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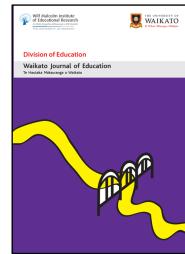
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A critique of Rata on the politics of knowledge and Māori education

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Abstract

This article unpacks and critiques the scholarship of Elizabeth Rata on the politics of knowledge in education. Rata represents a widespread, though covert, influence within the global academy of an imperialist form of philosophical universalism which has particular significance for Aotearoa New Zealand due to her vocal opposition to Kaupapa Māori education and Māori politics more generally. This article uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to focus on the arguments of one key article, in order to expose its philosophical weaknesses. Our analysis shows that Rata's scholarship is based on misconceptions of several key terms and concepts, which inexorably lead to inadequate arguments and invalid conclusions, and undermine the cogency of her claims about the 'dangers' of Kaupapa Māori education.

Keywords

Critical discourse analysis, curriculum theory, kaupapa Māori, post-structuralism

Introduction

Postgraduate students (and others) can be confused by scholars who mask their assimilationist intent behind good intentions and apparent rationality. An outstanding example of this is a New Zealand author whose work, based on a kind of ‘faded Marxism’ (Foucault, 2010, p. 67), claims a rational basis for arguing that education which recognises and respects indigenous knowledge—in this case, Māori knowledge—necessarily does a disservice to students by failing to teach the kind of knowledge that will make them ‘powerful’.

As critical, post-structuralist and feminist scholars, one Māori, the other Pākehā, concerned with educational thinking, practice and policy, we are moved to unpack and critique the scholarship of Elizabeth Rata (2012a) on her home ground, the politics of knowledge in education, because this is our home ground too. This article uses critical discourse analysis (CDA, following Locke, 2004) to focus on one key Rata article (2012b), exposing its lack of substantial argument and other weaknesses. We decided to undertake this research because Rata’s status as an international scholar, demonstrated by successes such as this award-winning article (Rata, 2012b) in a top UK journal, underpins her



oppositional stance and negative commentary on Kaupapa Māori, Māori education and Māori politics more generally (see, for example, Rata, 2012c). Although the article is now over five years old, the arguments have not changed. Elizabeth Rata is somewhat of a conundrum of an academic figure in education circles in Aotearoa New Zealand. The ‘sensational’ nature of her claims concerning Māori education regularly attract attention from media (NZ Herald, 2004) and politically conservative groups (Rata, 2007), not to mention annoyed Māori scholars (Pihama, 2019). The academic milieu in this country is tight and courteous, and consequently, there have been few if any academic challenges to this work, which in our view has accrued more credibility than it deserves.

We undertook the work of writing this article while thinking of Rata’s and our peers, the ‘silent majority’ of Māori and Pākehā scholars, many of whom disfavour how Rata pursues her anti-Kaupapa Māori cause, finding it unconstructive and unconvincing when considered alongside the undeniable success of Kaupapa Māori in education (Smith, 2003) and other domains. Yet Rata is a successful senior scholar, a Professor of Education in the most highly-ranked university in the country. Her claims against Kaupapa Māori depend on her scholarship about knowledge in education. In this article, therefore, we engage with her key arguments about knowledge, because if she is mistaken about knowledge in education, her ideas on education, in general, are called into question, and particularly her ideas on developing practices in Kaupapa Māori education.

We use Foucault’s insights about the triad of knowledge, power and language that he referred to as ‘discourse’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 11) in closely reading Rata’s key arguments, as a method of critical discourse analysis (Locke, 2004). The sections below show that Rata’s scholarship is based on strawman misconceptions of several key concepts, which inexorably lead her to invalid conclusions, and undermine the cogency of her claims about the ‘dangers’ of Kaupapa Māori education. An important note is our wish in this article to avoid ‘ad hominem’ remarks, whilst reserving the right to comment freely on Rata’s arguments. We respect the personal relationship we have with Elizabeth Rata as a peer academic in Education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rata eschews a widely-accepted academic convention that one should describe one’s ‘standpoint’ (Smith, 1999), presumably because to position herself as Pākehā would be to undermine the claim to objectivity she makes through assuming a default (unspoken) position. Rata declines to discuss her ethnicity and seems unaware of the confusion her Māori surname causes for those who do not know her personal history: she is reported in Jones (2006) as saying her background has no relevance to her scholarship, but we would respond by saying this attitude demonstrates her ignorance or refusal of Māori perspectives on and in her work, despite her life amongst Māori people, in the city with the world’s largest Māori and Pacific population.

