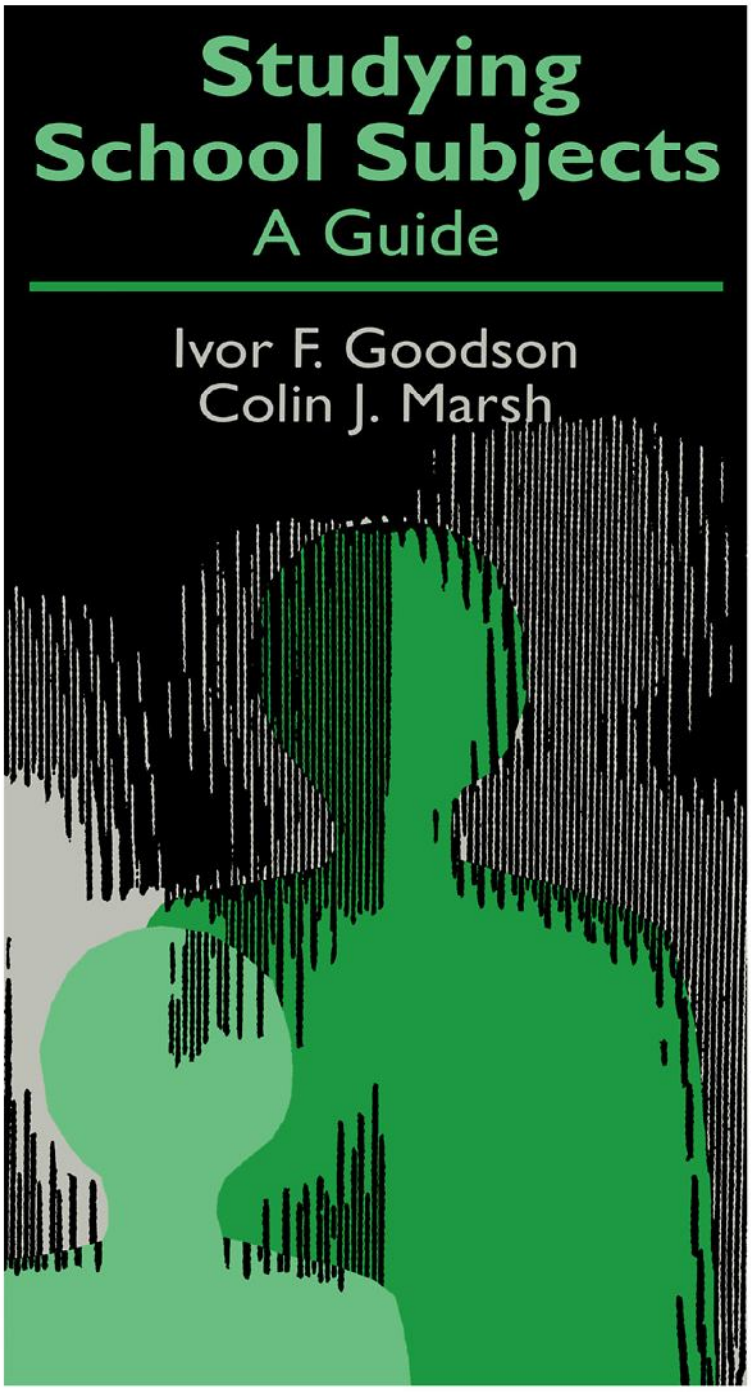

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Preface

In recent decades school subjects have rapidly emerged as a major focus of inquiry for a range of educational studies. As a result, there is a need for introductory texts in this area of work.

In some areas of inquiry a number of collections or introductions are already available. In the sociology of school knowledge, for instance, Michael Young's edited collection *Knowledge and Control* provides a pioneering collection of studies; his work is excellently complemented by Geoff Whitty's *Sociology of School Knowledge.* More recently Bernstein, in *Structuring a Pedagogic Discourse* and *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity,* provides generative lines of inquiry for those studying school subjects. Dowling's work in secondary school mathematics provides an example of just how generative these insights might prove.

Work on school texts has similarly been summarized and introduced in number of works. Michael Apple's *Teachers and Texts* and *Official Knowledge* provides accessible introductions to this field of inquiry.

