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Research article

# Why is 'powerful knowledge' failing to forge a path to the future of history education?

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## Abstract

The concept of 'powerful knowledge' has become extremely influential in discussions about curriculum in England over the last ten years. However, the concept seems to have done little to revolutionise curriculum design, and in some cases it has led to curricular narrowing and a focus on an increasingly nationalistic narrative in history. Michael Young (2019, 2021) has argued that the failure of the concept of 'powerful knowledge' to underpin meaningful curriculum reforms has been mainly due to its misinterpretation and loose definition. This paper explores these claims and finds that key voices in education in England, and history education specifically, have misunderstood and misapplied the concept of powerful knowledge. However, it also makes the case that powerful knowledge cannot be meaningfully defined in terms of history education, and that attempts to make curricular decisions based on the concept are therefore a distraction from more meaningful curricular work.

**Keywords** powerful knowledge; power; knowledge; history; history education; curriculum theory; curriculum

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## Introduction

There has been a great deal of talk over the last decade about the idea of a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum for English schools (Chapman, 2021; Counsell, 2016; Kitson, 2021; Simons and Porter, 2015; White, 2012, 2018; White and Brown, 2012; Young, 2007, 2016; Young and Lambert, 2014; Young and Muller, 2010). Since 2010, a group of Conservative educational reformers, including former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, and former Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, have attempted to enact a 'knowledge turn' in education. This movement has sought to put the acquisition of knowledge at the heart of policymaking in education, and has seen a resurgence in the concept of the 'traditional' liberal education, rooted in clearly demarcated academic subjects (Chapman, 2021; Evans, 2013; Gibb, 2015).

Michael Young's concept of 'powerful knowledge' has played a significant role in justifying, and nominally underpinning, this knowledge turn in education in England (Chapman, 2021). Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, for example, notes that Young's concept of powerful knowledge was central in the development of the revised National Curriculum for England (Department for Education, 2013) between 2011 and 2013 (Simons and Porter, 2015; White, 2012, 2018; Young, 2021; Young and Lambert, 2014). It also influenced the development of the 2019 Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection framework for schools. As the Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman (2019: n.p.), stated, Ofsted 'want to see pupils being taught "powerful knowledge"'; this she defined as a body of knowledge and skills 'that should be every child's entitlement'. There are echoes here of Young and Lambert's (2014: 71), admittedly broader, view that the curriculum 'represents the entitlement to knowledge for all ... children'.

The concept of powerful knowledge as a tool for content selection has particular ramifications in relation to secondary history education. It is therefore important to understand some of the intended aims for the introduction of powerful knowledge. In their book *Knowledge and the Future School* (2014), Young and Lambert make the case that powerful knowledge as a curriculum principle is an issue of social justice. By building a curriculum around powerful knowledge, they argue, schools are providing a guarantee of equality of access to 'the best knowledge we have', and therefore to future opportunities for social and economic advancement (Young and Lambert, 2014: 71). Smith and Jackson (2021: 152) term this a 'traditional social realist' position, in which social justice is sought through social mobility, and enabled by the provision of 'powerful' subject knowledge which allows students success within existing social structures. To understand this position further, it is worth exploring how Young has characterised educational development to show why powerful knowledge is important for achieving such ends.

## Powerful knowledge and educational 'futures'

In their article 'Three educational scenarios for the future', Young and Muller (2010) argue that two major historical trends can be observed in terms of curriculum construction. They characterise these trends as differing 'visions' for desired futures. A 'Future 1' vision is one in which the future will be deeply rooted in the past: a continuation of present norms and structures. Young and Muller (2010) associate Future 1 with the elite schooling system prior to mass education. The main purpose of a Future 1 curriculum is to transmit a fixed canon of knowledge, believed to be somehow a-social, to enable students to maintain these social norms and structures into the future. It is the 'knowledge of the powerful'. This knowledge is transmitted via school subjects, which are seen as the key means of transmitting the most culturally significant knowledge. Ultimately, Young and Muller (2010: 17) dismiss Future 1 as 'a recipe for social divisiveness, inequality, unhappiness, and conflict'. Young and Muller go on to suggest that the rise of mass schooling upset the Future 1 vision because such an education was only of limited value outside a small minority of elite jobs, as well as because not all children were able to be inducted into such knowledge traditions effectively.

'Future 2' is therefore characterised as a response to – and rejection of – Future 1. Young and Muller (2010) contend that Future 2 thinking is characterised by an attempt to break down existing power structures, reinforced with their repositories of knowledge, to enable the creation of a future substantially, or even entirely, different from the past. In Future 2, the transmission of fixed bodies of knowledge is rejected in favour of the development of generic, transferable 'skills'. In this model, knowledge is viewed as over-socialised. Young and Muller (2010: 14) contend that Future 2 'reduces questions of epistemology to "who knows?". They also suggest that the Future 2 approach has fallen short of its intended aims to

upset power structures, because it has not led to the specialised knowledge of the powerful disappearing in 'elite and private sectors and institutions' (Young and Muller, 2010: 19).

