Towards Powerful Knowledge in the Singaporean History Classroom

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Abstract

This article examines how historical knowledge can be made "powerful" – to equip our students with knowledge that enables them to understand, engage meaningfully with, and act upon the world. By outlining the features of powerful knowledge—specialised, conceptual, epistemic, and ontological—and addressing key challenges in implementing a knowledge-rich curriculum, this article considers the avenues in which historical knowledge can be made powerful for students. It then provides a practical framework for translating powerful knowledge into classroom practice. By offering both theoretical grounding and concrete exemplification, the article aims to support history educators in designing learning experiences that are conceptually rich, socially relevant, and enduring beyond formal assessment.

Introduction

"Knowledge" sits at the centre of many curricula – in Singapore, the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Desired Outcomes of Education explicitly states that students schooled in Singapore should possess "the necessary skills and knowledge to take on future challenges" (MOE, 2023). The curriculum in Singapore is not unique. It sits within a broader knowledge-turn in educational and curriculum contexts around the world that has been ongoing since the turn of the 21st century (Chapman, 2020).

Central to this shift is the belief that it is no longer sufficient for students to simply accumulate facts and skills about a subject matter. Rather, students are expected to develop an understanding of the nature of the discipline's processes and the knowledge that has emerged from these processes. These include the methods and organising concepts that underpin the discipline.[i] In practice, this often translates to positioning the discipline at the centre of the curriculum. Students are therefore invited to explore the nature and contestations of the processes through which knowledge is derived.

Singapore's secondary history curriculum echoes these broad goals. Correspondingly, it aims to "develop in students an appreciation of past human experiences, a critical awareness of the nature of historical knowledge, and the ability to make connections between the past and the present" (MOE, 2022). The latest iteration of the history curriculum is part of a gradual growth in the centrality of disciplinary knowledge, which started in

the 1990s.

Beyond developing disciplinary competencies in students, there is also a desire to ensure that students can bring this knowledge beyond the confines of the discipline. In the context of recent educational discourse in Singapore, this may be referred to at times as the problem of transference. In the case of school history, this desire entails going beyond simply sharpening students' historical thinking and reasoning, and ensuring that an education in history empowers them to act in the world with confidence (Chapman, 2021). Therefore, one interpretation of the Desired Outcomes of Education and the history curriculum is to view it as a desire to impart knowledge that is *powerful[ii]*.

But how does one bring powerful knowledge into the classroom? Implementing a knowledge-rich curriculum in the school is not without its challenges. Despite these challenges, the Singaporean history curriculum provides opportunities and frameworks for teachers to lead a classroom grounded in the principles of powerful knowledge, with the potential to provide students with enduring knowledge that can help them make sense of the discipline and the world beyond the classroom. These opportunities include the emphasis on conceptual understanding in the discipline and inquiry-based learning as a key pedagogical approach.

Born from a series of discussions between educators at the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Institute of Education (IoE), this article will explore some of the challenges and tensions of a knowledge-rich curriculum and make the case for powerful knowledge in the classroom by examining the features of powerful knowledge and how these features translate into teaching practice. In doing so, this article aims to provide practitioners with a starting point for considering the various components that contribute to developing students' knowledge that is both empowering and enduring.

Challenges of a Knowledge-based Curriculum in the Classroom

Even though, as mentioned above, the Singaporean school history curriculum has been framed as a knowledge-rich curriculum for a few iterations and has provided opportunities for the development of powerful knowledge in students, the translation of these ambitions into actual classroom practice continues to face a few key challenges and tensions that teachers have to grapple with. They are: (i) a knowledge-rich curriculum is complex and demanding on teachers, (ii) a knowledge-rich curriculum competes with other goals of the classroom, and (iii) a knowledge-rich curriculum in history struggles against the perception that the knowledge it espouses is less useful (or less powerful) compared to other disciplines.

