paying additional attention to the content of their curricula and attempting to align them to the concept of knowledge employed by ministers, government bodies and other influential third parties. Through outlining some of the history of the concept of knowledge in education, this paper show why educational concepts matter, and why conceptual analysis is a central part of educational studies.

In tracing the recent history of three concepts of knowledge, this paper will also make the case for incorporating elements of conceptual engineering into analytic philosophy of education. The philosophical method of conceptual engineering recognises the active roles that concepts play in shaping the world, and stipulates that the roles and purposes of concepts need to be considered in their analyses. Given the interplay between the concept of knowledge and recent educational history, the practical outcomes of adopting educational concepts should be a key consideration in conceptual work. The practical impact of the traditional philosophical concept of knowledge as justified, true belief and Young's two concepts of knowledge illustrate some of the considerations that conceptual engineers need to take into account.

I conclude that educational concepts can and often do shape policy and practice, and that analytic philosophy of education is thus central to educational studies. Further, conceptual analysis needs to consider educational aims rather than relying on abstract work on ordinary concepts. This requires a subtle shift from traditional conceptual analysis to conceptual engineering.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AND CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING

Strawson provides an account of the aims and methods of traditional methods of conceptual analysis. He differentiates ordinary concepts from technical concepts. Ordinary concepts include concepts such as 'good', 'punishment', 'sadness' and so on. Technical concepts are those which are precisely defined by the role that they play in technical fields for example, 'atom' and 'mass'. Strawson

draws an analogy between ordinary concepts and our native language: although we know how to speak our native language, we are not aware of the precise rules underlying its use. When it comes to ordinary concepts, we grasp how to use the concepts, but without explicit instruction we do not know how they work: 'we learn the words which express these concepts in a variety of ways; but we learn them largely without benefit of anything which could properly be called general theoretical instruction ... as children learn to speak grammatically before they hear grammars' (Strawson, 1992, pp. 6–7). Strawson concludes that 'the philosopher labours to produce a systematic account of the general conceptual structure of which our daily practice shows us to have a tacit and unconscious mastery' (1992, p. 7). Conceptual analysis is the clarification and mapping of the meanings of ordinary concepts.

Williamson labels this method 'philosophy's linguistic turn', and focuses on its clarificatory role. He states that 'many philosophers have hoped to make philosophy less disputatious by clarifying terms, and to escape from futile, dead-locked arguments' (Williamson, 2018, p. 37). The linguistic turn is associated with analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American world from the 1960s onwards. For example, Ryle describes analytic philosophers as cartographers, where 'once these key ideas are charted, the geography of the whole region is, at least in outline, fixed' (Ryle, 1971, p. 211). While no longer the sole focus of analytic philosophy, this sort of conceptual analysis still plays a prominent role in philosophical thinking. Starting from a point of clarity and agreement about key concepts allows for progress to be made when constructing arguments and reaching conclusions. Conceptual analysis can also be used to critique arguments by raising questions about the concepts being employed by them.

Analytic philosophers of education frequently use this method of conceptual analysis. Writing in 1966, R.S. Peters expresses disdain for more synthetic forms of philosophy and aligns himself with mainstream analytic philosophers of the time: 'There was a time when it was taken for granted that the philosophy of education consisted in the formulation of high-level directives which would guide educational practice and shape the organisation of schools and universities ... Professional philosophers, however, are embarrassed by such expectations' (Peters, 1966, p. 15). Peters' analysis of the concept of an educated person reflects the linguistic turn by resting his analysis of the educated person on who we would or would not ordinarily call educated. He makes a distinction between training and education by drawing on intuitions about what we ordinarily mean when we say 'education' *versus* what we mean when we say 'training'. More recently, Michael Hand's analysis of 'intelligence' draws on this analytic tradition. He asks, 'is there a more or less stable and coherent concept marked by the word "intelligence" as it is ordinarily used by English speakers' citing a scarcity of previous attempts to identify an ordinary concept of intelligence (Hand, 2007, p. 38).

