

Abandoning Mathematics and Hard Labour in Schools: a *new sociology of knowledge* and curriculum reform

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The aims for mathematics education stated in the Swedish school syllabus (2008) concern utility, enculturation, and communication. These are worthy aims for any compulsory schooling system. My starting point in this paper is a concern that schooling does not and, in its current state, cannot serve them. School mathematics has for a very long time been largely self-referential and it is now commonplace to observe that what are implicitly or explicitly presented as ‘real world’ (which is presumably to say, essentially extra-mathematical) problems are more appropriately described as comprising what I have termed a public domain of recontextualised practices (for example, Dowling, 1998). In some curricula, mathematical knowledge is distributed such that some students (and we all know which ones) are restricted to this public domain, whilst others are invited into the esoteric domain of pure mathematical activity. I contend that, whilst the latter group are those destined for mathematical success, both groups are given access to a set of practices that are peculiar to school mathematics, which is to say, mythologised by schooling; utility, enculturation and communication are thus confined to the school context. Essentially, this situation is generated and maintained by the grip of disciplinarity—the discipline of, for example, school mathematics—the reproduction of which is thus served by the school. Naturally, any form of differentiation of curricular content or performance will inevitably be recruited to the reproduction of social inequalities. In Dowling (1991 and 1998), for example, I demonstrated the ways in which the then most prominent UK textbook scheme effected a translation of social class into ‘ability’. The UK government, in particular, has responded to this by pushing up access to university and to peak performances in the various forms of public assessment, inching these achievements towards majority levels; the UK now sends nearly half of its eighteen-year-old girls into Higher Education, with boys only a few percentage points behind. At this stage, elitism begins to fail, but, in its place, schooling becomes geared to the provision of metrics for State policy effectiveness; students are working, not for their own enlightenment, but at hard labour for the benefit of the State: now where do we generally expect to see that?

What is needed is the wrenching of schooling from both disciplinary and State exploitation. Indeed, disciplinarity is itself beginning to transform in the university and elsewhere; this seems to be a part of the ‘postmodern condition’. I want to move via a critical engagement with the modernist sociology of Basil Bernstein towards a *new sociology of knowledge*—Social Activity Method (SAM, Dowling, 2009) that responds rather more effectively to what appears to be the contemporary state of knowledge production. This will entail proposing the dissolution of the disciplined, integrated code (to borrow (again) from Bernstein) of school mathematics (and other disciplines) with its mythologising of ‘understanding’, and its replacement with a collection code of templates for recruitment in practical action. This would be a collection that may include, but would be far from limited to, templates of mathematical origin that may help to facilitate the progression of schooling towards what it should be about: the introduction of children and young adults to what it is that what we, as local, national, global cultural complexes, now do rather than limiting itself to the ablative absolute of bracketed completion.