First, a knowledge-based curriculum is complex and demanding on teachers. Teachers must make sense of a complex series of conceptual ideas in history to inform their teaching decisions. These ideas tacitly demand that teachers not only be familiar with the substance of the historical knowledge that they teach, but also be familiar with the epistemological structures that underpin the development of that knowledge. Furthermore, teachers are also expected to translate that into the classroom in a manner that supports the conceptual learning and development of students (Chapman, 2021). To manage this complexity, several models have emerged internationally over the preceding decades to describe and account for progression in the conceptual underpinnings of historical knowledge. In the UK, this tradition began with the Schools History Project (SHP) in

1972, which first articulated the first and second-order concepts that served to organise historical knowledge (Gómez Carraso & Serrano, 2022). These ideas were subsequently developed into other models, most notably Seixas and Morton's (2013) 'historical thinking concepts' and Wineburg's 'reading like a historian' (Wineburg et al., 2011). Due to their influence in the framing of substantive (first-order) and historical (second-order) concepts in the Singapore history curriculum, educators in Singapore are unfamiliar with the ideas proposed by these scholars.

Second, a knowledge-based curriculum is perceived as competing with other classroom objectives. A key near-term goal of the classroom in Singapore remains student attainment on the standardised national examinations. Both the processes and desired outcomes of a knowledge-based curriculum often appear misaligned with excellence in formal assessment. For instance, even as teachers pursue conceptual learning in the classroom, the structure of the national examination appears to incentivise a disproportional focus on second-order concepts that are more directly linked to the types of questions that frequently appear in the examinations (Seow, 2022: 75). Furthermore, a knowledge-based and discipline-focused history classroom also seem to be a misfit with the needs of the majority of students in the history classroom as most of these students will neither go on to study history at a higher-level, nor will they go on to pursue history as a profession. In that light, focusing on history as a discipline rather than on assessment competencies and skills may appear to be missing the point.

Third, a knowledge-based history (and more broadly, the humanities) curriculum struggles with the perception that the knowledge it espouses is less practical, less useful, and less powerful compared to other disciplines, such as the natural sciences and mathematics. This is likely the result of history and the humanities' positioning within the educational system places it as a positive add-on to the otherwise "core" subjects of English language, Mathematics, and Science. At the same time, beyond the confines of the educational system, the natural sciences continue to prove to be instrumental in the improvement of our collective material well-being and have been closely linked to the health of the economy (Young & Muller, 2016; Horowitz, 1970). This characterisation further questions the value and purpose of teaching history conceptually or as a discipline.

Powerful knowledge has the potential to address these three challenges by bridging the gap between learning history for the sake of the discipline and examinations, and learning history to equip students with the ability to engage with the broader world. Powerful knowledge builds upon and supplements the models of historical thinking and reasoning that were mentioned earlier, but goes further, also considering what such knowledge might enable students to *do* if they possess it. It furthers competencies in the discipline as much as it orients students to bring that knowledge beyond the discipline.

By designing learning experiences in history around powerful knowledge, students can potentially be empowered to discover new ways of seeing the world today, engage in society's conversations and debates about themselves, and understand the grounds for accepting or rejecting knowledge claims (Kitson, 2021). Therefore, the principles behind powerful knowledge can serve as a meaningful organising framework to help teachers make informed design decisions for their

classrooms, thereby elevating the disciplinary knowledge being explored in the classroom into one that is powerful.

What is Powerful Knowledge?

Having laid out some of the promises and potential that powerful knowledge have for history education in Singapore, this section hopes to outline the features of powerful knowledge before outlining what its implementation might look like in Singapore's context.

The principle of powerful knowledge is rooted in a sociological approach to education. However, its roots in sociology do not diminish its contributions to curriculum discourse, nor does it reduce its relevance to our present demands in secondary education (as illustrated in the previous section). An example of its influence on curriculum design can be seen in England's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) positioning of powerful knowledge as a core feature of a balanced national curriculum (Ofsted, 2019).

Beneath the evocative and at times vague label of 'powerful knowledge' is the idea that, given a set of issues or problems, some knowledge claims have better claims to truth than other knowledge claims. Therefore, some knowledge can be said to be "more powerful" than others. Consequently, those who possess more powerful knowledge are empowered to act in and on the world. This is because they have access to knowledge that enables them to understand how relevant aspects of the world work and the potential consequences of different courses of action (Chapman, 2021; Young & Muller, 2016). In that regard, the Singapore history curriculum shares in the core promises and goals of a "powerful" knowledge curriculum.

However, the question remains: What are the features that make some knowledge *more powerful* than others?

