



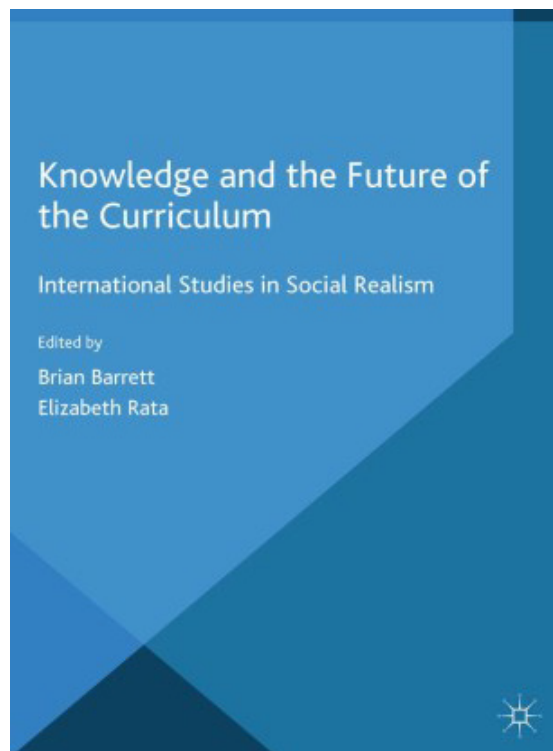
Book Review

Social Realism Project on Brings Back Knowledge into Curriculum Policy Making

Edi Subkhan^{1✉}

¹Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

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The significant change in curriculum policy shifts the orientation of how to develop the curriculum no longer based on subject-matter but prioritizes competency as a basis. In Indonesia, for example, in 2004 the government officially issued a new curriculum policy called Competency-based Curriculum in which emphasizes competency or skills as the most important things that the students should gain. According to Priestley and Biesta (2013), this phenomenon is common throughout the world, not only in Indonesia but also in Scotland, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and many more.

Curriculum that emphasizes more on skills or competencies than knowledge gained much criticism from many scholars. One of the most prominent criticisms comes from scholars' groups who hold strongly social realism as an epistemological foundation. They have a vision to bring back the knowledge into curriculum policy making, because the imbalance of the curriculum more on skills will lead the students to lose the aims, purposes, and direction of education they got involved in. Amidst this issue, Barrett and Rata (2014) published an edited book comprising several articles under the spirit of bringing back knowledge into the curriculum.

Previously, all the manuscripts have been presented at the Second International Social Realism Symposium at Cambridge in 2013. Throughout the book the authors propose the basic understanding of powerful knowledge, its

✉ Corresponding author :
Address: Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Semarang,
Sekaran, Gunungpati, 50229
E-mail: edi.subkhan@mail.unnes.ac.id

potentiality, limitation, and challenges. There are fourteen authors who joined this project, including Barret and Rata. The book divided into four sections, first elucidating the basic concept of powerful knowledge emphasize on its epistemological basis, second revealing the power relation between knowledge and policy, third, sharing several examples of the conceptual and implementation of powerful knowledge in the curriculum, and fourth, focusing on pedagogical implication of powerful knowledge.

ON POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

In order to fully understand the notion of powerful knowledge, it will be nice if we read the introduction by Rata and Barrett and chapter 1 first, because it is explaining the historical trajectory and epistemological basis of the term.

In chapter 1 Young and Muller stated that the idea of powerful knowledge comes from the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, especially about differentiation, classification, and specialisation (Young & Muller, 2014, pp. 42-43). Drawing from Durkheim's idea that knowledge is socially constructed and has differentiation and classification among others, Young and Muller said that not all knowledge is the same. They claimed that some knowledge is "better" than others in order to thrive students' complex ways of thinking as a means to solve their daily problems and transform society. Simply put, there are theories and practices. They call this type of knowledge as specialised knowledge developed by scholars based on scientific method.

