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Knowledge, Power, and Cultural Representation in Education

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between knowledge, power, and cultural representation in education, arguing that school knowledge is never a neutral transmission of settled facts but a selective arrangement patterned by relations of authority and legitimacy. It brings together four bodies of scholarship. First, the sociology of knowledge — Bernstein's account of classification and framing, Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of cultural reproduction, and Apple's critical curriculum theory — establishes that curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation each encode power. Second, the "powerful knowledge" debate, traced from Bernstein through Muller, Young and Muller, and Beck, is used to distinguish knowledge that is powerful because it enables disciplined thought from "knowledge of the powerful," a distinction frequently collapsed in curriculum reform. Third, research on textbooks and epistemic injustice documents how dominant groups are privileged and minorities marginalized through selection, proportion, framing, and narrative arc, extending in some accounts to the suppression of non-Western epistemologies. Fourth, the literature on culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy shows how instructional practice can build on students' cultural and linguistic experience while cultivating critical consciousness of structural inequality. The paper concludes that cultural representation is constitutive of educational quality rather than supplementary to it, that the curriculum is contested terrain open to transformation, and that enactment remains the sharpest difficulty — constrained by teacher bias, limited preparation, and unsupportive institutional structures, obstacles best understood as a multilevel learning problem rather than a matter of individual compliance.

Keywords: knowledge and power; curriculum theory; powerful knowledge; cultural reproduction

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1. Introduction

Few questions cut closer to the heart of educational theory than the relationship between what schools teach and who holds the authority to decide it. Education is never a neutral transmission of settled facts; it is a selective process in which some forms of knowledge are elevated as legitimate while others are marginalized, silenced, or never admitted at all. This paper examines that process through three interlocking lenses: the sociology of knowledge and power, the politics of curriculum, and the cultural representation of diverse groups in educational materials. Drawing together reproduction theory, the "powerful knowledge" debate, critical pedagogy, decolonization scholarship, and research on culturally responsive teaching, it argues that the curriculum functions simultaneously as an instrument of cultural reproduction and as a contested site where that reproduction can be challenged.

2. Knowledge and Power: Theoretical Foundations

The most influential account of how knowledge and power intersect in schooling comes from the sociology of education. Bernstein argues that curriculum is organised through principles of classification and framing, "which determine how knowledge is selected, transmitted and evaluated, thereby reflecting underlying power relations" (Idenyi & Bariki, 2026). In his earlier formulation, this insight was condensed into a memorable triad: "curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as valid realization

of this knowledge on the part of the taught" (Michael & Rose, 2017). Each of these three message systems, on this view, is saturated with questions of authority and legitimacy.

Where Bernstein mapped the grammar of knowledge selection, Bourdieu and Passeron traced its social consequences. Their theory of cultural reproduction "demonstrates how curriculum operates as a mechanism for sustaining social and cultural hierarchies" (Idenyi & Bariki, 2026). Michael Apple's critical curriculum theory extends this line of reasoning, conceptualising "curriculum as an ideological and political site through which dominant social interests are reproduced" (Idenyi & Bariki, 2026). Together these frameworks establish the central premise of this paper: that the arrangement of school knowledge is not accidental but patterned by relations of power.

The so-called "knowledge turn" in curriculum studies reworked these questions by asking what kind of knowledge schools should transmit. Muller traces the sociological roots of this turn and of the concept centrally identified with it — "powerful knowledge" — "beginning with the work of Basil Bernstein which was subsequently elaborated in a wide range of contexts-of-use in the broad field of curriculum studies" (Muller, 2022). Young and Muller elaborate the concept, tracing its origins to Durkheim and defining "powerful knowledge" as "differentiated and specialised knowledge" (Young & Muller, 2013). Beck usefully distinguishes this concept from two related ideas: "powerful knowledge" connects with "knowledge of the powerful" and "esoteric knowledge," all of which have "fed into recent debates about curriculum development and change" (Beck, 2013). The distinction matters enormously: knowledge that is powerful because it enables disciplined thought about the world is not the same as knowledge that is powerful because it is held by dominant groups. Confusing the two — or treating the latter as a warrant for dismissing the former — is a persistent source of difficulty in curriculum reform.