The proposition that some knowledge is more powerful than others also implies that not all knowledge is 'equal', and that there are distinctions between knowledge. Young and Muller proposed three key distinctions: first, there is a difference between 'knowledge of the powerful' and 'powerful knowledge'; second, there is a difference between specialised and unspecialised knowledge; and third, there is a difference between powerful and less powerful specialised knowledge.

First, 'knowledge of the powerful' and 'powerful knowledge' are related but distinct ideas. Whereas 'knowledge of the powerful' is concerned with who has access to knowledge, 'powerful knowledge' is concerned with what knowledge can enable one to do. 'Knowledge of the powerful' emerged from a context in which educators were concerned that unequal access to knowledge in an educational system may serve to replicate existing social inequalities, such as differences in socio-economic classes, by reducing the ability of a group to accumulate intellectual and cultural capital. Even though Muller's observations were developed from his experience and observations in South Africa, they nevertheless provide some food for thought for history educators in Singapore.

Sensitivity to 'knowledge of the powerful' is pertinent to teaching history because, as an intellectual and disciplinary tradition, history is often characterised as an elite phenomenon – it is reduced to the big man in power and their actions, to broad national narratives and heroes, and significant events and their turning points. Even with recent developments in the scholarship of social and cultural histories,

history can still be stereotyped as the knowledge of the powerful. School history in Singapore broadly grappled with the tension (of historical knowledge as 'knowledge of the powerful') as one of the few educational systems in the world that excluded students from access to history – students formerly on the Normal (Technical) stream were not offered access to the discipline, an inequality in access that is only recently changed with the introduction of G1 Humanities (MOE, 2023b). In this light, the ideas of 'powerful knowledge' explored in this article serve as a timely organising framework for educators to distinguish between access to and selection of knowledge within our curriculum (knowledge of the powerful) and what that historical knowledge can enable our students to do (powerful knowledge).

Second, powerful knowledge is distinct from everyday common-sense and unspecialised knowledge that is derived from one's personal experiences. A brief example of this distinction is the difference between one's personal experience of an event in the past and the knowledge about a historical event that has been generated through sound historical inquiry into the past. Through disciplinary history, students' everyday ideas about how the world works and how people behave can be gradually transformed into more sophisticated ideas about how people of the past, who lived in a different context and possessed minds of their own, behaved and acted (Lee, 2005: 31).

Third, building on the first two points, powerful knowledge is specialised and produced in a systematic manner. The systematic production of knowledge often takes place through disciplinary communities (such as groups of scholars and the peer-review process) with distinct fields and foci of enquiry. The knowledge developed through these disciplinary communities is objective and reliable due to the procedures of these communities through which new knowledge was scrutinised. This specialised knowledge enables those who possess it to transcend individual cases by developing unique interpretations (Chapman, 2021).

With these features of powerful knowledge in mind, powerful knowledge in the context of history are specialised forms of knowledge within history that will enable those who possess it to: (i) make sound revisions to historical knowledge, (ii) impose organising conceptual frames to the past to approach the past as an entity, (iii) examine the milieu in which historical knowledge is being generated, and (iv) engage with the present. This can be expressed through four modes of knowing, as summarised in the Table 1:

These different modes of knowing, when explored collectively in the classroom, have the potential to provide students with a powerful knowledge and understanding of history. The table also serves to help organise teaching decisions and give a guide to the design and implementation of a knowledge-based curriculum for the classroom. The following section provides an exemplification and further discussion of how these central considerations help to give a richer and more powerful learning experience for students.

Table 1. Translating features of powerful knowledge into the context of classroom history

Knowledge	Description
Content knowledge	Knowledge of the past that is beyond one's immediate experience (as opposed to unspecialised historical knowledge, derived from daily experience, acquired through participation in the historical disciplinary community
Epistemic knowledge	Knowledge of how knowledge is derived and what the limitations are (e.g., historical methods)
Conceptual knowledge	Knowledge of how substantive ideas and events from the past can be organised in relation to present-day questions
Ontological knowledge	Knowledge of societal debates and interest in questions about the past

Bringing Powerful Knowledge into the Classroom

Given the features of powerful knowledge, what might that look like in the classroom? The following exemplification will utilise the topic of the Japanese invasion of Singapore from the lower secondary history curriculum to illustrate the considerations taken to bring powerful knowledge into the classroom.