Clarity about key educational concepts is valuable when it comes to debates about educational practice and policy. It is important to come to some shared understanding of what a term means to avoid arguing at cross-purposes to one another. However traditional conceptual analysis is not always ideal for educational purposes. In the case of education, concepts make a difference to people's lives. This stands in contrast to more abstract philosophical work. For example, traditional work on the concept of knowledge is designed to provide clarity about abstract epistemological questions such as 'what is knowledge?' and 'what is it to know something?' Instead, the educational concept of knowledge raises questions about the aims of education such as: What should we mean by knowledge when we are designing the school curriculum? This is where the method of conceptual engineering comes in.

Reflecting on the nature of conceptual analysis, Sally Haslanger identifies three separate analytic tasks, the third of which is a paradigmatic account of conceptual engineering. She says 'there are several different ways to understand, and so respond to, questions of the form, "What is X?" or "What is it to be an X?" For example, the question "What is knowledge?" might be construed in several ways. One might be asking: What is our concept of knowledge? (looking to a priori methods for an answer). On a more naturalistic reading, one might be asking: What (natural) kind (if any) does our epistemic vocabulary track? Or one might be undertaking a more revisionary project: What is the point of having a concept of knowledge?' (2012, p. 223). She calls the first conceptual task conceptual inquiry, and equates it with the vision of conceptual analysis shared by Strawson, Ryle and Peters. The second, she calls a descriptive project which relies on 'empirical or quasi-empirical methods' (p. 223). Then, Haslanger points to another form of conceptual endeavour where 'the task is not to explicate our ordinary concepts; nor is it to investigate the kind that we may or may not be tracking with our everyday conceptual apparatus; instead we begin by considering more fully the pragmatics of our talk employing the terms in question. What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes; if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better?' (pp. 223–224). She calls this an analytic task, but it has also been called conceptual engineering. According to this method, conceptual analysis is used to pursue certain purposes. In philosophy of education, these need to be educational purposes. Conceptual inquiry into the educational concept of knowledge needs to ask what the concept of knowledge is for in education.

Rather than analysing concepts based on their ordinary usage, Haslanger thinks that the purposes of concepts in the social world need to be taken into account. Concepts shape how we think about the social world, and can lead to concrete changes in it. Conceptual engineering need not pertain to the social

world, and need not imply the creation of new concepts; In its most minimal form, conceptual engineering asks ‘which concepts we ought to use’ (Burgess and Plunkett, 2013, p. 1102). Nonetheless, when it comes to educational concepts, which are inherently bound up in the social world, Haslanger’s social understanding of conceptual engineering for social purposes seems a good fit.

The idea that educational questions, and thus their constituent concepts need to be attentive to the aims and purposes of education is recognized in philosophy of education. Peters’ work on the educated person is one way of thinking about what educators ought to be aiming for. John White argues that curriculum planning needs to take into account the aims of education before anything else (White, 2012a). Gert Biesta criticizes what he calls the ‘learnification’ of education, or ‘the transformation of an educational vocabulary into a language of learning’ (2009, p. 36). Here, ‘there is much discussion about educational processes and their improvement but very little about what such processes are supposed to bring about’ (p. 36). Rather than considering what good education is, Biesta points to a trend to thoughtlessly assume that education is primarily about learning. This, Biesta argues, leads to ‘a recognition that it also matters what pupils and students learn and what they learn it for’ disappearing from educational discourse (p. 39).

In a recent paper on conceptual engineering in education, I provide a test for whether a concept has been engineered with educational purposes in mind. Rather than specifying uncontroversial educational aims, I provide a test for whether aims and purposes have been considered in the analysis. The test asks whether a concept serves three purposes: ‘(i) to be good for the individual being educated; (ii) to be good for society as a whole; and (iii) to be capable of yielding practical guidance for educators. If a concept meets these conditions, then the concept has been analysed with its social context and purposes in mind’ (Gatley, 2022, p. 513). In contrast, I argue that Peters’ concept of education reflects ordinary usage of the term, rather than what the term ought to mean, or the role it ought to play in society.