A more radical tradition reads schooling through the lens of ideology and domination. Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed observed that "systemic oppression often operates unconsciously," with the oppressed frequently internalizing "the worldview of their oppressors, such that they both embody and aspire to the oppressor's position" (Saari et al., 2026). Critical pedagogy as a field, in Fischman and McLaren's account, "problematizes the relationship between education and politics, between sociopolitical relations and pedagogical practices, between the reproduction of dependent hierarchies of power and privilege in the domain of everyday social life and that of classrooms and institutions" (Fischman & McLaren, 2005).

Crucially, power operates not only through the explicit syllabus but through what is left unsaid. Social reproduction occurs through the implicit, or hidden, curriculum — "the 'unacknowledged, either intentional or unintended, pedagogical content that promulgates and maintains knowledge and appropriate behavior'" (Meek, 2015). As Orón Semper and Blasco note, the concept was taken up by scholars concerned with "the 'non-academic functions and effects' of schooling" and with "the ideological messages embedded in both the content of the formal curriculum and the social relations of the classroom encounter" (Semper & Blasco, 2018). From this critical pedagogy perspective, "curricula are regarded as seemingly neutral classroom expressions of political and ideological agendas that must be uncovered if they are to be critically addressed" (Semper & Blasco, 2018).

3. The Curriculum as a Political Site

If knowledge selection is a matter of power, then the curriculum is inherently political. Englund's influential formulation captured this by introducing "curriculum as a political problem, as a site for different groups struggling over education and its content" (Michael & Rose, 2017). What appears on a syllabus is therefore the provisional outcome of competing claims about what matters, what is authoritative, and whose experience counts as knowledge.

Heleta and Chasi make the mechanism explicit. Through "selectivity regarding what is included in the curriculum, educational institutions and academics 'preserve and distribute what is perceived to be "legitimate knowledge"' while silencing other knowledges," and the key issue is "the power to impose texts, materials and worldviews onto others" (Heleta & Chasi, 2023). In the Global North, and in many parts of the Global South, "the curriculum privileges and propagates white and Eurocentric perspectives, often claiming their universality for all settings," functioning as one of the main tools "used for the continued entrenchment, naturalization and reproduction of 'Eurocentric hierarchies of knowledge and humanity'" (Heleta & Chasi, 2023). Barlas presses the point further, describing curriculum as "an ideological project devised by the powerful in society" whose current form "came to be" to serve the interests of the powerful "at the expense of everyone else's" (Barlas, 2023).

This is not an abstraction. Empirical work on textbooks repeatedly confirms that the dominant ideology and unequal power relations "are reflected and reinforced through the strategic construction, selection, and presentation of knowledge in textbooks" (Chu, 2015). The politics of curriculum, in short, is enacted through the most ordinary artifacts of schooling.

4. Cultural Representation in Curriculum and Textbooks

Textbooks are the clearest evidence of how representation and power intertwine. In a critical analysis of three types of elementary textbooks used in China, Chu found that "knowledge about and the values and beliefs of the Han people are overwhelmingly dominant in all reviewed textbooks," while ethnic minority groups "are marginalized and the knowledge about them is incomplete and stereotypical," with most knowledge about them "constructed and presented from the perspective of the Han people" (Chu, 2015). The pattern is not unique to any single national context. Analysing Chinese language textbooks across four decades, Liu and colleagues similarly found "a largely selective, traditional, and stereotypical representation of ethnic minority cultures and languages," focused "primarily on cultures from representative ethnic groups" (Liu et al., 2022). Notably, they observed a tension in which growing interest in multicultural representation was accompanied by "decreasing tolerance towards ethnic multilingualism in textbooks over the past four decades" (Liu et al., 2022) — a reminder that symbolic inclusion and material recognition can move in opposite directions.

Representation also serves projects of national identity. Shah's study of twelve English language textbooks in one province of Pakistan shows that textbooks "function as national policy instruments, carry a hidden curriculum, and enact a global agenda," with national subjecthood constituted through discursive indexes including "religion, gendered subjectivity, languages, literature, and patriotic sentiments" (Shah, 2023). Lashari and colleagues found that minority faith language learners "perceive language learning spaces to be ideologically motivated, promoting a dominant religious identity narrative while disregarding diversity" (Lashari et al., 2023). Abdou's longitudinal analysis of Egyptian history textbooks from 1890 to 2017 found that Coptic history "has consistently been included, but allocated a disproportionately smaller space vis-à-vis other eras," with Copts "constructed as a largely persecuted and victimized people, with few contributions" (Abdou, 2017). Representation, then, is not simply a matter of presence or absence; it is a matter of proportion, framing, and narrative arc.