This refusal of Māori perspectives pervades Rata’s thinking (also see Mika, 2016) and is at odds with any claim to speak with authority on Māori education or politics. Rata routinely misrepresents the work of others, including the first author of this article, who is wrongly cited by Rata as advocating for ‘Māori science’ (Rata, 2012b, p. 106). Below, we show how she also misrepresents central concepts and contexts in her arguments about knowledge in education. Similar comments appear in a recent blog post refuting Rata’s media claim that Māori politics are based on ‘tribalism’ and therefore incompatible with a Western democratic state:

At best, Rata’s piece is faulty because it relies on a false premise. At worst, it’s intellectually dishonest. Rata misrepresents the nature of tikanga and rangatiratanga and displays an impressive ability to think in binary. (Godfery, 2013, unpaginated)

This quote aligns with our own assessment of Rata’s thinking as portrayed in her overall scholarship; ‘binary thinking’ is a key concept for discussing Rata’s work, explored further below. More fundamental, however, is a kind of political naivety that characterises Rata’s work. What she purports to expose with her dire warnings about Māori education is exactly what Māori have been encouraged to achieve by education policy. It is a matter of record that in the 1980s the new education policies of choice and culturalism were taken up by Māori, leading to Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM), so Rata is clearly confused to blame KKM for those policies (Stewart, 2018).

Unpacking Rata's article: The politics of knowledge in education

The title of Rata's (2012b) article indicates its wide scope with three keywords: politics, knowledge, and education. Rata is interested in a set of big, complex ideas that are effectively universal within certain countries, including Aotearoa-New Zealand, in terms of impact on the life of every single person in society. Rata begins with the phrase 'class equality' and the declaration of an interest in 'social justice' for 'subordinate groups' (p. 103). She makes her first claim:

The belief is that culturally responsive education is progressive, a belief that justifies the claim that processes of logic and reasoning are socio-cultural constructions. (Rata, 2012b, p. 103)

In this claim, Rata homogenises everyone involved in Māori education into one term: 'culturally responsive education'. She then alleges that everyone covered by this term subscribes to the extremely anti-science position that logic and reasoning are 'socio-cultural constructions'. Rata's extreme version of the concept of universalism is politically untenable, since for a Māori person to claim to 'be' Māori troubles the universal notion of humanism that underwrites (some aspects of) globalism. Rata displays black-and-white, either-or views about universalism and relativism, and seems to deny the possibilities for anything between the two most extreme positions. For example, anyone who claims to be Māori invokes a degree of ontological relativism, but this claim in no way equates to abandoning science and its cognitive values.

Logic is a universal human cognitive resource found in all cultures (Stewart, 2015), but Rata conflates 'logic' with 'naturalism' and thereby short-circuits her own argument. Rather than trying to mount an either-or argument (i.e. that science and Māori knowledge are either totally alike or totally unlike), it would be fairer to say that some aspects of science interact with some aspects of Māori knowledge. In describing her opposition's arguments in such binary terms, Rata seems either not to know them properly, or not to represent them fairly: as Godfrey (2013) stated, her argument is at best faulty because based on false premises, at worst intellectually dishonest. Rata reduces the question of universalism and relativism to a classic reified binary, meaning a false binary between two extreme positions, usually concealing a power gradient. In this case, Rata overlooks the vast power inequality between Māori and the state within which all educational activities take place. She seems to forget the cardinal principle of the sociology of education: 'everything in education is political'.

It is important to disestablish Rata's initial claim, above, because it undergirds the rest of her points. She blames what she calls the 'constructivist logic' of those she critiques for the lack of distinction between 'disciplinary knowledge' and 'social knowledge' and argues this lack of distinction has led to the collapse of curriculum into pedagogy. 'At that point curriculum and pedagogy are treated as the same process' (p. 104). This second step in Rata's logic is also faulty, and ignores more obvious and likely explanations for this 'collapse' or overlap, such as the ascendancy of 'assessment' to the detriment of both pedagogy and curriculum; and the effects of the last 50 years of debates about knowledge (that Rata seems to want to undo), which have been to focus on the active processes of building knowledge (Gilbert, 2013), as the goals of education have shifted with the rise of digital technologies – yet another factor in the curriculum debate about which Rata is silent. Since the 1950s, teachers have adapted to a number of social changes, including mass education, and have had to develop more effective pedagogies than those Rata seems to want to hark back to. Social constructivism has given new life to teaching by replacing the chalk-and-talk methods of the past. But by no means is it the only pedagogic tool in the teacher's toolbox.

