Knowledge, Policy and Practice in Education and the Struggle for Social Justice

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Chapter 5

Geoff Whitty: Student, Friend and Colleague; Some Personal Reflections

Michael Young

Introduction

This chapter is largely autobiographical. In writing with Geoff’s recent death still so much in my mind, I found it could not be otherwise. It begins with when we met in 1968; he was in my sociology of education tutor group during his Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) year at the Institute of Education (IOE). I then discuss some examples of the joint activities that our early contact led to and how much I learned from Geoff when he was later in my MA class, when we were co-authors of a number of publications and when we were fellow members of the loose movement of radical teachers and academics associated with the ‘the new sociology of education’. As our careers took us in different directions there followed a break in our professional association of some 20 years. However, over the most recent decade, as emeritus professors (in Geoff’s case, emeritus director) at the IOE, with offices near to each other, we began to see each other more regularly and to reflect on our shared experiences as sociologists of education and our responses to each other’s work, both of which continued to be contrasting.

We did not get as far as writing anything together again; however, we discussed the possibility, and I think we both felt that a joint reflection on our ‘common journeys’ into and through the sociology of education might shed light on the dilemmas that others working in the discipline have faced and shared. Our conversations were sadly cut short by his illness and then his death, and although I was aware that he had only months to live, this was so sudden that I was left with no joint plans to
take our shared thoughts forward. This chapter therefore can be no more than a modest substitute for the joint article that we were planning to write. I hope, however, that it sheds some light on aspects of Geoff as a person for those who hardly knew him or only knew him as a sociologist of education whose papers they had read.

**Transforming or building on a tradition?**

My memory of writing with Geoff suggests that implicitly we shared a set of values and assumptions that invariably took over from any differences that emerged when we had gone our own ways and appeared to differ. One thing we had in common but I think took for granted was that when we both became sociologists of education in the period 1967–73 it was a time when the discipline was not only expanding (and initially not controversial) but was on the cusp of undergoing a radical transformation. In the 1950s and 1960s there were very few people in England who regarded themselves as sociologists of education and those who did so saw their role as largely an adjunct of studies of social stratification. Their task was identifying the extent to which a child’s educational opportunities were distributed according to their social class. It had a strong set of social justice values focused on identifying and suggesting ways of reducing social class inequalities and a confidence that if research could demonstrate convincingly the evidence of unfairness, policymakers would find ways of remedying it. However, by the time I (and Geoff, a few years later) began our studies, the discipline was beginning to change. We endorsed the commitment to social justice and identifying and reducing social class inequalities of earlier sociologists of education (such as AH Halsey and Jean Floud), but thought it was necessary to go further. We were inspired by Basil Bernstein’s early studies of the social class basis of language codes (Bernstein 1971) and his early ideas about the curriculum. In this work, Bernstein had begun to offer a sociocultural explanation of the social class inequalities that earlier sociologists had identified.

As a consequence, a number of us began to focus on the discontinuities (and sometimes overt conflicts) between the culture of schooling and the culture that the majority of pupils (predominantly working-class) brought to school. Our hope was that by broadening the focus of sociology of education to schools themselves, their curriculum and their teachers’ pedagogy, we would be able to develop a more effective approach to overcoming the inequalities identified in the official...
reports and sociological research of the preceding decade. Of course, as the travails and divisions of sociology of education in the following years demonstrated, we had, at the time, a far from adequate grasp of the consequences of introducing this greater complexity to our analyses.

**My early impressions of Geoff**

It is at this point that I would like to pause to reflect on the first of Geoff’s qualities that I want to pay tribute to as part of this contribution. It is one that cut across how I knew him as a student and later as a colleague, and it was a quality that I think he found easier to express in what he said than in what he wrote. In a quiet and low-key but authoritative way, Geoff was able to question the ideas of others without undermining their confidence and, as a result, he could often help them to take the step needed to address the problem they had identified.

