



Powerful Knowledge in Social Studies Subjects—Challenges and Possibilities: A Problematizing Approach—Introduction

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Issues relating to the design of knowledge-based teaching in social studies subjects are always topical and it is important to discuss them in light of both research and pedagogical practice. Such a discussion needs to be historically aware and at the same time sensitive to contemporary debates and interests.

In recent years, Michael Young's thinking about powerful knowledge has come to play a prominent role in many contexts where knowledge issues have been discussed in relation to the curriculum. The approach he has developed, in several contexts together with Johan Muller, has aroused a great deal of interest. Young's and Muller's curricular-oriented analyses have also made their mark on pedagogically focused research. In a number of publications, the curricular and pedagogical interest in how powerful knowledge can be understood and developed in teaching and pedagogical strategies has been the central focus.

In this Special Issue, a number of articles have been collected that make relevant contributions to research focusing on knowledge-based teaching in social studies. These contributions can be read for inspiration and to enhance understanding, and as an introduction to pathways for taking research further, with a focus on both curricular and pedagogical issues, considerations and analyses. The various contributions form, one could say, a multidimensional platform for the analysis of knowledge-based teaching in social studies, but also for the development of research on this theme with reference to the concept of powerful knowledge.

The introductory article is entitled "Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education—Questions of Epistemology and Subject Literacy in Democratic and Inclusive Educational Contexts" and is authored by Bodil Liljefors Persson. In her contribution, the author addresses ongoing discussions regarding powerful knowledge in relation to social sciences in a broader sense, but special attention is given to religious education. The discussion highlights teaching on norms as well as values within teaching, and the concept of subject literacy is used as an explorative signpost for the development of teaching in multireligious and secular contexts, for which powerful knowledge is analysed as an epistemological prerequisite.

In the second article, written by Olof Franck, powerful knowledge is also treated as a conceptual and epistemologically fruitful prerequisite for the teaching of ethics and values. At the centre of the argument is teaching on controversial issues, defined with regard to a contextual approach. The need for the exploration of an ethical meta-language for the establishment of a theoretical framework for such teaching, defined with regard to the concept of powerful knowledge, and in which teachers may find support for teaching on controversial ethical issues, is highlighted here.

The next contribution has a focus directed towards geography, considered as a social studies subject, as is the case in Swedish schools. Sally Windsor and Jeana Kriewaldt present an analysis of how powerful knowledge and powerful pedagogy can be considered to be keystones in an approach relating to schools' geography curricula, where the development



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of structured teaching programmes for students is intended to extend their knowledge and actions for a sustainable future.

In the subsequent contribution to the Special Issue, “Important Perspectives and Concepts to Teach in Ethics Education”, Annika Lilja presents a study in which eight teachers in Swedish compulsory schools were interviewed about central perspectives and concepts related to their teaching of ethics. One of the results was that the teachers think that certain fundamental concepts are necessary in order for students to be able to recognise the teaching and understand what a life in a democracy means. The descriptions given by the teachers of what they perceived as important perspectives and concepts relate to knowledge that has the power and potential for social justice, which provides a relevant angle on the theme of this Special Issue.

In the fifth contribution of the Special Issue, “Knowing and the Known: A Philosophical and Pedagogical Critique on the Concept of ‘Powerful Knowledge’”, Siebren Miedema develops a critical analysis on the basis of the assumption that “the popularity” of the concept of ‘powerful knowledge’ has “increased during the last decade in academic circles and among politicians, too”. Referring to educational philosophers such as John White and Ingrid Carlgren and the educational theorist Gert Biesta, Miedema objects to the way in which the social-realist concept of powerful knowledge is used in sociocultural approaches, arguing that we are dealing here with two incompatible and incommensurable approaches.

In the next contribution, “Learning about What? Non-Confessional Religious Education after the Dissolution of the Binary Categories ‘Religion’ and ‘Secular’”, Peder Thalén draws attention to how religion and secularity have come to be dichotomised and perceived as binary entities. The academic discussion of post-secularity has, according to Thalén, shown the absurdity of such a structuring. In his contribution, he explores how the concept of powerful knowledge can make important contributions to a critical analysis of the binarity mentioned.

The seventh article in the Special Issue is titled “Can Powerful Knowledge Save Us? Critical Reflections through the Lens of Political Education”, and is authored by Johan Sandahl and Mattias Nylund. The authors examine, in the context of contemporary debate, “increasingly polarized political views”, “democratic erosion” and “social unrest”, and make references to the importance of academically grounded education as an antidote to give young people a clear basis for developing necessary contextual knowledge. Sandahl and Nylund claim, however, that a consensus regarding what “good political education” more specifically means does not exist, and they devote their presentation to critically examining “the ideas of powerful knowledge and its potential for political education” in relation to secondary schools. One conclusion of this study is that “powerful knowledge” or “disciplinary thinking” is “necessary for a good political education but not sufficient in its own right”.

The last article in the Special Issue is written by Klas Andersson, Kristoffer Larsson and Mattias Börjesson, who focus on the 2017 national exams in RE in Sweden. The national tests, which are given in all four social sciences subjects—civics, geography, history and religion (RE)—are ascribed an important role in education in Swedish discourse, and the authors emphasize that, through their validity and universality, the tests are perceived to manifest a knowledge that “empowers the knower to transcend her or his everyday experiences and take part in society’s conversations, which are central goals of social studies education”. Andersson, Larsson and Börjesson examine ways in which “aspects of powerful knowledge are manifested in the 2017 national test in RE”, and “whether the students are expected to demonstrate knowledge and abilities in relation to powerful knowledge”.

In summary, it can be said that the eight contributions reflect important critical and constructive dimensions of the Special Issue’s theme, “Powerful Knowledge in Social Studies Subjects—Challenges and Possibilities: A Problematising Approach”.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

List of Contributions:

1. Liljefors Persson, Bodil. 2023. Powerful Knowledge in Religious Education—Questions of Epistemology and Subject Literacy in Democratic and Inclusive Educational Contexts. *Social Sciences* 12: 642. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12120642>.
2. Franck, Olof. 2023. Powerful Knowledge as a Conceptual Frame for Teaching Controversial Issues in Ethics and Values Education in Social Studies Subjects. *Social Sciences* 12: 619. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110619>.
3. Windsor, Sally, and Jeana Kriewaldt. 2023. School Geography's Critical Role for a More Sustainable Future: Powerful Knowledge and Praxis. *Social Sciences* 12: 585. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110585>.
4. Lilja, Annika. 2023. Important Perspectives and Concepts to Teach in Ethics Education. *Social Sciences* 12: 582. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100582>.
5. Miedema, Siebren. 2023. Knowing and the Known: A Philosophical and Pedagogical Critique on the Concept of 'Powerful Knowledge'. *Social Sciences* 12: 578. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100578>.
6. Thalén, Peder. 2023. Learning about What? Non-Confessional Religious Education after the Dissolution of the Binary Categories 'Religion' and 'Secular'. *Social Sciences* 12: 573. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100573>.
7. Sandahl, Johan, and Mattias Björklund. 2023. Can Powerful Knowledge Save Us? Critical Reflections through the Lens of Political Education. *Social Sciences* 12: 556. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100556>.
8. Andersson, Klas, Mattias Börjesson, and Kristoffer Larsson. 2023. Powerful Knowledge and the 2017 Swedish National Test in Religious Education. *Social Sciences* 12: 533. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100533>.

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