In response to these two visions of educational futures, Young and Muller (2010) posit a third alternative: 'Future 3'. A Future 3 curriculum is one that accepts that the future should, and will, necessarily be different from the present, but that it remains rooted in the past. Therefore, education cannot simply break with the past as in Future 2: 'a Future 3 curriculum rejects the socially constructed givenness of school subjects associated with Future 1 and the scepticism about subject knowledge associated with Future 2' (Young and Lambert, 2014: 66). However, this requires a different way of conceptualising knowledge from the 'knowledge of the powerful' seen in Future 1. This different conceptualisation is what Young and Muller (2010) term 'powerful knowledge'. In Future 3, powerful knowledge is identified as the knowledge produced within, and agreed upon by, specialised communities. Therefore, knowledge is seen as the product of society, but also as the product of truth processes established by these specialised communities. Powerful knowledge is therefore knowledge of the products of such communities and the processes by which such knowledge was created. Young and Muller (2010) argue that giving students access to this type of powerful knowledge will help to break down class-based distinctions in education. Failure to do so, they argue, 'means a slowing down of any progress that has so far been made towards equalising epistemological access ... [which] has implications for both social justice and the viability of a knowledge-based economy in the future' (Young and Muller, 2010: 23).

Young, therefore, makes the case that the concept of powerful knowledge might be used as an important tool for making curricular decisions, shifting focus onto the substance of the knowledge to be taught to students, rather than being distracted by questions about the 'knowers', as might be the case in Future 2. Roberts and Roberts (2014: n.p.), writing in the preface to Young and Lambert's *Knowledge and the Future School*, state that '[Young] argues persuasively that ... the curriculum should be based first and foremost on the knowledge we consider all young people should have access to and begin to acquire during their school years'. Young and Lambert (2014: 71) further promote the importance of powerful knowledge in curriculum construction by suggesting that their book should be seen as 'a resource for heads in their curriculum leadership role, as a basis for an agreement in their school on "what it should teach" as well as for achieving greater equality'. In other words, powerful knowledge, as a principle, should enable schools to 'reach a shared understanding about the knowledge they want their pupils to acquire' by referring to the collective wisdom of the various disciplines (Young and Lambert, 2014: 69). A Future 3 school:

... gives all children access to powerful knowledge. It combines this commitment with an approach to pedagogy that progressively extends access to the full range of curriculum subjects and convinces students and their parents that acquiring this knowledge is worthwhile and is their right. (Young and Lambert, 2014: 195)

## Why has powerful knowledge failed to usher in Future 3?

There is certainly evidence that the concept of powerful knowledge has led to some extremely fruitful discussions about the role of knowledge in the history curriculum in schools (Alderson, 2019; Chapman, 2021; Chapman and Georgiou, 2021; Counsell, 2017; Kitson, 2021; Nordgren, 2021). However, despite the centrality of the concept of powerful knowledge to educational reforms in England, there is limited evidence to suggest that, in the decade since work began, these reforms have brought about a Future 3-type transformation. In history education especially, concerns have been expressed that the curricular constructions which have come out of the 'knowledge turn' have been more akin to the 'knowledge of the powerful', as associated with Future 1 (Counsell and Hall, 2013; Evans, 2013; Smith and Jackson, 2021). Although this trend is by no means universal, in many history classrooms, and in line with some of the stated aims of the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013), there has been a shift towards more 'traditional' curriculum constructions centred on the English national story (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Atkinson et al., 2018). This shift is likely to have been accelerated by the new Ofsted inspection framework (Burn and Harris, 2020). The 2019 Historical Association Survey found that 36 per cent of schools claimed to be following the National Curriculum 'closely', a significant rise from the 27 per cent that made a similar claim in 2018 (Burn and Harris, 2020). The example below is offered as an illustration of how the narrative of powerful knowledge has shaped something more akin

to a Future 1 curriculum construction. Interestingly, it also refers to the students as 'Historians'. In a true conception of Young and Lambert's (2014) Future 3, the students would presumably be seeking knowledge 'of' history provided 'by' historians. It is notable that the curriculum is titled 'the traditional curriculum' on the website:

The content of the History curriculum at Harris Academy Riverside is chosen to best illustrate the powerful knowledge which Historians should own; the development of England over a few hundred years for example from tribal squabbling in the ninth Century to the formation of the world's first coherent Parliament; the slow struggle against slavery and prejudice in the nineteenth Century in Britain and the United States and beyond; and the terrifying rise of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany in the twentieth Century. (Harris Academy Riverside, n.d.: n.p.)