As mentioned in the previous section, powerful knowledge in history should broadly provide students with content, epistemic, conceptual, and ontological knowledge, and this knowledge is distinct from unspecialised historical knowledge about the past. The figure below provides one way of conceptualising the relationship between these different modes of historical knowledge.

Figure 1. Features and aspects of powerful knowledge
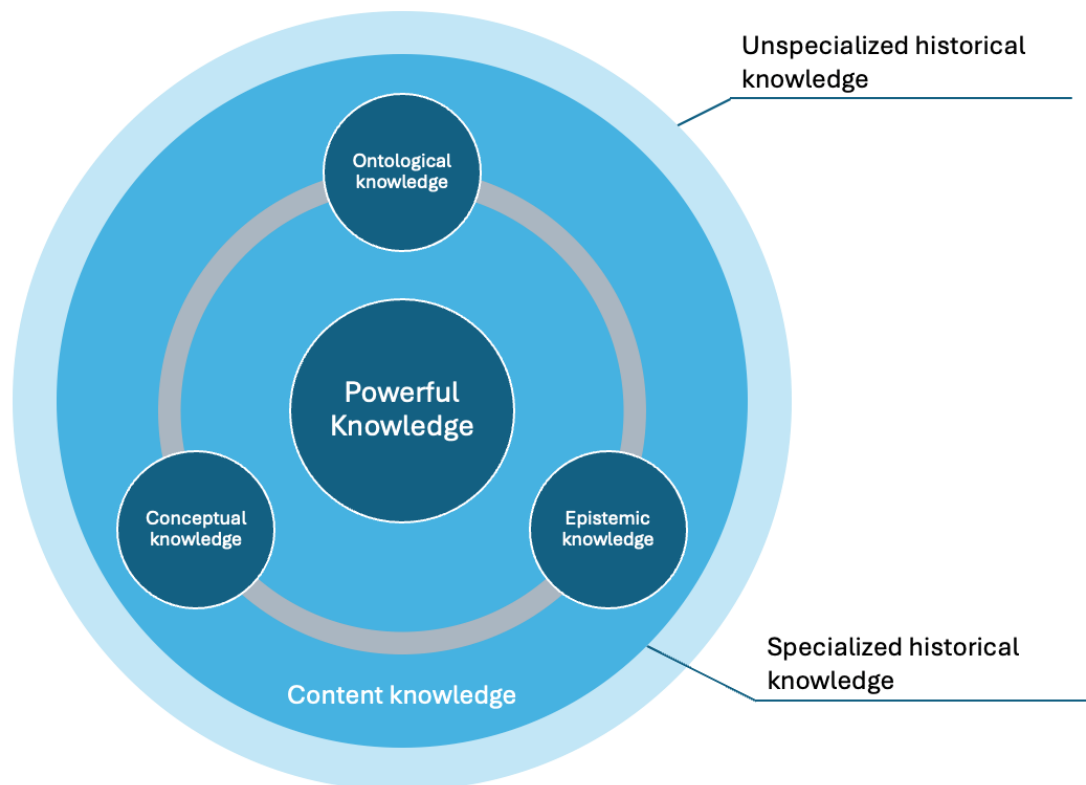
Therefore, when considering a lesson, teachers will have to consider what unspecialised knowledge about the topic students may hold, as students are rarely *tabula rasa*. In the example of the Japanese invasion of Singapore, this might include facts and narratives that were acquired through family histories and other national commemorative events (such as Total Defence Day and National Day). Furthermore, students may also hold beliefs and ideas derived from more recent developments, such as equating accounts and experiences of current conflicts, current social organisations, and current geographies, to those of World War II. For instance, students may attempt to draw parallels and analogies between the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, or to map how modern Singaporean society and government function compared to how Singapore functioned in 1942. This unspecialised knowledge serves as the starting point through which increasingly sophisticated specialised knowledge can be developed.

Beyond knowledge in content areas, unspecialised knowledge can also exist in the conceptual realm. For instance, words such as "causation" and "evidence" hold lay everyday meaning. However, they also specialised within the context of different disciplines. "Evidence" in the natural sciences implies a very different type of information and manner of using that information from that of history – the replicable and measurable data derived from scientific experiments represents a very different conception of "evidence" or proof from the particular first-hand account of a person who had witnessed the Japanese invasion of Singapore. Similarly, these unspecialised ideas of conceptual frameworks also serve as the starting point through which increasingly sophisticated

specialised knowledge about the epistemology of history can be developed.