Therefore, specialised/powerful knowledge needs such institutions like universities or research institutes to produce and schooling system to transmit it into the students. Because, unlike everyday knowledge experienced by the peoples (common sense), powerful knowledge needs to be developed and verified scientifically by the expert, mostly by scholars or academicians. In this book, several authors elucidate several subjects as examples of powerful knowledge, i.e. music (McPhail, 2014), geography (Morgan, 2014), and history (Ormond, 2014). Young and Muller also add STEM curriculum (Young & Muller, 2014, pp. 44-45). All the subjects proposed by the authors have the same characteristic, that is have huge potential to raise students' critical consciousness and encourage them to involve in and transform society.

However powerful knowledge and its exist-

tence within the schooling system raise several problems and criticisms. First, it seems that the social realist movement to preserve knowledge-based curriculum design has been perceived by some scholars as a regression that tend to de-contextualise the knowledge and make it more elitist. It is why the limited access to powerful knowledge becomes the main issue for disadvantaged students. Answering this doubt Morgan (2014, pp. 138-139) said that social realist arguments about the curriculum offer a third type of knowledge according to Young and Muller. Therefore, powerful knowledge has two dimensions, first the social dimension of the knowledge as a social product and second the scientific dimension of knowledge developed by the scholars.

As a scientific knowledge "powerful knowledge" should be developed underpinned by scientific paradigm and method to produce such theories that could go beyond the context. But, unlike the positivist notion of science, powerful knowledge accommodates many types of knowledge with their own characteristics and intentions. Therefore, STEM is not the only form of powerful knowledge, but also history, geography, music, etc. Nevertheless, not all subjects derived from disciplinary knowledge are powerful knowledge. When the content of the knowledge cannot arouse students' critical consciousness or cannot lead the students to think abstractly beyond their daily experiences, then the knowledge is not powerful knowledge at all.

Thus, the schooling system should be a place for the growth of the students' critical consciousness and abstract thinking that goes beyond their daily experiences. In this case, the work of Ira Shor (1992) illustrated comprehensively how teaching-learning practices within the classrooms are very challenging for the teachers, because it should empower the students by facilitating the students to raise their abstract thinking that could transcend their daily experiences into critical consciousness. Consequently, classrooms should be arranged as a space to disrupt students' false consciousness according to their daily life experiences. Accordingly, the social realist notion about curriculum is the same as the critical pedagogues, including its issues and challenges (see also Au, 2012).

For example, when the powerful knowledge produced by the expert should be transmitted through schooling system raised the problem of access, social realist as well as many critical pedagogues said that there always a tension bet-

ween the ruling class' interest to preserve the status quo and the interest of the marginalized community to get the access toward the powerful knowledge. Referring to Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), rather than merely conducting ideology critics or focusing on the "nature" of social reproduction in education, social realist takes a position to argue that education is not only related to the reproduction of the existing social order—especially the ruling class, but also has the potential to produce a new social order that is more democratic, humanist, and socially just through formulating powerful knowledge.

THE IMPORTANT OF POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

One of the reasons why social realists propose powerful knowledge is the common shifting paradigm on curriculum policy making from knowledge-based curriculum design into competency-based. Social realists find paradoxes and problems when the government issued new curriculum policies under the spirit of the "Knowledge Age"—such as knowledge-based economy. Social realists said: how come the government justifies their curriculum policy as a vehicle to drive a knowledge-based economy whereas the national curriculum design is based on skills only and marginalized the knowledge? Rata (2014) states that the neo-liberalization of education urges many countries to shift their curriculum policy into more instrumental to serve the market interest.

Rata (2014) warns that this movement is dangerous, because it does not only ignore the role of knowledge as the basis of modern civilization, but also weakens the democratic project of the nations. Barrett (2014) for instance, reveals the marginalization of knowledge in American education reform based on *A Nation at Risk report*. Barrett said that to increase the students' score in such international achievement tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as well as to meet the market demand, the government emphasized more on standardized testing than the knowledge. This policy assumes that accountability and standardized testing is the most effective way to ensure that the national education system is on the right track to meet the market demand.

