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INTERVIEWS WITH MICHAEL YOUNG

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ENTREVISTAS COM MICHAEL YOUNG
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Part 1 – The 1930s, 1940s & 1950 – Early & Education

George: Michael, could you tell us a little bit about your early life? Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Michael: I was born in my grandparents' house in Lancaster Gate, off Bayswater Road, W2, in May 1934. My parents lived in a flat in North London. It was called Sherwood Court. It's one of the streets around Baker Street, Marylebone. We lived there for a couple of years and then moved to Chelsea, just off the King's Road, and in about 1937 I had a brother, David. He's three years younger than me.

George: Tell us about your parents. What did they do? What were they like?

Michael: My dad went to Cambridge and did engineering. He initially got a job with a company called Standard Telephones and Cables. He found out that they were going to send him to India shortly before I was born. His mother-in-law didn't like the idea of her daughter going to India. She spoke to my grandfather, who was the vice chairman of a

paper company called Spicers, a family firm, which goes back into the 19th century. He got my dad a job there as manager of a card factory by London Bridge – Borough – up until the war, when he joined the Royal Air Force as a volunteer. He was a flight controller from 1940 until the end of the war and was "mentioned in dispatches". He hardly mentioned his war service to us, and I only found out he had any sort of decoration after he died.

George: What memories do you have of the war?

Michael: A happy family. My dad was posted to Anglesey, the island off Wales. We moved there in 1940 and I had a very happy family life. It was extraordinarily normal. I was aware of the war but only in a very indirect way. I got very interested in RAF airplanes and which bombers were going to go over and bomb Germany. Other than that, I'm conscious of the fact that it was a very normal upbringing for a family of two boys. With my sister born in 1944. My mother never did paid work. The war was quite a break to her; she'd never cooked a meal in her life. Until the war, my parents had a living in maid who did the cooking and a nurse who looked after me. Then the war happened and all that changed. My mother suddenly had to look after the kids and do the cooking and the housework and everything. It was quite a change for her, but she managed amazingly well, and I think, enjoyed it.

George: Do you think your dad's engineering background influenced your own school studies?

Michael: Not at all. He always had a little workshop in the back of the house, where he used to go to and 'do things'. "Dad's in his workshop," we would say, but we never knew what he was doing. I had absolutely no talent or interest in that at all. His leisure time influenced me, because he was very keen on golf. From quite an early age, he made sure that my brother and I both learned golf. I spent a lot of my childhood playing with my brother. There was a small course near where we lived. We joined for a very annual subscription. We used to play many, many rounds together. Neither of us was very good, although David reached a single figure handicap; I never got below 16. We were very enthusiastic about playing and were always excited when our parents wanted to play with us.

George: Where was that?

Michael: That was in Surrey. Towards the second part of the war, my dad got posted down to a station in Stanmore, North London. We lived in Edgware, probably from about 1943 until 1945. Then after a year in our pre-war house in Chelsea, we moved to Surrey. That was where we played golf and where I was brought up from the age of about 12 until I left school.

George: You went to school in that area?

Michael: No, I didn't. I went to boarding school, first of all in Hemel Hempstead, in Hertfordshire, and secondly at Charterhouse in Godalming, near Guildford. Both were schools that my dad went to. He got a cut in the price on the fees, he told me afterwards, so he was able to afford it. When I think about that time, it was real austerity for nearly everyone. Even people who were relatively comfortable and middle class didn't have very

much money, but there wasn't much to spend it on. There was still rationing, there were still things you couldn't buy. You couldn't get ice cream, for example, or bananas! It's difficult to remember that; we just took it for granted. I think there was much more equality in society at the time.

George: What are your memories of school?

Michael: I was very happy at school. I enjoyed it. I just thought boarding school was something that children did as part of growing up. We never met anyone who hadn't been to a school like the one I went to. I really didn't know there were other people. Occasionally, my parents would say, you must look out for the 'village boys' who went to the primary school, but we never saw them. They were somewhere else. It was almost like a kind of social apartheid in a way without us being aware of it. It was all I knew.

I did mostly classics and maths until I was 16, but I didn't like it all that much. In sixth form I started doing science for the first time - chemistry, physics and maths. It was the first time I found a subject, chemistry, that I was really interested in, on its own terms - and good at.

George: Who were the best teachers at your school?

Michael: I think that there were one or two good teachers. It was less the teachers in a way than the subject, that interested me - funnily enough. I think that often kids suddenly find there's something they can do. It's a lesson for me in what I've done since, that it's really important to discover there's something that you can do well. I was a very average, ordinary kid, but I did find that I could do chemistry, and that was really important. Not so long ago I discovered the French psychoanalyst, Lacan. He had this idea that we're all born with a 'desire for knowledge'. That connected to me. I hadn't thought about it before.
In a sense it's akin to Vygotsky's theoretical idea that learning has to be voluntary. You can't actually teach anybody anything, they have to learn. You can help them, but they've got to have that **desire** to know. I found that – not very much in physics, I'm ashamed to say, but I certainly did in chemistry. I didn't do any biology. Unfortunately, what happens in schools is that a lot of kids actually *lose* the desire to know, whereas if we somehow found a way of enabling kids to discover that desire, which is inherent in all of them, schooling would be quite different. It would be a really lovely thing to be a teacher, and not a struggle much of the time. That's been quite a revealing thought to me.

George: Can you put your finger on what it was that sparked that desire to learn, in chemistry in particular?

Michael: I was intrigued, particularly when I started doing organic chemistry, by what happened when compounds reacted, and that you could work out what tests to do to find out what they were. The whole area of chemical combination interested me at that time, I can't say more. I didn't have any philosophical interest in science, nothing like that. I just liked doing it. I got to know the lab technician. I used to go in after school and help him and his assistants, as some kids always do. I felt at home there in the labs in a way that I never felt anywhere else, because I wasn't any good at music, I wasn't particularly good at sport, I wasn't particularly good at art. Suddenly I'd found something I could do.

George: Did you have close friends at school?

Michael: I had good friends. I have one still who was in the Latin class with me. He became a teacher. He also broke away from what nearly everybody else did from my school- a job in 'the city'. He ended up as a comprehensive school head teacher and I became a secondary school science teacher and then a university professor. We took very different routes from those that our contemporaries at school took. We were both the first people in our family to have anything to do with public sector education.

George: Would you say you would be considered a success by your school?

Michael: I was in the sense that my headmaster – and this is quite surprising because it relates very much to the family – contacted my dad and said, "Michael's showed some ability in science. He ought to go to Cambridge." When I was about 16, my dad had sent me off to have an interview with a chartered accountant because he had this idea that becoming an accountant guaranteed a good income in the future. I had a friendly interview, but I didn't like the thought of a job. I wanted to stay at school, so my dad responded to the head and said, "Okay, well, he can go to Cambridge if he really wants to." The head had been to Cambridge and, as was the way with those things at the time, knew somebody at Trinity College. He phoned him up and said, "We have a good student." I never even went for an interview or anything; I just suddenly found that I had got a place at Cambridge. Of course, the other thing that's really bizarre now is that I was one of about 3 in 100, a tiny percentage of people who went to university at all. Now, of course, 40% or 50% do, and in the Scandinavian countries, something more like 60% or more. The going to university became quite a different experience.

George: What year did you go to Cambridge?

Michael: I went to Cambridge in 1954 to '57. I did national service two years after I finished school, in the Artillery. This was another example of the English social class system. I went to this basic training regiment, and people who'd been to a school like mine were put through a test and sent to officer cadet school. Before I knew where I was, I wasn't Gunner Young, I was Second Lieutenant Young. I remember thinking, it's rather like being a perfect, only the those who I was now in charge of were adults. They knew much more about everything than I did.

George: What was the atmosphere like in Cambridge at that time? Do you have memories of college life?

Michael: I was at Trinity and did the Natural Science Tripos. I did chemistry, physiology, and biochemistry. Trinity was a very elite college. There was a small group of students who had done well at grammar school, and a much larger group from Public Schools. The two groups hardly knew anyone from the other group. The thing that most struck me at the time was that virtually no one I knew was doing science. Science was different: you had to go into the labs in the afternoons and things like that, whereas my friends who'd been in school with me, who were doing history, law, or English, didn't have to attend any lectures. They were almost proud that they didn't.

George: How did the community at Cambridge compare to the community at school?

Michael: There was no sense of community. I think that was one of the reasons why I never really built on my enthusiasm for chemistry at school when I went to university. I scrambled to a bad degree, but I never had the same involvement in studying. I wasn't part of any group that took their studying seriously. I think Cambridge was only interested in the small number who were going to do doctorates and make a name for themselves in one of the sciences. They would spend a lot of time with them. The rest of us, they really couldn't care about – they weren't interested. That was certainly my experience. I didn't have a proper tutor. I didn't think one had to. I didn't complain, but it was not the best time of my life at all.

George: Can you remember any of your lecturers?

Michael: Well, I remember some tutorial classes with Fred Sanger, the only biochemist, I think, who's ever won two Nobel prizes. But when I think back to that time, there were these people at Cambridge who were doing extraordinary research, but I didn't really have any contact with them at all. A large group of students attended lectures in chemistry and there was one I will never forget. I am sure he had a doctorate- at the time he was a Reader- but he was always known as Mister. It would almost have been a put down to call him 'doctor'. He would come into the lecture room followed by his assistant, and it was his assistant who did all the demonstrations in front of us. The lecturer would stand back and watch him, another example of the division of labour, which I think is quite revealing. I just took it for granted. I didn't question it; I didn't examine it. I didn't have a good time at Trinity- many students I knew people I knew had motorcars, drove to London, went to parties and joined clubs. I didn't do very much of that because I didn't have much spare money.

George: Do you wish you'd been able to get more involved in the subjects at Cambridge?

Michael: Of course I do, but I think it was never a realistic possibility. What I regret is that there were really interesting people who were there that I didn't meet. I wasn't involved in the union or anything. I was there at the time of the Suez war and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. One of the few times I went to the student union, they had this big debate around the question: should we go to the aid of a Soviet satellite in revolt?' The vote was that we shouldn't. Sensible at least, because we wouldn't have achieved very much. Anyway, that was the big issue. I began to feel uneasy about the Suez war with us as a colonial power and being opposed to what the Soviet Union was doing in Hungary. I'd never thought about such things before and. Never read anything except Trollope's novels.

George: What was the teaching like at Cambridge, and at school as well? Was it fairly traditional?

Michael: The teaching at Cambridge was hopeless. I would say that the teaching at Cambridge at that time was based on the assumption that students learned, and if you didn't, that was your fault: either you were lazy or lacked ability. There was very, very little emphasis on teaching at all. School was different. The thing that I feel, looking back- the

most about school – and it's not just a feature of Public Schools like mine– was the incredible narrowness of the curriculum. From the age of 12, I did no history, no geography, no humanities, except Greek and Latin. Greek, Latin, and maths took up two-thirds or more of my curriculum time. That's an appalling education, although Michael Gove liked it, I believe. I didn't follow it through at all. I feel disappointed in myself: here was this amazing opportunity at Cambridge, but I think it was never to be, for me anyway. I did manage to get a degree, which not everybody who I knew did.

George: What motivated you to study in this phase of your life?

Michael: Well, I wasn't motivated to study. That's the point. I wasn't motivated to study at all! We were just getting by and doing as little study as possible. It was a long time before I discovered a motivation to study and it certainly wasn't at Cambridge.

George: After Cambridge, you spent a short time at Shell.

Michael: Yes, I worked with Shell Chemicals.

George: Tell us about that. What were you doing for Shell?

Michael: Well, what they did in that era was to recruit people as management trainees from places like Oxford and Cambridge and have them sit around for a year. They didn't have any training programme. We were supposed to be training to become future managers, but in fact, there was no training at all. I got bored. Thermoplastics was the field of Shell that I was involved in. Initially polyethylene but, towards the end of the year I was there, they started developing polypropylene and polycarbonates: a broader range of the possible byproducts from oil. We had quite close links with Holland as it was an Anglo-Dutch Company and spent a couple of weeks in Pernis. When I was in Cambridge, I had a vague interest in wanting to do something worthwhile. I had some interviews with the ICI (Pharmaceutical) and Glaxo, what's now GlaxoSmithKline, because I had this vague ill-defined notion that I wanted to put my science to some use. It didn't really materialize. I hadn't thought it through enough. They didn't offer me a job, but Shell did.

Part 2 – The 1960s – Teaching Science & Studying Sociology

George: At what point did you start thinking about going into teaching?