Taking on board the method of conceptual engineering can help to avoid a tendency to rest educational questions on analyses of how concepts are ordinarily used, or what we ordinarily associate with education. Rather than analysing what ‘education’, ‘knowledge’, ‘intelligence’ *etc* are commonly taken to mean, the conceptual engineer asks what they ought to mean to best promote educational purposes. This builds thinking about educational purposes into the method of conceptual analysis.

### 3. KNOWLEDGE

Having sketched the importance of concepts in education, and explained what conceptual engineering for educational purposes entails, I will now return to the

concept of knowledge in education. In this section, I will explore three concepts of knowledge and their interactions with educational practices. Each way of conceiving of knowledge and its interaction with educational history illustrates the various dangers and shortcomings possible when engaging in conceptual analysis for educational purposes. However, none of these shortcomings amount to an argument for abandoning conceptual analysis. They show the importance of continuing to engineer concepts that serve educational aims and can make a real difference to students' educational experiences. Throughout this section, the three criteria for an engineered concept (Gatley, 2022) will be referred to as a means of diagnosing shortcomings in the concepts proposed.

### *Knowledge as Justified, True Belief*

Knowledge as justified, true belief has been the traditional analysis of knowledge since Plato's *Theatatus*. Greco and Sosa state that 'epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is driven by two main questions: "what is knowledge?" and "what can we know?"' If we think that we can know something, as nearly everyone does, then a third main question arises: "How do we know what we know?" Most of what has been written in epistemology over the ages addresses at least one of these questions' (Greco and Sosa, 1999, p. 1). For much of the history of analytic philosophy, conceptual analysis of knowledge has been focused on ordinary language, intuitions, and clarity about abstract epistemological questions.

Knowledge as justified, true belief is clear enough to provide a useful foundation for a range of questions about the nature of knowledge and knowing. Identified problems with the concept (eg Gettier cases) have led to new ways of conceiving of the more fine-grained aspects knowledge, particularly its constituent concept of justification. Knowledge conceived as justified, true belief is fruitful within the discipline of epistemology. It has also played a valuable role in analytic philosophy of education. Israel Scheffler uses knowledge as justified, true belief to clarify the concepts of learning and teaching (Scheffler, 1965). Harvey Siegel uses knowledge as justified, true belief to advocate for an epistemologically informed account of rationality and critical thinking where justification and truth both play an important role in belief formation (Siegel, 2017).

Looking at the history of the curriculum, concepts of knowledge that equate it with truth, such as the justified, true belief concept, have been influential. The idea of a liberal education and its broad, balanced, discipline-based curriculum rests on an account of knowledge where the pursuit of truth is intrinsically valuable. Cardinal J.S. Newman, a pioneer of liberal university education, says that 'knowledge is capable of being its own end' (Newman, 1931, p. 27) and 'the physical and moral world, sciences, arts, pursuits, ranks, offices, events, opinions, individualities, are all viewed as one with correlative functions, and as

gradually by successive combinations converging, one and all, to the true centre' (Newman, 1931, p. 63). Peters makes the case for a broad liberal education based on the idea that education contains a pre-existing commitment to pursuing truth, and the pursuit of truth is best engaged in via theoretical activities such as 'science, history, literary appreciation, philosophy, and other such cultural activities' (Peters, 1966, p. 160). O'Hear similarly states that 'the disciplines are taught and engaged in for their own sake, because they are recognised to be valuable in their own right and part of any fully civilised existence' (O'Hear, 1981, p. 4).

