A Critique on the Hierarchy of School Subjects : Beyond Epistemology

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Article

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Abstract

One of the main characteristics of contemporary educational systems is the enduring hierarchy of subjects, which favors abstract fields like physics and mathematics above practical and artistic courses. A strong philosophical basis is offered by Jennifer Bleazby's (2015) groundbreaking work, which contends that this hierarchy is the result of a Platonic "search for certainty" that values abstract, apparently universal knowledge over the tangible and physical. Bleazby (2015) contends that, despite the fundamental nature of this epistemological critique, it is not enough to account for the hierarchy's lasting power. A more thorough examination shows that the professional politics of subject communities, neoliberal economic imperatives, and socio-political systems of class reproduction are all intricately linked to and reinforce these epistemic presumptions. This paper argues that the curricular hierarchy is a dynamic and resilient structure that is essential to the perpetuation of social and economic inequality, rather than just a philosophical artifact, by analyzing these overlapping forces.

Keywords: hierarchy; epistemology; education; society; philosophy; curriculum

Introduction

Most schools have an unwritten yet powerful hierarchical structure. Mathematics and physical sciences are at the top, followed by the humanities, while vocational, technical, and arts-based topics are at the bottom (Goodson, 1992). Bleazby (2015) expertly traces the conceptual roots of this "conventional curriculum hierarchy" to a long-standing epistemological tradition in Western philosophy that associates knowledge with certainty and abstraction. This tradition, which began with Plato, devalues knowledge gained through practical experience, the body, and the material world. Contemporary reforms, such as the English Baccalaureate, which prioritizes a narrow range of "academic" courses, indicate the worldview's continued influence (Parish, 2024).To properly understand why this hierarchy exists, we must look beyond its epistemological underpinnings. This paper will expand on Bleazby's foundational critique by arguing that the "quest for certainty" is a rationale that legitimizes and is sustained by three other powerful forces: the curriculum's role in social reproduction, the instrumental demands of the neoliberal economy, and the agency of subject communities competing for status.

The Socio-Political Dimension: Knowledge as Cultural Capital

Bleazby (2015) offers an epistemic framework that did not emerge in a social vacuum. Its values are entirely consistent with the objectives of historically dominating socioeconomic classes. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" is essential here (Morrish, 2019). High-status information is valuable not only for its abstract purity, but also because it serves as the elite's cultural currency. Familiarity with this knowledge, as well as the "habitus" or disposition it fosters, serves as a gatekeeper, allowing entrance to elite colleges and lucrative occupations while barring people from lower-status groups (Dewey, 2024). As a result, the curriculum becomes a crucial

tool in the perpetuation of social inequality, classifying students based on intellectual merit (Ball, 2021).

From that perspective, the hierarchy is both a social and political access issue and an epistemological one. Michael Young's (2014) concept of "potent knowledge" provides an important layer of nuance. Young contends that theoretical knowledge, which is frequently found in traditional academic subjects, provides unique methods of thinking and interpreting the world that should be accessible to all students. The unfairness is not the existence of specialist discipline knowledge, but its unequal distribution (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018) When access to this "strong information" is limited, the curriculum hierarchy restricts underprivileged students' social and intellectual mobility, reinforcing their marginalization (Kelsh & Hill, 2024).

The Economic Dimension: Neoliberalism and Instrumentalism

Neoliberal forces have co-opted and changed the traditional hierarchy during the last few decades (Zajda, 2020). In an era of severe global rivalry, education is increasingly defined as an economic growth instrument, with disciplines evaluated based on their perceived market utility (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). The constant emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) is the most visible evidence of this tendency (Mageed, 2025). These subjects are promoted not only for their intellectual rigour, but also for their direct relationship to innovation and national economic competitiveness (Charney et al., 2021).

This instrumentalist reasoning results in a modified hierarchy in which even historically high-status topics such as the arts and humanities are devalued unless they can demonstrate clear, verifiable economic consequences or the development of "transferable skills" (Fuller et al., 2021). The language of "easy" versus "hard" courses, which Bleazby (2015) observes in the context of the English Baccalaureate, is frequently a thinly veiled economic judgment. The modern curriculum hierarchy is thus influenced by a synthesis of the ancient "search for certainty" and the newer, more aggressive "quest for economic utility" (Sleeter, 2024).

The Professional Dimension: The Politics of Subject Communities

A subject's status is actively built and defended from inside by subject communities, as opposed to being imposed from above by philosophical traditions or government policy. Bleazby (2015) emphasizes this when she describes how science in Britain was transformed from an applied "science of common things" to "pure laboratory science" to maintain its academic prestige. This phenomenon, known as "academic drift," is a common strategy in which subjects attempt to climb the hierarchy by adopting high-status knowledge characteristics such as developing abstract theory, codifying content in textbooks, and establishing strong disciplinary boundaries (Carlgren, 2020).

This internal dynamic helps to explain why vocational, technical, and arts education continues to be marginalised. These domains frequently struggle to fit to the mainstream model of abstract propositional knowledge (Jones, 2022). Their emphasis on practical skills, embodied cognition, and process over product makes them challenging to standardize and assess using the written examinations that are typical of the academic hierarchy (Sinnema et al., 2020; Apple, 2021). The resulting hierarchy is thus a negotiated and contested terrain, created by opposing subject communities' political influence and strategic manoeuvres (Ballantine et al., 2021).

Conclusions: Challenging a Multi-Layered Hierarchy

Bleazby (2015) provides a substantial critique of the erroneous epistemic assumptions that underpin the traditional curriculum hierarchy. Her plea for a Deweyan alternative based on authentic inquiry and interdisciplinarity provides a philosophically consistent road to a more equitable and meaningful education (Kelp, 2021). However, as this study has argued, the hierarchy's durability cannot be explained just by its intellectual basis. It is a complicated, overdetermined structure that is supported by mutually reinforcing systems of social class reproduction, neoliberal economic policy,

and intellectual politics. Therefore, removing this hierarchy demands a multi-pronged strategy. Just advocating for a new epistemology is insufficient. We must also confront the high-stakes assessment regimes that harden the hierarchy (Au, 2022), the inequitable funding systems that disfavours specific topics and institutions, and the narrow, utilitarian view of education that dominates public discourse. A truly democratic and intellectually stimulating curriculums for all students will only emerge as a systematic challenge not only to a centuries-old "search for certainty," but also to the massive social and economic interests that have claimed that pursuit.

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