Yet, a wide range of work has emerged which employs a socio-historical approach to school subjects and which also studies the historical emergence of subject traditions and subject departments. To date, there is no summarizing text to introduce new students to this work. Hence, we decided to develop a guidebook to this range of work and to do so in ways that provide a student with sampled highlights from some of the more exemplary works in the field. So the book is a mix of introductions: to sources, to concepts and to methods. In doing so we hope new studies will be undertaken which will broaden and deepen our understandings of school subjects; for these social inventions remain at the centre of the formal educational sector.

September 1996

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Many colleagues have been generous in responding to particular chapters: Dr Barry Cooper, Professor Gary McCulloch, Professor Judith Little, Professor Bill Green, Professor Peter Medway and Dr Leslie Siskin—Our thanks to them.

The difficulty of a book of this sort is that it is addressing a kind of moving target—especially at this time of rapid restructuring in curriculum matters; new initiatives such as the Dearing Report in Britain came out after the book went to press, likewise with major reports in the USA and Canada. Hence, there have been some valuable displays of understanding from the publishers, Falmer Press who have, as always, been patient and persistent 'beyond the call of duty'. Thanks to Malcolm Clarkson and Jackie Day in particular.

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The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893–1959 by Kliebard, H, Published by Routledge.
English and Englishness by Doyle, B, Published by Routledge.
Howson, A.G, History of Mathematics Education in England, Published by Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 1
Introduction: Studying School Subjects

Why Study School Subjects?

In many parts of the world there is now evidence of a basic reconstitution within the school curriculum. Sometimes this is presented as the reestablishment of the 'traditional' over the 'progressive'; the 'basic' over the 'esoteric' or 'idiosyncratic'; the 'rigorous' over the 'experimental'. In the early 1980s, US Secretary of Education, William Bennett, wishfully caught the flavour of this gathering reconstitution which grew in global scale through the 1990s:

> The national debate on education is now focused on truly important matters: mastering the basics-math, history, science, and English; insisting on high standards and expectations; ensuring discipline in the classroom; conveying a grasp of our moral and political principles; and nurturing the character of our young. (Bennett, 1990, quoted in Apple, 1990a, p. 379)

Curriculum theory has had too little to say about the historical or political dimensions of this change. The concern of most curriculum specialists has been on how to implement the changes, on how to train subject teachers or how to develop 'pedagogic content knowledge'. Abjectly the curriculum theorist has too often played the part of the facilitator of political will: 'ours not to reason why, ours but to do or die'.

The historical amnesia of so much curriculum theory is both a symptom and a cause of this intellectual and political posture. As we shall see the failure to study school subjects historically and sociologically has many causes but whatever the causes the result is that 'subjects' have become a normative aspect of schooling, treated as taken-for granted 'givens'. In fact, however, nothing could be further from the truth; by 'studying school subjects' we rapidly come to understand them as the most quintessential of social and political constructions. School subjects by this view are social constructions that intersect with patterns of social relations and social structure and are intimately implicated in the reproduction thereof and in processes of cultural transmission.

How can it be that the form of social construction that sits at the heart of schooling worldwide has remained so substantially unscratinized? If we begin by accepting that school subjects themselves are an important source for study a number of problems arise.

'The subject' is an elusive and multifaceted phenomenon because it is defined, redefined and negotiated at a number of levels and in a number of arenas. In our scrutiny it would be impossible to arbitrate over which points in the ongoing negotiations were critical. Also, the terrain differs substantially according to local or national structures and patterns. In such a shifting and multi-layered terrain, it is plainly problematic to try to define common ground for this study.

A good deal of the most important scholarship on the school curriculum, certainly on curriculum as a social construction, emerged seriously in the 1960s and early 1970s. This was, however, a period of change, expansion and experimentation everywhere in the Western world, and nowhere more so than in the world of schooling in general, and curriculum in particular. For critical curriculum scholarship to happen during such times was both encouraging and, in a sense, symptomatic. The emergence of a field of study of curriculum as social construction and as ideology was an important new direction. However, while itself symptomatic of a period of social questioning and criticism, this burgeoning of critical scholarship was not without its negative side. This negative side had two important aspects. Firstly, influential scholars in the field often took a value position which assumed that schooling should be reformed root and branch; 'revolutionized'; 'the maps of learning redrawn'. Secondly, this scholarship took place at a time when a wide range of curriculum reform movements were seeking to do precisely this—to revolutionize school curricula. On both grounds, therefore, it was unlikely that such scholars would wish to focus upon, let alone concede, the areas of stability that may have existed within the school curriculum. Their concern was not so much with what existed, what was *there,* but with what *ought* to be there.