I was first struck by this quality of Geoff’s when he was an MA student and I was his tutor. It was the early 1970s and, as I have indicated, in many ways a unique time to be involved in the sociology of education. The educational climate was radical and optimistic about the possibilities of change; boundaries between lecturers and students were blurring, and most students were teachers studying part-time and not very different in age from their tutors. Evening seminars at the IOE invariably continued in the pub long after they were formally designed to finish.

It was a context in which Geoff quickly became a kind of informal ‘leader’ of the group. However, he managed to do this without undermining me as the responsible tutor or intimidating the other students and making them think that he knew much more than they did. It was as if he intuited that everyone wanted the discussion to go in a particular direction, but needed someone, often not me as the tutor, to voice it. I recently shared my memory of these seminars with Geoff and he agreed that they were a remarkable group of students and that they represented a rare example of what might be called ‘unplanned collaborative pedagogy’. The series ended with a collective vote that as we had much more to discuss we should continue the seminars after the end of the term in different people’s homes. Of course, everyone was under pressure and the meetings did not continue for more than, at most, four or five further sessions. However, they established a model of what was possible, and it is significant that a number of those involved became
contributors to both of the books we edited together (Young and Whitty 1977; Whitty and Young 1976).

**Our early dialogues and collaborations**

Our collaborations were based in contrasting as much as shared views. Our first difference was over the potential of the ‘new sociology of education’ and ideas that I had explored theoretically in my first book, *Knowledge and Control* (Young 1971). This book was not intentionally political or only in the academic sense that it questioned much that was taken for granted in education at the time. It was initially inspired and suggested by Basil Bernstein, when he was my MA tutor (and later my head of department), and I hoped the book would contribute to a broader set of research questions in the sociology of education that linked the distribution of power and knowledge. However, it was quickly popularized (although not immediately politicized) by David Gorbutt (1972), a teacher educator and former student, who saw it as pointing to a new agenda for teachers and lecturers as potential agents of change. It was not long, though, before its ‘social constructivist’ assumptions were challenged by ideas inspired by Marxist theory. It was at this point that Geoff intervened with his outstanding paper ‘Sociology and the Problem of Radical Educational Change’ (Whitty 1974) in which he challenged existing Marxist theories as being overdetermined and the social constructivist assumptions of the ‘new sociology of education’ theories as neglecting questions of power and social class. In coining the concept ‘naïve possibilitarianism’, his paper conceptualized the issues better than anyone else writing at the time and is still highly relevant today.

A related aspect of Geoff’s approach to the sociology of education – which I did not recognize at the time, but which I think he always carried with him and has been a model for me – would also reveal itself in one of the first examples of our joint authorship. The *Times Educational Supplement* had asked us to review a book edited by Nell Keddie, one of my former students, called *The Myth of Cultural Deprivation* (Keddie 1973). It was published in a Penguin Special series alongside books by Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, all, at least in theory, trying to turn the established educational world upside down. I remember wanting to write a very positive review persuading everyone that they should read the book. Geoff, however, was more cautious and raised the question, ‘what are radical critiques for?’ Demolishing prevailing arguments does not, of itself, achieve anything. So we titled our review ‘Beyond
Critiques’ and we argued that although ‘critiques’ of current policy or (in this case) much current research, were important, they would only have some purpose if they indicated the nature of the alternatives that they implied. Without at least theoretical possibilities, critiques could be more undermining than emancipatory for those they criticized. This was a principle that Geoff followed in much of his later work, and which I have attempted to follow as well.

Geoff and I built on these dialogues and collaborations in our afore-mentioned jointly edited books – Whitty and Young, 1976 and Young and Whitty, 1977 – in which we set out to hold together analyses of the potential of the growing contradictions of capitalism and the potentially progressive role that sociologists of education working with radical teachers could play in establishing a socialist society. We concluded in these books that the possibility of radical educational change was ultimately a political issue that will depend on circumstances far beyond education. In this case, Geoff and I resolved our conceptual differences in a shared politics rather than in a new theoretical position in sociology.

However, Margaret Thatcher’s success at the 1979 general election put an end to any optimism that capitalism could be easily overcome, at least in the short term. Geoff and my interpretations of and response to this ‘policy turn’ and the failure of the movement that we had been involved in were rather different, although not at odds. However, they meant that we barely interacted for over two decades.