In essence, this statement of curriculum purpose seems to cite the concept of powerful knowledge, but to enact it in a Future 1-type curriculum. This is by no means an isolated example. In 2020, students at the Pimlico Academy in London, and their parents, protested over the school's narrow curriculum which sidelined Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) history and experiences (Parveen, 2021). Parents especially complained that the chronological sequencing and focus on royal power reduced opportunities to explore the more diverse history of Britain or the wider world. Similar narrowness can also be seen when school leaders such as Katherine Birbalsingh, head teacher at the influential Michaela Community School in London, declare that their aim is to put dead White men back on the curriculum (Birbalsingh, 2019; Griffiths, 2020).

In his more recent work, Young (2021) openly states that the concept of powerful knowledge has not been as transformative as he had hoped. In discussing the failures of powerful knowledge to move schools towards a Future 3 orientation, Young highlights two fundamental issues. First, there has been a failure to communicate the importance of resources in enacting a powerful knowledge curriculum. Second, teachers, schools and politicians have misunderstood the nature of powerful knowledge:

Certain schools indeed claim that they are teaching powerful knowledge . . . This reflects: (a) their misunderstanding of the concept; and (b) our failure, as sociologists of education, to be specific enough about our definition of the concept and its role. (Young, 2021: 252)

The remainder of this article aims to explore the second of these claims. The case will be made that the concept of powerful knowledge in secondary history education is not just poorly defined and interpreted, but that it is impossible to define meaningfully. Moreover, it will be suggested that the concept of powerful knowledge creates significant dangers because it encourages a sidelining of the moral and philosophical purposes of history education in favour of a belief in the neutrality of powerful knowledge. By encouraging educators to believe that curricular decisions can be outsourced to the academic discipline of history, a void is left where moral and ethical choices should be debated at a school level. This void is in turn filled by the 'knowledge of the powerful', and the opportunities for social justice, however conservative, are undermined. As Nordgren (2021: 196) argues:

Knowledge for its own sake is not an accessible basis for building a curriculum and such a position will inevitably be transmuted into a neoconservative anti-intellectualism. Schools need a principled idea of what constitutes powerful knowledge, but educationalists must also ask the question: 'powerful for what?'

## Misunderstandings of powerful knowledge

To assess whether those in education have simply misunderstood and misapplied the concept of powerful knowledge, it is first important to gain a clearer understanding of Young's definitions. I have endeavoured to summarise these below (Young, 2016, 2021; Young and Lambert, 2014; Young and Muller, 2010):

- There is 'better knowledge' in different disciplines. This is 'powerful knowledge'.
- Powerful knowledge is specialised and is produced and debated in universities as part of academic disciplines. It is therefore peculiar to the discipline, as well as being the product of broad disciplinary agreement.

- The concepts which form powerful knowledge in a discipline are systematically related to other concepts or ideas within a discipline, and therefore allow generalisations and thinking beyond particular cases or contexts.
- Powerful knowledge is always provisional in relation to the truth processes of the discipline. It is the best knowledge we have now.
- Powerful knowledge is created and maintained in academic disciplines; therefore, it is best communicated in schools via subjects that are related to those disciplines.
- Powerful knowledge is distinct from everyday knowledge, and therefore requires specific teaching.

With these definitions in mind, it is now possible to explore how far powerful knowledge has been misunderstood at the level of policy, inspection and implementation. At a policy level, Young is quick to point out that the Conservative Government did not support schools well enough in securing the necessary human and material resources to craft and maintain a curriculum rooted in powerful knowledge. He is also critical of the understanding of powerful knowledge shown by government, and some schools, in terms of curriculum construction:

The government's policies so far, are unlikely to be a basis for achieving their claimed goals of making an entitlement to a subject-based curriculum a possibility for all pupils; if anything, they could lead to the opposite . . . Schools are beginning to advertise themselves as offering a knowledge-led curriculum and this has become a slogan, rather than a set of questions about how such purposes might be realized. (Young, 2016: 273)

At a policy level, as well as in some schools, as previously noted, powerful knowledge seems to have been conflated with the 'cultural literacy' movement associated with US Professor of Literature E.D. Hirsch (Hirsch, 1988, 1999, 2006; Smith and Jackson, 2021). This is not entirely surprising. As well as citing the influence of Young, the Department for Education in England has noted the direct influence of Hirsch on the development of educational reforms (Gibb, 2015). In addressing this conflation, Young (2021: 246) is at pains to point out that there is a huge difference between Hirsch's conceptions of cultural literacy and the concept of powerful knowledge, arguing that '[Hirsch's] prescriptions, if understood literally, inevitably lead not to common knowledge, but to memorisation and not understanding'. Here again, Young makes the point that recall and memorisation are not directly compatible with the concept of powerful knowledge.

Young (2019) has been equally critical of how the national inspectorate, Ofsted, has understood powerful knowledge on similar grounds. For instance, a recent Ofsted publication defined powerful knowledge as 'content which has been identified as most useful' (Ofsted, 2019: 43), as well as 'knowledge and cultural capital . . . [students] need to succeed in life' (Ofsted, 2019: 42). This appears again to be a concern with the development of 'cultural capital', but less in the sense Bourdieu initially intended, and more akin to Hirsch's cultural literacy. It also speaks to a misunderstanding of the role that curriculum plays in wider challenges to issues of social justice (Young, 2021).