Liberal education is still a dominant ideal in English curriculum policy. Composed of English, mathematics, science, history, geography, modern foreign languages, art, physical education, technology and music, the 1988 British National Curriculum reads like an updated version of a liberal curriculum. Aldrich expressed disappointment at the lack of change or vision behind the 1988 curriculum, saying that it mirrored 'the basic grammar school curriculum devised at the beginning of the twentieth century' (Aldrich, 1988, p. 22). White makes a similar point about the 2000 National Curriculum when he says that 'new patterns have been overlaid on old, but the old show through' (White, 2004, p. 179). Gove's curriculum reforms appeal directly to liberal education: 'What we desperately need is a department at the heart of government championing the cause of education, the value of liberal learning, the wider spread of knowledge as an uncontested good in its own right' (Gove, 2009, p. 2).

The influence of a concept of knowledge that equates it with truth, and equates truth with intrinsic value is visible in this snapshot of the history of education. It is also problematic. As I have argued elsewhere, intrinsic value is not necessarily educationally valuable, and so the idea that knowledge is intrinsically valuable does not imply that it ought to form the basis of a curriculum (Gatley, 2022). This is because activities are 'educationally valuable if they are good for a student, either because the student values that activity for its own sake, or because that activity is instrumental to, or constitutive of something else that the student values for its own sake. Whether a student values something for its own sake is up to them, there is no imperative to value some things rather than others just because they are intrinsically ... valuable' (2022, p. 13). In order to argue that knowledge ought to form the basis of the curriculum, some alternative account of its value needs to be offered.

This illustrates the problem of traditional conceptual analysis in relation to educational issues. The analysis of knowledge as justified, true belief works for abstract questions about the nature of knowledge and knowing, but says little about educational issues. The analysis does not have educational purposes in mind. It fails my three tests: it has not been analysed with (i) what is good for the individual being educated; (ii) what is good for society as a whole; and (iii)



to be capable of yielding practical guidance for educators (Gatley, 2022) in mind.

Some other problems arise when approaching knowledge in this way. First, if justified, true belief is taken as a basis for choosing curriculum content, then there is too much potential curriculum content to provide clear guidance about what the curriculum should look like. Any proposition that is justified and true is a contender for inclusion, which could mean innumerable pieces of knowledge all competing for limited curriculum time. Second, there are many areas of learning that do not clearly consist of justified, true beliefs such as relationships education, aesthetic education or many areas of the humanities where the best available content is contested, and that contestation is often the basis of teaching in a subject.

Knowledge as justified, true belief does not necessarily serve the students being educated because it does not help the curriculum planner to pick out the particular pieces of knowledge that will best serve individual students as they live their lives. It could provide individuals with a set of fragmented facts that are unrelated to their ordinary concerns. Knowledge as justified, true belief does not necessarily serve society as it does not specifically pick out content that will help to develop good citizens and workers. Finally, knowledge as justified, true belief is too vague to put into practice as it is unclear to teachers and policy makers which knowledge to prioritise, and also what constitutes a justified, true belief, particularly in more pluralistic fields such as the arts and humanities. It is not that the traditional concept of knowledge is wrong, but more that it does not serve educational purposes well. It is not a good fit.

These issues show that the traditional concept of knowledge does not obviously do the work that curriculum planners need it to do. In addition to epistemic concerns, curriculum planners need to ask what knowledge is for and what purposes they hope that it will play in education. The concept of knowledge needs some engineering to make it educationally fruitful and appropriate. Knowledge as justified, true belief does not clearly consider educational purposes when it comes to the curriculum.

### *Michael Young and Concepts of Knowledge*

One of the interesting facets of Young's work is that, coming from a sociological perspective, his default position is the connection between knowledge and social outcomes. Young explains that 'a sociological approach to the curriculum argues that the curriculum is socially constructed, and specifically that there is a link between the distribution of power, the interests of the powerful and the curriculum' (1998, p. 8). The curriculum can 'act as a tacit form of social selection- often against the interests of the majority' (1998, p. 8).

Young's work on the curriculum has social aims at its heart. As such, we would expect results that accord with the method of conceptual engineering.

