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# Beyond Decontextualisation and Cynicism

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## **Abstract**

Some see schools primarily as places where students learn academic skills that are crucial to individual and social development. Others see them primarily as places where students are stigmatised and where social inequality is reproduced. Despite their differences, both views of schooling tend to assume the same unrealistic conception of schooled knowledge as being decontextualised, as being separate from the social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles that occur in all cognitive practices. In this article I argue for a more complex account of schooling, one that reimagines the intertwining of academic learning and social identification without privileging one over the other.

## **Comments**

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# Beyond Decontextualisation and Cynicism

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Some see schools primarily as places where students learn academic skills that are crucial to individual and social development. Others see them primarily as places where students are stigmatised and where social inequality is reproduced. Despite their differences, both views of schooling tend to assume the same unrealistic conception of schooled knowledge as being decontextualised, as being separate from the social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles that occur in all cognitive practices. In this article I argue for a more complex account of schooling, one that reimagines the intertwining of academic learning and social identification without privileging one over the other.

Many people both imagine and practice schooling as if it were primarily about decontextualised knowledge and skills. From this perspective, schooling is an indispensable vehicle for both individual and societal improvement because it provides literacy, numeracy, and other essential skills. Advocates of this position need not deny that practical considerations and social relationships inevitably influence schooling. They simply claim that we must minimise any interference from such practical and social factors and focus on the crucial knowledge and skills that schooling can provide.

Schooling certainly does provide essential knowledge and skills, and it can be an important vehicle for individual and societal development. Nonetheless, many have argued that schooling should not emphasise decontextualised knowledge and skills. Dewey (1902, 1916) argued that all kinds of knowledge exist as part of action in the world and that knowledge in use is not subordinate to decontextualised knowledge. He recommended that we teach children by engaging them in doing things. He did not mean that schools should simply teach children practical skills

without leaving room for reflection, argument, and evidence. To act skillfully, people must reflect, gather evidence, and imagine other possibilities. But schools too often overemphasise the decontextualising aspects of intelligent action and fail to teach students how these contribute to a larger process that involves both reflection and engagement. Dewey held that schools should teach general knowledge and skills as part of the larger process in which they are used in practical tasks. With this argument, Dewey showed that decontextualised cognition and practical activity are not opposed. Instead of choosing between general knowledge and practical skills, educators should teach the superordinate process of intelligent action, which involves both reflective abstraction and engaged participation.

In the century since Dewey developed this argument, a new version of the knowledge–action dichotomy has emerged. As more sociological and anthropological studies of schools were done over the past decades, it became clear that social identification, power relations, interpersonal struggles, and other non-academic processes take place at the same time as academic activities in the classroom (e.g., Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, Lintz, & Okamoto, 1996; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles do not occur on a separate track alongside subject matter, argument, evidence, and academic learning. The academic business of schooling is interwoven with its social functions. As Foucault (1975/1977) has shown, most educational acts are simultaneously acts of power and acts of knowledge. Academic activities such as assessment, for instance, classify students into groups, and the groupings often correlate with and help reproduce stratifications from the larger society. Other academic decisions, such as the selection of a canonical curriculum or a favoured dialect for instruction, reflect and reinforce the social position of those who control the schooling system.

Recognising that the academic and social functions of schooling are deeply entangled, some critics argue that we must overcome our faith in the transformative academic potential of schooling. They are cynical about schools as sites of individual and social development, believing instead that schools reproduce unjust social hierarchies. Furthermore, they argue that the fiction of decontextualised academic knowledge helps mask the insidious social processes in schools. Schools sort students into categories such as “unintelligent,” “disabled,” and “antisocial” and then use the ideal of pure academic knowledge to warrant such judgments and to ignore their social correlates and effects. In response to these deep problems, the critics sometimes recommend a radical overhaul of the educational system—eliminating schools altogether, perhaps in favour of apprenticeship training, or abandoning the idea of core academic contents and creating balkanised, sectarian schools.

