What Is ‘Really’ Taught As The Content of School Subjects? Teaching School Subjects As An Alchemy

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Abstract
The research for the practical knowledge for school improvement is enticing and daunting. Enticing in teacher education research and international assessments of student performance as the goal is fulfilling the national hope for the future of a better society as well as correcting inequities. The daunting part is finding the correct mixtures of research, policy and programs that can guarantee the future.

Yet what if these research assumptions of school improvement have no historical validity? What if what is studied and measured as children’s knowledge and skills in science, mathematics, music, and art, for example, have nothing to do with learning these fields of knowledge?

It is this “what if” that I will explore historically. I argue that the object of the curriculum and their learning theories are to make particular kinds of people; the child is to be the citizen, the good worker, the “good” parent; they are not about learning what science and mathematics are. And the efforts to include “all children” paradoxically produce differences and division. To explore these claims, I look at the school curriculum as practice of translation, liken to The Medieval alchemy that sought to transform metals into gold in order to find the ultimate truth about the world. The school curriculum are magical transformations of the substance of physics, for example, into a social organization and psychologies of schooling. The object of the translations into school subject are making children into normal, productive and moral members of society. And the pedagogical and psychological theories generate comparative principles that differentiate and divide, excluding and abjecting in the impulse to include. Curriculum models are not historical inventions to translate disciplinary cognate fields!

If this analysis is appropriate, then the very practical and useful knowledge sought to improve teaching is impractical; impractical in relation to the social commitments of the common school.

About the speaker
Prof. Thomas Popkewitz’s field of interest includes Curriculum History and Studies, Cultural Sociology of School Reform/Change, Professionalization / Teacher education, Cultural History of Education and Its Sciences. His studies are concerned with the social epistemology. His research includes historical, ethnographic, and comparative studies of educational reforms and the education sciences in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Southern Africa, and the US. Prof. Thomas Popkewitz has written or edited over 30 books and over 300 journals articles and book chapters. Two of his books have won awards for their contribution to educational studies. Three of his US studies have been translated into multiple languages. He has also co-directed a ten-country European Commission funded research project on educational governance and social exclusion (1999-2002), (co)directed comparative projects in the history and contemporary contexts of educational reforms, and currently researching the changing relation of science, policy and society produced by international student performance assessment (Swedish VR).