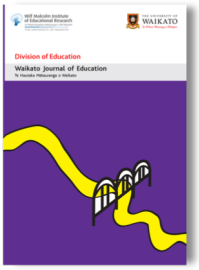

Waikato Journal of Education

Journal website: https://wje.org.nz

ISSN 2382-0373

Published by the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research

Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research
Te Pūtahi Rangahau Mātauranga o Wilf Malcolm
THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

Volume 24, Issue 1, 2019

Response

(To the article by Georgina Stewart and Nesta Devine: "A critique of Rata on the politics of knowledge and Māori education" published in this issue)

Elizabeth Rata

Editor: *Noeline Wright*

To cite this article: Rata, E. (2019). Response. *Waikato Journal of Education*, *24*(1), 103-105. https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v24i1.675

To link to this volume: https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v24i1

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Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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Response:

To the article by Georgina Stewart and Nesta Devine: "A critique of Rata on the politics of knowledge and Māori education" published in this issue.

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The opportunity to reply to this article is timely. I am currently analysing the epistemological schism which emerged in Auckland's School of Education in the 1990s for Roger Dale's Festschrift. Stewart and Devine's ire at my 2012 *British Educational Research Journal* paper provides a perfect illustration of that schism, one which centres on the form and function of symbolic knowledge. Is this knowledge objectifiable product or subjective process? Is it an object independent of the knower hence potentially available universally or are our ideas always tied to the knower and to the knower's socio-historical position? How one answers these questions leads directly to the 'powerful knowledge' - 'knowledge of the powerful' dichotomy, and ultimately to questions about the potential link between knowledge and ethics (Rata, 2018). Are the symbolic systems of human society 'humanising' as the power of knowledge enables us to understand the conditions of our existence and communicate this understanding universally? Or, is objective knowledge "dehumanising" (Smith, 1999, p. 39); everywhere and always the knowledge of the powerful, to be resisted by the knowledge of the powerless?

In the 1980s, I, along with Tuki Nepe, Linda Smith, and Graham Smith, was deeply involved in the establishment of kaupapa Māori education. We were also doing postgraduate study. As critical theorists, we insisted that knowledge can never be objective, that it is always the knowledge of the powerful. Kaupapa Māori was positioned in opposition to the 'powerful'; as the resistance and praxis of the powerless. Following the completion of our masters' degrees (mine was about the kaupapa Māori schools' establishment [1991], with Tuki Nepe's 1990 thesis describing kaupapa Māori theory), three of us went on to doctoral study supervised by Roger Dale. I developed the theory of neotribal capitalism in my PhD thesis and book (1996, 2000). Linda Smith's thesis and book were about decolonising methodologies (1996, 1999) and Graham Smith's 1997 thesis was about kaupapa Māori theory and practice. My research raised significant doubts about the knowledge/power theorising that we used to justify our kaupapa Māori politics with Munz's (1999) explosive critique of Smith's scholarship prompting me to critique my own work. I continue to wrestle with what symbolic knowledge is and its implications for education.

The knowledge question

The function symbolic knowledge serves depends upon what it is. What is the source of our ability to conceptualise what we do not experience, what we can only know symbolically? How are we able to share the knowledge and with whom? Is there a source of knowledge which is independent of socio-

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historical conditions? Is there a mechanism for the separation of the symbols of thought from the conditions of their creation? Any serious attempt to grapple with the 'knowledge question' must address these matters because depending upon how that source is understood, depends on the way we understand how knowledge may be used. There are four main explanatory contenders:

1. Humanism

The 'activist' view of knowledge privileges our mental activity. The individual's mental system (Kant's categorical apparatus) is a system of presuppositions which builds human intelligence. Recent neuroscience research, including evolutionary educational theory (Geary, 2002), supports this understanding of intelligence as belonging to the individual but built (its architecture) as the individual is socialised into symbolic rationalised systems. The intellectual framework of universal human reason informs "the unity of humankind" (Popper, 2003, p. 237).

2. Socio-culturalism

This approach places the source of thought in the myths, religions, languages, arts, and sciences of our symbolic systems; developed in the social relations and language of historically determined conditions. In this Hegelian-inspired approach, our "intellectual outfit" is part of our "constantly changing social heritage" (Popper, 2003, p. 237). The intellectual outfit may be Hegel's national 'spirit', Marx's 'class consciousness', or an indigenous 'way of knowing'. The point is that the knower and knowledge remain tied. Knowledge can be separated neither from its creator nor from the socio-political conditions of its creation. The post-1970s' revival of ethnicity as a structuring socio-political category (Rata, 2017) shifted the knower as a 'classed' knower to an ethnicised one - the kaupapa Māori knower. Here symbolic knowledge is always subjective, always in the interests of the knower - and with all the attendant dangers – tied to the knower's race, gender, sexuality, and religion.

The knower-knowledge tie has unintended consequences, ones seen in the Stewart and Devine article. Despite their intention to avoid an *ad hominin* attack, the tie means that they are unable to discuss my ideas without attributing motives and intentions to me. I am wrongfully and harmfully accused of 'intellectual dishonesty' and the 'manipulat(ion of) a form of Marxist care for the underprivileged'. Not only is the knowledge misunderstood but I am defamed.

3. Social realism

Social Realism attempts to explain how the symbolic knowledge created within socio-historical conditions (hence available to power interests), may become objectified, generalised (understood and applied to other situations), and universalised (understood and applied by others). The question is 'what is the process of separation/emergence?' Key writers (Rob Moore, Johan Muller, and Michael Young) maintain that through disciplinary accountability, abstracted concepts can be used as tools for the creation of the research object (epistemology) and for its analysis and theorising (methodology). That disciplinary accountability must be sufficiently rigorous to expose power interests built into the knowledge creation and retained in the separation process.

4. Fallibilism

This is very similar to social realism's claim that objectivity is made possible by scientific methods of accountability but with an interesting difference. The determinism found in both social realism and socio-culturalism is rejected for a rationalist account with the knowledge product created in the scientist's cognitive apparatus. However, unlike Kantian rationalism, fallibilism does not attribute impartiality or objectivity to the scientist. Rather, and here is the commonality with social realism,

objective knowledge is "a product of the social or public character of scientific method" (Popper, 2003, p. 243).

Conclusion

Popper (2003) refers to the *friendly-hostile co-operation of many scientists*" (p. 241) required for generative research. I suggest that a fruitful way forward for educational studies in New Zealand is to use such cooperation to re-engage with the knowledge question in scholarly ways. The alternative is demonstrated by the tone and content of Stewart and Devine's article.

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