Michael: Well, during my year at Shell, I started getting myself educated and becoming a bit more politically aware. We lived down in Chelsea, quite near the Royal Court. This was at the time of John Osborne and the Angry Young Men, *Look Back in Anger*, Arnold Wesker, all these people. I got quite involved. I don't know exactly how – there must have been something that triggered me off. I started reading. I think I started having an education, probably, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, the kind of things I'm sure both of you would have read at different stages of your careers. It was a complete revelation to me. Then, at Shell, I was offered a job as Southern Regional Representative of Shell Chemicals. I had to decide: am

I going to take that job? I didn't want to spend the rest of my life promoting English capitalism, I said to myself, so I decided to resign. At the same time, I realised I needed an education. I came across one or two things in sociology. I don't know what the first thing was. I went to a summer school and got inspired by various people and reading things. I applied to go to LSE to read sociology for another degree. I always remember because the interviewer said, "Mr. Young, why on earth should we offer you a place when you've already shown that you can't make use of university at Cambridge?" I could only agree with him! I thought it was perfectly reasonable at the time. Anyway, I then found that it was possible to do a part-time, evening degree, at what was then Regent Street Polytechnic (now Westminster University). The School of Commerce was based in a nondescript building behind Regent's Park, on Little Titchfield Street. I registered for an external degree, which was, in those days, a London degree, taught at the Polytechnic and examined by the university. Then I thought, "How am I going to find time to do this?" I said, "well, I'll become a teacher because I'll have all those lovely holidays!" Also, I've got a science degree, so I can get a teaching job without any teaching qualification. I started off as a supply teacher at a school called Spencer Park behind Clapham Common. The last thing in mind I had ever thought of was to become a teacher in any kind of school at all. I didn't know *what* I was doing. I found myself teaching music, French, almost anything when another teacher was sick. I met some people at school there, other teachers. That was important to me. One of the experiences that I'll never forget was with an Australian who I got friendly with. I was saying to him, "Look, I have real problems about discipline, particularly as I've been put in a laboratory." For somebody who can't cope with class discipline, well, you know what can be done with Bunsen burners, you can plug them into the water tap. There were complaints about the water getting through and flooding the classroom below! I felt dreadful. The Australian said, "I'll tell you what I do. I come in early in the morning and I write down all the details of a lesson on a blackboard mounted on an easel, and I write the details of a second lesson on the back. I take these around with me from class to class and say, 'Now, get writing, kids.' It takes up the lesson time. That's what I do, and I don't have any problems with discipline. The school was comprehensive. It had about 14 forms: three were called 'academic' – A1, A2, and A3; then three was another group that were called 'technical' – T1, T2, and T3 and T4; and then there were the ones who they didn't know what to call, I think it was 'general' – G1, G2, G3. It was the 'general' teachers who were most often sick, so I usually got one of the G forms. I was very lucky that the only member of my family who had ever heard of a school like Spencer Park was by then the divisional inspector for the inner London Education Authority in which it was based. A vacancy came up for a chemistry teacher in a school. She suggested I might apply. There weren't too many chemists about, so the headmaster was delighted to have me, despite the fact that I didn't know anything about teaching and not all that much about chemistry! I gradually learned by making mistakes and by talking to my colleagues. To begin with, I couldn't work out how it was that kids who were behaving, happy, very much involved and busy studying in one class, would come into my laboratory and there was a riot! I couldn't make out what had gone wrong. Anyway, I learned and it was the making of me as a teacher. It was a great experience. I had five and a half years there and ended up as Head of Science. We started getting students staying on for A levels in physics, chemistry and biology by the time I left. When I first got there, they had only done general science at

what was then O level. I did a lot of out of school activities with them, a science club, and we even put on short plays, until the Head of English joined the staff and took them over. We went on field trips to Snowdonia and had a great time. Almost we lost them in the fog one day – but it was a really great experience.

George: Am I right in saying it took you six years to complete your degree?

Michael: Yes. I was trying to study sociology in the evenings, but I was also very much involved in the Nuclear Disarmament movement. Getting involved in CND was a big, big change for me. I suddenly realised that nuclear defense is a completely irrational policy. You have a weapon that, if you use it, means you will be destroyed yourself. CND was a growing movement at that time, with Bertrand Russell, Donald Soper and others as leaders. I went on to help organize one of the Aldermaston marches and organize study groups. Because of my CND activities, I didn't really have much time for my studies. I stopped attending the Polytechnic classes, but some way or other I was determined to do the degree. I was actually very motivated to study by this point, for almost the first time in my life, so I started studying again. The degree was divided into two parts. Part One was economics, statistics and philosophy. Part two was sociology. I managed to pass Part One, which was quite an achievement because I hadn't done anything like that in my previous life at all. I remember working very hard. At one point, I met the professor there, Steven Cotgrove, who wrote the first A-level text in sociology. He wasn't a very interesting sociologist, but that was irrelevant. He said to me, after I'd been for about three or four years, "are you thinking of doing a master's degree?" I was flabbergasted. I thought that master's degrees were something for academic people. I never thought of myself as academic. I said, "I wasn't, but maybe I should!" I've always felt very grateful to him. In hindsight, it was one of those moments when somebody tells you something that makes you really think again.

George: How were the moves into teaching, studying sociology and your political activities received by your family and friends? What did they think?

Michael: Well, I don't think my friends were an issue because I didn't really inherit any from my former life. My family was just puzzled. They didn't know what to make of it. They didn't know what sociology was. They were more worried about the fact that I'd let my hair grow! I think they may have been more worried about my sister. They were trying to educate her into somebody's wife, as people did in those days. She rebelled against this and part of her source of rebellion was me as a kind of 'alternative parent'; I was 10 years older than her. She ended up going to teach in Peru, then came back to study anthropology. She didn't go on with anthropology, but it changed her completely. After a period apart, she did not need another 'parent'. However different, we have become close friends. At the time the rest of my family was just confused: what I was doing was completely outside their experience, to be fair – though they were not un-supportive. I think that the political education I got, partly through theatre and partly through CND, made me realize I knew absolutely nothing about the society that I had grown up in. I had taken it completely for granted, as many

people do. I knew absolutely nothing, and I thought, "Well, I need to study it." That was my motivation. I wanted to understand the world I lived in. I also thought, having been a chemist, that if I really understood sociology, I might become part of changing society. This was naive, it turned out: I've learned the opposite is true! Sociology teaches you about the difficulties of change. It doesn't teach you how to change the world, only that society is a very complex, difficult thing. As much as anything, I learned about social class and how that had shaped my life and shapes our society even when I was quite unaware of it. To a large extent, it still does, although I understand it a bit more now. A lot of sociology then was about social class. That was an education for me, and going to teach in what would now be a comprehensive school was part of that project. It was around the time Richard Titmuss and others were documenting the massive educational inequalities in society. All of that was really formative for me.

George: It sounds like quite an exciting period.

Michael: Yes, it was very exciting.

George: It strikes me that you couldn't have had the excitement of that period without the rupture and the change of direction. Do you think that's influenced how you've thought about education?

Michael: I hesitate to generalize about personal biographies because they are always both unique *and* general; they turn out differently for people. I've always tended to make the connections to my experience too easily, but they are hard. That's one of the reasons I've been glad to work closely with Joe Mueller (he is based in CapeTown) over the last 10 years or so. He's very much a theorist's theorist. He's never been a schoolteacher, he hasn't had that experience, but he has thought a lot about education and what schools can and cannot do. It's too easy to think that theory has a purchase on practice. I think back to Marx's wonderful quote, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point is to change it." In a sense he's right, but it doesn't actually solve anything. You're still there with the same question. I think we have to live with that.

George: Let's get back to your story. What happened after your sociology degree?

Michael: Looking back, I had an amazing amount of good fortune. There were two things in particular. One is that I resigned as a teacher, around Christmas 1965, and had until the summer to study full-time. It was breathtaking that I could begin studying in the morning and work through until evening – absolutely marvelous. It was the most important, incredible time for me that I was able to do that. Consequently, I managed to get a good degree this time. At first I thought I would go to LSE to do a master's, because it was the only place I knew that offered sociology, but I found out that in the year I would be doing it, Asher Tropp, who did the Sociology of Education option, would be on a sabbatical. I wanted to do Sociology of Education to link my sociology to my teaching practice. I don't regret the way I studied sociology, but at the time I couldn't see any connection between my study and my job. During the day, I was teaching one body of knowledge, while in the night I was trying to learn another. I couldn't make them come together at all! They seemed to be completely separate. Anyway, because Tropp was on sabbatical, I didn't apply to LSE,

they weren't offering that option. Then my tutor said, "Well, why don't you try Essex?" This was a leading place for sociology at the time and was very much a radical center in the discipline. I applied to the master's in Sociology at Essex, which I was accepted onto. I got a one-year ESRC grant to do it. What happened – this was the other stroke of good luck that completely changed my life – was that the person who was due to teach me Sociology of Education at Essex was himself on sabbatical. And who was asked to stand in but Basil Bernstein. He became a visiting professor. I didn't know it would be so important at the time. I had read his early work, the socio-linguistic papers, which I'd found very exciting when I read as an undergraduate. He would come up from London and give his classes, and quite often I used to go back with him on the train. We got chatting and we seemed to get on very well. He asked me to his house sometimes. It was before he became well known for his articles on the curriculum. There was this curious moment when I had a tutorial with him and he said, "What are you doing for your dissertation, Michael?" I said, "I haven't really thought." Then he said, "Why not do it on the curriculum?" I was completely blown: sociologists didn't write about the curriculum! They didn't even think about it. What *was* the curriculum anyway? There was nothing in the literature. Anyway, he was very persuasive and I did not find it easy to say no. I realised afterwards that he was thinking about the curriculum at that time, but hadn't written anything about it. Looking back, maybe he thought I might have some ideas which is why he suggested it. I agreed and spent most of my dissertation trying to explain why it was that sociology had not been interested in the curriculum. Part of that comes out in the first chapter of *Knowledge and Control.* At some point, he said, "What are you going to do now, Michael?" I thought, "I don't know – I will need a job? I'm applying for one lecturing in sociology at Goldsmiths." He said, "Well, I think I've got a job for you at the Institute of Education!" My mind boggled, but I said, "Oh, sounds interesting." So, on Tuesday I went to Goldsmiths and was offered a job, but I said I'm going for an interview at the Institute the next day. Then, surprise, surprise, I got offered a job at the Institute, which I ended up accepting. I was very fortunate: if I hadn't had that connection with Bernstein, that would probably never have happened.

George: What year was that?

Michael: 1967.

George: So, you'd finished teaching in '65 to focus your time on studies ...

Michael: I had the first six months of 1966 studying for the BSc in sociology. Then I did a year at Essex and in October 1967 I took up the post at the Institute as a lecturer. I was suddenly thrust into an impossible position. I'd only ever taught pupils chemistry and here I was with three sociology classes. One was to be a tutor for graduates who were becoming social studies teachers. I'd never taught any social studies; I hadn't a clue what it was! The second was what was called the academic diploma, which was a course for practicing teachers who wanted to transfer to one of the disciplines of education – in their case, sociology. Then I had an MA class and I was asked to teach sociological theory and methodology. Two of my classes were evenings, and the seminars often ended up by going to the pub. There was sometimes more sociology being discussed in the pub than in the

seminar! It was very important that as the lecturer I got to know my students. I was very lucky in that sense: one member of my MA class, Ian Hextall, became one of my best friends. There were others too who became good friends; for example, John Beck, Sally Inman and Geoff Whitty, who later became Director of the Institute. Some of my best friends and colleagues were on that course. It made a big difference. It was partly that there wasn't all that much age difference between me as a lecturer and the teachers on the course. Many of the students were at a similar stage. They'd seen an opening up of higher education with opportunities to study for a master's degree. Those who didn't want to become Head Teachers saw another route for themselves. Many of them ended up as university lecturers. In a sense, it taught me in a practical way what Durkheim theorized about, that thinking and innovation and knowledge are actually social. I didn't have a sense of the social at school, nor at Cambridge. It was only when I started school teaching, doing the part-time degree, then going to the Institute, that I discovered the importance of communities. They weren't communities in a formal sense, but people without whom I might never have done what I did. In my later years, I have been very impressed by Durkheim. He spent his life arguing and struggling against individualism. He was saying, "Individualism is not what we are as human beings." Everything he writes about knowledge, education, suicide is based on that idea. I think that I've learned it in my own life. The people I've known, worked with, shared with have changed often, but they've all been incredibly important. Although during my career I have learned that of all Durkheim's insights about the 'social' the most important is also the most difficult: that knowledge, what we go to school and university to acquire, is not only social. But perhaps the meaning of this is the most difficult issue for sociology[1].

George: What was the Institute like in those days?

Michael: It was very different. It had three very distinct main sections to its activities. It had the bit that was the leftover of colonial education, it had the bit that was training teachers doing a PGCE and it had the expanding group focused on the professional development of teachers, mostly through the 'foundation' disciplines. They never met much interaction between them. It was only relatively recently that there started to be bridges between school subject specialists who train teachers and those of us who work in the disciplines. This separation was because the education disciplines (with the exception of philosophy) were not until recently involved in school curriculum, whereas it is something teachers are always involved with. So recently some school subject specialists at the university and in schools started to think: "Well, maybe there's something interesting about sociology." When I first started teaching sociology of education, its primary focus was about how the external factors of society shaped the school. We did not focus on what was happening *in* the schools and the educational system itself – questions about curriculum and pedagogy. It took me a long time, for all kinds of reasons, to make that shift. I tried in my dissertation, I tried in my first book *Knowledge and Control*, and I even tried in some classroom–based research but I didn't really make much progress until quite recently. The Institute didn't

[1] I did not mention this in my original interview. However, in George's revised version, I realize it is too important not to mention here – I will come back to some of its implications later.

have a specific political position. There weren't the same kind of political issues about education at the time. There was a broad consensus that inequality, especially social class inequality, was a problem. There were those who were more sympathetic to what I called a 'compensatory education' approach to inequality, which tried to make up for the fact that working-class kids had working-class homes which were not helping them to study. Bernstein wrote quite a famous paper called *Education cannot compensate for Society* which was partly a response to interpretations of his earlier work on language. His famous distinction between elaborated and restricted codes caused him many problems, because how could you talk about two thirds of the population as having restricted codes? What did they do? Behave like Neanderthals, grunting and not putting sentences together? Of course he did not mean that and much of his later work was devoted to explaining what it did mean. I think it's one of the reasons why his latter work is, to put it mildly, unnecessarily difficult to follow. It's very, very interesting but is tortuous in its style. I think he was protecting himself subconsciously from the abuse that he got back in his earlier work. What still needs to be done is to show that there is as much continuity as difference in the two phases of his work – both are necessary and important. It's not something for me to do: I was too involved, I am not sufficiently a linguist.

George: Tell us about your relationship with Bernstein.

Michael: He had a lot of personal problems, and I had a lot of personal problems with him. I feel like I was quite lucky. Some people who had a close association with him didn't survive – at least in terms of their careers. I can think of three or four examples of those who were – what's the word I'm looking for? – almost intellectually *castrated* by him. They didn't feel their minds were free and they published very little. In terms of their potential, they were no different from those who succeeded. Mercifully, I didn't get caught in that trap. I nearly did. I was recruited as his protégé. The problem was that I wasn't willing to follow him at the time. I felt he was a part of the old sociology of education, not the new – which for all its limitations, as exemplified by my book *Knowledge and Control,* was asking radical questions about knowledge in the curriculum. He and I fell out very, very badly and we never really recovered a relationship, which is one of the things I regret.

