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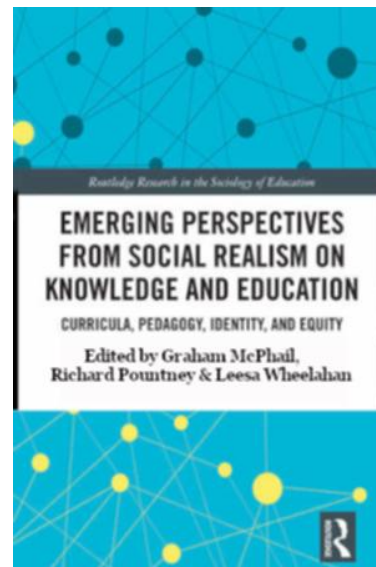
McPhail, G., Pountney, R. & Wheelahan, L. (Eds.). (2025).
*Emerging perspectives from social realism on
knowledge and education: Curricula, pedagogy, identity,
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Edited by **Graham McPhail, Richard Pountney**, and **Leesa Wheelahan**, *Emerging Perspectives from Social Realism on Knowledge and Education* brings together contributions from multiple scholars across 13 chapters, organized into four sections: Theoretical Matters, Curriculum Contestations, Knowledge and Teacher Education, and Crossing Boundaries. The volume illuminates the analytical significance of social realism in contemporary debates on knowledge across pedagogy, curriculum, teacher education, and inter-disciplinary learning. Its strength lies in forging meaningful exchanges among these four pillars rather than treating them as distinct categories.



The volume is a recent addition to the corpus of scholarship advanced by Michael Young, Rob Moore, and Johan Muller, among others, to revive knowledge from its diminished state in response to relativistic critiques. Utilizing varied methodologies, it emphasizes the interlinkages between the intrinsic epistemic value of knowledge and social justice goals, while mapping possibilities of access and opportunity within current educational practices.

The editors set forth the complex theoretical legacy of social realism with subtlety. Beginning with an overview of the social realism (SR) approach in education for social justice, they advance an overarching argument for the restoration of traditional disciplinary categories. This argument is substantiated by reworking the concepts of the British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein, particularly his concepts of “recontextualization,” “discourses,” and “grammar,” alongside established SR concepts such as “Powerful Knowledge” (as opposed to the “Knowledge of the powerful”). The latter is central to SR literature, which

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views knowledge as bearing an epistemic integrity of its own, containing inherent generative and emergent potentials irreducible to mere power games.

The first section summarizes theoretical debates in the new sociology of education. The provocative phrase “sociological tiptoeing,” deployed to characterize Bourdieu's position on knowledge, is well contrasted with Bernstein who placed central importance on knowledge itself. The prevalent fad of undermining abstract theoretical knowledge in favor of lived realities, experience, and skill-based curricula is criticized as posing significant threats to social justice, reinforcing differential access to the epistemic world of powerful knowledge for learners. This distributive inequity, the authors argue, is detrimental to marginalized groups. Without equal engagement with powerful knowledge, which carries generative potentialities for disruption by imparting skills for theorization and abstraction, their possibilities for structural subversion are severed. The argument draws effective interlockings between Gramsci's and Vygotsky's mutual emphasis on the objectivity of the theoretical component of knowledge and the threats posed to such objectivity by progressive educationists. The potential hazards of valorising everyday practices for working-class learners' access to knowledge are foregrounded with conviction. Reinvigorating Gramsci and Marx, the authors make concrete attempts to enclose a collaborative space between contending schools of educational thought in order to advance the ontological position of social realism. However, the conception of “everyday practices” and “theoretical component” as rigid, essentialized binaries persists throughout the section, weakening the overall analysis. Despite this conservatism, the first section lays fertile ground for the empirically substantiated conversations on the state of knowledge that follow.

The second section, comprising four chapters, supplies extensive analysis of Brazil and New Zealand's music knowledge systems in the wake of the decolonial turn. It sheds critical insight into the remaking of knowledge structures, urging policymakers and educationists to resist superficial attempts at inclusion that undermine canonical, specialized disciplinary knowledge. The curricular patterns of both national frameworks are analysed with emphasis on the generative nature of canonical knowledge. A case is pursued for substantive accommodation of indigenous knowledge within the powerful curriculum, enabling meaningful dialogue between the two systems. Such dialogically formulated “powerful knowledge,” through processes of recontextualization, echoes the broader social realist concern for an equilibrated epistemic and historical justice. Even so, the discussion is hesitant on elaborating the criteria of integration of indigenous knowledge systems already implicated in Western ontological and axiological registers, and it is the New Zealand articles that ultimately shine through as the richer scholarly pieces.