A parting of ways

We faced, at the time, a very different context. By the mid-1980s, sociology of education (and indeed other educational disciplines) had been almost completely removed from the initial and further professional education curriculum at the IOE (as at faculties of education across the country) and those working in the discipline were almost forced to redirect their attention towards policy issues, if it was to survive. Geoff was led into giving a greater emphasis to policy research. He went on to pursue a series of highly regarded studies in the areas of teacher education policy and schools reform; he would also take up a series of managerial positions, first at Bristol Polytechnic and later back at the IOE as its director.

This leads me to the second of my personal reflections on Geoff. Two later incidents that I remember are worth recalling as they highlight other aspects of his character. The first was when in the late 1990s he
was invited to apply for the Karl Mannheim Professorship of Sociology of Education at the IOE to succeed Basil Bernstein. He knew that I was the senior member of the department and that I might myself be thinking of applying for the post, which I did. It was some years since we had last met, and I was surprised to get a phone call from him asking to come and see me at home. He told me that he would withdraw his application if I was unhappy about it. As one of my former students, and a co-editor of two books, he did not want to be in competition with me without at least getting my opinion first. Of course, I told him to go ahead and apply – his CV was much stronger than mine – and he was appointed. Nevertheless, he need not have come to see me and even I, who had known him quite well at one time, was surprised that he had. Likewise, following this appointment, I remember him asking me about the book that I must have mentioned that I had vaguely thought of writing. I said that I had thought of ‘The Curriculum of the Future’ as a possible title and he encouraged me to stick with it, which I did. Without that conversation, I am not sure I would have got the book together at all; it was later translated into Korean, Chinese and Portuguese (in Brazil) and without it I would certainly not have been appointed as a professor.

The reviewers of that book echoed Geoff’s view of what he had earlier referred to as my ‘naïve possibilitarianism’, although they did not use the concept! By then – this was in 2000 – the ‘new sociology of education’ was no longer ‘new’ and was now little mentioned. My ‘naivety’ was, according to the reviewers, expressed in the educational possibilities of the changes in capitalism known as ‘flexible specialisation’ (Piore and Sabel 1986) that I wrote about. In contrast to the late 1970s, when it was a politician, Margaret Thatcher, and her slogan, ‘there is no such thing as society’, that contributed to the end of the radical hopes of many of us, by now, over a decade later, it was a fellow sociologist, Christel Lane (Lane and Wood 2012) with her more sceptical approach, who predicted that ‘high-tec’ Fordism rather than the new forms of flexible specialization associated with ‘post-Fordism’ was a better description of capitalism’s likely future. I never asked Geoff what he thought about the ‘new times’ of the late 1980s, though I imagine he would have been sympathetic to Christel Lane’s view; the signs of new more flexible and democratic work relationships were few and far between beyond Jutland and Emilia Romagna.
Reuniting and a continuing dialogue

Some may find it strange that Geoff and I lost contact, almost completely, from the end of the 1970s and that it was not until he retired as director of the IOE (though not from academic life) in 2010 that we began to get to know each other again, and to value each other’s work, often in ways we had not always done in the past. Meeting more than in passing in the last few years and beginning to reflect on our experiences of our discipline, the sociology of education, and recognizing that earlier work was often a kind of dialogue that we had hardly acknowledged was not going to be easy, certainly for me. After all the years of lack of contact, and the occasional tensions when he was director, we both had to rebuild our confidence in each other.

During this time we found new differences of view. These were concerned with the curriculum implications of my recently developed focus on knowledge in the curriculum (Young 2007), and the apparent similarities in this ‘knowledge turn’ and the curriculum policies of the Conservative-led coalition government, as voiced by Michael Gove as secretary of state for education. In recalling this dialogue, I am once again drawn back to a personal reflection of Geoff as a colleague, conscious as I am of how much I miss Geoff’s characteristic combination of empathy, rigour and principle.