George: I wanted to ask about 'the old' versus 'the new'. You have written in the past about Peters and that movement in philosophy of education that he led within the institute. Were they very influential?

Michael: Peters was the kind of guru of educational theory when I was first appointed. He stood at the pinnacle of what I would call a division of labour. It saw philosophers as telling teachers what they should be doing, psychologists telling them why many pupils will resist what they say and sociologists telling teachers why their job is so difficult – or even impossible because the external world (for us, society) has other ideas. From the point of view of that division – plausible in its own terms – he didn't think it was right that we, the sociologists, had a right to question what teachers should do or what knowledge the curriculum should stipulate – that was philosophers' job! He was a nice man and I respected him. I used to play squash with him back then. We were quite friendly. He sent me a little note once saying, "Interesting papers, Michael, but in fact you need to study epistemology.

I think you should go and attend a course in Birkbeck with David Hamlyn" – quite a well-known philosopher there – "they'll put you right about what epistemology is." I wish I'd kept it.

George: What was Bernstein's relationship with Peters?

Michael: Well, it's interesting, actually. In Bernstein's early work he avoids the knowledge question. He puts it aside and develops his own approach to curriculum codes. Only in the latter work, not long before he died, did he write several papers which opened up questions around knowledge. You probably remember the horizontal and vertical discourses paper. He says, "I didn't consider these, but now I feel I am able to." So, I don't think there was respect between them because Bernstein didn't really address the knowledge question until quite late on. For the first two or three years at the Institute, I didn't teach anything about sociology of education. I taught sociological theory. I didn't teach much about Durkheim but I taught a bit about Weber and a bit about Marx, and I discussed symbolic interactionism and its methodological implications. I thought that the teachers wanted to come and learn sociology, not to learn about education. They could work out what they did with it. I think I was at least partially right, although with hindsight I would have placed much more emphasis on Durkheim. At the time I was still relying on my undergraduate knowledge. I wanted my students to develop the theoretical background to be able to make their own judgments about different educational theories and policies.

Part 3 – The 1970s – Knowledge & Control

George: Let's talk about your book *Knowledge and Control*. Perhaps we should start with the conference that was held in Durham. What was that conference and how did it come about?

Michael: The conference in Durham was the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association. It was the first and I think the only one they've had which was focused specifically on education. There was a person called Richard Brown who was a professor at Durham and was involved in the Association. He had responsibility for putting the conference together, but he was an industrial sociologist, he knew nothing about education at all. He contacted Bernstein, who immediately called me into his office. Bernstein didn't like doing those kinds of things, I never understood why this was. I went up to Durham. This was in 1969, only a couple of years after I'd been appointed as a lecturer. I met Professor Brown and helped him construct the conference. I suggested that he invite Bourdieu and that others in our group would present papers. And that's what happened. The closing address was given by Bernstein. This became a chapter in *Knowledge and Control*. Its title was "On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge". He was an incredibly good speaker – a much better speaker than a writer. He enthralled everyone: they thought it was terrific though I am not sure that they understood him – I certainly did not, at the time. The day after the conference we came back down to London. Bernstein, Bourdieu, and I found ourselves sitting around having a drink in the bar of what was then the Russell Hotel. I don't know exactly how it happened, but to be brief, I think

we were agreeing that we had hoped that the Conference would provide a new focus for the sociology of education, but it didn't. So, let's do it ourselves. It was Bernstein who suggested a book, and that became *Knowledge and Control*. It's amazing when I think about it because I was still a junior lecturer, and he just handed the editorial work and finding the papers over to me. Whatever its strengths and weaknesses, it did focus on a new direction, that sociology should be concerned with what the education was – the knowledge that it expected pupils to acquire, and, not just with how it's distributed in terms of inequalities. The papers tackle that issue in different ways. The first chapter was mine, based on my MA dissertation but taking it a bit farther. Two of the chapters were written by master's students on my course, Geoffrey Esland and Nell Keddie, both based on their MA dissertations. It had Bourdieu's structuralism, Bernstein's Durkheimianism, Keddie's symbolic interactionism, Esland's social phenomenology, and my Weberian sociology of knowledge and power. It also had an interesting anthropological paper comparing and finding similarities between African and western scientific thought. It was a very eclectic book. One of the reasons why it was so successful in terms of sales was that it was adopted by the Open University as a set book for their Sociology of Education course. At that time, there were an enormous number of teachers who hadn't got degrees – they'd got teacher certificates only – and who wanted to upgrade their certificates to become degrees through the OU. This book, which was really quite inappropriate for an undergraduate course, became exactly that! It was cheap too, it sold for £1. For that reason, it got around among the teaching community. Curiously, it didn't really get around to the sociological community at all, despite it being my primary readership.

George: What did you hope the impact would be?

Michael: I really hadn't the faintest idea, beyond wanting to put a "new direction" in sociology of education that questioned the existing system "on the map". But I hadn't been an academic for long, so I was just pleased to get it done. It wasn't much reviewed – I only remember one. But it soon got to annoy people. It wasn't given a serious academic examination for quite some time. It was given a semi-fame via a paper called *Knowledge out of Control* by the philosopher Richard Pring, also at the Institute of Education. He later became a professor at Oxford. His critique, to put it very crudely, said, "What the hell is such a book doing? They have 'socially constructed' it all away!!" The interesting thing, looking back, is that during those early years at the Institute there was a kind of internal battle between the philosophers and the sociologists. I argued that a sociological approach had something important to say about the issues the philosophers had previously taken as their own. Their response was "He has no right to make such claims; he doesn't know his epistemology!" I was very dismissive of such arguments at the time; I thought it was just an internal disciplinary battle. However the books thesis that truth is a question of who has the power to define what counts as knowledge anywhere, not just in the school curriculum, left a big question mark: having opened up the whole knowledge question, what follows? That was the, or at least one of the big educational questions in the early '70s and it has never since gone away. Geoff Whitty, who had been a student of mine at the Institute, wrote a very good paper which was based upon his MA dissertation. He coined the phrase "naive possibilitarianism", which captured the sense that I wanted to claim that a new reality was possible, and that it would be a reality in the future even, when, in fact, it was

no more than a remote possibility at the time. He ascribed this label to me with regards to my views on a democratic socialist society, and argued I was naive if I didn't accept that achieving such a society was going to be a long slog and by no means certain in our lifetime. He turned out to be more right than he knew. Geoff himself was at least a bit of a naïve possibilitarian himself as he turned out to be when we worked together later in that decade.

George: That leads us on to some broader questions. What was the spirit like at the time? Because, obviously, it wasn't long after '68.

Michael: They were 'interesting times' as the Chinese used to put it. Forms of criticism and radicalism were part of the academic climate. Many small journals were started: there was Radical Education, Radical Statistics, Radical Psychology, History Workshop, Radical Philosophy, to name a few, as well as the more revolutionary ones like Big Flame – the best of them. If you went to a bookshop like Dillons, (now Waterstones) in Gower Stree, there was a whole string of these pamphlets on the bookshelves. They straddled the Trotskyist to the existentialist left. *Knowledge and Control* was caught up in that movement and benefited from that culture, which lasted until the late '70s. I suppose it ended in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher was elected.

George: How do you feel about *Knowledge and Control* now?

There are two things to say about the book. One is that it has this focus on the question of knowledge and yet it was actually very eclectic in its interpretation of that question. Some of it is more relativist, some of it is more phenomenological, some of it is more structuralist. People reacted to it in different ways. The other thing is that people have said, and this surprised me enormously, "This changed my way of thinking completely. I've not thought the same since I have read your book, Michael." Some of them agreed with it and some thought it was a disaster. One woman, when I went to New Zealand, got in touch with the person who invited me and said she wanted to take me out to lunch. I'm never willing to say no to having a lunch! The first thing she said was, "*Knowledge and Control* was a book that changed my life. It was the most important book I've ever read. Your latest book, *Bringing Knowledge Back In* is the worst book I've ever read and I completely disagree with it." I gobbled up my lunch and went home. Bernstein was one of those with reservations about *Knowledge and Control*. He was right in a sense. His concern, I now think, was not only that I was undermining education, but that I was undermining sociology or even specialist knowledge altogether. More recently I've used the idea that knowledge is powerful, that critical knowledge is powerful, whereas the argument in *Knowledge and Control* was that there is nothing special about this knowledge. Essentially, we were saying that the people who run the show want to keep running the show, and taking for granted much of what we know and how we think is how they do it. Bernstein was right to spot that and, of course, he was also right to spot that my argument would end up undermining sociology. If you take the logic of the sociology of knowledge seriously, the traditional sociology of knowledge at least, then it either leads to the undermining of any kind of specialist knowledge, or is itself contradictory when it is applied to itself. This is why I appreciate Durkheim. He gave us another way. He didn't express it in these words, but in

essence he said, “Knowledge is both real *and* social. To say that it's social doesn't mean that it is necessarily relativist. It means that to recognize that there is something external to our thinking that is “real, material or social and to say that physics or the slave trade was real, doesn't deny the fact that it's still social; it was a product of the slave traders and there are better (and more real accounts of what they did, by historians that are real too.” It took me a long time to realize that. I've had to try and live with both. I've got a good friend who is a convert to Catholicism. He says, "What you do now, Michael, is to not give enough credit to your early work," despite the fact that he's part of a church whose theory of knowledge is categorically not that it is socially constructed!

George: How did *Knowledge and Control* affect your working life in the early '70s?

Michael: In the early '70s I ran what was a very successful master's module with people who were interested in the area we were exploring. Geoff Whitty and I produced two books that grew out of those seminars. One was called *Society, State and Schooling,* the other was called *Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge.* The latter was more directly geared to what teachers could do, whereas *Society, State and Schooling* was an attempt to argue for a progressive democratic future that was not determinist in the traditional Marxist sense. Typically, *Society, State and Schooling* was far more successful than *Explorations*, whereas we thought the latter was more important. *Society, State and Schooling* became part of reading lists in social science and politics degrees in universities. The problem with *Explorations* was that there were very few people who were interested in reading about radical ideas regarding physics teaching. What the two books shared was a recognition that *Knowledge and Control* would be inadequate if it didn't have a politics which suggested how the world was going to change to make the future possible. That's what they both argued. The problem was that the teacher radicals in the schools were political activists and had little time for what they saw as over-erudite curriculum issues. Few of us had read much Gramsci and when we did were reluctant to take the concept of “organic intellectuals” seriously. Of course, it wasn't long after we published these books that we were proved wrong in seeing the possibilities of forging links with trade unionists – not by better arguments, but by the election of Margaret Thatcher. For the next 13 years, books like ours were completely marginalized. I nearly gave up doing any academic work at all because I couldn't see where I could go. It was only when I got involved in vocational education that I found a kind of lifeline of practical action – it was more theory than social action that I gave up.

George: *Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge* contains lots of examples of collaboration with teachers. How did they come about?

Michael: They were mostly contacts who Geoff had or master's students that I had supervised. We made up a rather fragile community of people who shared an optimism – perhaps an over-optimism – about a collaboration between radical teachers and the new sociologists of education. We thought, together, that we would be able to change schools. Clearly, we were wrong.

George: Why do you think that was?

Michael: Joe Muller criticizes those books for substituting a 'politics' for an 'epistemology'. He argues that we focused more on hope than on what we could honestly claim from our social science was 'better knowledge'. You could say he was being a bit critical of our sociology, which on the one hand questioned the objectivity of knowledge, while on the other, claiming that it did have an objective basis of its own. I think there's some truth in his critique, but I don't think he's completely right. We have to hold the two together. It is one of those issues that I have addressed since I started working with him. We haven't cracked it and we don't have identical views, but I do think we have better questions than we did then.

George: Looking back now, do you see them as a continuation of the ideas from *Knowledge and Control*?

Michael: Yes, but with a more explicit political slant. When I was last in South Africa, The question came up, "What did Bernstein think of these two books?" Apparently, Bernstein was quite dismissive. He said: "They're not sociology, they're politics"; whereas they were highly praised by Raymond Williams in a brief review. I think my position now is somewhere between the two. I don't want to dismiss our position. Although it could have been more realistic, we were along way f away from the kind of politics that have been necessary for the kind of educational changes we were arguing for to be likely. I'm a bit more inclined to dismiss *Knowledge and Control*'s social constructivism which did focus on the sociology and not the politics. And yet it opened up questions about the curriculum that were not being raised by anyone else at the time.

George: I want to come to *Society, State and Schooling*. There's an essay that you wrote in that which was reprinted, I think, in *The Curriculum of the Future*. It's called *Curriculum Change - Limits and Possibilities*.

Michael: Yes. I remember it well.

George: In that essay, you and Geoff develop a distinction between curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice. Tell us a bit more about that distinction and where it came from.

Michael: The paper was originally given in a lecture series on the curriculum at the Institute. They were called the Doris Lee Lectures, given in honor of Doris Lee, who was the first Professor of Curriculum Studies at the Institute. I was very surprised to be asked to do one. I imagine that Bernstein refused and that therefore they felt they should have a sociologist. Anyway, I did it. I remember working on it quite well. I wanted to hold the line between the relativism that social constructivism leads you into and the determinism inherent in theories influenced by Marxism. It was a reaction to a paper by the very well-known American philosopher of Education, Maxine Green, titled *Curriculum and Consciousness*, which took a more phenomenological approach. You might say the distinction was similar to the one Joe and I made many years later between *Future 1* and *Future 2* (Young and Muller 2009). Treating the curriculum as an inert body of knowledge, as in Eric D. Hirsch's lists of what all American children should know, doesn't recognize the fact that the knowledge included in a curriculum has a history and has to become part of the consciousness of the student. On the other hand, to deny the externality of curricular

knowledge is also wrong because there is a danger of forgetting what it is that you want the students to have access to, that schools can offer.