Rata explicitly states the reactionary nature of her argument as being a call for a 'return' to Enlightenment ideas and ideals (p. 107). She rehearses the theory behind this regressive recommendation with reference to Michael F. D. Young, who first 'exposed' the workings of powerful knowledge in the curriculum (Young, 1971) then later recommended disciplinary knowledge retain a place in a critical approach to curriculum (Young, 2008). Young was one of the first curriculum theorists to argue that "the academic curriculum was constructed to preserve the status quo" of a hierarchical society, and "systematically ensured that the majority of working-class pupils were failures" (Young,

2008, p. 5). Rata seems to have missed two of Young's main points in these phases of his work: first, the *unfairness* of how disciplinary knowledge works in the school curriculum; and second, the need for a *critical* approach to disciplinary knowledge in the school curriculum. In pursuing her logic through to the implications for Māori schooling she seems not to notice the irony of recommending a traditional school curriculum based on disciplinary knowledge when history shows this system has resulted in generations of unmitigated school failure for the vast proportion of Māori children (Simon, 1994).

Following the introduction section, Rata's (2012b) article proceeds in four main sections, which she refers to as 'developing her argument' (p. 107). For brevity, the main thesis of each section is listed below, followed by comments on each.

1. That changes in the type of knowledge in the school curriculum can be related to the weakening of the nation-state and the revival of pre-modern communitarian groups, within the political and economic context of global capitalism.
2. That what is lost in the postmodern turn against Enlightenment reason is the critical reasoning of the democratic movements of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, replacing rational knowledge by socio-cultural experience.
3. That there is a difference between the objective knowledge found in the disciplines and the social knowledge that is based in experience: the former enables the unthinkable to be imagined, whereas knowledge that comes from only experience tends to limit the knower to that experience.
4. That there are consequences for education of the shift away from disciplinary knowledge towards localised knowledge, whereby the working class, and in particular the re-ethnicised section of the working class, are doubly disadvantaged. (summarised from Rata, 2012b, pp. 107-108)

Thesis 1:

That changes in the type of knowledge in the school curriculum can be related to the weakening of the nation-state and the revival of pre-modern communitarian groups, within the political and economic context of global capitalism.

Response to thesis 1:

It is indisputable that the school curriculum is a real-world site of the knowledge debates, and Rata is on safe ground in linking changes in curriculum, and schooling more generally, to the effects of global capitalism in countries like Aotearoa New Zealand. Rata follows several critical curriculum theorists in this concept (Apple, 2000; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). But there are many links in the complex chains connecting these social phenomena, and any adequate delineation of their relationship must account for much more than Rata seems willing to contemplate. The last 50 years of academic scholarship and philosophical debate cannot be represented as a simple choice between Enlightenment thinking or ethnic revival (which she glosses in this section as 'localisation').

Globalisation, to the extent that it represents late capitalist theorising, largely in the form of neoliberal imperatives, can be seen as a universalising influence, and a direct consequence of Enlightenment thinking (Olssen, 2004). Neoliberalism, like classical liberalism, traces a direct line of descent from Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Hegel. No doubt much of our curriculum shows these influences, largely from OECD, US and UK sources, but also in the inheritance from 19th-century immigrants and their assumptions about knowledge, education and the nature of students, and consequently of appropriate forms of pedagogy. These inheritances are both not all bad – and not all good. The weakening of the nation-state is probably less significant than improvements in communications in this regard. The development of communitarian groups is inaccurately described as 'revival of premodern communitarian groups' (Rata, 2012b, p. 107). Feminist and LBGTQ+ groups can

hardly be described as ‘revivals’ yet they are now influential in the development of contemporary curriculum and education practices. Along with globalisation goes a strengthening in some forms of localisation—dialects of English for instance—which reflect places and cultural priorities that cannot be globalised (Robertson & Dale, 2008). In attempting to locate Māori cultural revival within a dismissal of localisation as opposed to the universal rationality of globalisation, Rata misses the point that Aotearoa New Zealand is a historically and geographically well-defined entity where the *nation* has an existence beyond the usual parameters of ‘*nation-state*’ (Novitz & Willmott, 1989).