In the case of both 'knowledge of the powerful' and 'powerful knowledge', Young can be understood as engineering the concept of knowledge to achieve social aims. In the next two sections on Young's concepts of knowledge, their interactions with recent educational history show that his analyses fall short on two grounds. First, they are not clear enough to guide practice in the way that was intended. Second, they fall short of serving individual learners' interests. Before looking at each concept individually, it is worth noting the history of Young's work and its interactions with educational policy and practice, as it is this that makes his work an interesting case study.

Initially, Young promoted an educational concept of knowledge that focused on the power of those who define what we mean by an educated person and the 'power of some to define what is "valued knowledge"' (1971, p. 32). He labelled this 'knowledge of the powerful'. This concept casts knowledge as socially constructed, subjective and malleable. It also implies that the content of the curriculum should be used to pursue social change, fighting against the 'power of some'.

Young later came to view this understanding of knowledge as flawed. He cites his research into the curriculum in South Africa, where during apartheid 'both Apartheid and Bantu Education were so clearly social and historical constructs that these ideas became political slogans rather than a basis for a sociological analysis' (2010, p. 12). Whereas initially, knowledge of the powerful was a good explanatory concept for heavily politicised curricula, on the collapse of the apartheid regime, accounts of the curriculum reliant on power relations between actors lost their appeal. Teachers had been prepared to deliver a curriculum for social activism, not for providing the curriculum that their students needed once the urgency for Apartheid related activism had dissipated. He says, 'the theory that knowledge is power that had underpinned the critique of apartheid education had nothing to say about alternatives. It had the well intentioned but unrealistic aim of "freeing" teachers but with little idea as to what they would be "freed" to do' (2010, p. 13).

In response, Young started conceiving of knowledge in epistemic terms rather than social terms. He appeals to the traditional philosophical view that 'what counts as knowledge . . . is given, either because the world really is that way, or because our view of knowledge is objective and certain' (1998, p. 7). In a paper written alongside Muller he states that 'we intuitively feel that some knowledges are "better"- epistemically, morally or aesthetically- than others . . . [they] are more universal than others' (2013, pp. 230–31). Young and Muller argue that if students are to be treated equally, then they should have equal access to what Arnold famously termed the 'best that has been thought and said'

(Arnold, 1932, p. 7). This, Young holds, is powerful knowledge- it provides students with certain intellectual powers (2010, p. 24).

Young contrasts powerful knowledge with ‘Gove’s traditional view of the curriculum’ (Young, 2010, p. 22) which he claims would ‘inevitably perpetuate an elitist and unequal system and continue to deny learning opportunities to many students from disadvantaged homes’ (Young, 2010, p. 29). Despite this, Young’s concept of powerful knowledge has indeed been taken as a justification for the traditional curriculum. As White points out, ‘the debate about “powerful knowledge” is not an academic exercise. Michael Young’s concept is a keystone of curriculum policy’ (White, 2012(2)). Furthermore, Deng accuses Young of promoting an account of knowledge which is valued for its own sake, rather than for more specific educational ends (Deng, 2018).

The concept of powerful knowledge has been politicised in English curriculum policy to push a traditionalist agenda. Young’s response is that ‘looking back, “powerful knowledge” was more of a slogan than a concept: a kind of linguistic device whose purpose was to remind teachers that knowledge matters. Since then, it’s been taken up and spread around the place as if it was some brilliant new idea, but really it’s just a signpost towards some very difficult questions that everyone needs to think hard about’ (TES, 2022).