George: Do you see that essay as continuous with what you wrote later in your career?

Michael: Yes, as I said in my last response. However, in 1975 I had no idea what an alternative to the fact /practice dichotomy might look like.

George: How much was that work influenced by the reaction to *Knowledge and Control*?

Michael: It was, although probably more by sympathetic critics such as Geoff Whitty, than the more negative critics who reverted back to 'curriculum as fact'. I've learned that if you want to change things, you must begin with the strengths of the position you want to change. This is based on the assumption that if it doesn't have any strengths, it's probably not worth arguing about!

Part 4 – The 1980s & 1990s – Vocational Education & Curriculum of The Future

George: There was quite a long gap between the two mid-70s books and *The Curriculum of the Future*. It sounds like quite an interesting period of your career. What were you working on at that time?

Michael: There was a real void in the early '80s. I don't think I was doing anything very useful, at least theoretically. I did, however, become involved in my local Further Education College – as Chair of Governors – probably too involved, but that is another story.

George: Was that a void in terms of your theoretical work, or a political disillusionment? What contributed to that fallow period?

Michael: It's a very fair question. To put it crudely, I think it was a crisis of my professional identity as a sociologist of education. I no longer knew what I had to profess or teach; I'd lost confidence in sociology. If you lose confidence in your professional identity as a disciplinary specialist, what on earth do you have to say to your students? At one time, I thought of applying for a research project in science education, to go back to my past career as a science teacher. I didn't pursue it in the end, but I found that period extremely difficult.

George: What caused you to lose faith in sociology?

Michael: There just didn't seem to be a space between Marxism, which saw everything as revolution in the field of production, and an existentialist phenomenology that focused only on the meaningfulness of one's actions – a form of intellectualized radicalism that was going nowhere. Those were the only two options I could imagine at the time.

George: How did you make it out of this void?

Michael: Well, this is an example of how much luck is a factor in our lives. A colleague of mine had been a university-based governor at a local FE college, what is now called Westminster Kingsway. They were moving and she said, "They're asking me whether I know anybody. Would you like to do it?" I said, "I'm interested in that," and soon after became a governor of this college. Within two or three years I was chair of governors. There was a really brilliant principal, a guy called Fred Flower. He gave me a way back into education at a time when I had completely lost confidence in sociology. I felt as though I could do something useful through vocational education.

George: Did your work at Kingsway change how you thought about education?

Michael: Firstly, I found that I wasn't too bad at being a Chair of Governors, in terms of recruiting, making judgments about senior staff, those kinds of things. I regained a certain sense of my own professional competence. More broadly, one thing I learned from Fred Flower was that, for some students, the vocational route was a way of getting a better education. In other words, he taught me that seamless progression through the academic curriculum of GCSE'S and A levels was not the only way. There are other ways. And that what was necessary was to expand and strengthen those ways intellectually as providing alternative routes. I realised that FE colleges were an important part of the system. Kingsway was a classic example of FE in London; it was basically a second chance college. Most of the people who were studying towards exams like A levels were doing so because they'd dropped out of school. They'd failed and they were trying again through a different route. It was a time when there was a lot of scope for curriculum innovation. The college had some interesting courses: one was called GCSE Mature, which was a different formulation to the traditional syllabus. Courses were constructed to take account of the fact that adults had experience, whereas the traditional academic courses did not. It was around the time when, under Margaret Thatcher, an education strategy was launched called TVEI. Thatcher believed that the way education was structured at the time made it very difficult for a government to change anything, because the combination of unions and local authorities held the reins entirely. Her idea was, in essence, "if you can't change them, then you may at least be able to bribe them" – a benign bribe, of course. The government came up with a source of funds called TVEI – technical and vocational education initiative. Its goal was to reform the curriculum for students of 14+ and prepare them for the knowledge and skills likely to be needed in the future. The Department of Employment put up the money and schools and local authorities bid for it by offering schemes that met certain criteria. People were rather divided about this, as you can imagine. It appealed to us because it was, at least we hoped, a way of bridging the academic/vocational divide. They also bribed the universities. The Institute was told that if it used its status as a leading university to improve vocational education, they would get funding from the government. The director at the time, Denis Lawton, decided to establish a post-16 centre. He knew I'd been chair of governors at Kingsway, and so I was asked to lead it. That certainly wasn't an offer, I could say no to. My work at Kingsway had meant that, for several years, much of my working life had not been spent in the place that I was paying my salary. The post-16 centre gave me an opportunity to rationalize this divide. Also, it got me away from trying to make sense of sociology, which, as I've alluded to, was either waiting-for-the-revolution Marxism or a sort of directionless phenomenology. I became aware that one could go

beyond the academic-vocational divide and that it had the potential to be a very fruitful way of reforming both tracks. In the end, I found that the theoretical questions are similar for vocational education and training (VET) as they were for the school curriculum. The notion of competence is pervasive in the VET world. It assumes you can specify the outcome of learning in advance, whereas the academic approach says that you've got to provide the opportunities for students to acquire knowledge if they are to progress in improving their employability. In a sense, by the end of about 12 years working on VET, I became more of an educationalist and less of a sociologist. I realised that the knowledge question is broadly the same wherever it appears: higher education, vocational education, school education. I can't comment on primary education because I have too little experience. Anyway, my 2007 book *Bringing Knowledge Back In* makes the argument that the knowledge question is just as important in vocational education as anywhere else. The question takes a different form, but it's just as important.

George: Tell us more about your time at the post-16 centre.

Michael: I was very fortunate to be able to recruit Ken Spourss, who had been an advisory teacher working from what was called then the College for the Distributive Trades. He was great. I wouldn't have been able to create the Centre without him. We had a lot in common, for instance we both had an interest in Gramsci, his more articulate and informed by his politics, mine less so! Gramsci was the one Marxist who was realistic about what the left could do and that it had to be done within existing capitalism. Most of the others thought it would just disappear under its own contradictions away. The Post 16 Centre had a broad brief of improving vocational education. For once, I feel that I was quite smart. I said, "Well, if we're going to have a centre for vocational education in the university, what it's got to do is ask how do you bridge the academic-vocational divide? How will you bring the knowledge of the academy into the field of vocational education?" These questions informed a lot of the work we did at the centre as well as much of what I wrote about in *The Curriculum of the Future*. I was Head of the Post 16 Education Centre from 1987 for ten or eleven years. Then the institute got reorganized and the centre was transformed and I ceased to be its head. Obviously, I am prejudiced but although it did much good work it was not the same from then on. Looking back, I think it played a very important role. It stressed that if you claim that a course or a qualification is an example of vocational education, there's a danger of forgetting that you're talking about *education.* However, if you are claiming that a course is education and not training, then it must involve access to knowledge and not just access to skills. You have to find ways to combine the two. That was very much the goal that Ken Spours and I identified; it emphasized that we were a *university*-based Centre, something that was, in my view, less emphasized after 2000. This does not negate the importance of the Centre's later work for the Tomlinson Committee. We were fortunate in the early period to have an advisor from the Department of Employment who was sympathetic to our aims. It also was the time when the Maastricht Treaty was signed. That opened up the possibility of cross-European collaboration. We became involved in a number of projects with different European countries, and I started to learn about European education. I visited Finland several times, as well as Germany, Spain and the Netherlands. It was a great education for me because my educational knowledge had up to then been narrowly UK based. In about 1991, after a lot of discussion,

we decided that if we wanted to try and establish vocational education as a university field of enquiry, the best way to do this was by offering a specialized MA (the MA in VET). Ken was keener on this at the time than I was – partly because he was more enthusiastic about what qualifications could achieve –, but I was quite keen too. We wanted to say that this is an area that's sufficiently important to be studied at the master's level. It was the only master's degree in vocational education at the time in any British university. Unfortunately, potential students didn't get the funding that they needed, so we only recruited a few teachers. In particular, it didn't get a significant number of teachers from FE to come and study. However, it has expanded and become part of the IOE's modular programme since then. Nevertheless, it was important intellectually and politically, as well as for me in terms of my own professional career. When we started at the centre we self-published a series of working papers, they were very well received in the profession but not given any status or recognition by the university. We realised that we had to shift towards publishing in academic journals. I think that if we hadn't done that I would probably never have got my chair.

George: In your 1999 book, *The Curriculum of the Future*, you discuss the idea of post-Fordism and certain economic theories that were being discussed in the late '80s and early '90s. What was the main thrust of those ideas and how did they cause your position to evolve?

Michael: Well, during that period there were various publications which suggested that capitalism was changing and that the old F. W. Taylor managerialism model – of reduce the control of the worker over their work as a basis for maximizing profits, the expectation of surplus value – was becoming problematic. Examples from Japan, Italy, the Nordic countries, Germany, were all suggesting there was a new model. There were some influential theorists – Piore and Sabel, Wolfgang Streek and Robin Murray at Sussex – who were saying that Fordism, which as an extension of Taylorism, was on the wane. At the time, we thought we were getting to a stage in which it would be important for workers to be able to combine knowledge and skill, rather than simply reproducing skill. Therefore, any education system had to start thinking about preparing people for the different 'economies of the future', and this had particular implications for vocational education. That idea was ultimately proved false, or at least over-optimistic: capitalism didn't develop in that way, partly because of the possibilities of the new information technologies. The examples we had found turned out to be isolated experiments arising from particular local conditions. Emilia Romagna, cooperatives in the Basque Country, and others were not representative of any new phase of capitalism. The idea of a more benign and equal form of capitalism was also picked up politically. The journal of the Communist Party, called *Marxism Today,* identified with what was known as Euro Communism, a quite different kind of communism to the Soviet model. It was quite influential, and it published a number of articles on that theme. Our ideas of how to bridge the skills/knowledge gap were developed as an extension of the Euro Communist movement. In the end, the European economy didn't shift from Fordism to post-Fordism but to what Christel Lane referred to as "high-tech Fordism". Workers were still in a subordinate position, but the technology did quite a lot of the more intellectual work previously undertaken by workers. Flexible specialization was another popular and related idea at that time, and Ken was very much

involved in this. He was more optimistic about its possibilities than I was. We had many debates around the issue – it was influential at the time I was writing the papers that became chapters of my *The Curriculum of the Future*.

George: It's interesting you say you were less optimistic. *The Curriculum of the Future* is often taken as being quite an optimistic set of papers. Would you say you were optimistic during the '90s?

Michael: Yes. I started optimistic, and I probably still WAS when I was finishing *Curriculum of the Future*, but it led to a very different approach in the 2000s. Ken stayed with our earlier ideas. His chapter in my festschrift published in 2017 makes the argument that while he was supportive of my work, I should go back to what I was doing in the *Curriculum of the Future*.

Part 5 - 1990-2010 - An educational future for post-apartheid South Africa

George: Tell us about South Africa. Why did you first start to go to South Africa?

Michael: I had a long-term interest from when I first got involved in politics, way back in the '50s. Colonial freedom was one of the strands of left-wing politics that I identified with then, and South Africa was obviously an important example. I was involved in something called the Stop the Seventies Rugby Tour. It was an interesting and quite a scary experience of direct political action for me. We were trying to get on the rugby pitch to stop the game by throwing packets of flour mixed with purple dye among the players. There were lots of police around and I was very glad to escape! I first visited South Africa in 1980 or '81. My former wife was South African, and I went out to meet her family. I found it a very uncomfortable experience. She had had a typical white experience of growing up and had been very happy, although later she got involved in anti-apartheid student politics. It was this that had led her to come to England to study and teach. Understandably, when we went to South Africa she wanted to show me the good things – things that I didn't really want to see, I knew that apartheid was evil. I didn't want to see anything good about it, which of course there are for all things, and South Africa is a very beautiful country, and even under apartheid not all White people were racist. I felt sorry for her, but it was not easy. I also met two people who became very close friends of mine. One is the historian Peter Kallaway – he had been a student with my wife and writes about colonial education. He has become interested in the role of missionaries and how they played a significant role in the anti-apartheid movement. He compares the situation to the countries where there were few missions, like the Belgian Congo, and where there were no Mandelas either. The other person I met, who has been a friend ever since, was Joe Muller.

George: What roles did you have in your work in South Africa?

Michael: From 1990 I had a group in the Post 16 Centre called Research and Education South Africa, which was funded by the Canon Collins Trust. We had mostly black students who came to do master's degrees here to prepare them to take over the education system

when an ANC government was elected. After the ANC was legalized in South Africa In the 1990s, I got in involved in a whole range of adult educational activities with African trade unions and various other groups who were involved in planning a new structure for education which could be introduced once apartheid was abolished. I helped in developing a unified qualifications system to replace the one that had treated the different races separately. Racial divisions were the structure that they wanted to abolish. What I gradually came to realize was that although we were using the same term – 'a unified qualifications framework' –, we gave it a significantly different meaning. Coming from England, my meaning of 'unified' stressed that it would bridge the academic /vocational divide, where theirs was that it should bridge the racial divide, especially that between whites and blacks. We both wanted a national system that was the same for everyone, although we emphasized different divisions as our priority. This was entirely understandable when I came from a country where social class was the major divider and they had grown up in a country that had 18 different education systems divided by race. Of course, just as we in England have racial divisions and inequalities, albeit not legal ones, post-apartheid South Africa inherits both racial divisions and, though less visibly, social class divisions. I think the major lesson I learned was that qualifications only measure what people have learned. The primary determiner of life chances is the education and training that is provided – the schools, colleges and universities –, and that is where the focus of reform has to be. It is, of course, easier to design a qualification system 'on paper'. The question of the education itself, the curriculum and pedagogy, remains. Again, understandably, post-apartheid South Africa was in a hurry – they wanted something they could show to the African population who could by then vote – and a qualification system appeared to offer that. The thing I want to stress is not so much what I did in South Africa, but what South Africa did for me, in educating me. It changed my thinking fundamentally about questions around curriculum and knowledge. At the time, they were adopting an approach to education which had similarities to the message of my first book, *Knowledge and Control,* that knowledge and education were social constructs, expressions of the distribution of power in society. They effectively viewed the curriculum as what we later called '*knowledge of the powerful*'. The powerful in South Africa had been the white Afrikaners who dominated the apartheid society. That group represented a minority after the 1994 elections, the first free democratic elections they had. All the apartheid legislation was removed, the power of the apartheid regime was removed, and so many took the view that, "Now that power has changed, education can also change." They saw an opportunity to build something quite new and took on the idea of a democratic curriculum based on social constructivist ideas. Black teachers were very much behind this. They had experienced being dominated by white administrators who told them what to do, but now they were free. They were effectively told, "Now you're free, you can build a democratic curriculum with your black students, and nobody is going to stop you from government or the law." The problem was that teachers had absolutely no experience of any kind of curriculum other than what they knew. They had just been cogs in a wheel before, which meant they didn't know what to do with the freedom that they were given by the new model. There was chaos in the schools, complete chaos. No students wanted to learn. They thought that schools were places for perpetuating the revolution. They'd bought the myth. Mandela said, "you are here to learn", which is a rather conservative thing to say, and the students didn't like it.