Thesis 2:

That what is lost in the postmodern turn against Enlightenment reason is the critical reasoning of the democratic movements of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, replacing rational knowledge by socio-cultural experience.

Response to thesis 2:

Titled *Socio-economic class and knowledge*, in this section Rata draws on her Marxist roots, arguing that traditional schooling based on disciplinary knowledge has acted as a levelling mechanism for children to succeed, regardless of their family’s wealth – ‘re-distributing the resource’ (p. 111). Yet this popular ideal clashes with the well-established relationship between family income and educational success: wealthy parents simply have resources and therefore options unavailable to impoverished parents (Carpenter, 2008; Gordon, 215).

In this section, Rata collapses ‘localisation’ together with ‘postmodernism’ (and relativism) then alleges that sympathy towards any of these ideas entails rejection of ‘critical reasoning’ and ‘rational knowledge’. This is an example of a classic straw-man argument, invoking an extreme version of what is really at issue, a tactic often used to support appeals to universalism. By labelling without engaging with their ideas, the article does a disservice to her opponents and reveals its own philosophical poverty. Any number of well-respected works patiently point out the flaws in such simplistic arguments (see, for example, Herrnstein Smith, 2005; Putnam, 2004). Presenting distorted (straw-man) versions of one’s opponents’ ideas (e.g. few if any postmodernist thinkers reject science or reason) and homogenising one’s targets (e.g. treating all kinds of Māori education as the same) are two key ways in which Rata pursues her ‘arguments’ that fail to meet the accepted standards of scholarship in any discipline.

Given the imperatives of capitalism itself – for a literate, docile but not independent-thinking workforce, it seems odd to blame either post-structuralists or communitarians for any decline in ‘critical reasoning’ or the understanding of knowledge now endorsed in school curricula. While it is true that the Enlightenment introduced an emphasis on rationality which was largely (but not totally) missing in medieval scholarship, it retained the teleology of mediaeval Christianity. This teleology – or endpoint – takes on different forms in the daughter-theories of Enlightenment: liberalism, capitalism and Marxism, whether it is political freedom, the perfect market, or pure communism. The kind of rationality which is then admissible lines up with that endpoint. The ballot box, economic rationalism and utilitarianism are various means to specific endpoints, but in all cases, there is a deference to ‘progress’, which has been devastating to the global environment, to the economic freedom of multitudes, and to the actual freedom of dissident minorities. While each is ‘critical’ of the other in terms of ends, criticality in terms of an examination of the underlying assumptions of all these ‘enlightened’ theories has been made available only through post-structuralist analyses.

Thesis 3:

That there is a difference between the objective knowledge found in the disciplines and the social knowledge that is based in experience: the former enables the unthinkable to be imagined, whereas knowledge that comes from only experience tends to limit the knower to that experience.

Response to thesis 3:

While we have sympathy for Rata's attempt to reinstate the significance of the teacher's knowledge (the notion of teacher as nothing more than 'facilitator' is exasperating and derogatory), the argument as it is expressed is another example of Rata's propensity towards 'binary thinking' - in this case with 'disciplinary knowledge' or 'powerful knowledge' (p. 114) on one side and 'radical constructivism' (p. 116) on the other. Rata claims the latter involves 'discarding the notion that teachers have knowledge that might benefit the learner' (p. 116), though this seems like a distorted version of the ideas of Bishop and others under the banner of 'culturally responsive pedagogy' (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007). Rata (mis)characterises the viewpoint opposed to her own:

Knowledge can be nothing more than the construction of the knower; the product of social groups and their interests (Moore & Muller, 2010). Rational human thought is understood as the knowledge of the powerful, mere ideology internalised as false consciousness by less powerful groups and complicit in their subjugation. (Rata 2012b, p. 117)

This statement is problematic: the first sentence conflates the two ideas of personal and social constructivism of knowledge. The second sentence is incoherent because although rational human thought is understood as the knowledge of the powerful, this is not the same as believing it to be 'mere ideology' – so Rata's argument does not account for all the logical possibilities. Rata collapses or homogenises the categories of those who sympathise with 'postmodernism', with those who support 'localised epistemologies' but uses examples from Māori education.