After considering the unspecialised knowledge that students may hold about the topic, there is also a need to consider the content, conceptual, epistemic, and ontological knowledge behind the topic. The table below provides a summary of some of the possible knowledge that can be explored in the classroom regarding the given topic.

Table 2. Exemplification of various aspects of powerful knowledge with the topic, using the Japanese invasion of Singapore as an illustration

Knowledge Area	Elaboration
Content knowledge	Outbreak of World War II and the Fall of Singapore - Reasons for the Fall of Singapore - Japanese and British military strategies
Conceptual knowledge	- Military strategy - World War
Epistemic knowledge	Accounts - Differing interpretations - Cause and consequence - Multiple causes - Agency - Unintended consequences
Ontological knowledge	Why is it important to defend one's sovereignty and independence?

Much of the exemplification above is familiar to teachers in Singapore – the content and conceptual knowledge are already laid down in the syllabus. Meanwhile, teachers will have to decide on the exact conceptual, epistemic, and ontological knowledge that will be utilised in the lesson and identify appropriate goals to actualise these in the classroom.

The following example features lesson objectives that are drawn up with reference to the considerations of the content, conceptual, epistemic, and ontological knowledge that can be communicated and developed with students as part of the chapter on the Japanese invasion of Singapore. The series of lessons is grounded in an inquiry into why accounts of the fall of Singapore differ. Refer to Annex 1 for a brief outline of the series of lessons.

Lesson No.	Sub-Inquiry Focus	Lesson Objectives
1	Why did Singapore fall to the Japanese in 1942?	At the end of the lesson, students should: **Content knowledge outcome:** 1.　　Explain the reasons for the fall of Singapore in 1942.

Lesson No.	Sub-Inquiry Focus	Lesson Objectives
		2. Outline the sequence of events leading up to the fall of Singapore in 1942. **Ontological knowledge outcome:** 1. Have an awareness of why Singaporeans today are interested in knowing more about the reasons for the fall of Singapore in 1942. **Epistemic knowledge outcome:** 1. Understand that events can have multiple causes 2. Understand that individual actors have agency 3. Some events and actions may have unintended consequences
2	Can historical narratives and stories differ and remain true?	At the end of the lesson, students should: **Epistemic knowledge outcome:** 1. Be able to state the common characteristics and features of historical accounts. 2. Be able to explain why they deem certain accounts to be better at explaining why the event occurred. 3. Understand why there are plural accounts of the past (e.g., perspective, purpose, location in time, genre). 4. Understand that there is a difference between the past (what happened) and history (the stories we tell about the past afterwards) 5. Understand what accounts are and can be (e.g., they are not mirrors of a fixed past).
3	How do Australian, British, and Singaporean accounts of the fall of Singapore differ?	At the end of the lesson, students should: **Epistemic knowledge outcome:** 1. Be able to engage in the critical reading of historical accounts.

Lesson No.	Sub-Inquiry Focus	Lesson Objectives
		2. Be aware of some of the elements that influence the nature of historical accounts. **Ontological knowledge outcome:** 1. Have an awareness of the nature of British and Australian interest in the defence and fall of Singapore, and the significance of this event to the people in these countries.
4	How can we explain the fall of Singapore to others?	At the end of the lesson, students should: **Epistemic knowledge outcome:** 1. Be able to construct a historical account based on an understanding of the key elements of historical accounts. 2. Be able to construct a cogent explanation for the fall of Singapore. **Ontological knowledge outcome:** 1. Have an awareness of how the stories we tell about the fall of Singapore are being mobilised to influence memory/identity building in different societies.

In the example above, each lesson is accompanied by a set of design outcomes in the different knowledge areas. When taken collectively, they can serve to help students understand the basis for accepting or rejecting knowledge claims in history by providing students with the epistemic knowledge that (a) 'history' and the 'past' are different, (b) history is deliberately constructed by someone after the event, and (c) the past is interpreted in different ways by different people. This was achieved through the positioning of the concept of historical account as the key concept that drives and anchors the inquiry. It further provides students with the means to engage in debates and conversations about critical concerns that the Singapore society (and perhaps other societies as well) faces and has faced in the past, with the lesson objectives designed to introduce students to the broader societal interest in the given historical topic. It also offers opportunities for students to build an understanding of the present-day concerns of communities affected by the fall of Singapore in 1942, and by extension, enables students to engage with the issues and concerns of today's society through their possession of this knowledge, thus making the acquisition of such knowledge 'powerful'.