Education has this conservative element which they had forgotten or seen only as imposition by whites, which it had been. What I saw in South Africa, combined with certain theoretical articles I read, really shook me up. I realised how wrong my earlier thesis was. Of course, it freed the teachers from having been oppressed by apartheid, but they had not been educated, they hadn't been trained. They didn't know what to do with that freedom, they had no guide, and no curriculum. What was a really important, education for me, was that sometimes you need experience as well as theory to change your ideas. I will be forever grateful to South Africa.

Part 6 – The 2000s – Bringing Knowledge Back In

George: Let's move on to *Bringing Knowledge Back In.* That's often seen as something of a turning point in your career. Which were the theoretical papers that led you to reexamine some of your earlier positions?

Michael: There were various papers around the year 2000 that offered a critique of the new sociology of education I'd been involved with in the 70s. Two people were particularly influential for me: Rob Moore, who was in Cambridge, and Joe Muller, who I had met on my first visit and who was based in Cape Town. Joe had gone to Cambridge as a visiting scholar and worked with Rob on a paper in 1999, titled *The Discourse of 'Voice' and the Problem of Knowledge and Identity in the Sociology of Education*, that was very critical of my earlier work. Their argument shocked me because they were both good friends of mine, and here they were saying that there were fundamental weaknesses in my earlier work. I had rather let that question go through the previous period. I was head of the Post 16 centre at the Institute and I'd become very involved in the qualifications debate. Rob was one of the earliest people to establish the notion of social realism. His paper with Joe was an opportunity for me to go back and rethink the more basic questions about these concepts – social constructivism, social realism – that had been made explicit by their paper. I could not avoid linking their theoretical critique of my earlier work to my experiences in South Africa during the previous decade. As I said earlier that practical experience made me realize there was something wrong with a theory of the curriculum that directly links it to power in the way it tried to. It says nothing about the question one is left with: If you remove the power, what kind of curriculum are you going to have? That's what led me to try and ask some of the more fundamental questions. It led me to rethink my views about Bernstein, to reread and to get a new interpretation of the work of Durkheim, and look at the links between curriculum and pedagogy through the work of Vygotsky.

George: What was the prevailing view of Durkheim at the time, and how did you read him differently?

Michael: The prevailing view of Durkheim within sociology, with some exceptions, including Bernstein, although he was never explicit about it, was threefold: that he was a

conservative because he placed an emphasis on society being governed by social consensus on values; that he was a positivist because he emphasized that social facts are real, and social science should be a science; and also that he was a functionalist. All these were seen as aspects of Durkheim's work to critique. When I came to read some more of Durkheim, particularly *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and also to read the commentaries on them – people like Parsons, a very influential American sociologist – I found that there was a rather different Durkheim than the one I'd known about before. It was a Durkheim who wasn't a positivist in the current sense. He was a positivist only in the sense that he thought that you could have a science of the social, and study morals and values objectively, but that it would not be exactly like the science of physics because social phenomena are different from natural phenomena. He was a structural-functionalist but only really in the sense that he was looking at the *interdependence* of the different parts of society. It's better expressed by another American sociologist, Merton, who talked about the difference between a normative functionalism, which focuses on consensus as a base of society, and what he called a general functionalism, which looks at society in terms of the interdependence of its parts. Society may or may not be dominated by powerful groups, it may or may not be based on consensus – the key thing is how the elements relate to one another.

George: What made you go back to Durkheim, if he was not widely regarded within sociology of education? Why did you start reading him again?

Michael: I went back to Durkheim because of his concept of the 'social'. When I was an undergraduate in sociology, there were two big debates, one between Durkheim and Weber and the other between Durkheim and Marx. In the early 2.000s, I found myself needing to rethink that relationship between Durkheim and Marx. They had two very different ideas about the division of labor, and they had two very different ideas of the social. Durkheim's argument was that the fundamental features of a society are the common norms that are shared by that society, whether it's a tribe, a clan, or a society in the modern sense, whereas Marx saw all societies as based upon the mode of production. Durkheim's point is that you can't start with the mode of production, you have to start with the social. That is the most fundamental feature of human beings, from the moment they are born. The mode of production is just one form that the social takes. That's the point I went back to. I was able to develop the idea, very much in collaboration with Joe and Rob, that knowledge could be both social *and* real. It's social because knowledge can only be produced by groups of people in history, unless you see it as coming from the divine spirit, but it's also real in the sense that it constitutes the shared understandings of society: it is particular social relations in particular social contexts that shape the forms that knowledge takes. I realised that if you didn't insert the real back into the social, you couldn't really have any analysis of a curriculum at all.

George: Let's move on to Bernstein. What direction did he take after you worked together on *Knowledge and Control*?

Michael: Bernstein's work is expressed in the five volumes of *Class, Codes, and Control*. You can see these as going back to his starting questions and elaborating them in a more

sophisticated and developed way. Of course, one of the reasons why people resist Bernstein is that he's very difficult to grasp. People sometimes feel that it's better just to leave it! It's unfortunate because there are nuggets of incredibly original thinking in his work. Some people have managed to make it explicit but not many. His early work on language codes was much criticized and much misunderstood, as we discussed earlier. When he talked about elaborated and restricted codes, he was talking about the relationship between everyday thinking and curriculum thinking, which means he had, even within his early work on language, a theory of the curriculum. This became central to his later work. I was rethinking my position around that time, and was influenced by a very good paper of his called *Open Schools, Open Society*. There was also his paper on the curriculum, about vertical and horizontal knowledge structures, in 1999. He hadn't focused on questions around knowledge and the curriculum for nearly thirty years, since *On the Classification and Framing of Knowledge,* in 1971. He says, in the beginning of the *Vertical and Horizontal Discourse* paper, "Now, I'm turning to the question of knowledge in education."

George: Was Bernstein your route back into Durkheim?

Michael: No, I think Durkheim was my route back into Bernstein. If you read Bernstein, the influence is quite difficult to see. He doesn't quote or reference Durkheim directly much. He doesn't really make explicit anyone he's read. It's quite difficult to know where it comes from unless you've got some background to be able to see that. The influences on him were implicit rather than explicit. I think it was that way round. When I read the *Vertical and Horizontal Discourses* paper, I suddenly realized what he'd been saying before. If you look at *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, it had been only implicitly influenced by Bernstein through my re-reading of Durkheim, because I suddenly had a theory of the curriculum. I think if you'd spoken to Bernstein himself, or even if you'd spoken to somebody like Joe Muller at that time, they would have said that I was still resistant to engaging with Bernstein – this is a resistance that I still have not completely overcome. I think I could have learnt about the importance of Bernstein earlier than I did. He was very important to me in my career. I met him when I was a master's student, he got me a job and arranged for me to produce my first book. That set me up, looking back. I didn't really think very much about it at the time. I didn't think, "Gosh, I need to be grateful," or anything, but certainly it was important for me. I wish I had managed to have an ongoing relationship with him. That's something I regret, although I'm aware that some people had their careers destroyed by him. Some became disciples in a way that was not helpful. The irony is that I ended up doing things later on that he might have been quite pleased about, had he still been alive. He certainly wasn't pleased about my earlier work. I'd be the first to admit that my earlier work would have been stronger had I been able to grasp what he was saying sooner. It was 30 years after I first came across him that I seriously began to try and understand what he was saying. I hadn't exactly dismissed his work, but I had certainly stood apart from the Bernstein tradition. It's not insignificant that I really started thinking about him again after he died. I'd had quite a lot of difficulties with Bernstein, the man, but I realized I needed to go back and think again about his texts and ideas.

George: Your re-reading of Durkheim and Bernstein helped you reconceptualize the curriculum. Tell us about your reading of Vygotsky.

Michael: I was developing work in relation to vocational education and training, and also how one conceptualized and thought about learning, particularly in relation to work-based learning, because that was a core element in any vocational education program. Sociologists have always dismissed learning as a psychological issue, and therefore, you don't find a body of work on the sociology of learning. There's a body of work on the sociology of knowledge, which has its own weaknesses but is at least there. In it somewhere, is a rather marginal part of how Durkheim was treated in terms of what he wrote about knowledge. You can't find anything explicit about the question of learning, and, if you can't find anything about learning, how can you find anything about education and curriculum? The curriculum is not just about a body of knowledge, it's about acquiring a body of knowledge through learning. There was a lot of interest in learning at that time, the idea that people could learn late in life, that they could learn at work, they could learn in all kinds of different ways. It was a form of democratization, in a sense. Learning wasn't just what people do when they're reading books and sitting in classrooms, it's also the process by which they can develop from their everyday life. I was looking for a way of thinking about that. In Vygotsky, I found somebody who focused on the differences between how we learn as we grow up and the kind of learning that takes place at school. The model of learning and what we learn is completely different. He was very interested in that relationship, which I now believe is absolutely crucial for how we think about curriculum and pedagogy. I also saw him as an important counterbalance to Durkheim, who can be overly structuralist in his approach. I was wary of that, because structuralism doesn't really say anything to people in classrooms, the people who are actually involved in questions of teaching and learning.

George: When you were writing the papers that ended up being published in *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, did you see them as a revolution in your thought or did they feel like a continuation of your earlier work? Did it feel self-consciously different?

Michael: The Vygotsky-Durkheim paper was a real breakthrough because nobody else had made that connection as far as I know. It's remarkable that two such unlikely people who never met each other or had anything to do with each other should have made such, in a sense, similar arguments, one stressing more on curriculum and one stressing more on pedagogy. I remember when I went to Uruguay and read some papers there. People were amazed at my interpretation of Durkheim: they couldn't believe it. They said, "this is not the Durkheim we know; Durkheim is an old hack conservative!" I said: "now wait, listen, let's see what we can learn from him." I hadn't really read much Vygotsky. I'm more of a Durkheimian, because Vygotsky doesn't come out of the sociology corpus. I came across him because I realised that if I was going to be involved in vocational education, I would at some point have to think about learning. There was a colleague, Harry Daniels, at the Institute who specialized in Special Educational Needs. I said to him something along the lines of, "sociologists don't deal with learning, it's a psychologist's thing. Is there anything I can read?" He recommended Vygotsky, whose work contains a theory of learning. It was incredibly important for me to read Durkheim and Vygotsky together, because both of

them deal with the separation between school and everyday life. Vygotsky doesn't talk about it as the sacred and the profane, he talks about it by distinguishing common sense from theoretical concepts, but they're making the same point. If you can make two unlikely people say the same point, it can quite often take off.

George: What was the reception to *Bringing Knowledge Back In* when it was published? Did it make a stir?

Michael: Well, it won second prize in an annual competition for the best book of the year in education, buts it's not really been engaged with by the mainstream sociological community at all. The same happened to Bernstein's work. People read Bourdieu, but not Bernstein. I'm still pleased with *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. It is the book I'm most proud of. The argument is, I think, sound, and well worked through. Most of the chapters have something intrinsically interesting on their own to say, at least I hope so. I'd only like it to have been reviewed a bit more!

George: As an aside, I'm interested to hear your thoughts on where we are today. Curriculum has become very fashionable in the teaching world as well as in the academic world. Do you think we're still lacking theories of learning?

Michael: I don't think so, no. On one level, yes, of course, we are, but even more we're lacking theories of knowledge. There's an awful lot of talk about the curriculum, there's not much thinking about what kind of theory of knowledge you want for a curriculum. What the realist focus brought to the sociology of education was an emphasis on the stipulation of knowledge in the curriculum. We made the argument that if it's not stipulated, there's no chance of kids getting access to it. Our focus was on the fact that knowledge is produced and is changed from what is inherited from previous societies. In other words, knowledge builds on knowledge. That's one thing, but quite another thing is the fact that the knowledge in a curriculum must be accessed by people who come without any prior knowledge, or with knowledge that's very different from the knowledge that's found in the curriculum. I didn't say much about that at all, but it's crucial. What we need is not just a theory of knowledge, which you can get from Durkheim and the sociology of knowledge; you need a theory of, if you like, *educational* knowledge, which is knowledge that students can acquire. To some extent, that's still my problem to this day. I learned from Vygotsky that learning in everyday life is incidental to what one is doing. You pick things up, which is why there's so much emphasis by some psychologists on play. I wouldn't disagree with that at all, but there comes a point when play has its limitations. The point that Vygotsky made, which is still, I think, incredibly radical and not often recognized, is that acquiring knowledge in school has to be the voluntary act of a learner.

You can't actually teach if you define teaching as the transmission of knowledge! If you focus only on the teaching, then you forget that the knowledge still has to be acquired. If you haven't encouraged the process of acquiring it, all you get is memorization and potential reproduction in tests. This is why the insight of Vygotsky is absolutely fundamental, yet the current interest in the curriculum overlooks this point. It's so

concerned to say "Have we got the knowledge?", that it forgets to ask, "How is the knowledge being acquired?"