### *Knowledge of the Powerful*

In *Knowledge and Control*, Young approaches curriculum knowledge as socially constructed. He points to the importance of interrogating ‘how knowledge is selected, organised and assessed in educational institutions’ (1971, p. 19). Young criticises the traditional conceptions of knowledge presented by the analytic philosophers Hirst and Peters as ‘based on an absolutist conception of a set of distinct forms of knowledge which correspond closely to the traditional areas of the academic curriculum and thus justify, rather than examine, what are no more than socio-historical constructs of a particular time’ (1971, p. 23). Instead, Young advocates an approach that focuses on the socio-historical constructs at play. He claims that ‘those in positions of power will attempt to define what is taken to be knowledge, how accessible to different groups any knowledge is, and what are the accepted relationships between different knowledge areas and between those who have access to them and make them available’ (1971, p. 32). To illustrate this, Young points to earlier work by Bernstein who equated the aristocracy with liberal/conservative values and non-vocational character education; merchant and professional classes with bourgeois values with higher vocational and professional courses, and so on (Young, 1971, p. 29).

This way of conceiving of knowledge sees it as intrinsically tied up with social processes. It is people, with their different roles in society, who decide what should be known by which groups of people, and for what ends. This way of understanding the curriculum is useful; it makes sense of the instrumentalization of schools and universities to prepare students to participate in the economy, or to develop good democratic citizens. It can also explain moves to open up the curriculum to a broader group of people, or to promote social change through changing curriculum content, as can be seen in the case of moves to decolonise the curriculum. If the educational concept of knowledge is seen as flexible, socially constructed and serving social ends, then the curriculum is a tool for changing society and its content can be chosen based on the changes that are being aimed for.

In later work, Young rejects this approach to knowledge and the curriculum. He claims that by casting the curriculum as something that 'could always be changed' to promote greater equality, 'this oversociological view of knowledge led to an over-politicised and instrumental view of the curriculum as something that could always be changed if political purposes changed' (Young, 2008, p. 3).

One way of diagnosing the problems faced by conceiving of curriculum content in terms of 'knowledge of the powerful' is that this conception prioritises societal aims but neglects the value of knowledge to the individual being educated. Societal aims are prioritised because the curriculum is seen as an instrument for pursuing an ideological or political vision for society. This allows for different political actors and parties with different visions of a good society to shape the curriculum at will. The concept implies that students are being educated to play a role in one particular envisioned society. Knowledge of the powerful is the knowledge that those in power want educated people to acquire. Similarly, awareness of this leads to the view that curriculum knowledge can counter the dominance of the powerful by selecting opposing, but still political laden curriculum content.

While it is true that being educated to play a role in society can benefit the individual, this depends on whether the vision of society they were educated for is in fact a good one, and whether the vision of society they were educated for is the society they end up living in as adults. A student who moves countries to a different sort of social structure might find their education at odds with the new life they need to lead. A student who lives through political changes, either through normal democratic processes, more dramatic regime change, or historical factors such as climate change or a pandemic, may find that their education has not prepared them very well for the new version of society that they find themselves in. This highlights the importance of ensuring that educational concepts serve the individual being educated too.

Conceiving of knowledge as knowledge of the powerful leaves curriculum content entirely in the hands of those with political agendas. There is no anchor between curriculum content and something that is valuable beyond particular social circumstances. Since social circumstances change, this can lead to curricula constantly changing and providing little of value to students living in changed circumstances.

### *Powerful Knowledge*

Young's response to his own criticisms of knowledge of the powerful is to reconceptualise knowledge as more epistemically anchored. He refocuses attention on the value of acquiring knowledge to the student being educated, saying that knowledge provides students with intellectual powers (2010). Young's new approach has been described as critical realism, where knowledge is seen as objective, though fallible. Good curriculum content provides students with the best available knowledge drawn from long standing specialisation in disciplines and subjects. Consequently, a subject based curriculum is an appropriate means of teaching students the knowledge they need to develop intellectual powers.