Young (2021: 245) has suggested that these misunderstandings of how powerful knowledge could be used to influence curriculum are mainly down to the failure of the Department for Education, certain academies and the inspectorate to engage with the broader aims and purposes of curriculum. However, in all the examples given, there is a defined purpose of knowledge acquisition. In relation to Ofsted, for instance, the purpose of the knowledge is to enable transition into the next stage of a child's education. This purpose inevitably involves the acquisition of the 'knowledge of the powerful', a point Dennis (2021) makes in relation to preparing students to be successful in applying to elite universities. For the Department for Education, a key purpose for curricular reform has been developing national pride:

There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive, patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements. Which is why the next Conservative Government will ensure the curriculum teaches the proper narrative of British History – so that every Briton can take pride in this nation. (Gove, 2009: n.p.)

In both these instances, the concept of powerful knowledge has masked an underlying moral and ethical judgement about the purpose of education. This masking effect is inherent in the concept, as it has sought to move discussions onto desirable knowledge and away from 'knowers' and their purposes. Powerful knowledge in some parts of the history education community has therefore been marshalled in

the service of instrumentalist or nationalistic ends, while simultaneously suggesting that such knowledge selections are rooted in the academic discipline of history. Teachers with limited knowledge of the wider discipline might feel unable to challenge such pronouncements due to the reified nature of much historical knowledge, so the cycle continues. By contrast, if teachers were empowered to question the purposes of knowledge acquisition, as well as the knowledge itself, they would be likely to have more concrete and defensible views based on their experiences (Harris, 2012).

## History-specific misunderstandings

Exploring how definitions of powerful knowledge have been understood by history educators is also instructive. Here, Young (2021: 251) is more positive, suggesting that 'a significant group of history educators were working with the precepts of the idea that history could be powerful knowledge long before the concept itself was introduced by sociologists of education'. This might question the need for the concept of powerful knowledge in the first instance; however, upon closer inspection, there are also significant issues with how powerful knowledge is being defined by some history educators.

At this point, it is appropriate to differentiate between two broad categories of knowledge in history: 'substantive knowledge' and 'second-order concepts', or 'disciplinary knowledge' as it is sometimes called. Ashby and Lee (2000: 199) explain this well:

Substantive history is the content of history, what history is 'about'. Concepts like peasant, friar and president, particulars like The Battle of Hastings, the French Revolution, and the Civil Rights Movement ... are part of the substance of history. [Second-order] concepts like historical evidence, explanation, change and accounts are ideas that provide our understanding of history as a discipline or form of knowledge.

In the mid-2000s, many history teachers might have defined powerful knowledge in terms of these second-order concepts (Husbands, 1996; Husbands et al., 2003; Kitson et al., 2011). However, current debates about knowledge in history have tended to downplay the importance of second-order concepts as powerful, in favour of focusing on the generative power of substantive knowledge (Counsell, 2016; Hammond, 2014; Harris, 2021a; Kitson, 2021). This has influenced the ways in which history educators have tried to define powerful knowledge as primarily substantive knowledge. For instance, discussion of powerful knowledge in the history education community has tended to focus on how substantive knowledge shapes the ways in which students think or reason about content they encounter later in their studies (Counsell, 2017; Fordham, 2016). To put it another way, some knowledge selections within particular curricular constructions have more generative power than others. To give an example, a teacher who wishes their students to know the causes of the First Crusade (or the first of the Frankish Invasions, depending on how this is framed) would certainly find it more 'powerful' to have ensured that students had grasped the concepts associated with religious beliefs in the eleventh century beforehand, and to see how these beliefs helped to develop the concept of 'just war', than it would be for them to have grasped the principles of Inca leadership. The notion that certain powerful knowledge can underpin and enable future knowledge acquisition is a central and important part of curriculum design, and one which has been sidelined too often in the recent past (Counsell, 2000, 2016, 2017; Ford and Kennett, 2018; Fordham, 2016; Hammond, 2014). However, this kind of knowledge does not fit neatly with Young's definition of powerful knowledge, which suggests that such knowledge should be universal. Instead, it might be better classed as knowledge that has 'internal curricular power'. Yet justifications for the inclusion of specific knowledge because of its generative power within the curriculum end up being self-referential. To make the case that A and B have more generative power than C and D when teaching X does not help educators decide whether to teach X in the first place. Change the curriculum, and the internally 'powerful' curricular knowledge would change as well. As Nordgren argues (2021: 178), history teachers cannot avoid the issue of whether X should be taught but 'need to reconsider regularly what is worthwhile historical knowledge ... [by engaging with] the tensions between the intrinsic structure of the subject and the extrinsic objectives in the curriculum'. A good recent example would be whether or not a student should learn the story of the United States as one of heroic expansion, complex interplays within a region, or as settler colonialism (Estes, 2019; Ostler, 2019; Sleeper-Smith, 2015). Each of these choices would entail a very different focus and content set for study. The logic of powerful knowledge as knowledge with internal curricular power sidesteps the issue of curriculum construction altogether, and

leaves unresolved the messy ethical decisions in which educators need to engage to decide whether to teach topic X, Y or Z. Yet this is exactly the kind of issue that Young argued the concept of powerful knowledge could address (Young and Lambert, 2014).