Part 7 – The 2010s – Powerful Knowledge & The Three Futures

George: After *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, you began to publish a long-running, still continuing series of papers with Johan Muller. Could you tell us how you began to work with Joe?

Michael: As I said earlier, I was married to a South African. My first visit to South Africa, in '81, I went over to meet my wife's family. I was there for six weeks, and I had a loose connection with the University of Witwatersrand. One of the people I met early on was Joe. He taught courses on the sociology of education as part of the BEd that South African students were doing there. He asked me to give a couple of talks on that program. This was before he knew about Bernstein. He was not originally trained as a sociologist any more than I was, he was more of a psychologist, but he was discovering sociology very fast once he got involved in that job. That was around the time I got to know him, through doing a couple of lectures on his course. I didn't see him again until he came to England about 10 years later, in 1990. During that period, he had become very influenced by Bernstein, who himself had been out and given some lectures in South Africa. They influenced a lot of people but particularly Joe – he became a very articulate representative of Bernstein's approach. I resisted the Bernstein approach, right the way up until late, until the end of Bernstein's life. Joe was constantly saying to me, "Given what you're thinking, Michael, I can't understand why you don't go and talk to Bernstein." I said, "I have tried, but I would love him to want to talk to me." We had this divide: he used to walk past me in the street and not even recognized me. I didn't see any way to bridge the gap, but there was Joe in the middle who was trying to do something about it. I think I over identified with the Prodigal Son and expected him to get in touch with me, but for whatever reason he wouldn't or couldn't, and nor could I. Anyway, in the end it was through the papers Joe wrote with Rob Moore that I became interested in Joe's work. I started thinking that we should think together, and perhaps write together. That was when we published the paper on *Truth and Truthfulness* that became the last chapter of *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, and we've worked closely ever since. *Curriculum and the Specialization of Knowledge* is a book born out of 10 years of collaboration.

George: Let's talk about that book, *Curriculum and the Specialization of Knowledge*. The papers within that book start in about 2008, 2009, soon after *Bringing Knowledge Back In* was published. Perhaps we should start with *What are Schools For?*, which is a paper you said in the past you were pleased with and the reception that it got.

Michael: Yes.

George: I believe it was a response to John White. Could you tell us a little bit more about how the paper came about?

Michael: Yes, it was partly inspired by my reading a pamphlet produced by the Philosophy of Education Society which had the title "*What are Schools for and why?* I remember hearing him present that at the Institute. A thought came to me, and I said, "What are they learning? Where's the knowledge?" It was that thought that crystallized for me that schools provide a possibility for students or pupils, whichever age they are, to access knowledge that they wouldn't get from their everyday lives. That is why they exist, regardless of the fact that schools reproduce an unequal society. That had been what sociologists had been focused on, and I would never want to deny it. Schools do reproduce inequalities. Nevertheless, they also are the peculiar context, a unique context, for people to have access to knowledge. In a sense, the sociologists of education had tended to dismiss that, rather than see it as crucial to how we understand what schools are for. Around that time, I was invited by the Royal Society of Arts to give a lecture in a series they were running. I decided to give a talk called *What are Schools For?*, which was published later in my book with Joe. Looking back, I think that was one of those insights that one is lucky enough to have that actually changed a lot of thinking about education, about schools. I realised that it was problematic for those on the left to assume that schools are just nasty institutions, which, until we overthrow the capitalist society, can do nothing. They always are doing two things: reproducing class and other social inequalities and being the context for accessing knowledge that takes at least some pupils beyond their experience. Those two things are always in tension.

George: Was *What are Schools For?* the first place we find the distinction between powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful?

Michael: No. I think the first paper was actually something I did while I was visiting a Professor at Bath, during the period shortly after *Bringing Knowledge Back In* had been published. The idea of powerful knowledge had been implicit in *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, but it only started to become explicit afterwards. I was asked by a colleague, Paul Dowling, to take part in a series of seminars. He said, "Will you come and give a talk about what's happening in the sociology of education?", because he'd come across *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. He didn't agree with me about it, but that's not the point. I sat down and wrote a paper for that seminar, and I came up with the distinction between knowledge of the powerful and powerful knowledge. It is quite likely that Leesa Wheelahan, who became a good friend, referred to powerful knowledge before me, in her book *Why knowledge matters in curriculum.* I only heard about the book later and for me the Paul Dowling seminar was the first time I had mentioned the term, but it is not science and it is only about when a phrase that has stuck was coined. My idea was that if you start with knowledge of the powerful, you end up focused on power, not the curriculum. That was where we were back in the days of *Knowledge and Control*. If we want a sociology of education that speaks to the possibility of changing education, I argued, one that speaks to what teachers are actually doing in classrooms, then we need to focus instead on the powers of knowledge and powerful knowledge, rather than knowledge of the powerful. At least that's how I came to express it later. Looking back, powerful knowledge is more of a slogan than a concept – a kind of clever linguistic device. Since then, it's been taken up and spread around the place as if it was some brilliant new idea.

George: Why do you think that's happened?

Michael: I think it's a simple idea, powerful knowledge. People picked up the importance, without really thinking about what it entailed. Of course, we want our kids to have powerful knowledge, but what does this imply we should do? What people didn't do, and Joe and I didn't do until later, around 2014, is to acknowledge that power is a much more complicated concept than it first appears. When I talked about knowledge of the powerful and powerful knowledge, I hadn't really thought through a theory of power. What I learned, through Steven Lukes's excellent book *Power: a radical view*, is that power can be either *power over* or it can be *power too*. We hadn't made explicit that there's always that tension in power. That's really important, but unlike powerful knowledge, it hasn't been taken up in a more popular way. That tension can be expressed in the same knowledge. Let's take physics, as an example. Clearly, if you want to understand something about the world we live in physically, it's really, really important to understand that Einstein and quantum theory replaced the theories of Newton. It's not that Newton was wrong, but the later theories were somehow more powerful. That development is a feature of science.

George: So those later theories have the power to explain the world we observe more accurately?

Michael: Yes, but not only that. Think of what science can do in a practical sense: microbiology, the fact that we can now design viruses and so on. This is all evidence of the *power to* aspect of knowledge, but, of course, knowledge can be used as something to assert *power over* others. People who have power in the society can use it against those who don't. I don't think we were explicit enough about that tension at all. Most educational thinking, particularly the more radical educational thinking during the three Labour governments, avoided knowledge altogether. They wanted to find some way of being progressive, increasing participation, opening opportunities, and so forth. They saw knowledge as actually blocking that. Their focus was on participation, but we also have to ask the question, "What are you participating in?" If you take people out of school and send them down to a farm, they can look around and play and do all kinds of things that may make them feel happy, but it's not actually what schools are for. What they're for, uniquely for, is getting access to knowledge. That was quite important for us.

George: Let's move to 2010. A number of things happened that year. On a macro level, we had a new government, a conservative-led coalition, and a new education secretary who I think we will need to talk about. In terms of your work, you published the paper on the three educational futures. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit more about how that idea came to being and what it was a response to.

Michael: I was asked to make a contribution to a commission that one of my colleagues, Carey Jewett, associated with the University of Bristol, was working on. It was funded by the previous Labour Government's Department for Children, Schools and Families. The question was: "What are schools going to be like in 2030?" I got talking with Carey Jewitt, who was the editor here at the Institute, and she said, "I'd really like to have a paper by you, because I didn't realize the work you were doing. It's very interesting." I started

thinking about the work Joe and I were doing, and thought it was something we ought to collaborate on. What we tried to do in that paper was to take seriously the issue about access to knowledge. If you're thinking about the future, then you need to think about the theory of knowledge that informs the future. This is where we got the idea of the three futures. Future 1 arises from the view that knowledge is independent of the social, that it develops in certain ways but our relationship to it doesn't change. That theory underpinned the traditional curriculum in the grammar schools and public schools in this country. What Labour was trying to argue was that there was another way, which drew on people's experiences, their life experience and activities and so forth, in order to increase access to knowledge. That's what was being developed through the first decade of the 21st century, what became for us Future 2. Future 2 was a reaction to a very fixed notion of knowledge. Kids and teachers in schools can create knowledge, this theory said, it's not something that's dished out down from on high. We were very critical of both those models, and Future 3 was our attempt to go beyond them. I think it caught on, it was quite an influential paper. People found it quite an exciting way of looking at curriculum change and so forth. I don't want to deny it – we're quite proud of it, really – but it had two fundamental weaknesses. One was that it had an implicit idea about the future which was wrong, because, with the election of that Conservative government, we ended up getting a return to a version of Future 1. We didn't go forward, the whole idea of the tension between 1 and 2 leading up to Future 3 was wrong. We should have said 1, 2, and then back to a version of 1! There is hardly any identifiable Future 2 left, really. That was a weakness which we didn't see, but it was a model put forward for the purposes of debate. One shouldn't be too hard on it. The other thing was that we never really developed in detail what Future 3 might look like. There is a sort of Hegelian dialectic in 1, 2 and 3: you start with fixed, you get a radical change to the fixed. You start with a thesis, then you get an antithesis. This radical change to the fixedness is what generates a new future, the synthesis. In hindsight, that idea was not developed. Friends of mine and colleagues have talked about a Future 3 geography or a Future 3 this or that, but there's no good framing of what that might mean. It's just really wanting to do something that in fact we think is good, rather than thinking it through. That was our weakness. Joe and I are thinking that somewhere around that might be our next paper.

George: I want to explore the Future 1 – Future 2 distinction in a bit more detail. It's something that goes back to your work in the '70s, this idea of curriculum as fact versus curriculum as practice. You might think of the distinction between powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful in similarly dialectical terms. Do you see those parallels?

Michael: I think that they are all in one way or another addressing the same question. The social theory of knowledge put forward in *Knowledge and Control* became a bit more explicit in the distinction between curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice. You could certainly argue that curriculum as fact corresponds to Future 1 and curriculum as practice to Future 2. What's different about that paper was that the idea of a Future 3 was left very implicit, so while it was quite well received at the time, partly because it was prepared for a non-specialist audience and readership, which meant it was a relatively easy read, I don't think it was read a lot after it was published. It wasn't the kind of paper that caught the imagination of the wider education community in the way *Knowledge and Control* did, in

the way *Bringing Knowledge Back In* did, in the way powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful did. A big part of success in the social sciences depends on whether something catches the imagination of the author's community.

George: I suppose my question relates to a common narrative about your career, that there was this huge change somewhere around the year 2000, this turn towards knowledge, which is also linked to a so-called political turn, as it's been described in the media. What I'm suggesting is that there's actually a lot more continuity within your thinking than is often recognized. Would you agree with that?

Michael: I think that John Morgan captures that quite well actually in one of his papers. I certainly became more aware of the theoretical basis of my work as time went on. I think that for instance, particularly in *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, I wanted to emphasize the distinction that in fact, a social constructivist view - knowledge of the powerful - is not really going to get us anywhere, because it's got nothing to say about what happens when you've removed the power. The question if 'powerful knowledge' may become or remain 'knowledge of the powerful' remains. I'm much more explicit about the importance of the realism than I was earlier in my career. Back then, I really played down and almost dismissed realism. I felt that if you combined a political theory of power with a relativist theory of knowledge, that could open the door to a possible future, but I came to realize that this combination was not the way ahead. Relativism is quite a useful tool for raising questions, but it's no good as a theory because, as the philosophers have often pointed out and I've come to realize, it doesn't account for itself. A theory must always be able to account for itself.

George: Let's move to more concrete matters. Tell us about Michael Gove and the changes to the curriculum that happened while he was education secretary. What was your response to those?

Michael: After the election, Tim Oates, who works for Cambridge Assessments, chaired a commission that produced a new curriculum framework, funded and commissioned by Gove. Tim acknowledged my work in his report. The new framework was then taken up by the coalition government in their first National Curriculum of 2014. It soon became apparent to me that there was confusion between the political emphasis on tradition – a traditionalist view of knowledge, so to speak - and the educational emphasis on the fact that knowledge must be part of anybody's education. The problem with knowledge in the end is a problem of being clear about its realism, without forgetting about how access to it is distributed. As people became increasingly excited by the idea of powerful knowledge, these two questions became blurred. I found this troubling, because powerful knowledge is a good phrase, nothing more. I met David Lambert around this time and we decided that we needed to try and write a book, which became *Knowledge and the Future School*. What we wanted to do, and I don't think we succeeded, was to make a clear argument that the knowledge question was a question for the left as much as for the right. It had been seen as entirely for the right, regressive in that it was about tradition and preserving elites. We wanted to say "No, if you combine it with a different politics, it's an important part of that politics." We didn't succeed, for obvious reasons, I suppose. We had no power behind us.