Young treads a fine line here between what he calls a traditionalist 'curriculum of the past' and his 'curriculum of the future'. In the 'curriculum of the past', knowledge and learning is pursued for its own sake, there is an emphasis on transmitting existing knowledge, subject knowledge is more important than the relationships between subjects and there is an assumption that school knowledge is independent from non-school contexts (1999, p. 11). Young's 'curriculum of the future' promotes 'a transformative concept of knowledge which emphasises its power to give learners a sense that they can act in the world; a focus on the creation of new knowledge alongside the transmission of existing knowledge; an emphasis on the interdependence of knowledge areas and on the relevance of school knowledge to everyday problems' (1999, p. 11). Unsurprisingly, Young's 'curriculum for the future' has become a tool for those promoting a 'curriculum of the past'; the two concepts of knowledge employed are more similar than they are different and Young is not clear enough about what knowledge is for to differentiate his ideas from traditionalist accounts of knowledge and education.

In recent work, Young describes what he thinks has happened to the concept of powerful knowledge:

This idea, especially the extent to which it mirrors the existing academic curriculum of GCSEs and A levels, is found in most selective and fee-paying public schools. It was, not surprisingly, picked up (in substance, although not initially in name) by right-wing think tanks such as *Civitas* and later by the Conservative-led coalition government ... The coalition government used the concept primarily to

criticise and distance themselves from the curriculum policies of the former Labour governments which had emphasised the experience of students rather than the knowledge acquired and focused on widening participation to make access easier for disadvantaged pupils. As a result of government policies such as the EBacc, a version of [powerful knowledge] became the benchmark for ranking schools and was adopted as a curriculum principle by many academies and free schools. At the same time, the government abolished hundreds of qualifications that did not fit their academic model. (Young, 2020, pp. 19–20)

Powerful knowledge became a heavily politicised concept that lost touch with any educational purposes beyond reproducing a perceived gold standard of education provided by well-established British private schools.

Young's own diagnosis of what went wrong with the concept of powerful knowledge is that the concept was not clear enough to pursue the social ends it was designed to promote. He says that the concept was deficient for three reasons: 'the ambiguous meaning of power; the incompleteness of the model of powerful knowledge as a curriculum principle; the neglect of the interdependence of curriculum and pedagogy' (Young, 2020). 'Powerful knowledge' gives little guidance as to why knowledge is powerful, or which parts of knowledge are powerful and to what end. Other than specifying subjects as the source of powerful knowledge, Young's concept does little to explain why subjects should be taught and how they should be taught. This allows for the concept to be politicised and emptied of its intention to provide students with knowledge that is useful to them. The subsequent curriculum moves by the English coalition government and then conservative government pursued a policy of knowledge for its own sake, with little explicit educational value.

From a philosophical perspective, and from the perspective of conceptual engineering, this lack of clarity and direction in Young's concept of powerful knowledge is problematic. It is not clear enough to put into action. In failing to fully enunciate its educational aims, it falls short of being in the interests of individual learners or society more generally. This is why it is unsurprising that the concept was able to be moulded to suit political purposes. From Young's perspective, this openness and lack of clarity is just part of the nature of the concept: 'powerful knowledge is not a tool that can tell you what knowledge to include in your classes or how to structure them ... It is not a curriculum principle in precise terms or the basis of short-term goals or outcomes that can be unambiguously measured' (2020, p. 27). This highlights the care that has to be taken with educational concepts. Proposing a loosely defined concept can lead to damaging educational policies and practice.

White criticises the looseness of Young's concept and the lack of clarity about educational aims and educational value reflected in it. He points out that Young does not fully explain why knowledge is educationally valuable: 'to pursue why knowledge is desirable takes one into an ethical discussion of what

it should be for, i.e., what schools should be aiming at' (White, 2018, p. 329). While Young criticises teaching knowledge for knowledge's sake, he does not develop his account of why knowledge is powerful, or what the aim of providing students with powerful knowledge is. This creates a concept that is too loose to tie to educational aims, and not clear enough to guide appropriate policies and practice. As a result the concept of 'powerful knowledge' has been misused to pursue political agendas with different educational aims in mind.