I cannot remember the exact date of the seminar; it was around 2011 and in the early days of the coalition administration. It took place at the University of Bath when Geoff was a part-time professor there. In my talk I made the case for an academic subject-based curriculum for all pupils in secondary schools (at least up to the age of 16). Geoff suggested that I sounded as if I must have been Michael Gove’s speech-writer. Of course, I had not been, and there was more than a touch of irony in his comment. However, he was noting the striking if superficial similarities between my arguments and Gove’s proposals – an issue that at the time I had not fully taken account of.

I have had much worse things said to me about my views on the curriculum; however, the point I want to make is that Geoff’s response made me think about how to engage with the comparison between my views and those of a politician with views I was otherwise opposed to. I remember my initial thoughts were, ‘How could he say that?’ and ‘What about the books we wrote together?’ But, moving beyond our personal differences, he was raising a question that I have often returned to. It is only recently that I have become aware that the problem involves
conceptualizing the curriculum in terms of subject contents (Gove’s position) and a sociological view that links ‘content’ to the resources they depend on (Young 2018).

Geoff would also respond on this issue more formally in his chapter for the book on my contribution to the field that three of my IOE colleagues edited (Guile et al. 2017). In 1970 Basil Bernstein wrote a paper titled ‘Can Education Compensate for Society?’ that defined an issue that has remained central to the sociology of education to this day. It was published in the weekly magazine New Society and so in comparison to most of his work was and is widely quoted and, one hopes, widely read, at least within the education community. Geoff referred to it in his 2017 chapter (Whitty 2017) when he quoted Bernstein as arguing that: ‘education must involve the introduction of children to the universalistic meanings of public forms of thought’ (Bernstein 1971).

He went on to argue that Bernstein was making a pedagogic and not an epistemological point; however, this leaves an ambiguity that Bernstein resolved in his later work. If a teacher’s pedagogy does not include the aim of epistemological access,5 there is no guarantee that her/his students will be educated in the sense of the Bernstein quote above. Geoff recognized the importance of the curriculum/pedagogy distinction but did not take the issue further.

Geoff and I also had our differing perspectives on the social realist developments in the sociology of education in terms of my work with Joe Muller on the curriculum and professional knowledge (Young and Muller 2015), to which Geoff responded directly in the last book he would publish (Whitty and Furlong 2017). Here Geoff took a more cautious stance on the question of knowledge than we did. In relation to the curriculum he drew on Bernstein to reach a slightly ambiguous conclusion on the issue of subject boundaries. And in his discussion of professional knowledge he sided with Sue Clegg and her argument that our defence of the role of disciplines was in danger of overemphasizing academic knowledge and not taking enough account of the breadth of knowledge that patients and clients of professionals bring to solving the problems they present. These issues are likely to be at the centre of debates about the future of professions that many argue is increasingly threatened by developments in artificial intelligence (Susskind and Susskind 2015).

Each of these differences remained unresolved between us. If I had tried to tackle how we differed on the ‘knowledge in education’ issue on my own, the result would have been a one-sided critique that I did not want to undertake in this reflection on and appreciation of Geoff’s work.
I am left with a question as to whether educational issues are always resolved (or not) politically, as I think we both thought in the 1970s, or whether, as I am inclined to think now, there is something that links the issue of knowledge to education that transcends politics because both research and teaching involve a commitment to truth. This is not to say that the distribution of knowledge is not a political issue, but that it is not solely political.

One thought that I did not have an opportunity to put to him was that if these two periods are seen together, they suggest that there was a continuity in his analyses in the form of a kind of implicit ‘middle way’, or perhaps, a dialectical approach that he never made fully explicit. That said, his criticisms were always couched as reservations and expressed in ways that left me with questions that I knew I needed to address. I am only sorry that we did not have the opportunity to follow them through, and as a result offer clearer options to policymakers, teachers and our fellow researchers. As Christine Counsell says in a recent paper, educational issues, and curriculum issues in particular, are always about making decisions and therefore about power at every level (Counsell 2018). In engaging with the tricky issue of knowledge in education we need to consider the decisions that teachers make every day in the classroom as well those made by governments, the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, inspectors and examining boards6 – issues that were at the heart of Geoff’s work throughout his career.