Gove had the power of government. A lot of work had been done by the right-wing think tanks in the late '90s – Civitas, Politeia, Policy Exchange – which I did not know as much about as I should have done. They had produced stuff about the importance of knowledge but had not addressed the issue of what's involved if you want it to be a democratic policy, which of course they weren't interested in. They were more interested in preserving the knowledge than whether it was being made more accessible. This became the dominant account, and people on the left collapsed me and my work in with Gove's traditionalist view of knowledge and the elitist curriculum based on that of the public school. The left insofar as it thinks about knowledge at all, which is not much, tends to be very critical about theories that attempt to deal with these questions. We were a bit naive too. Geoff Whitty took a more realist view than I did at the time. A realist view of the implications of a realist view of knowledge. He never thought it was likely to be part of a democratic change. He never wrote specifically about this, but his work said implicitly, if you want powerful knowledge to be part of a curriculum, then you're going to have to change the distribution of power. Powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful are not as separate as they have been perceived to be. Making powerful knowledge the principle of your curriculum is not just a curriculum issue, it's a resource issue. When you've got per-pupil funding four or five times higher in the elite schools than in the state schools, then some will have the resources and some won't. Independent schools can charge £10,000 or more per term, which most people can't afford, and their students will do 12 or 13 GCSEs and four A-Levels. It's no wonder they tend to get into the best universities. They've worked very hard, no doubt, but they've also got the resources behind them. And of course, those schools are not designed for most people, they're designed for just a few. This is not to say that there isn't important work to be done, both in schools and in academic institutions like the IOE, about what a new curriculum, a knowledge-based curriculum might look like. We shouldn't assume that the curriculum is only going to reproduce inequalities, just because it needs resources that state schools don't have. If we do get some kind of political change, then we'll need an understanding of a powerful knowledge curriculum more than ever. That's what the South Africans didn't have after the apartheid curriculum. They didn't even have the idea of it, nor of course did they realize that abolishing the legal framework of apartheid was only a first step – although without question an important first step. No one, I guess, would go back to the 1980's. I am sure there are political scientists who know something about how to move from the power of the law to the power of a society – but that takes us beyond education. We have to keep open the idea of powerful knowledge for all and the problem of making it a reality, in any society, and develop both. I'll put it like this: we have to keep open the idea of a curriculum that is pedagogic, in the sense of it being about making powerful knowledge accessible, difficult to access, but accessible; we also need a concept of pedagogy that is curriculum or knowledge-based, and that's difficult to make explicit as well. The whole strand of learning theory that comes in from psychology is always about learning as some kind of autonomous process. It doesn't matter what you're learning, our brains can learn anything. It's a process model, whereas I think learning is very different, depending on what you want to learn, or your students to learn. I'm quite positive about Bernstein's concept of recontextualization here, that in developing a curriculum you have to take the knowledge from one context, where it's being researched and produced and developed, into another, where it's being sequenced through the years

of schooling, in order to make it accessible. That process is very under-researched. We take for granted that the physics that you would teach for A-Level is somehow handed down from the physics that's been produced by physicists. We don't look at that process. The only person who's even touched on these questions is Lyn Yates, an Australian curriculum researcher. She was the lead author on a book called *Knowledge at the Crossroads*. It's one of the best attempts I've seen to at least engage with these issues, if not provide answers. Another person who is interesting about this is the French researcher, now based in Brazil, Bernard Charlot. His research is focused on the relationship that pupils develop to knowledge, which is another way of addressing the problem. This idea of a relationship to knowledge is intuitively a crucial one, but he never really addresses the fact that the nature of this relationship will be different depending on what the knowledge being related to is. He tends to focus on the relationship and leave open the question about what pupils are developing a relationship to. I'm a bit less optimistic about his work than I was when I first came across it.

George: Can you tell us about your work with Carolyn Roberts?

Michael: I was invited to speak to a conference of headteachers organized by the Prince's Teaching Institute. I was very skeptical to sign up because I'm not a devoted monarchist. Prince Charles was behind it and I thought to myself, "I'm a bit suspicious of this," but I'd met one or two people who'd worked in the organization and I now think that they do very good work, Charles seems hardly to interfere. It started because Charles was worried about the love of the humanities being lost and not being given enough attention in schools. This is true, of course, and made more so by the EBACC, which stipulates five subjects only, including one humanity. However, the people involved in the institute convinced Charles that actually it wasn't just a question of humanities. There is a problem with access to, dare I say, powerful knowledge in the humanities, but this is just as much the case in subjects like maths and physics and foreign languages as well. They run an interesting professional development program and I've given a number of talks at their conferences. At the end of one of them, someone came up to me saying, "I've read your book," and she was holding a copy of *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. This was Carolyn. I was absolutely amazed, I didn't think headteachers had time to read such books! It wasn't a book that was written for schoolteachers or headteachers at all. That was true about *Knowledge and Control* as well. It was written as part of a debate within the sociology of education, not for those involved in the practice of teaching. Anyway, she was head of a school up in Durham at the time and I said, "Well, we must meet and talk about this more." We got together with a retired head, Martin Roberts, of Cherwell School in Oxford, and my colleague, the geographer, David Lambert, who had been speaking at the same conference. That was how we came to put together *Knowledge and the Future School*. There are chapters by Carolyn and by Martin, as well as by David, and the rest of the chapters are mine. What I found particularly interesting about Carolyn's chapter was what she calls her manifesto, which is a list of ten important things that she wants the departments in her comprehensive school to address. I've used that as a teaching device quite often, because it's written in clear, straightforward, and jargon-free English. I've used it in lots of different countries, even Vietnam, believe it or not. You could say that it summarizes the argument about the powerful knowledge, albeit without addressing the resource issue or spelling out what it would actually mean. It

doesn't talk about subjects per se. But it's a good example to use for the question, what are schools for? It's a good summary, not only of what she got out of the book, but what I wanted readers to get out of it. Carolyn is a useful touch point for me, somebody who's involved in running a school with 1,600 kids while trying to develop a knowledge-rich curriculum that's sympathetic to what I believe in. Her positive reaction to reading it made me feel that writing it was worth it.

Part 8 – The 2020s – Looking Backwards & Looking Forwards

George: I think now would be a good time to take stock. Did your career turn out as you expected it to?

Michael: It partly depends on when you think it began. Are we assuming that it began when I got the job here at the Institute of Education, around '67?

George: Yes, but even before that. I was going to ask you a question about when you were a teacher, someone who was interested in education, but hadn't quite found their way.

Michael: Well, I decided to take up a teaching post to give me the time to study sociology, rather than doing sociology with the intention of applying it to my teaching. I discovered two things. One was that teaching as a profession took me over and I hadn't really got any time left to do sociology. All the holidays I'd heard about didn't materialize in quite the way that I thought they would! I did eventually manage to finish my part time sociology degree, and I'm very, very glad I did. I started school teaching as a supply teacher at the end of '59 and I gave up teaching to finish my sociology degree at the beginning of 1966, so it was really six years of school teaching. I never saw my future as progressing to be a deputy head or head. I didn't see that route as one that I was ever going to follow. I didn't know what I was going to achieve, I just knew I wanted to study sociology, to try and understand the world I was in, a world I was completely ignorant of when I started teaching. I've said already that I went into sociology thinking I would learn how to change the world, but what I learned is how difficult it is to make any change to the world at all. That's what sociology taught me. It taught me about the constraints on change rather than the possibility of change, but I never lost the vision of the possibility of change. To answer your question, a whole series of events occurred that had never entered into my head. I never thought that I would do a master's degree. I never thought that I would get a job in higher education. I never thought that I would get a job at the Institute of Education, one of the leading universities in the country. None of these was ever in my imagination at all. I never thought that I would become well-known in my chosen field. I never thought about that, and it is a constant surprise to me that things worked out the way they did. The thing I most appreciate about being here at the Institute is that I was able to have almost three completely different jobs while I was here: teaching sociology of education, developing a center for post-16 education that focused on vocational education and training, and then developing, as a sociologist, a theory of the curriculum in the last 10 years or so of my time here. These could not have been more different, and I could do it all in the same institution without even applying for a job. Incidentally, I did once apply for a job elsewhere, a chair at

York in 1975. I didn't get it, and didn't apply for anything again until Bernstein suggested that I apply for the job at the Institute. I have never known what, from our brief acquaintance, he saw in me, but I am very grateful that he did.

George: What are you most proud of?

Michael: I'm most proud of the people that I've met who have been my students, who have gone on to do great things, often far greater than me. I can only list a few. Geoff Whitty is one I think of most, but there are others. Nell Keddie would be one, a remarkable woman who contributed a unique chapter in *Knowledge and Control*, and Stephanie Allais, who has created and continues to build a very special centre (REAL) at the University of Witwatersrand for undertaking research and preparing students for doctorates, mostly Black (over 75% of the population record themselves as black) but not all. And John Beck, a distinguished but modest scholar who has set for me an example of honesty and integrity which I can never live up to. If I've got one ability to be proud of, I'm proud of taking advantage of the luck that came my way. I think that I was lucky at the time I began. The sociology of education was always going to go through some kind of change in the 1960s, because suddenly the social sciences were being treated positively in England. I happened to focus on the right things. I had colleagues who were focused on organizational questions rather than curriculum questions, and they never had the same impact I had. It was the curriculum questions that really seemed to take off. The book I'm most proud of is *Bringing Knowledge Back In*, because it's more reflective than anything that I did before. I've been proud of the work that I've collaborated on with Joe Muller, and I was proud of the project that we had about professional education that led to the book, *Professional Knowledge*. I'm also proud of the work that we've done with the group over the last two or three years. I'm proud that I've had some role in shifting the sociology of education to focus on things that mattered to schoolteachers. I've always intuitively felt that sociology has a contribution to make, as do philosophy and psychology in different ways.

George: It strikes me that there are some parallels between the change in direction instigated by *Knowledge and Control* and the change in direction instigated by *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. Would you say you've been ahead of the curve during your career?

Michael: I would say that I don't think I could have written the third one if I hadn't edited the first. And written the second. They are interdependent in that sense. I don't know about being ahead of the curve. I wouldn't dream of giving myself the same status in the field as Bernstein, the only genius I have ever met. I think he is unique in the disciplines that I've been involved in. What I have been quite good at, if anything, is making connections with people in a variety of fields, not just in my own discipline. At the same time, I hope I've managed to hold on to the importance of that discipline. I don't know, it's hard to say.

George: You've always been in touch with practice. In a way that some theorists maybe lose a connection with practice, it seems as though you've always been very aware and shaped by your practical experiences.

Michael: I think that is true. I always thought sociology would teach me more than it did about educational practice. I've had to work quite hard to make it do so. On the other hand,

I've also been aware of the problems that come with over focusing on practice. We can be deceived as much by remembering that education is a practice as forgetting that it is. Education is not an island, it's part of a wider society. You can't forget that. Since the early days, when I was involved in the nuclear disarmament movement, I've become less involved in politics. I would say I have focused on the internal relations of knowledge and the curriculum more than on the wider context that shapes them. People on the left might see that as a limitation, which I think is a sad comment. They tend to be people who haven't focused on the curriculum questions. I suppose that in this complex world we live in, you can't do everything, you've got to decide what you're going to focus on. One of the great advantages of focusing on questions around knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy is that it's allowed me to avoid to some extent the other important issues and leave them to other people, although I accept that sometimes we have to bring them together. Specialization is a double-edged sword. It's crucial to the advancement of knowledge and the advancement of society, but it's also instrumental in fragmenting it.

George: Do you have any regrets?

Michael: That's a big question, really. I think that I could have read more. I could have taken my critics more seriously. As I said earlier, I could have learnt about the importance of Bernstein earlier than I did. I think I was very privileged to have come across a really original thinker. Many people don't in their lives and I certainly did. I feel very grateful for that. I do have one more regret. I had the opportunity to go to Cambridge. There were a lot of fantastic people in various fields, particularly around biochemistry, which I was interested in. Fred Sanger, who won two Nobel prizes, and many others. I didn't take advantage of that bit of luck, if you like, of getting into Cambridge. It was an exciting time. It wasn't long before I got to Cambridge that Watson and Crick produced the DNA discoveries, but I didn't know anything about it at the time.

George: To what extent do you think your own experience of education has shaped your career and your work?

Michael: There are two ways. Clearly, I've never thought very highly of the curriculum or the teaching at my school, although I was perfectly happy there. I didn't know anything different, and it got me to Cambridge and later, because I had a science degree, it got me a teaching job. At that level, I recognized that it helped. What helped me even more was my social class background, that I had well-to-do middle-class parents who had resources at home. It was an elite education. While it was very narrow, it wasn't bad per se. I did at least acquire knowledge that I couldn't get from my life experience. This is why I think Future 1 has more to offer than Future 2, despite, somewhat ironically, me being more sympathetic to the politics of Future 2. One thing I didn't recognize, as a pupil, was the *importance* of the knowledge I could acquire. I could have done so much more, but I didn't. It wasn't until I started studying part-time sociology in the evenings that I really became motivated to study, and that wasn't down to good teaching. There were one or two people who set an example for me, but Regents Street Polytechnic wasn't a very good teaching institution. The absolute importance of learner motivation has been a lesson for me. Education is about what learners do, but they cannot do it without teachers. Sometimes

I've been able to do it here at the Institute, and often I haven't. When you do manage to get a student or students excited about some problem, you can sit back because they will take off. They'll come to you for some guidance, but the motivation will come from them.

George: What do you know now that you wish you'd known earlier in your career?

Michael: I would like to have at least been fluent in one foreign language, probably French, because I was more interested in French thinking, sociology, and so forth. I'm ashamed of the fact that I've never been able to read anything in a language other than my own. I managed to convince myself that it didn't matter when I was at school. In reality, I was not willing to put the effort into something I wasn't particularly good at. I put the effort, to a certain extent, into subjects like maths because I was quite good at them anyway, so they delivered back to me success. French didn't, and I regret that. The Maastricht Treaty was enormously beneficial to me. It opened up the UK to collaboration with other European countries. That's why I'm so firmly anti-Brexit. Before Maastricht, I knew absolutely nothing about education or anything else in countries on the other side of the channel. We had a whole string of collaborations with four or five different countries, which was itself an education. The fact that education overseas was different made me realize the acute problems in our own system.

George: What advice would you give to a teacher starting out in their career now?

Michael: I would say, get professionally educated before you start. I'm sure I would have been a much better teacher if I had done a PGCE at a place like the Institute. I'd have had to spend a year linking theory and learning how to teach, whereas I went straight into teaching. I'd never been interested in education before, I never even thought about teaching. I went in purely for instrumental reasons, and I was a bit of a disaster for about a year. I think I became a reasonably competent chemistry teacher by the end, and I was head of a small department in the secondary school with some really good students. One of them wrote to me a few years ago and said, "I was thinking about when I was studying with you and what I remember most are all the new novels and plays you introduced me to." Not the chemistry. I thought that was interesting.

George: What about people studying sociology? What advice would you give to them?

