

Whose knowledge counts and what counts as knowledge? Educational policy and student identities. (0121)

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Apple, throughout his essays, relates knowledge to power and explores how by using power to determine what counts as knowledge, and whose knowledge counts, minority groups are further marginalised and disenfranchised.<sup>1</sup> This paper considers how knowledge was defined through the policies of the New Labour and coalition governments and students position their identities in relation to this knowledge.

In 1995 Tony Blair told the Labour Party conference that “Education is the best economic policy there is for a modern country”.<sup>2</sup> This neo-liberal recasting of education as economic policy is dangerous because it denies the intrinsic value of knowledge, reducing it to a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

In the boom years of New Labour this policy appeared to work, GCSE and A level results rose year on year and Universities embraced the widening participation agenda, welcoming this burgeoning class of those who had embraced opportunities and ‘got their heads down’. The reality was however that during the boom times the many did do well, but the few didn’t: “education reforms couched in the rhetoric of choice, difference and diversity often turn out to be sophisticated ways of reproducing existing hierarchies of class and race.”<sup>3</sup> Education and economic inequalities grew.<sup>4</sup>

These inequalities are both more pronounced and more hidden because of the period of sustained economic growth and because the statistics mask the enormity of the problem.<sup>5</sup>

This Blairite view of knowledge as a means to an end meant that New Labour focused on what knowledge can lead to, not what counts as knowledge: “From Blair, in particular, came the message

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1 Michael W. Apple, *Knowledge, Power, and Education. The Selected Works of Michael W. Apple* (2013, Routledge)

2 Tony Blair, ‘Leader’s speech, Brighton 1995’ (British Political Speech) [online] available at: <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=201> [accessed 22 November 2015]

3 Geoff Whitty, ‘Education, social class and social exclusion’ (2001) 16(4) *Journal of Education Policy* 287-295, p.289

4 John Hills et al., *An anatomy of economic inequality in the UK: Report of the National Equality Panel* (2010, Government Equalities Office), 1

5 John Hills et al., *An anatomy of economic inequality in the UK: Report of the National Equality Panel* (2010, Government Equalities Office), 73

that what mattered was the use to which knowledge might be put in the world.”<sup>6</sup> New Labour did not challenge the framework of the National Curriculum they inherited from the Conservatives<sup>7</sup> and with no firm ideological stance about what counts as knowledge the move to allowing the private sector to influence how knowledge is defined through the creation of academies was almost inevitable.<sup>8</sup>

The economic crash that followed the boom exposed the real lack of a coherent economic policy at the heart of New Labour and the claim that ‘learning led to earning’ was dismissed, the coalition government that succeeded New Labour was able to dismiss the widening participation agenda and bring in an agenda of austerity where funding for education was rationed.

The coalition government used the austerity agenda to justify the abolition of the EMA, the trebling of tuition fees and criticise ‘grade inflation’. Gillborn described this as a period of ‘interest divergence’, which he contrasted with Bell’s model of ‘interest convergence’<sup>9</sup> which is central to CRT.<sup>10</sup> What Gillborn argues is that the economic downturn has created the environment where white people feel that their economic well-being is threatened and they are content to support policies that shore-up the historical structures of racial domination.<sup>11</sup> He further cites clear evidence that an austerity agenda impacts disproportionately on black communities which compounds matters.<sup>12</sup> Gillborn’s theory is born out in the development of educational policy by both the coalition and Conservative governments of recent years.

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6 John Yandell, ‘Whose Knowledge Counts?’ (2013) (Institute of Education) [online] available at: [http://research.ioe.ac.uk/portal/services/downloadRegister/5316721/JY\\_knowledge131107.docx](http://research.ioe.ac.uk/portal/services/downloadRegister/5316721/JY_knowledge131107.docx) [accessed 23 November 2015]

7 John Yandell, ‘Whose Knowledge Counts?’ (2013) (Institute of Education) [online] available at: [http://research.ioe.ac.uk/portal/services/downloadRegister/5316721/JY\\_knowledge131107.docx](http://research.ioe.ac.uk/portal/services/downloadRegister/5316721/JY_knowledge131107.docx) [accessed 23 November 2015]

8 Stephen J. Ball, *Education plc: Understanding private sector participation in public sector education* (2007, Routledge).