Closing comments

This chapter has been more personal that most contributions to this collection, although it does, as Geoff’s work often did, relate to some of the ‘big issues’ that Western capitalism and its education systems are facing. However, I found it was impossible to bring together more fully these personal experiences that say something about Geoff as a person with a more formal academic appreciation of his work. I am, however, confident that other contributors will do this.

Geoff was, more than most, a complex person and if I had not emphasized the examples of his personal acts of kindness and concern, I would not have been true to Geoff as the person who, in the last period of his life, I felt that I began to get to know better. So what I have tried to do in this chapter is to give those who never knew him but will read his publications a perspective on Geoff the person and not just Geoff the
famous sociologist of education who held senior positions in a number of institutions and was awarded a CBE. I think this 'hidden person' may also be found in his writing but in a slightly different way. He was surprisingly tentative about his judgments and in the criticisms that he made of others; his careful and considered form of argument was, I would suggest, an indication of a modesty that was not obvious or easy to recognize given his achievements.

The two issues on which Geoff and I explicitly differed were and remain central issues for many sociologists of education. They arose both at the beginning and towards the end of our careers. In the first case, we differed in emphasis, resolved our differences in two joint publications but found the position we took overtaken by events. In the second, Geoff was critical of my 'social realist' focus on knowledge-led curriculum. He thought that I had gone too far and not taken enough account of the ideas that I had argued for at the beginning of my career. Our differences were in a sense the direct opposite of those we had resolved in the 1970s. One point worth noting; there is very little in the current political climate that suggests a resolution couched in political terms similar to those we drew on in the 1970s is likely, at least in the near future.

Geoff Whitty influenced my academic career, especially in two critical moments, as much as anyone (except perhaps Basil Bernstein, who set me on the road to focusing on knowledge and the curriculum). Of much wider importance, his body of work in sociology of education has held together our often tangled and divided discipline when at times it looked as if it might disintegrate altogether. We did not always agree. However, we began by asking similar questions about social justice and the distribution of knowledge in education and we were still asking them several decades later.

I shall never forget how, at the 2018 event to celebrate his 50-year association with the IOE (from student to director emeritus), Geoff amused all of us with his description of his application to do a PGCE there being initially rejected. Nor shall I forget the hopes we shared in the 1970s, even if their realization seems much further away today than it did when we first wrote together. I am deeply grateful for what I learned from him – in particular his sense of ‘hope without optimism’ that the title of Terry Eagleton’s recent book (Eagleton 2017) expresses so well.
Acknowledgements

There were many people in my thoughts when writing this chapter, but none read earlier drafts. However, by chance, a few days before the date for sending chapters to the editors, my South African friend, the historian Peter Kallaway, came to stay. I was on the point of writing to the editors to say that after a number of attempts, I had decided that I could not send them a draft. Peter’s response was typical, ‘Just write it’, he said. Somehow he gave me the confidence to do what he said, so thank you, Peter; as you have not read it, you need feel no responsibility for its content! I would also like to thank Andrew and Emma for their elegant restructuring of my original draft.

Notes

1 Geoff’s journey was from teaching history in a comprehensive school and mine from teaching chemistry in a technically oriented middle school.

2 Tony Crosland’s famous Government Circular 10/65 requesting Local Education Authorities to begin converting their provision of secondary education into a single ‘comprehensive’ system was a powerful example of their success.

3 For example, Louis Althusser’s much quoted chapter in his book Lenin and Philosophy which located schools as part of an ‘ideological state apparatus’ (Althusser 1971).

4 The concept ‘flexible specialisation’ referred to quite different work relationships to those currently associated with what is now known as the ‘gig economy’.

5 This argument is explained in detail in Muller’s paper ‘Every Picture Tells a Story’ included in Young and Muller (2015).

6 I am reminded in any focus on decision-making of the political scientists, Bachrach and Baratz’s (1963) unforgettable point that often the issues about which we do not make decisions (they called them ‘non-decisions’) may be as important as those that we do.

References