In response to these critics, others argue that schools are still primarily about teaching decontextualised skills and knowledge. Social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles undeniably happen in schools, but educators must try to minimise the effects and focus on the academic core of schooling. The

argument between those who defend the academic promise of schooling and those who emphasise its insidious social functions resembles the argument that Dewey faced a century ago between those who defended decontextualised academic knowledge and those who emphasised practical tasks relevant to students' everyday concerns. But the contemporary dispute is not exactly the same. Today we must face the reasonable cynicism of critics who point out how schooling can disempower some students and socially identify them in damaging ways.

Can Dewey's strategy—one that reconceptualises school as having a larger purpose that includes but goes beyond decontextualised academic knowledge—help overcome the opposition between contemporary defenders and critics of schooling? I argue that it can, although significant conceptual and practical work remains to be done. To adopt a Deweyan approach to the dispute between the social critics of schooling and the defenders of decontextualised knowledge, we must explore the weaknesses of each position and uncover the assumptions about knowledge that they unwittingly share. Neither one of the positions nor a simple combination of both will suffice.

The defenders of decontextualised knowledge fail to recognise the real social effects of schooling, whereas critics overemphasise the insidious social functions of schooling. They correctly describe how we too often use an ideology of academic purity to mask the social functions of schooling, and they point out the damaging effects that schooling can have. But they overreact by misunderstanding the academic functions of schooling. Privileging the social over the academic is not an adequate response to the opposite error.

What Vygotsky (1934/1987) called "scientific concepts"—concepts that start from the abstract and grow toward making sense of experience, whether these concepts come from the humanities, the social sciences, or the natural sciences—enrich human life. Schools are not the only places that one finds such "scientific" concepts, but they are crucial for maintaining the disposition toward reflective thought and for passing it on to future generations. Academic learning is a special kind of cultural practice, thoroughly social but nonetheless important. Most other activities do not make space for the reflection facilitated by academic types of thinking. Academic thinking is not purely decontextualised by any means. It is bound up with social identification, power relations, and other social processes, both as resources for academic learning and as interruptions of that learning. And, as Dewey argued, successful academic thinking connects abstract ideas back to experience and action in the world—a process that Vygotsky called "ascending to the concrete" (Engeström, 1987; Hedegaard, 2002). But academic thinking also fosters the reflection sorely needed in other domains. Those of us privileged to work in educational institutions carry on traditions thousands of years old in which people have taken the time to examine assumptions behind taken-for-granted ideas and to reflect on how life could be different if we adopted other ways of thinking and acting. Journalists, artists, and others also encourage people to see the world in

new ways and to act more reflectively, and we need such alternative approaches as well. But educators help young people become disposed to examine their assumptions and reflect on the different ways that they might envision experience.

So we cannot dismiss the academic functions of schooling as mere ideology masking its insidious social functions. On the other hand, it will not suffice to deny the pervasive social functions of schooling. It is simply a fact that social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles happen pervasively in schools. We must, instead, rethink the opposition between decontextualised academic knowledge and insidious social processes. Why do we often think of the “academic” and the “social” as separate types of processes? Could we develop a more complex view of schooling that would construe them as being complementary?

We tend to assume that apparently nonacademic resources—for example, practices of social exclusion and xenophobic stereotypes—are relevant to the insidious social functions of schooling while assuming that academic resources—such as students’ background knowledge about curricular topics—are relevant to its academic functions. But academic resources can be deeply implicated in insidious social processes, and apparently nonacademic resources can be deeply implicated in academic learning, as many empirical studies of schooling have shown (e.g., Packer, 2001; Wortham, in press). Students and teachers often use academic concepts to tease or exclude each other—for instance, by pointing out what certain students do not know or by employing curricular concepts to describe each other as “unevolved,” as “totalitarian,” and so on. Students’ experience with social identification and power struggles also contributes to their academic learning, as teachers use examples and narratives of personal experience to illuminate the curriculum. “Social” should thus not be opposed to “academic,” because many social activities rely on academic concepts and many academic activities involve social knowledge.