The third section applies a knowledge-centric realist lens to teacher education using Bernstein's key concepts. It demonstrates the need for coherent curriculum design that ensures the internal, logical connection between the epistemic structure of a discipline and the cognitive structure of students' minds. The argument that such design requires the combined expertise of pedagogues and disciplinarians underscores the need to rescue knowledge structure from

affectively charged political entanglements. Fresh inquiries into the existing literature on teacher professional learning are furnished, advocating a realist intervention to foreground knowledge practices in Professional Development and Learning (PDL). The “break-away” discourse in teacher education, the tendency to move away from parent disciplines like sociology and philosophy as evident in the emergence of fragmented subjects such as “education studies,” is criticized for disrupting the natural rhythm of knowledge acquisition and transmission. The critique extends to the scarcity of a dedicated disciplinary curriculum for beginning teachers. The scarcity is attributed to the unfair subsuming of “educative” discourse by “political” discourse in the education field. The genuine strength of this section, and the volume as a whole, lies in its treatment of teacher education, curriculum, and pedagogy not as isolated analytical constructions but as an intertwined whole bearing significant consequences for learners.

The social justice driven project of restoring disciplinary boundaries concludes in the final section, dedicated to the trend of “interdisciplinarity.” Claims to equity made on behalf of interdisciplinary curricula are scrutinized. The authors convincingly communicate the need to negotiate disciplinary boundaries while warning against the rhetoric of a radical break from disciplinary structures, which endangers underprivileged learners' equitable access to rigorous academic tools in the guise of equity. The final chapter assesses the organizing curriculum principles and pedagogic dynamics of a case-study school in response to global shifts, underlining the perils and promises of the “Future 3” curriculum through a Bernsteinian realist eye.

A careful reading of the book yields the inference that knowledge has not yet lost its intrinsic capacity and currency for effecting transformation. This inference, however, seems hurriedly arrived at once one notices the book's frail attempts at addressing the criticism levelled against social realism. The response to Zavitz's critique of SR's feasibility and praxis remains underdeveloped. The critics have been accused of misinterpreting concepts and keeping unrealistic expectations from the theory. Zavitz's critique, which questions whether SR can move beyond the theoretical register into workable pedagogical transformation, has its merits and deserves a more serious reckoning.

The running theme of the book is premised on the social realist idea that acquisition of “powerful knowledge” is a precondition for reforming it. Yet there is an unsettling silence regarding the subjectivity of marginalized learners in the interval between encountering powerful knowledge and acquiring the capacity to subvert it. The authors leave largely unexplored the processual nature of knowledge transmission, overlooking the modalities of assimilation and acculturation at play in the classroom, which manoeuvre the capacities learners can actually acquire. They argue for effective pedagogical methods to enable such transmission but hesitate to dive into the intricacies of the matter. Most importantly, the theoretical meditations in the book, while ambitious in scope, fail to account for standpoint epistemology and its claims to objectivity on behalf of marginalized groups not yet in possession of powerful knowledge. This is not a minor omission; it is a structural gap that the book's own premises make impossible to ignore.

Despite these limitations, this edited volume is recommended as a major intervention in the sociology of education, highly capable of stirring dialogue among various theoretical factions on the pertinent issue of differential knowledge access for learners across the world.

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About the Reviewer

Ashay Raj is a graduate student in Sociology at the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. His research and writing focus on education, with particular interest in questions of access, social justice, and the ways classrooms are shaped by diverse social identities. As an ethnographer, he is currently conducting fieldwork in a village school in Andhra Pradesh, examining the lived realities of learners and teachers as they are negotiated through curriculum and pedagogical practices. Beyond academia, Ashay is deeply engaged with the performing arts and literary culture. He contributes poetry and opinion pieces to news and digital media platforms and has been actively involved in theatre and reading collectives. He views these artistic practices as vital pedagogical resources with the potential to foster critical reflection and transformative social change.



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