Michael: I was very fortunate at the time I began sociology, I think. The so-called founding fathers – Marx, Durkheim, Weber – while they have their limitations, they did ask many of the big questions we still need to ask today, about what can provide solidarity in a society that is potentially fragmenting? What holds it together when religion doesn't have the same role as it had before? How do we organize it to create innovative industries and services? How do we modernize without creating new inequalities? They all to some extent address those questions, and they were courageous and ambitious enough to address them on a wide scale. We don't have people who address those big questions about the future now. For instance, debates about whether modernization is inescapably capitalist. Or whether capitalism is inescapably unequal. Or whether socialism is authoritarian and dictator informing or how we can leave a world for our children more likely to tackle climate change than we have been – and before it is too late. Many of those debates have

disappeared, but I think they are the questions that educationists ought to be asking. What are we preparing young people for? We asked them in the '60s and '70s, albeit without reaching good answers, but they're not so well asked now at all. You only have to look at the bookshelves in Waterstones and the absence of small bookshops.

George: Do you have hope for the future?

Michael: Yes, unequivocally. Of course, I do. I don't think I could continue to be involved in education if I didn't. There are fantastic things going on, and I just want to find ways of opening up these possibilities for people. So, I feel optimistic in the broad sense, but I do feel pessimistic when I look at what's being done to knowledge and truth by the government and the rather feeble response to that by the opposition in this country. I think we have to find new ways of thinking about what are the alternatives to innovation, to markets, because markets seem to be the only way now. I'm always on the lookout for things. I'm very impressed with Preston. They've managed to take back more control over their provisioning, their whole society. It's only a small example, but I think it's really interesting. We need to find ways of creating more bottom-up kinds of strategies. I think that's important.

George: What about for education?

Michael: Well, I'm very concerned. Education is such a national thing. In the UK, I'm concerned about the de-democratization of education, so that schools are increasingly being run and managed by a kind of quasi-private business rather than a body that has been publicly elected. I think the cooperative movement of schools is important. There are a lot of academies that are now part of the co-op movement, which I think is excellent. A friend of mine works in that area. I think I might have tried to get involved in that some kind of way, things that take you beyond the curriculum questions.

George: We have a relatively new education secretary. What advice would you give him, or what would you like to say to him?

Michael: I think it's time we found ways of shifting the focus to the local and not assuming that everything should come from the top. So, in a sense, I'd just say: keep quiet. Allow opportunities for change, evaluate them and so forth, but let the initiatives come that way. That seems to be the crucial question of society as a whole. When I think of the Communist Manifesto by Marx, he says something along the lines of, "Workers of the world, unite, you've got nothing to lose but your chains," but, on the whole, the workers of the world have never wanted to lose their chains. I hope for some kind of more local initiative, individual local initiatives, which are linked up in some way, but it’s tricky. I don't have great expectations about Secretaries of State, except what they don't do. One of the things I learned from getting to know more about Europe is the way in which governments operate. In Europe, there's often an intermediate layer where decisions are made about education by professionals in the field rather than by the secretaries of state. When the politicians get involved, like with the health service, it's usually a disaster. So, the politicians need to draw more on the professionals and the professionals need to think more about their democratic role, their specialist role. The government’s role is really to set directions

and visions, rather than trying to implement. To take an extreme example, the idea that the Secretary of State should say what's on the curriculum of history or English or anything else is, I think, absurd. It wouldn't happen in almost any other country, it would be decided by professionals.

George: Why do you think it happens here?

Michael: Because we've never really had state education. It's been a kind of fudge between the private charities and the emerging state, which only ever dealt with the welfare end of education. One of the things that does worry me a lot about the future, incidentally, is the marketization of universities. Because of the way universities are funded, they now have to concentrate on their financial situation rather than on their responsibilities as research and teaching institutions. What is distinctive about universities plays second fiddle to 'balancing the books', which is fine if you are Sainsbury's, but not if you're the University of London. I think we've forgotten what public institutions should be about.

George: What should they be about?

Michael: About more democratic versions of expertise.

George: What would your ideal school look like?

Michael: There's a danger of giving progressive but unrealistic answers to this question. I think that one has to be aware in a school of certain elements of bureaucracy, of tradition, of hierarchy, that progressive education has always tried to ignore. About two years before I left my chemistry teaching post, I got shortlisted to become a head of science in a big school. It was quite a senior job. I went for the interview, but I was put off by the headteacher. He was very innovative and progressive: he said, "I always put the pupil first." What put me off was the realization that, if you're a headteacher, you've got to trust your teachers. You can't always put the pupil first. Let's say a pupil came to him and said, "I don't like this teacher," or something like that. That statement on its own is not a good criterion. You have to look at what's happening in that class. I got offered the job and I turned it down instantly. I didn't want to be in a school where the head would go beyond his teachers. Likewise, there was a time when I thought we should do away with exams, but I now think they're probably the best we can do in terms of schools being more accountable. I think that Ofsted have tried quite hard to find a better way of making schools accountable in the recent shift. What they didn't realize was how difficult it would be to find a form of accountability that's not tied to performance measures. I'm happy to hear Ofsted say, "Let's try and look at the quality of the curriculum in a school, not the proportion of kids who've got high grades", which is what has dominated accountability in the past. They've tried to do that, but it's been much harder than they thought. The other priority for me would be to try and limit the extent to which what kids do precludes them from doing different things later. I don't completely reject streaming in some forms. You have to think about the teacher and what they can do with the diversity of kids in a class, although as I mentioned earlier, it's too simple to talk only about what teachers do – it's about what teachers *enable* learners to do. I think there may be an argument that streaming can support the initiative of learning in some cases. I suppose I need to qualify something I said

earlier about it being the motivation of the learner that counts. This is very important, but you can't consider the learner without taking into account the teacher. The learner is only a learner, in the school sense, when the teacher is present. If it was only the learner who counted, you could leave the learner out of school, you wouldn't need schools. I had a brief period of being enthusiastic about Ivan Illich and the de-schooling of society, years ago now. He makes a powerful case that schools are in fact anti-learning. Of course they can be, but it's too easy, it's too glib. Schools *do* have an important educational role, and I just think we need to hold on to that. The left is a bit wary of saying that.

George: What are you working on now, and what do you hope to work on in the future?

Michael: I'm thinking about writing a kind of intellectual biography of this period of my life that we have been discussing. That's in the context of also trying to be clear about the role of a theoretical discipline like sociology. The position I've been in, namely a university-based Lecturer and then Professor, has been quite a privilege. From being a schoolteacher it's a real privilege to have the time to undertake enquiries, respond to what others have written about my work and really try to think. I think we need to think more in universities about what we do with our time because education is, in the end, a practical issue, with children learning in school, and teachers trying to find new ways of helping them – especially those who find learning difficult. There should be more support for encouraging that kind of thinking – thinking with a purpose, not as in the traditional sense 'thinking for its own sake'. We have colleagues at the IOE who think a lot about how to 'educate' teachers, but the people who are at the core of teacher education tend to be those who give most of their time to helping students to become teachers in a short one-year course. I would like to work on plans for a two-year course that is no longer based on discipline and subject specialists, and think about reconstructing faculties of education on the basis of bridging that division. Recent sociology of education has made some steps towards what a curriculum should be like. It has made less progress in specifying how students might develop a relationship with that knowledge.

George: Which questions do you think you set out to answer when you embarked upon your sociological career, and do you think you've answered them?

Michael: I wrote my MA dissertation on a sociological approach to curriculum, which at that time didn't exist anywhere. I spent most of my dissertation trying to make sense of why there hadn't been one. When I edited my first book, *Knowledge and Control*, I think I managed to take my dissertation a bit further and suggest that the question 'What knowledge?' was also the question 'Whose knowledge?', without providing any answers, although I didn't get very far in saying what such an approach should look like. I feel a lot more confident that I have ideas about how such questions should be formulated than I did when I started. The thing that saddens me is that, despite the expansion of the social sciences and more broadly the educational sciences, there are not many of us who think that these questions are a priority for sociologists. On the other hand, it is exciting that others, often not sociologists, have started asking those questions about their subjects. After a period of losing confidence in sociology, I now think that, at its best, it is one of the most powerful ways we have for asking these questions about knowledge and how an

ever-increasing proportion of each cohort can ask them and find answers. It's not insignificant that Durkheim, the first sociologist, wanted to replace Kant, the greatest philosopher, with sociology. Kant is an amazing philosopher, but sociology can address questions that he and his philosophy could not. What Durkheim was particularly concerned with that Kant did not address was the question "What does it mean to say that what makes humans distinctive is that we are **social** beings?" Kant is an individualist at heart, and that's why his essay on enlightenment cannot say anything about possible futures. I think that the sociality of humans must lie at the heart of our individuality and any theory of society must involve a theory of education. This is my hope, but it cannot be the hope of optimism, especially as the bombs rain down on Kyiv and Ukraine's other cities. When I look back, I feel grateful for being given the chance to have a go, and it happened to be in education. I tried to do something with the opportunities I have had. I could have done much more, of course, but I haven't finished yet.

I would very much welcome any comments or questions on any part of this text that I will reply to.

Knowledge and the sociology of education- 1967-202?

It is almost three years since George Duoblys (a physics teacher in a secondary school) and I helped by another teacher, Henry Ward, undertook this interview with Michael Young in our small, paved garden in Kennington in South London. Since then, we were delighted to celebrate the election of a Labour Government with Keir Starmer as the first Labour Prime Minister after the 14 years in which the Conservative Party was in power. We were also glad to know that Brazil too had a new Government with President Lula beginning his third term. There were high hopes for both Governments, although we are aware that it was not an easy time for those wanting to reform. However, we thought it might be helpful for Brazilian readers to have an idea of what has happened since nearly 3 years ago.

George: What do you think this Labour Government will be able to achieve in education?

Michael: I was deeply disappointed that there was no mention in the new Government's policies of the corrosive effect of the academisation of schools, which almost silently has been an exercise in de-democratisation linked to enormous salaries for CEO's and an impenetrable **bureaucracy** of accountability with local sources of power largely removed.

We constantly read that schools are inadequately funded, and most are unable to recruit the full range of specialised staff. However, although the new Secretary of State expresses her commitment to working **with** teachers on any disputes, she appears to approve without consultation the new 5-category approach to ranking schools which is rejected by all the major unions.

While the government has made decisions that no Conservative government would have risked, their whole approach is to avoid anything remotely contraversial. Unfundable but well intentioned ideas like free higher education will only disappoint. Nordic countries with such an approach have been working towards it since the 1960's. Our new government has

to start from where we are, which is 14 years of Conservative governments with the priority of reducing educational funding by the state (labelled always as the taxpayer) and avoid being blamed for it by blaming the regulatory bodies.

George: Our new education secretary has launched a national review of the curriculum. What do you hope might come out of this?

Michael: The Secretary of State spoke of needing **ladders of opportunity out of poverty,** there is nothing wrong with the idea – what it lacks is any content of the new knowledge that such 'ladders ' must include to engage with disaffected pupils or any strategies that teachers might be free to try out. The mode 3 subjects and school based certification are examples from the 1980's which could have been tried. New models of rigour and coherence would be needed and statistics only used when appropriate on a school-by-school basis. For example, all schools could be funded to have teachers with research time and experience and linked to wider national projects. Small scale and local innovation but with a broader long-term vision of a more educated society are not impossible.

A final message to my Portuguese readers in Brazil and Portugal

Thank you for reading this interview. I would be delighted to receive any responses you might have (m.young@ucl.ac.uk) and the extent to which the changes in my ideas have helped you to understand education in Brazil and question my ideas. Such questioning is best done through the history of each country. England and Brazil could not be more different in size, history, geography or culture although both have in common an education system that is dominated by inequalities - primarily but not only, inequalities of social class.

I owe my greatest thanks to Menga Ludke and Joana Romanowski for the way they have approached a far from easy task. I have learned much from Menga over many years as well as the many other Brazilian scholars who I have met at Conferences or as visiting scholars or students at the IOE. I first met George only 5 years ago when, with another teacher, Henry Ward, and my colleague Jan Derry, we established a Teachers and Knowledge Group. I therefore hope that the interview will be of value to classroom teachers as well as to researchers in the universities in both countries. We have much thinking to do.

George may appear only to have a minor role as an interviewer in this publication, but this was far from true. Interviewing of this kind requires an intellectual approach about what questions to ask. So, "thank you, George", you are a brilliant teacher as well as a good friend to me.

A paper I gave at a conference at the Institute of Education in 2023, attended by a group of European researchers associated with the KOSS and Specialised Subjects and Curriculum groups, has at last been published by the Journal of Curriculum Studies and can be down loaded for those interested: Reflections on sociological approaches to the question of knowledge in education. It is more directed to my fellow curriculum researchers than to

classroom teachers. However, it traces briefly some of the changes covered in my interview with George Duoblys.

Notes on the text

George and Michael have been meeting together regularly with Henry Ward (Biologist) during the last three years as members of a group of teachers and academics who came together to discuss the question of knowledge and how it could become more of a dialogue between those working in schools and those in universities who teach, but also research and write. Recent work in the sociology of knowledge in education has been a significant but our only resource, and we have had contributions from philosophers and sociologists as well as a range of school based subject specialists. Henry Ward and George Duoblys are planning to bring together a book of writing by members of the group which are contributions in their own right, but also represent attempts, as does the book as a whole, to bridge the university school divide.

It was George who suggested the interviews and that they might be of interest to some who were familiar with Michael's published work and some who were not. He is most grateful to George for the work he put in both in developing the questions and converting the recording into an intelligible text. Both of us have done some final editing. I found the questions relevant and at times challenging. George's own reading of Michael's work helped him to pose the questions, and the interviews are nearer to a conversation than to a journal article. The text has, therefore, no formal referencing. However, we will add a list of the main references that arise in the text as an Appendix.

We hope that this is the beginning of a dialogue with anyone who is interested. Contributions are in no way limited to responses to the interviews. We intend to invite a number of people to join a Committee which will loosely read contributions and in some cases make suggestions to authors. The latter will be free to decide whether they want to be anonymous or be named.

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