We nonetheless tend to resist seeing such interconnections between academic activities and the social identities, power relations, and subjective biases that also occur in school. We “purify” the apparently purely social and apparently purely academic realms (Latour, 1993). Latour and others argued that our urge to purify derives from an unrealistic conception of knowledge, dating to the European Enlightenment, in which true knowledge is grasped by the individual mind as being objective and certain. According to this conception, legitimate knowledge must be purged of all connections to social identities, power relations, and subjective biases. The knowledge that we teach in school must be separated from subjective factors associated with our selves and our politics, and thus we should not mix subject matter, argument, evidence, and academic learning with social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles. Advocates of this Enlightenment conception acknowledge that academic and social processes sometimes go on simultaneously. But genuine learning must be analysed as the purely academic process that it is.

Alternatives to the Enlightenment view take more seriously the fact that social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles play an important role in human cognitive life. Human activities, including academic ones, both presuppose and create social identities. If we trace the processes relevant to the development, validation, and use of academic knowledge, we quickly discover that social identities, institutional arrangements, and power relations are bound up with that knowledge. To understand how people learn and use the resulting knowledge, we must explore how academic knowledge is intertwined with social identities and power relations. Conversely, to understand how people get socially identified, we must explore how identities are bound up with and constrained by cognitive insights into the world.

We must recognise that the involvement of social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles in cognitive practices such as schooling does not undermine our claims to know things. It is simply a fact that they intertwine with the academic activities of schooling. If we maintain an Enlightenment conception of pure academic knowledge, we have two unpalatable alternatives: deny this fact and pretend that schooling mostly involves pure academic activity, or accept this fact and deny that schooling has genuine academic value. Latour (1999) has argued, in a Deweyan way, that we must refuse both alternatives. Instead, we must reconceptualise knowledge. Rather than stand apart from and reflect the world, knowledge functions in the social world. The fact that knowledge is intertwined with social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles does not make it invalid.

To apply this insight to schooling, we must re-envision schooling as something connected to and not separated from the social world. Social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles happen pervasively in schools. This conclusion does not mean that we must struggle to eliminate such “corruption.” Knowledge is often used in the service of social relations, in various ways, and it should be no surprise that this phenomenon happens in schools as well. Schools should maintain something of their distinctive character—as places where young people are taught to step back from and reflect on experience and to use the fruits of their reflection to act differently in the world. But encouraging students to develop habits of abstraction and reflection should not mean that we expect them to strip away their social identities, positions, and relationships in school.

So how should we reconceptualise schooling, given the intertwining of academic practices with social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles? First, we must acknowledge that teachers and students inevitably enact and evaluate models of personhood. By “models of personhood” I mean conceptions of what “self” and “other” are like, with respect to more widely circulating sociocultural conceptions of people (Agha, in press). Any society provides a set of such normative models, which circumscribe the types of person that one can be—for instance, “diligent and promising student,” “disruptive and resistant student,”

“sociopathic threat to society,” and so on. In any interaction, participants must explicitly or tacitly use some models of identity to construe each other. Schools are no exception. Both educators and students come to inhabit models of identity, often predictable ones but sometimes unexpected ones, as they interact with each other over time.