While Young engages in something akin to conceptual engineering, his two concepts of knowledge have failed to focus on (i) the value of education to the individual being educated, and have failed to (iii) be clear enough to elicit appropriate guidance for policy and practice. This has played out in recent educational history.

### *An Educational Concept of Knowledge*

Engineering a concept of knowledge for educational purposes requires some account of what we mean by educational value and educational aims. This is a common feature of conceptual work in philosophy of education, from the idea that knowledge serves the aim of developing students' rationality (Hirst, 1974) to the idea that education aims to develop human flourishing (Reiss and White, 2013). Asking whether a concept serves (i) individuals, (ii) society, and (iii) is clear enough to put into practice (Gatley, 2022) provides a rough guide to see whether educational aims are guiding the concept or whether the conceptual analysis proposed is somehow adrift from the social world it serves.

The traditional concept of knowledge as justified, true belief leads to an understanding of knowledge that is abstracted from educational aims. The concept has not been engineered with education in mind. Instead it works to answer abstract questions about the nature of knowledge and of knowing. That is not to say that it is irrelevant to discussions about knowledge in education, but that it is limited in what it can contribute. Young's concept of knowledge of the powerful has some educational aims in mind, namely aims associated with shaping a fairer society. However, it neglects the value of knowledge to the individual being educated. This allows for an instrumental curriculum which changes according to the political and ideological aims of whoever is in charge at the time. Finally, Young's concept of powerful knowledge attempts to tie the curriculum to knowledge that is considered educationally valuable, but falls short because Young never fully articulates what it is about powerful knowledge that makes it powerful, or why knowledge is central to the aims of education.

All of this matters because the concept of knowledge plays a central role in what happens in schools. Young's concepts of knowledge demonstrate this in their interactions with recent educational history. The misconstrual of powerful

knowledge to suit political aims in the case of the curriculum in England is particularly striking. The English National Curriculum is currently firmly subject-based. As a result, a large number of children are being taught a subject-based curriculum under the loose justification that 'knowledge is powerful' but without a clear understanding of what 'powerful' means, or how knowledge can serve individual students.

An educational concept of knowledge needs to serve the individuals being educated, serve wider society, and be clear enough to put into action. These criteria require some account of the aims of education and a developed articulation of how knowledge is capable of meeting those aims. Without this, the three concepts of knowledge explored have shaped curricula based on insecure assumptions, with real effects on almost all members of society in England.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Educational concepts matter because they influence educational policies and practices. Traditional methods of conceptual analysis which focus on ordinary language, and stem from abstract non-educational questions do not always provide the focus on educational aims that is needed to guide educational policy and practice. This can be seen in the case of knowledge as justified, true belief. Conceptual engineering seems like a promising way forward as it recognises the centrality of educational aims in conceptual analysis. Conceptual engineers ask what we want concepts to do. This foregrounds social issues, matters of individual value, and concepts that provide clear practical guidance. However, if conceptual engineering is undertaken without fully taking into account the three criteria of (i) serving individuals, (ii) serving society, and (iii) being clear enough to guide practice, the results can cause social harm. This is illustrated by the three concepts of knowledge outlined and how they have interacted with educational history to push and pull curriculum policy in different directions.

Going forward, philosophers of education need to continue to refine concepts to fit the sort of world they want to create. Drawing on conceptual engineering as a method helps to clarify the importance of aims, and to encourage transparency about how those aims are used in conceptual analysis. It also articulates why it is important to tailor concepts for educational purposes rather than to rely on abstract analyses that do not have educational aims in mind.

Finally, opting out of analysing educational concepts is just as unhelpful as proposing flawed ones. In the absence of academic attention, educational concepts will continue to be used, just without the scrutiny that educational studies can provide. Knowledge is a central concept to education with wide ranging implications for the curriculum and those being educated. A clear account of



why knowledge is educationally valuable is needed to support curriculum development and implementation. This is why conceptual analysis, particularly when understood as conceptual engineering, is a valuable tool in the field of educational studies.

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