The consequences for learners are tangible. Research on racial representation suggests that the absence of representation — "the absence of role models of color in the materials" — "ha[s] a way of influencing the self-perception and attitudes towards learning among colored students in a negative way" (Iweuno et al., 2024). Yet Rantz cautions that simply adding content is insufficient: representation "is still an important part of a culturally responsive curriculum, but simply adding diverse authors, characters, or historical figures

is often not enough on its own" (Rantz, 2026). Classroom materials are more meaningful when cultural experiences are "connected to real historical, political, and social contexts rather than reduced to simplified or stereotypical portrayals," and when marginalized communities are presented "as diverse, active, and complex rather than through narrow or deficit-based narratives" (Rantz, 2026).

5. Epistemic Injustice and the Decolonization of Knowledge

Behind questions of representation lies a deeper question about whose knowledge is counted as knowledge at all. Cummings and colleagues draw on Fricker and Paraskeva to propose the systemic form of epistemic injustice they call "curricula injustice," defined as education policies and practices used to "'naturalize' discrimination, racism, sexism, colonialism, and patriarchy by marginalizing diverse epistemologies, disciplines, theories, concepts, and experiences" (Cummings et al., 2023). In development education, this is evident in "the failure to publish and cite scholars from the global South and Eastern Europe ... but also the failure to integrate non-Western epistemologies in curricula" (Cummings et al., 2023).

The mechanism, McEntee and colleagues argue, begins with division and proceeds to ranking: "Indigenous knowledge is assumed to be one thing while Science another," and with such demarcation in place, "epistemic domains can be ranked; one being viewed as superior, more reliable, more 'evidence-based', or more relevant than the other" (McEntee et al., 2024). What results in colonial settings is "epistemic violence, referring to the silencing of marginalized social actors" (McEntee et al., 2024). El-Hani and Ludwig situate this within a longer history of "epistemicide," described as "the suppression of social practices of knowledge production that contradicted colonial interests, carried out through the interventions of Christianity, colonialism, capitalism, and, also, Western modern science" (El-Hani & Ludwig, 2024). Critically, they insist that epistemicide "is by no means a fact of the colonial past, but continues to be part of a project of homogenization of the world" (El-Hani & Ludwig, 2024).

The critique of Eurocentrism is not merely a charge of bias but an epistemological one. Imad and colleagues observe that by prioritizing the knowledge and perspectives of one particular culture, "Eurocentric epistemology not only fails to recognize the richness and diversity of human knowledge and experiences, but also is blind to its own limited ways of seeing and understanding reality" (Imad et al., 2023). Arday and colleagues capture the hegemonic ambition in Zeleza's formulation: Eurocentrism "seeks to universalize the West and provincialize the rest" (Arday et al., 2020).

What decolonization demands, however, is frequently misread. Govender and Naidoo are emphatic that decolonisation "does not require removing white men and women, both foreign and local, from the curriculum," quoting Mbembe's insistence that it "is not about closing the door to European or other traditions. It is about defining clearly what the centre is" (Govender & Naidoo, 2023). Omodan and colleagues similarly frame decoloniality as a proactive stance "towards reorienting established knowledge production methods and disrupting colonial forms of oppression at all levels," challenging "Euro- or Americentric epistemology" and seeking knowledge that can be created "through reclaiming or revitalizing indigenous knowledge" (Omodan et al., 2023). Ultimately, decoloniality "strives to re-orient spaces of education around polyvocal perspectives, which include narratives from various sources representing different identities" (Omodan et al., 2023).

6. Culturally Responsive and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

If the curriculum is where power is inscribed, pedagogy is where it can be negotiated. Culturally relevant pedagogy, as Ladson-Billings articulated it, "advocates the elements of academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness" (Young, 2010). Pinetta traces the shared premise of the family of approaches that have grown from it —

culturally responsive, culturally sustaining — namely "that learning is a socially mediated process explicitly connected to students' racialized, cultural, and linguistic experiences" (Pinetta, 2023). By integrating students' "funds of knowledge" into instructional content, "educators build meaningful connections between home and school cultures," so that a student's cultural background "becomes a mechanism for learning rather than something they must divest from to advance academically" (Pinetta, 2023).