Yet the areas of stability and universality with regard to school subjects are nothing less than astounding; they provide an antidote to the optimistic 'change assumptions' of the curriculum scholars of the sixties and seventies and now to the new 'change' and 'restructuring' optimists of the 1990s. Recent research offers a further reminder that national and local proponents of subject change face a 'world culture' of school subjects. In *School Knowledge for the Masses,* Meyer, Kamens and Benavot (1993) have reviewed the spread of school subjects as a *world movement* associated with modernisation. Much of their data is located at the primary level, even so, the universal characteristics of 'core' school subjects are shared throughout the world. Without exception in the wide range of countries they reviewed the same short list of basic subjects were granted unquestioned pre-eminence, normally in the period 1890–1910. If anything, their work reminds us of the aberrant nature of curriculum reform aspirations in the sixties and seventies and shows that the contemporary reconstitution of traditional school subjects follows the trends of a long-lasting world movement. Throughout the Western world there is exhortation, but also evidence, about this 'return to basics', this reinscription of traditional subjects. In England, for instance, the new National Curriculum defines a range of subjects to be taught as a 'core' curriculum in all schools. The subject categories thereby instated bear an uncanny resemblance to the list generally defined as secondary school subjects in the 1904 Regulations. In this sense, the National Curriculum reflects a new movement to reconstitute the school subjects first launched in the world movement of the 1890–1910 period.

New Directions for Studying School Subjects

In studying school subjects, our scholarly inquiry has now arrived at a new stage. Initial work in the early twentieth century provided some important precursors to the work of studying subjects as social construction; sociologists of knowledge like Bernstein and Young, Giroux and Apple, then played a vital role in rescuing and reasserting the validity of this intellectual project; in the process however, some of the necessary focus on historical and empirical circumstances has been lost. The task now being undertaken is to reexamine the role of sociological and historical methods in the study of curriculum and to rearticulate a mode of study for extending an understanding of the social history of the school curriculum and, in this work, particularly school subjects.

In fact, Young later came to acknowledge the somewhat static determinism of his earlier writing in *Knowledge and Control* and to argue that historical work should be an essential ingredient of the study of school knowledge. He wrote of the need to understand the 'historical emergence and persistence of particular conventions (school subjects for example).' By failing to situate the problems of contemporary education historically we are again limited from understanding issues of politics and control. He concluded that 'one crucial way of reformulating and transcending the limits within which we work is to see…how such limits are not given or fixed but produced through the conflicting actions and interests of men in history' (Young, 1977, pp. 248–9). Elsewhere, Goodson has called for us to develop a social constructionist perspective on studying school subjects (see Goodson, 1990, pp. 299–312).

The study of the written curriculum of school subjects should afford a range of insights into schooling. But it is very important to stress that such inquiry must be allied to other kinds of study: in particular studies of school process, of school departments, of school texts and discourses, and of the history of pedagogy. Schooling is composed of the interlinked matrix of these, and indeed other, vital ingredients.

One of the important reasons for studying school subjects is that they create justificatory discourses or 'regimes of truth' for the organization of school knowledge. Much of the work on school subject matter and content knowledge assumes that classroom practitioners can reorganize and redirect school knowledge in ways that are more pedagogically sensitive. However, studying school subjects as dominant discourses implies that they, themselves, set parameters for practice. In this sense, the preactive definition of school subjects is a crucial part of understanding 'the terms of engagement' within the schooling. Much of the work on school subject matter assumes degrees of autonomy on behalf of school teachers which is denied by the power of preactive school subject definition. The very forms and discourses of school subject knowledge definition provide important parameters for any subsequent redefinition. In this sense, to understand school subject knowledge is to begin to study the nature of schooling; it is also to begin to understand the limits on the growing focus on 'practice'. To focus and embrace practice is to accept a whole range of preactive decisions about schooling. 'Practice' in this way, in sublimal form, exhorts us to accept the limits of political feasibility.