Purified conceptions of decontextualised academic learning assume that one general model of personhood is appropriate for all educated people engaged in academic activity. To inhabit this model, teachers and students must ignore personal ambitions, power relations, and subjective biases, focusing instead on pure academic understanding. This model of personhood is based on a misguided conception of human nature, one that unwisely extrapolates humankind’s central characteristics from the special case of decontextualised knowing—claiming, for instance, that logical reasoning about decontextualised problems is the mark of a human being. In some contexts, this model of the decontextualised thinker may be appropriate and beneficial. But, when overgeneralised, this model of purely academic personhood blinds us to insidious social functions of schooling. This model of decontextualised personhood also leads us to misunderstand many important possibilities of schooling. Schools could be places for students to try out different types of personhood for themselves and to attribute different models of personhood to others. Schools can also prepare students for the fact that cognitive practices always include social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles. To capture this potential of schooling, we must acknowledge that neither reason nor power, neither the academic nor the social functions of schooling, exist in pure form for very long. As a general principle then, schooling should be about more than just teaching skills and content knowledge. It should also be about exposing children to, and letting them inhabit, various models of personhood. One set of models will cast students as decontextualised thinkers, but other sets will cast students as acting in the world, as relating to others, as struggling to change the world, and so on.

Such models, however, have an inevitably normative dimension. Different groups will value and devalue different models of personhood, based on divergent moral stances and visions of the good life. Having abandoned the idea of pure academic learning, how do educators decide what and how to teach? This question is serious, but it should not force us to become defenders or simple critics of “pure” decontextualised cognition. Acknowledging that bodies of knowledge are historically developed and socially embedded does not mean that students should not learn about them. Students benefit from learning many skills and facts from the traditional curriculum, both as a means to develop reflective dispositions and as tools for thought and action. But teachers and students should not imagine the curriculum as decontextualised knowledge and skills. Instead, they should embrace and explore its social embeddedness.



This perspective would suggest, for example, teaching knowledge as it is embedded in the social world—through projects that engage with phenomena as they occur naturally, through clinical experiences in which students solve real problems, and so on. It would also mean applying academic reflection to the processes of teaching and learning themselves. Teachers and students should reflect on what is traditionally taught and what is not typically taught. Social distinctions that are present among students themselves—having to do with gender or ethnicity, perhaps—are almost surely related to why certain topics are included in the traditional curriculum and others are not. Instead of ignoring this fact and letting it have potentially insidious effects on students, teachers and students can make it an explicit topic of discussion. Doing so avoids the social blindness of purely academic approaches, but it also includes the traditional academic skills of reflection and systematic analysis, which students can apply to the school curriculum itself. Students can thus develop academic skills and reflective dispositions by acknowledging and exploring how the idea of pure academic content is a myth. This sort of reflection can also be applied to other aspects of the learning process. Students could, for example, explore the social dynamics of classroom interactions to learn something about how knowledge is contested and validated in practice. I am advocating what looks like critical pedagogy, as that described by Freire (1970) and others, but I am emphasising that we must acknowledge and explore the cognitive and academic aspects of such teaching as well as their potential social effects. Done well, critical pedagogy is both about helping students learn to think academically and about social transformation.

This set of ideas is only one among many about how educators can acknowledge and take advantage of the inevitable presence of social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles in the academic practices of schooling. More such ideas and practices are needed as we come to grips with the social embeddedness of all educational practices. I close with two notes of caution. First, schooling that wrestles with the social embeddedness of schooling in this way will not by itself solve the larger social problems that make their way into schools. There remain institutional conditions and material practices, beyond schools, that will require broader social action. Second, I acknowledge that this sort of reflexive inquiry is messy. If we could sustain a clear vision of pure academic content, the goals of education would be clear: students must master a set of knowledge and skills by engaging in teaching and learning that affects their minds but excludes their identities and their relationships. Once we acknowledge that the contents of the curriculum and the processes of teaching and learning are interwoven with social identification, power relations, and interpersonal struggles, however, we lose this clarity of purpose. But we are preparing students for life, which is messy in the same way. Schools must embrace the social complexity of human cognitive activity by using the social dimensions of schooling as an educational resource. Some-

times doing so will require classroom discussions of complex ethnic politics and fraught moral questions, and sometimes these discussions will be heated and the conflicts will be irresolvable. But if teachers handle them well, students will benefit from struggling with such issues, and they will learn how to reflect systematically even on such difficult questions. Running away from the intertwining of academic practices and social identification will do more harm than will struggling with their interdependence.

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