These are not merely rhetorical commitments. Abacioglu and colleagues note that culturally responsive teaching implies "designing culturally relevant curricula and culturally responsive instructions to make learning more relevant and effective" (Abacioglu et al., 2019), citing evidence that students were "more engaged in reading, more critical about the reading material, and were able to identify more with the selected texts" when literature reflected characters and problems similar to their own lives (Abacioglu et al., 2019). Kim's analysis of Korea's multicultural curriculum frames culturally responsive pedagogy as "a flow of 'asset-based pedagogy', providing conceptual and methodological tools to understand the structural problems of inter-cultural inequality" (Kim, 2025), and calls for a curriculum that plays the role of "'mirrors and windows' that accurately reflect and reveal students themselves and the culture around them" (Kim, 2025).

Yet the theory's most ambitious element — the cultivation of sociopolitical consciousness — is also its most demanding. As Pinetta notes, "the incorporation of CRP must also promote students' ability to critically reflect on and act upon societal inequities," with the end goal of cultivating youths' capacity "to interrogate cultural norms, institutions, and polices that reaffirm systems of oppression (e.g., racism, xenophobia)" (Pinetta, 2023). Representation alone will not accomplish this; it requires a pedagogy that treats knowledge itself as an object of critical inquiry.

7. Barriers to Enactment: Agency, Resistance, and Structure

If the case for culturally responsive, decolonized education is compelling, its implementation is stubbornly difficult — and the obstacles are instructive about how power operates. Young's collaborative study with administrators and teachers at one urban school revealed "deep structural issues related to teachers' cultural bias, the nature of racism in school settings, and the lack of support to adequately implement theories into practice" (Young, 2010). Pagán proposes a "race-conscious, multilevel, ecological framework to illuminate the societal, institutional, and individual obstacles that teachers must navigate in the pursuit of CRP" (Pagán, 2022).

Teacher agency is central to whether reform takes hold. Min and colleagues note that "how teachers develop their agency toward inclusive practices and what influences the agency developed have been undertheorized and underexplored" (Min et al., 2021), while Wagner found that most teachers had "limited preservice training and professional development for engaging this population, making it challenging to implement effective strategies" (Wagner, 2025). Resistance itself, Neri and colleagues argue, is better understood as "a multilevel learning problem that stems from (a) limited understanding and belief in the efficacy of CRE and (b) a lack of know-how needed to execute it" rather than as "a problem of individual compliance" (Neri et al., 2019). Reframing resistance this way turns it into "a diagnostic tool, or warning signal about when, where, for whom, and why a change can be particularly difficult" (Neri et al., 2019). Such framing is significant: it relocates the problem from individual deficit to the systems and structures that shape what teachers can do.

8. Conclusion

The evidence assembled here points to a consistent conclusion. Knowledge in education is never innocent of power: it is selected, classified, framed, and evaluated according to principles that reflect and sustain particular social and cultural hierarchies. This operates

through the formal curriculum and the hidden one, through textbooks that privilege dominant groups and marginalize others, and through epistemic arrangements that rank some ways of knowing above others — sometimes to the point of epistemicide. Cultural representation is thus not an addendum to educational quality but a constitutive dimension of it, shaping students' self-perception, engagement, and sense of belonging.

At the same time, the scholarship reviewed here resists fatalism. The curriculum is contested terrain, not a closed system. Powerful knowledge can be extended rather than merely withheld; representation can move beyond additive gestures toward complex, contextualized portrayals; decolonization can redefine the centre without closing the door to any tradition; and culturally responsive pedagogy can build on students' funds of knowledge while cultivating their capacity to interrogate the very institutions that shape their lives. What remains, and what the literature identifies most sharply, is the difficulty of enactment — the multilevel obstacles of bias, under-preparation, and unsupportive structures that teachers must navigate. Addressing knowledge, power, and cultural representation in education therefore requires attention not only to what is taught, but to who decides, how it is portrayed, and what conditions make a more just curriculum actually possible.

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