## Redefining powerful knowledge to enable curriculum construction

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that Young is correct in his assertion that the concept of powerful knowledge has indeed been misunderstood or misapplied in education, and in history education specifically. This in turn means that powerful knowledge has been a poor tool for making the kinds of value-free curriculum decisions that Young suggested it might enable. Young suggests that his definitions of powerful knowledge could have been clearer, and that this might have averted such problems. The final section of this article seeks to explore whether powerful knowledge can ever be defined effectively enough, in terms of history education, to enable curricular-level decisions to be made in the value-free way Young originally implied.

One immediately apparent issue is that some school subjects, such as the sciences, seem to fit more readily with the concept of powerful knowledge than others, such as history or English literature. This, Nordgren (2021) suggests, is due to different types of discourse. Bernstein's (2000) classification of discourses offers some insight here. Bernstein (2000) argues that some school subjects, such as science or mathematics, are rooted in hierarchical discourses. Meanwhile, others, such as history or English literature, have horizontal discourses. In a vertical discourse, students need to grasp fundamental ideas and principles to enable them to grapple with more complex ideas. For example, in physics, the concept that all matter is formed of particles underpins all thinking about atomic structures, and continues to be important even when new discoveries are made about the increasingly minute substructures of protons or quarks. Although there is debate over the order in which students might need to acquire these fundamental ideas, there is a large degree of agreement on what might be classed as fundamental. In hierarchically structured subjects, then, the concept of powerful knowledge seems to offer a means to agree upon the core ideas, if not the order of teaching. The Association of Science Educators has attempted to put this into practice in its publication, *Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education* (Harlen et al., 2010). This document contains 10 substantive 'ideas of science' and 4 disciplinary 'ideas about science'.

By contrast, the discourse of history is structured more horizontally. If history is, for the sake of argument, a study of people in time (Bloch, 1992), then there is nothing within the discipline itself that suggests where the substantive core might lie: which people, and in which time? There is nothing inherently more complex about studying one period, or one set of changes, compared to another. For example, students might develop substantive knowledge on the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany aged 13, or 15, or 17, but it would not be a prerequisite for a study of British colonialism in India aged 18, although it certainly might provide interesting points of comparison. One issue for exploration, therefore, is whether history could ever define a set of substantive knowledge or concepts akin to the 'big ideas of science', which would provide a definitive list of powerful knowledge for history.

## Powerful substantive knowledge

When considering definitions of powerful knowledge, the question, as some history educators have pointed out, is much more related to purpose (Kitson, 2021; Nordgren, 2021). Powerful for what? When Michael Gove initially set out to reform the history curriculum for England in 2013, his purpose was very much couched in developing an 'Our Island Story' narrative of patriotic English history (Evans, 2013). This approach significantly shaped the substantive outlines of the draft history curriculum, which focused heavily on a political story of English exceptionalism populated almost exclusively by White, British, upper-class men (Evans, 2013). The content choices put forward by the Department for Education in the draft curriculum were of course powerful in the context of telling such a story. When the wider educational and academic community came to challenge the original draft of the curriculum, however, they did so not only on the grounds of the content selection, but also in terms of its nationalistic purposes. Even adding the dimension that history should help students understand the present, as Rösen (2017), or indeed Bloch (1992), might argue, scarcely makes the task any easier. The issue of whose present needs

to be understood, and what needs explaining, is a philosophical debate in its own right, and upsets the notion that selections of powerful knowledge should essentially fall out of the debates of the disciplinary community, to be picked up and digested in schools.

Nevertheless, it is worth persevering with the process of defining powerful knowledge in substantive terms, as this idea seems still to have a great deal of life in schools. To do this means establishing which substantive knowledge, drawn from the vast swathe of content and ideas one could teach in human history, might be classed as uniquely powerful. Even knowing where to begin in such a task is challenging. Should the powerful substantive knowledge of history be considered in terms of powerful events, powerful substantive concepts, or powerful historical statements of fact? Exploring each in turn will give some sense of the difficulty.