9 Derick Bell, ‘*Brown v Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma’ (1980) 93(3) *Harvard Law Review* 518–533

10 David Gillborn, ‘Interest-divergence and the colour of cutbacks: race, recession and the undeclared war on Black children’ (2013) 34(4) *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 477-491, 478

11 David Gillborn, ‘Interest-divergence and the colour of cutbacks: race, recession and the undeclared war on Black children’ (2013) 34(4) *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 477-491, 487

12 David Gillborn, ‘Interest-divergence and the colour of cutbacks: race, recession and the undeclared war on Black children’ (2013) 34(4) *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 477-491, 487

Michael Gove saw the fallacy of the claim that knowledge had only instrumental value and took the opportunity to give a Conservative answer to the question 'what counts as knowledge' which is now entrenched in Britain's educational policies and structures.<sup>13</sup>

Specifically Gove made important comments about the relative merits of different forms of disciplinary knowledge as well as what is culturally valuable and he is conservative (with a small 'c') preferring the traditional in terms of culture, knowledge, and teaching method. Yandell argues that Gove prefers the traditional didactic methods with the teacher venerated to the 'sage on the stage'.<sup>14</sup> This view of teaching methodology characterises students as passive vessels waiting to receive knowledge from the teacher and is what Freire was describing, and critiquing, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.<sup>15</sup> Gove favours this absolutist idea of knowledge with limited scope for more modern ideas of relativism and this is clear from the 2013 version of the *National Curriculum* which has as its stated objective the introduction of children to "the best that has been thought and said".<sup>16</sup>

On cultural value Gove derides, for example, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Lord of the Flies* whilst lauding the work of George Eliot, Jane Austin, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. That Gove is saying one form of knowledge is more valid than another is concerning, that he derides every form of knowledge that reflects a cultural history other than white Englishness is prejudiced against everyone who doesn't identify with white English culture. Being taught someone else's culture, rather than your own, is, according to Critical Race Pedagogy, a form of emancipation.

Student identities and ideas as to what counts as knowledge will have been shaped by these two ideologies. In turn their conception of their own identity will shape how they position themselves in relation to knowledge and how they see knowledge positioned as it relates to them – is knowledge of their own culture valued or are they being asked to know a culture of 'other'?

The educational policies of New Labour directly correlated learning with earning and other socio-economic advantages. This neo-liberal approach frames education in the language of formal equality of opportunity.<sup>17</sup> What this alleged correlation between learning and earning did was exacerbate a culture of victim blaming – if you are economically disadvantaged it is because *you* failed at some

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13 Michael Gove, 'The Secretary of State's speech to Cambridge University on a liberal education' (25 November 2011) [online] available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-cambridge-university> [accessed 23 November 2015]

14 John Yandell, 'Curriculum, Pedagogy, Assessment: of rigour and unfinished revolutions' in M. Allen and P. Ainley (eds), *Beyond the Coalition: reclaiming the agenda* (2013, Radicaled)

15 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edn., 1996, Penguin)

16 Department for Education, *The National Curriculum in England: Framework Document* (2013)

17 Tony Blair, 'Leader's speech, Brighton 1995' (British Political Speech) [online] available at: <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=201> [accessed 22 November 2015]

point in your past to learn. Further, the students' relationships to knowledge and how they perceive knowledge is shaped by their 'working identity'.<sup>18</sup>

The roles and behaviours students adopt are racialised and students make unconscious, or even conscious, choices as to how they wish to be perceived: "In this sense, Working Identity refers both to the perceived choices people make about their self-presentation... and to the perceived identity that emerges from those choices (how black we determine a person to be)."<sup>19</sup> Working identities are gendered as well as racialised and BME women are especially impacted because of the intersection of these two identities: "these two identities interact and intersect in ways that materially shape a person's vulnerability to the experiences of discrimination."<sup>20</sup>

The working identity that a student has – both how she sees herself and how others see her – impacts upon her experiences of education. If she has a working identity that assimilates whiteness and masculinity then her position in relation to knowledge and the power and privilege this gives her are different from if she has a working identity that incorporates blackness and femininity.

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18 Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013, OUP USA), p.1

19 Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013, OUP USA), p.1

20 Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White?: Rethinking Race in Post-Racial America* (2013, OUP USA), p.71