The point is to ask whose rationality is at question: the traditional Marxist question 'who is advantaged by this?'. Rationality per se is content-free; a process rather than a product – certainly it is neither an ideology nor an episteme. But what counts as 'rational' is very much in the arena of ideology. For instance, the Fourth Labour Government suppressed all debate on their political and economic programme by arguing 'there is no alternative' - that is, by suggesting that any alternative way of thinking—of rationalising—was irrational (Tolich, 2018, p. 18). Institutionalised systems, as Foucault reminds us, are always the product of the thinking of the victors. 'What works' is always a programme bounded by the rationality of the powerful, rather than by an absolute and questioning rationality that pays attention to the premises of people who are not in powerful positions (Rabinow, 2010).

Thesis 4:

That there are consequences for education of the shift to localised knowledge and away from disciplinary knowledge in the curriculum, whereby the working class, and in particular the re-ethnicised section of the working class, are doubly disadvantaged.

Response to thesis 4:

In this section, the article's generic argument connects most closely to Rata's more pointed quarrels with Māori education, research and politics, which she has pursued since the early 2000s (Rata, 2003, 2006). 'Literacy is the development of intelligence' (p. 118) - the contested concepts in this article accumulate. Rata draws on classic Bernstein to support her Marxian argument:

[C]hildren from the working class [read: Māori] receive less of this intellectual resource [literate socialisation at home in early childhood] than those in the middle class. (p. 118)

Rata argues that 'cultural' education, such as KKM, doubly disadvantages all but the few elite ethnic (Māori) students by confining them to 'working-class literacy *and* into the localisation of neotraditionalism' (p. 118). Rata argues that such education completely shuts off access to 'mainstream' education outcomes, but this conclusion is counterfactual and flies in the face of the documented overall success of KKM (Sciascia, 2017; Tākao, Grennell, McKegg, & Wehiipeihana, 2010; Tocker, 2014).

Rata's key binary is between 'disciplinary knowledge' vs. 'social knowledge' but deploying these terms as two natural, mutually exclusive categories creates a reified binary, on which the rest of her argument is like the proverbial house of cards. She misses the point that ALL knowledge is human knowledge, and overlooks interesting questions about the **intersection** between social and disciplinary knowledges, such as how social knowledge becomes disciplinary knowledge, in her quest to build a wall between the two. Rata's reified binary makes a flimsy epistemological foundation underpinning her entire argument, which explains why she reaches such idiosyncratic conclusions about Māori education.

The popularity of Rata's scholarship in the media may be compared to the case of the documentary *New Zealand: Skeletons in the Cupboard* that TVNZ recently removed from its website. This case invoked the knowledge debate, starting with a 'tweet from a concerned viewer' asking 'why the network was featuring pseudoscience in the "documentary and factual" section of its online offerings' (Radio New Zealand, 19 August 2018, unpaginated). The concern is not the existence of such unfounded theories, but the appetite within our society for this kind of material.

Conclusion

Rata's conclusions about the 'dangers' of KKM are improbable and unconstructive, and seem not to have been picked up by other scholars, Māori or Pākehā alike, outside her sphere of personal influence (Jones, 2006), except in reviews (Benade, 2013; Duncan, 2011) or to write rebuttals in newspapers (Gilbert, 2013) or academic journals (Andreotti, 2009). It is now over 15 years since Rata began speaking and publishing about the 'dangers' of KKM. Over that time her claims have become increasingly unrealistic, as empirical evidence emerging in the intervening years has shown how much better Maori students succeed in KKM than in mainstream schools.

Rata's scholarship appeals to a particular section of the local elite by endorsing its own prejudices and re-inscribing those prejudices as 'rational'. She also manipulates a form of Marxist care for the underprivileged so that it becomes—once more—a form of assimilationism, more distinctive of 19th century liberalism than of contemporary recognition of the claims of the Other. By combining the two—Marxism and elitism—she appears to be both caring and supportive of the status quo. What we have is, in effect, a circular format: Rata writes for a certain sector of public opinion, held by powerful people who are invested, for whatever reason, in disparagement of practices or ideas that value ways of being and knowing outside the formal Western tradition. That specific group is very receptive to her ideas and reinforces them, as her ideas in effect reinforce their own.

The writing of this article has been an attempt to fill a gap: given that many Māori educators have deliberately avoided engaging with Rata's work, there has been very little published rebuttal of her claims about Māori education. We hope this article proves useful for postgraduate students and others who may not have the background to see through Rata's spurious claims about knowledge, Māori and education.

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