In addition, Corbel (2014) also finds the

de-differentiation of knowledge and skills and the changes in the dictionary meanings of knowledge and skills. The previous meaning of knowledge and skill is clear, that knowledge is related to abstract understanding and skill related to the ability to do something. However, right now Corbel reveals subtle conceptual inflation of meaning in the current definition of knowledge and skill. He also finds out how "knowledge and skill" became a particular type of phrase and it is blurring the distinction between knowledge and skill. For social realists—especially by referring to Durkheim—knowledge and skill should be differentiated. This is a problem because the term "knowledge and skill" simply means skills.

Amidst the popularity of the 21st-century skills proposed by the Partnership of for 21st Century Learning, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and etc (see also Global Partnership for Education, 2020; McPhail & Rata, 2016; Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Trilling & Fadel, 2009) such criticism by social realist is important. Therefore, bringing back knowledge project by the social realist is not only securing the students' right to get the powerful knowledge, but also strengthening the knowledge as the foundation of education and modern society. Moreover, bringing back knowledge project is an attempt to prevent the students from trapping in such a market-driven education policy that gave the students technical skills only.

For those who believe that subject-matter curriculum design is an old-fashioned way to design the curriculum, social realist consideration on the importance of knowledge as the basis of education will be an alternative perspective to face the dominant discourse and trend in curriculum policy making. Not to defend the status quo and elitist form of the "traditional" knowledge, but to make the knowledge become more powerful underpinned by scientific method and re-contextualize it in order to transform the society. Blurring the meaning of knowledge and skill will disadvantage the students and teachers at schools, especially when knowledge is simply meant as skills and the government emphasizes standardized testing, and both should serve the interest of the market.

In the Indonesian context we can see how the government seems always refers to the 21st century skills framework as the main consideration to revise the national curriculum from 2013 onwards. Unfortunately, there is no criticism toward this intention. Most of the evaluation

toward the Indonesian national curriculum of 2013 only focuses on the implementation, not the theoretical basis of the curriculum policy making. Therefore, the discourse of the curriculum and learning practices has been dominated by such terms like competency/skills-based curriculum design, outcome-based education, student centred learning, link-and-match, etc. Facing this phenomenon, the publication of Barrett and Rata's (2014) is important, because we can use it as a tool to analyse the contemporary phenomenon of curriculum policy making in the Indonesian context.

I will pose criticism toward the lack of deep and meaningful discourse on powerful knowledge in the Indonesian context.

Based on my experiences as a young scholar who concerns on Curriculum Studies, especially in the Indonesian context and my involvement in the Indonesian curriculum developer association, I found that no one has paid attention to the idea of powerful knowledge that gained much attention and debates among curriculum scholars at the international level. Most of the discourse on curriculum is related to *how to* level discourse, such as *how to* design the national curriculum that meets the challenges of the 21st century, industrial revolution 4.0 and society 5.0, etc. There is no counternarrative toward competency-based curriculum design, link-and-match, and other market-driven education approaches posed by such curriculum experts from my association.

The work of Barrett and Rata (2014) will be a good reference for those involved in curriculum policy making and curriculum as a field of studies in the Indonesian context, because it illustrates how the discourse on contemporary curriculum issues which emphasize on the epistemological basis will benefit the policy making process. As I have proposed previously (Subkhan, 2019) the development of Curriculum Studies and policy making process at the national level lead by the government and curriculum experts need many theoretical perspectives. Therefore, the domination of market-driven policy and constructivism should have its counternarrative, and the social realist approach provides a critical perspective that always warns of the negative potential from such curriculum design developed by the government.

Unlike its counterparts from the Marxian tradition on Curriculum Studies (for example see Apple, 2004; Au, 2012) which more focused on

revealing the hidden agenda of the ruling class which always reproduces inequity in education and how to fight against such discrimination, social realist approach has a deep interest on analysing the core of the curriculum—the scientific and epistemological discourse of the knowledge. As More (2014) said that social realism in Curriculum Studies will complement constructivism and move beyond the problem of positivism and epistemological relativism, it is such a hope that if we take some consideration toward this school of thought, the future of curriculum as a field of studies and policy making process will go beyond its technical and procedural level toward more essential and meaningful level.

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