A first approach might be to try to identify a set of core events, a canon of powerful knowledge which would enable all students to access and understand history. The problems in this approach are evident almost immediately. Is the Peasants' Revolt or the English Reformation a better example of powerful knowledge? What about Reconstruction in the United States? Or the Haitian Revolution? The case could certainly be made that such knowledge fits with Young and Lambert's (2014) definition of powerful knowledge as that which enables learners to explain, predict or envisage alternatives in particular curriculum contexts. It is certainly difficult to understand the British Civil Wars, or the colonisation of North America, or any number of other things, without first covering the developments which took place in the English Reformation, but the same might be said of exploring the relationships between France and Scotland in the sixteenth century, or the impact of British colonialism in Ireland. This also supposes that the curriculum should contain a study of the British Civil Wars and the colonisation of North America. A history teacher in Beijing, or Stockholm, or Tirana seems far less likely to be teaching about the British Civil Wars, and therefore the explanatory power of studying the English Reformation is instantly diminished. This seems so obvious as to be moot, but it is vital because one of the other core tenets of powerful knowledge is that it needs to have broad explanatory properties for the discipline as a whole. Choosing any given set of events only reveals a power relative to other content being taught, or to external aims, such as instilling a sense of national identity. Teaching the English Reformation is powerful in terms of understanding numerous aspects of English, and wider British, history, politics, economics, what it means to be British and so on, but it is not universally accepted as 'powerful' in the same way as the scientific concept 'Objects can affect other objects at a distance' (Harlen et al., 2010: 21). Therefore, events themselves surely cannot be powerful knowledge.

Another approach might be to move away from a focus on events, and to define a set of 'powerful substantive concepts' to be learned. This is more similar to the 10 'ideas of science' referred to previously (Harlen et al., 2010). It might be possible, therefore, to say that understanding substantive concepts such as 'democracy', 'empire' or even 'peasant' could constitute powerful knowledge in history. Michael Fordham (2016: 74) has suggested that much work is yet to be done on how students progress in their understanding of substantive concepts, but hints that 'substantive concepts can become devices by which particular period pictures might be collated and compared'. This in turn suggests a particular 'power' in students having a good grasp of a set of substantive concepts. Yet such concepts are not rooted firmly in the discipline of history, and therefore fail the test that powerful knowledge should be established through the truth processes of the community of enquiry (White, 2018). 'Democracy' and 'empire', for example, might be claimed by political sciences or philosophy. 'Empire' might equally be claimed by geography, while 'peasant' could easily be explored in the discipline of sociology. Although substantive concepts develop specific meanings within particular historical contexts, and therefore might be argued to be unique to history in this way, their abundance makes selection a continued issue. Even in studying a single historical event, a history teacher might need to refer to dozens of context-specific substantive concepts. To teach such a list of substantive concepts would certainly be of greater weight than any school curriculum could bear. This is also to assume that concepts selected might have universal applicability, both across and even within periods of study. There is already significant debate in historical discourse over which substantive concepts best explain a period. A good example of this can be found in recent arguments over the framing of US history, where there is heated debate over whether 'pioneer', 'settler' or 'colonist' is the best term for those White citizens engaged in the process of westward expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Estes, 2019). The core problem remains one of selection – an issue which the concept of powerful knowledge was intended to solve. The choice of substantive concepts for study would necessarily depend on the overall shape



of the curriculum, but it could not determine the shape of the curriculum as Young and Lambert (2014) suggest powerful knowledge could, and indeed should.

A final attempt to define powerful substantive knowledge in history rests on the notion of generating ideas and concepts which transcend specific time periods or events. This would certainly meet Young's criterion that powerful knowledge should be generalisable across contexts. Therefore, it might be possible to take a broad look at history and establish universal conceptual statements such as: 'people are prone to challenge authority', or 'revolutions lead to change'. However, this throws up new problems. The first is already obvious: neither of these ideas is universal, as neither applies in all cases in history. Second, it seems doubtful that even a handful of historians would be able to create an agreed-upon list of universal concepts, let alone the discipline of history as a whole. Even if such a process were able to identify a selection of 'powerful' ideas to agree upon, there would still be no consensus on which events in history might best convey or exemplify them. As such, it would appear that substantive knowledge in history cannot fit any definition of powerful knowledge as outlined by Young. If it is impossible to define powerful knowledge in terms of substantive knowledge, then any attempts to claim particular substantive content as powerful knowledge is, as has been noted earlier, little more than a mask for a set of underlying purposes. Too often, these purposes are involved in maintaining the status quo and leaving real inequalities unchallenged (Smith and Jackson, 2021).

## Powerful disciplinary knowledge

Substantive knowledge is not, of course, the only form of knowledge in a history curriculum. A good portion of history teaching is concerned with enabling students to understand the nature of the discipline of history (Ashby and Lee, 2000; Lee, 2017; Peck and Seixas, 2008; Seixas, 2011; Seixas and Morton, 2013). Notably, in Young's terms, it is 'powerful' for students to understand how a discipline seeks 'truth', as knowledge claims are always provisional and rooted in truth processes (Young and Lambert, 2014; Young and Muller, 2010). This is true in other subjects as well. Previously reference was made to the 14 'big ideas' of science, of which 4 were 'ideas about science' (Harlen et al., 2010).