This brief example aims to demonstrate how each facet of historical knowledge can be considered within a given chapter and translated into classroom objectives, thereby potentially introducing aspects of 'powerful knowledge' into the classroom. Necessarily, further research and conceptual refinement would be required to ensure that this draft framework for thinking about powerful knowledge –

through the four "modes of knowing" (Content, Epistemic, Conceptual, and Ontological) – develops coherence, relatability, and effectiveness, for purposes of professional practice, or be made relevant for the general history practitioner. Nevertheless, this initial attempt may serve as a helpful starting point for succeeding work, where continued iterations could eventually lead to a more robust framework for powerful knowledge, especially one that supports progression in students' learning in history and guides teachers to systematically develop lesson designs that focus on developing students' thinking and understanding in history. (An initial identification of topics for teaching powerful knowledge in secondary Singapore history through inquiry-based learning, focusing on aligning content with both the history curriculum and the principles of powerful knowledge, can be found in Annex 2. They show how ideas about powerful knowledge or the four "modes of knowing" may be first identified and then further explicated through deliberate lesson designs.)

Conclusion

Powerful knowledge is knowledge that empowers those who possess it. In history, acquiring such knowledge must involve equipping students with more powerful ways of understanding history and the historical past (Lee & Ashby, 2000: 216). Among other things, this means providing students with opportunities to engage with the disciplinary basis of the subject and to understand how knowledge about the past is constructed, as well as how different versions of the past are judged and arbitrated (Afandi & Baildon, 2015). By introducing powerful knowledge into the classroom consciously and intentionally, teachers will be able to offer students with more than just knowledge of the past; they will also equip them with the skills to utilise

historical knowledge in a meaningful way for the present. It is knowledge that enables those who possess it to act effectively both within the historical inquiry context and more broadly in society beyond the discipline. However, as discussed in this article, attempts to introduce powerful knowledge into the classroom can be a daunting task that requires teachers to be cognisant of the structures that underpin historical knowledge. Thankfully, significant research has been conducted over the years to help express and model historical concepts for teaching and learning. Building on these models, the principles of powerful knowledge can guide teachers in making conscious decisions to go beyond merely communicating knowledge of the past.

Of course, powerful knowledge is not without its critics. Some found the definition of powerful knowledge too narrow, arguing that, strictly speaking, only scientific knowledge contains all the necessary features that Young and Muller laid down. Education philosophers have argued that for a "so-called core subject", history does not contain schemes of *sui generis* concepts as science and mathematics do, and may not strictly be said to have its own system of interrelated concepts (White, 2018: 327). Meanwhile, others also proposed that the broad prescriptions of powerful knowledge made it unwieldy and unsuitable as a set of principles for making curriculum decisions (Ford, 2022). Nevertheless, we believe that the 'powerful knowledge' framework can continue to offer a potentially useful approach to curriculum design and one that can also meet broader educational objectives. The opportunity to acquire deep subject matter knowledge about 'the past' (e.g., through understanding the variety, peculiarity, and strangeness of life in the past) and the ability to develop powerful ideas about 'history' (e.g., as a discipline

rooted in the practice of historians, or as a defensible form of knowledge with its own disciplinary rules and standards of construction) can enable students to develop an increasingly sophisticated and more nuanced understanding of how the world works. If conceived and taught well, notions of powerful knowledge offer the potential to empower students with a range of intellectual tools and skills to engage with the world (beyond their everyday or context-bound experiences) and ensure that the understandings developed in the history classroom are enduring and have a life beyond the purposes of school history.

Acknowledgements

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ⁱ Early proponents of such a curriculum includes Lynn Erickson, who put forth a "three-dimensional" model of curriculum, and whose work has resurfaced among history educators in Singapore as a means of making sense of the many moving parts of the curriculum.

ⁱⁱ The notion that knowledge can be powerful was mooted by Young (2009) and Muller (2009), who developed the principles of *powerful knowledge* both as a critique of conventional approaches to the sociology of education at the time and as a set of curriculum principles.