

Elizabeth Rata (2012) *The Politics of Knowledge in Education*.
New York/London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Reviewed by Leon Benade

The review

Elizabeth Rata's recent book *The politics of knowledge in education* (2012), seeks to explain what Rata sees as the political and economic trends underlying the shift from universal, epistemic knowledge to socialised knowledge, and she finds a perpetrator in the politics of localisation. The book is thus underpinned by her argument that 'the commitment to academic knowledge in democratic nations has been damaged by the forces of localisation'; knowledge which ought to take students 'beyond their experience is replaced by knowledge based in experience' (p. xii, emphasis in original). Rata's ontology is that her argument be judged by its logic, not her position in relation to it – in turn informing her epistemology of 'universal objective knowledge' that can be known by all, regardless of context (p. xii).

In the case of the Ministry of Education's *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), it seems Rata may have a point in arguing that knowledge has been 'hollowed-out' of the Curriculum, where it is evident that the policy-makers and many of the curriculum writers had their eyes fixed firmly on preparation for participation by future citizens in a globalised knowledge economy. Knowledge is pushed aside in place of key competencies and values, which are the platform on which the rest of the curriculum is built.

This is a manifestation of a larger, international agenda. A leading collective voice in the international policy effort to shift the focus of schooling onto competencies is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Work on key competencies at the OECD level dates to the high level of interest that its member states showed from the 1980s in attempting to isolate and track the individual knowledge, skills and competencies that would make for successful societies. However, as no 'explicit, overarching conceptual framework' existed, the *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)* programme was initiated by the

OECD, becoming the responsibility of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO) and the United States Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Competencies are defined by OECD so that they are not synonymous with skills, but include 'knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as social and behaviour components such as attitudes, emotions, and values and motivations'. It is the intention of the OECD that national education systems would place competencies at the very core of any curriculum, and that, indeed, these would be explicitly taught and assessed, thus highlighting the precarious position of knowledge.

Rata's thinking is influenced largely, though not exclusively, by the work of several 'social realists' in the sociology of education, in particular Maton, Moore, Muller and Young who argue for the existence of rational, objective, and therefore, universal knowledge, available to all. Any writer will face the challenge of how best to structure a book, and no doubt Rata thought carefully about this issue; however I would have preferred to see a tighter construction of her various theoretical frames of reference at the outset. In the end, she has placed her substantive discussion of social realism beyond the mid-point, in chapter seven ('Social realism and the sociology of education').

Nevertheless, chapter one ('The politics of knowledge') includes her acknowledgement of her key theoretical inspirations, including anthropologist, Jonathan Friedman, for his analysis of the impact of flexible labour policies of post-industrial capitalist states on working-class identity, leading to a shift either to prioritise tradition or multiple voice. Here she also acknowledges Alan Macfarlane and his book *The making of the modern world: Visions from the West and East* for her use of the notion of 'partial loyalty'. These influences appear in various places in the book.

Key constructs used by Rata in the book include the distinction between 'epistemic (or disciplinary) knowledge' and 'social knowledge'; the 'twin evils' (as Rata calls them) of constructivism and culturalism; localisation; and trust (in the 'national imaginary'). These are discussed and used to argue her position in chapters one ('The politics of knowledge'); two ('Localisation'); three ('Trust and the national imaginary'); six ('Social relations of trust'); eight ('Knowledge and

culturalism’); and nine (‘Localised Knowledge’). Rata also advances a number of epistemic arguments around questions of the construction of knowledge (chapter five ‘Social relations of symbolic production’); and the authorisation of knowledge (chapter four: ‘Knowledge and authority’ and chapter ten: ‘Controlling knowledge’). She ends the book with a chapter entitled, ‘What should be taught at school?’. This chapter departs from the majority of the book, which focuses on the tertiary sector, adding to the sense I had that this book could have benefitted by a different structure. Instead, the reader finds several arguments and positions being repeated across the chapters, rendering an already complex book less accessible than it might have been.

The politics of knowledge in education is a complex book, in which the writer engages with a real problem, namely the contested status of knowledge, at a time when digital and electronic advances, coupled with globalisation, are eroding the basis of what might be termed ‘traditional knowledge’. Is Rata’s work a manifestation of the death throes of a bygone concern with acquiring content? Rata would argue not – rather she is claiming the value and importance of keeping faith with enduring concepts that help to expand experience and take the student beyond that experience. Such transformative outcomes are not possible if knowledge is domiciled in, and restricted to, relativising or context-bound notions of knowledge as the product of personal construction of experience.

Reference:

Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media Limited