When referring to disciplinary, or second-order, knowledge, there is far more agreement within the discipline. For instance, numerous historians have made the case that history involves the pursuit of questions about the past, and that these questions form a dialogue between the past and the present (Bloch, 1992; Collingwood, 1994; Megill et al., 2007; Tosh, 2010). This process has been termed 'historical enquiry' by history educators (Dawson, 2015; Mohamud and Whitburn, 2019; Riley, 2000; Wrenn, 2010). To borrow Dawson's (2015) framing, it might be considered 'powerful' for students to know that historians are always on a trajectory from knowing little to knowing more, and that they engage with evidence, ask questions, develop and refine hypotheses, and continue in this vein until they are satisfied that the shape of some tentative historical truth has begun to emerge. Translating this idea for students has been a central element of literature on history teaching in England for some time (Husbands et al., 2003). It might be possible to argue that there are 'powerful debates' happening in relation to such questions in history, and that awareness of such debates might, in turn, constitute powerful knowledge.

It might also be possible to make the case that it is 'powerful' to appreciate that historians ask distinctive types of question about the past; that asking and answering such questions entails a set of approaches that are broadly similar; and that the processes involved in asking and answering second-order, or disciplinary, questions have the potential to be generalisable. Some examples of what historians ask and answer are questions around:

- why things happened
- how things changed or stayed the same
- the impact of events
- the similarities or differences between people's experiences
- appropriate generalisations
- the nature of historical evidence
- the ways in which the past has been interpreted or represented
- historical significance.

All of these types of question have rich traditions within historical study, but also in the study of school history. Fordham (2016), for instance, shows how history teachers in England have developed highly subject-specific discourses about the teaching of substantive and second-order concepts in the

classroom. Indeed, Young (2016, 2021) notes that classroom research on second-order concepts by history educators such as Buxton (2016) and Foster (2016) has contributed significantly to defining powerful knowledge in history. More recently, and in a similar vein, Young references Lee's (2017) concept of 'historical literacy' as a form of powerful knowledge in history (Young, 2021).

However, even with this more promising lead, defining powerful knowledge as second-order concepts, or disciplinary knowledge, still raises several problems of definition, and therefore of curriculum construction. First, on the level of definition, White (2018) points out that although concepts such as 'continuity and change' have specific meanings within history, they are not completely divorced from the everyday concepts, and therefore they do not meet Young's definition of powerful knowledge. It is possible to argue, as Blow (2011) or Counsell (2005) do, that seemingly everyday concepts such as 'continuity and change' have unique meanings as disciplinary constructs in the study of history. Yet, even ignoring overlap between the distinctive and the everyday, a deeper exploration of the discipline quickly unpicks notions that there is neat disciplinary agreement about such concepts in the first place.

Thus far, the historical discipline has been referred to as if it were a coherent whole. In reality, the 'discipline' of history is a maelstrom of competing groups, individuals and ideas. From his perspective as a Jewish historian, Bloch (1992), for instance, referred to the historical discipline as 'the guild', conjuring up not just images of dedicated craftsmen, but of competing power groups, contested methods, protectionism and petty self-interestedness. It is probably worth noting here that any concept which places power in the hands of a discipline that has such a poor record of empowering non-White historians, and women, probably needs to be looked at with some scepticism anyway. The recent race and ethnicity report produced by the Royal Historical Society makes this point powerfully (Atkinson et al., 2018). This process of exclusion and silencing occurs not only in the discipline, but also within the community of history teachers (Dennis, 2021). This matters immensely, because it means that when historians explore issues of cause, for instance, there is no real consensus on what constitutes a proper object for study, let alone a means of answering such questions. Some historians gravitate towards looking at human agency, while others dismiss human action as inconsequential next to the huge dialectical sweeps of historical forces. By the same token, some seek to study the machinations of those in power, while others pursue the history of those made invisible by the powerful (Bloch, 1992; Cannadine, 2002; Carr, 1990). These are naturally extremes, but they illustrate the point that it is not easy in history to make even the basic disciplinary claim – 'when investigating causes, the discipline of history agrees that both personal and impersonal causal factors should be explored', or, 'students should study both social and political history' – as has been attempted by researchers in the past (Seixas and Morton, 2013). There are also wider debates about the ultimate purposes of historical study, which shape the objects of study and chosen methodologies for schools as well. For example, Tosh has inspired work by history teachers which explores the concept of 'usable pasts' (Howson, 2009; Howson and Shemilt, 2011; Tosh, 2010). Similarly, recent work by history educators has drawn on Rüsen's concept of 'historical consciousness' to explore how students are enabled to look at the uses of history (Harris, 2021b; Kitson, 2021; Nordgren, 2021; Rüsen, 2017; Smith and Jackson, 2021). Meanwhile, Collingwood's concept of 'historical imagination' has seen a recent resurgence in teachers' classroom experimentation (Collingwood, 1994; Harley-McKeown, 2021; Hill, 2020; Sellin, 2020). All of these approaches to historical study will necessarily use very different second-order conceptual lenses than a teacher inspired by the methodologies of Carr (1990). Unlike the sciences, which tend towards the identification of universal truths, history seeks better and better understanding of the variety of human experience through time. This is, by definition, fractal, and tends to infinite variation, just like life itself.