The link between subject knowledge and subject pedagogy is a crucial line of inquiry; so too is the link between subject knowledge and subject assessment. In addition, more

broadly conceived notions of curriculum will have to be explored: the hidden curriculum, the curriculum conceived of as topics and activities and most important of all the primary and pre-school curriculum. Further work must be undertaken on comparative studies of the school curriculum. As work begins to explore the way in which school subject content relates to the parameters of practice we shall begin to see in a more grounded way how the world of schooling is structured.

This book is entitled *Studying School Subjects* but like any title it may mislead. Because the focus is on the scholarly study of school subjects as constructed social phenomena, it does not adopt the more recognizable pattern of 'studying school subjects' so familiar to school students and teachers. More specifically the book does not look at how school subject knowledge is negotiated in the classroom. This is perhaps the most crucial dimension in understanding school subjects. But we have taken the view that this dimension cannot be fully elucidated until the neglected area of study of school subjects, their *'preactive' definition,* is undertaken. The definition of subject knowledge which precedes interactive negotiation and redefinition in the classroom and which is currently the site of such considerable political activity must be studied in it's own right.

The current wave of reconstitution of school subjects indicates the importance of the preactive definition of school knowledge whether this be conducted at national or local level, or at school or department level. In the end our studies of such preactive definition must illuminate the crucial relationship between these preactive definitions of subjects and their interactive realisation in school classrooms. But for the moment so neglected is the study of the preactive definition of school subjects that no such marriage of methodologies could be consummated. *Studying School Subjects* is therefore the precursor to investigating the links between school subject knowledge and classroom pedagogy and activity; and indeed between broader political purposes and educational objectives.

The work of the past two decades or so has provided an initial intellectual grounding for a more broad-based and sustained project of studying school subjects. This book seeks to further this initial, somewhat narrow, intellectual base, which is largely monographic in form, towards a much wider range of studies which embrace all aspects of school subjects. As a result, we have tried to provide some introduction to the 'feel' and quality of sources for the study of school subjects by providing quotes at some length, from some of the major works in the area. The concern is to provide an introductory text for those undertaking the study of school subjects and to point out in preliminary manner the major areas of inquiry for such work.

Chapter 2 briefly discusses school subjects as cultural and historical phenomena, as a way of providing a contextual background to the inquiry chapters. What then follows are a series of sections which cover the main foci for studying school subjects. Hence chapter 3 discusses school case studies and looks at a number of case studies of this sort which provide examples of this form of inquiry.

Chapter 4 discusses in some detail the study of subject 'traditions' and concludes that just as there are important differences within subject boundaries of the same order as the differences between subjects, so also there are major 'traditions' which exist with varying degrees of articulation and allegiance, *within* most school subjects.

Chapter 5 discusses the organizational vehicle which carries school subjects in most secondary schools namely the 'subject department'. This is a neglected area of study but one of growing importance in this era of educational restructuring.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 provide an introduction to work on the social histories of three subjects: science, mathematics and English. Historical study of these three 'core' subjects is well advanced and provides exemplars for future work on other subjects.

In chapters 9 and 10 more sociological studies in the school subject are presented. Studies of patterns of stability and change are reviewed and the reader is introduced to some explanatory frameworks that have emerged in this work.

Reflections and Issues

1 To what extent do you consider that school subjects have remained stable and universal over time? With reference to a school subject that you currently teach or are most familiar with, how has it changed over the decades, if at all? Which individuals/groups/interests do you think have been responsible for the changes, or lack of changes?
2 Is it legitimate to separate out preactive definitions of subjects from their interactive realisation in classrooms? What are some advantages in focusing upon preactive definitions prior to seeking relationships with interactive experiences in the classrooms? What are some of the problems in following this line of research?
3 In terms of the subject(s) you currently teach or are most familiar with, explore the relationship between the subject's content and form and how it is taught. How can these relationships be justified? Are some of the links changing, and if so, in what direction and why?

Suggested Reading

Useful articles includes:

Apple, M.W. (1990) 'The politics of official knowledge in the United States', *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* **22**, 4.

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Apple, M.W. (1990) *Ideology and Curriculum.* 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.

Goodson, I.F. (1995) *The Making of Curriculum: Collected Essays,* 2nd Edition, London and Washington, DC: Falmer Press, especially for a more detailed discussion of 'preactive' and 'interactive' curriculum categories.

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