Beyond these historiographical debates, there is also a wider range of criticisms about how Western historians have dominated the development of historical methods and areas of study. Historians such as Trouillot (2015), Cutrara (2018) and Sheehan (2021) have all made the case that non-Western and Indigenous historical methods are often sidelined. Who has the power to define what counts as history is an important part of what is perceived as powerful knowledge. Young (2021) is quite dismissive of this point, equating Indigenous ways of knowing history as pre-modern. As Fulbrook (2002: 7) notes, 'the very plurality of approaches in history suggest there is no single disciplinary approach'.

Of course, such intricacies may have to be set to one side in the name of practicality. It is certainly possible for students to study history and understand elements and ideas of history without them getting lost in a sea of historiographical intrigue. Indeed, even the concept of history as disputed might have some merit as a 'powerful' disciplinary idea. Some acceptable simplification might lead to the conclusion that there probably is a broad agreement among most historians on valid and invalid approaches to

historical study, and that such approaches should form the core of how the discipline is translated into a school subject (Megill et al., 2007). In doing so, it is possible to return to a tentative definition of powerful knowledge in history: namely 'powerful processes', 'powerful questions' and 'powerful debates'. This is certainly a line with which Young (2021) seems to agree in his most recent writing on powerful knowledge.

However, such a definition brings the discussion full circle. If truth processes, disciplinary questions and their related debates are the universal elements of historical study, then the curriculum skeleton being created is once again void of substantive content. If powerful knowledge is disciplinary knowledge, there is still no justification for students studying any one set of substantive knowledge over another. It might be possible to make a case to base the entirety of a Key Stage 3 history curriculum on topics connected to the growth, development and crises of the Kingdom of Benin. The only thing which would prevent teachers doing this would be a judgement about the extent to which students should know the history of the nation in which they are currently residing, for instance. Such a justification might be perfectly acceptable, but it would not be supported via the lens of powerful knowledge. There is seemingly no conception of powerful knowledge in history in which substantive content selections do not have to be justified in relation to wider principles and aims. This does not mean a return to the relativism of Young and Muller's (2010) *Future 2*, but it does mean that those who construct a curriculum in history need to think beyond the tempting shortcut of powerful knowledge. In doing this, history educators need to refer to the wider, or profane, world which Young rejects in the pursuit of a body of specialised knowledge. As Nordgren (2021: 184) points out, 'history as a school subject must refer actively to the contemporary world to make sense: ... what is extrinsically relevant will affect what becomes intrinsically significant for the inner logic of the subject'. In short, history educators would be better served thinking about the aims and principles of their teaching as a guide for curriculum construction, rather than attempting to identify a set of value-free powerful knowledge.

## Powerful distractions

This paper has aimed to explore the question of why the concept of powerful knowledge has not been more successful in securing meaningful curriculum reform for social justice in England. It has shown that the concept of powerful knowledge has been interpreted in very different ways by the Department for Education, Ofsted and history educators when compared to Young's original intent. Indeed, these misinterpretations have led to a version of powerful knowledge which Young (2021) claims not to recognise.

It has also been demonstrated that the problem lies not just in how the concept has been interpreted, but also in the very definition of powerful knowledge itself. At its inception, the concept of powerful knowledge sought to sidestep questions of power and ethics in content selection for school curricula. In reality, this proves to be impossible in relation to history education, as there is no definition of powerful knowledge which can establish a value-free set of curriculum content to study. The gap is being filled instead with an increasingly narrow and nationalistic set of constructions that confound young people's understanding of the world in which they live (Smith and Jackson, 2021). To paraphrase a comment made by Eric Foner, the history that students are being taught could not have produced the present we are living in.

History educators, therefore, need to take note. The concept of powerful knowledge is proving to be as much a distraction from good curricular thinking as a help. History has the potential to enable students to consider their own experiences and the experiences of others, to humanise both the past and the present. It can provide channels for understanding, and help develop tolerance and social cohesion. But, as Nordgren (2021) notes, it cannot do this without careful attention to these dimensions. History educators who are serious about providing a 'powerful' curriculum for their students might be better served worrying less about powerful knowledge and thinking more robustly about the ethical justifications of their content selections (Smith and Jackson, 2021). Without this important work, history education in England risks becoming stuck in a self-referential set of arguments for retaining an outdated and damaging national narrative in place of a true history education.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Conflicts of interest statement

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