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Social realism, knowledge and curriculum: furthering the conversation

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ABSTRACT

Building on the '*Didaktik* Meets Curriculum' dialogue, this symposium (special issue) seeks to further the ongoing discussion on knowledge and curriculum—recently revitalized by the concept of powerful knowledge—by engaging with social realism in conjunction with *Didaktik* and curriculum theory. The symposium features two key articles concerning social realism: Johan Muller revisits the early work of Basil Bernstein, while Michael Young examines the foundational ideas of Émile Durkheim. It also presents six response articles authored by scholars from England, the United States, and Finland, each engaging with Muller's article, Young's article, or both. Central to this discussion are the following questions: How should social realism be understood on its own terms? Why has it exerted very little influence in the United States, Germany, and other German-speaking countries? In what ways do curriculum theory and *Didaktik* differ from social realism? And what might constitute a beneficial and productive relationship between social realism, *Didaktik*, and curriculum theory?

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The concept of powerful knowledge has gained extraordinary influence over the past two decades. In England, where the term was arguably first coined, it has significantly impacted curriculum policy and school practice (Duoblys, this issue). It served as a guiding principle during the 2011 National Curriculum Review, which proposed that 'the concepts, facts, processes, language, narratives, and conventions of each subject' constitute powerful knowledge to be embedded in the curriculum (James et al., 2011, p. 9). This principle has influenced the development of knowledge-rich or knowledge-led curricula in schools, where powerful knowledge serves as a foundational curriculum principle (Firth, 2020; Young et al., 2014). Internationally, the concept has become a 'clarion call' for restoring the centrality of knowledge in education and curriculum (Muller, this issue). This restoration is evident in the OECD's Learning Compass 2030, which reflects a shift from an exclusive focus on 21st-century competencies towards reaffirming the importance of disciplinary knowledge in education.[1]

In the educational research community, the take-up of the concept of powerful knowledge has been remarkable. In England, it has been particularly embraced by two subject research communities: history and geography, both of which have produced significant research outcomes incorporating insights from the concept (e.g. Chapman, 2021; Counsell, 2018; Lambert et al., 2015; Sehgal Cuthbert & Standish, 2021). In Nordic countries, researchers have integrated the concept into subject-specific education, emphasizing the transformation of disciplinary knowledge into teachable content, aiming to provide students with

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access to specialized, coherent knowledge that fosters critical thinking, intercultural competence, and societal engagement (Aashamar & Klette, 2023; Bladh et al., 2018; Gericke et al., 2018; Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). Furthermore, the concept has revitalized the 'curriculum meets *Didaktik*' dialogue initiated by Bjørg Gundem, Stefan Hopman, Ian Westbury, and Kurt Riquarts over three decades ago (Deng, 2015, 2020; also see Bladh, 2020; for the dialogue, see Gundem & Hopmann, 1998; Westbury, Hopmann, & Riquarts, 2000). We are witnessing an extraordinary revival of interest in the role and place of knowledge and content in curriculum, teaching and learning, and teacher education (Deng, 2020; Gericke et al., 2022; Hudson et al., 2022; Krogh et al., 2021).

While 'powerful knowledge' has become a significant lexical item in the international educational community, its theoretical underpinning, *social realism*, has not received sufficient attention. Over the last two decades, a distinctive school of thought has emerged within the sociology of education under the banner of social realism, with seminal figures such as Michael Young, Johan Muller, the late Rob Moore, and Leesa Wheelahan. As a departure from the new sociology of education (NSOE), which reduces knowledge to mere standpoints, interests, and power relations, social realism asserts that knowledge—while socially constructed—is objective and real, playing a vital role in transcending personal experience and ensuring equitable access to education (Wheelahan, 2023).

Primarily informed by the work of British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein, the social realist school has developed a sophisticated understanding of the nature, forms, and structures of knowledge. It has also established its own distinct approach to theorizing about the curriculum, including its aims and content (Wheelahan, 2023). Social realism is further characterized by a coalition of scholars primarily based in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, with biennial meetings known as the 'Cambridge Symposium on Knowledge in Education' (e.g. Barret & Rata, 2014; Barrett et al., 2017) Additionally, a global coalition of scholars dedicated to studying Bernstein's theories on education, pedagogy, and knowledge structures convenes biennially at the 'International Basil Bernstein Symposium' (e.g. Ivinson et al., 2009; Muller et al., 2004). Their work has also significantly contributed to the development of social realism.

As an emerging field of scholarship, social realism has boldly claimed to address 'the crisis in curriculum theory' by developing a curriculum theory centred on 'the learner's entitlement to knowledge' (Young, 2013). It has been proposed that social realism—particularly the Bernsteinian theory underpinning it—serves as a theoretical framework integrating curriculum theory and *Didaktik* (Lilliedahl, 2015; Rata, 2024). Recently, Elizabeth Rata edited the *Research handbook on curriculum and education*, utilizing the social realist Bernsteinian framework to integrate *Didaktik*, curriculum theory, and cognitive science. Surprisingly, however, she does not appear to build upon or engage with other authoritative, benchmark curriculum handbooks, such as the *Handbook of research on curriculum* (Jackson, 1992) and *The Sage handbook of curriculum and instruction* (Connelly et al., 2008). Nor does she attend to the influential '*Didaktik* Meets Curriculum' dialogue mentioned earlier. Similar tendencies are also evident in Lilliedahl's (2015) proposal.

In this context, it is interesting to observe that social realism has gained relatively little traction in the United States, Germany, and other German-speaking countries, where curriculum theory and *Didaktik* are well-established traditions in the study of education. Instead, it has been primarily influential in England and its former colonies, such as Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa (Barton, 2024).

Several intriguing questions arise: *How should social realism be understood on its own terms? Why does it have very little influence in the United States, Germany, and other German-speaking countries? In what ways do curriculum theory and Didaktik differ from social realism? And what might constitute a beneficial and productive relationship between social realism, on the one hand, and Didaktik and curriculum theory, on the other?*

The symposium

Building on the '*Didaktik* Meets Curriculum' dialogue, this symposium (special issue) aims to advance the ongoing discussion on knowledge and curriculum—recently revitalized by the concept of powerful knowledge—by engaging with social realism in conjunction with *Didaktik* and curriculum theory. It features two articles: one by Johan Muller, revisiting the early work of Basil Bernstein, and another by Michael Young, focusing on the early work of Émile Durkheim. Bernstein and Durkheim are arguably the two most significant influences on the social realist approach to thinking and theorizing about knowledge, education, and the curriculum. Both Muller and Young, as founding figures of the social realist school, have made significant contributions to the development of the concept of powerful knowledge. These two papers were revised by the authors based on the keynotes delivered at the meetings of the KOSS (Knowledge and Quality across School Subjects and Teacher Education) network,[2] held in Helsinki on 26 October 2022, and in London on 22 March 2023.

The symposium presents six invited response articles written by scholars from England, the United States, and Finland, who were asked to engage with Muller's article, Young's articles, or both, referencing the body of social realist literature where appropriate. These scholars interpreted Bernstein and Durkheim, as well as the social realism associated with them, from the perspectives of social realism, curriculum theory, and *Didaktik*.

Two feature articles

In 'The palimpsests of knowledge', Johan Muller begins with a critique of the superficial or misapplied uses of the concept of powerful knowledge in England, particularly by politicians, ministers, and headteachers. He argues that what they have overlooked is social realism, which is an integral part of the concept—a tradition deeply embedded in the broader Bernsteinian framework, centred on the knowledge question. To illuminate the social realist tradition, Muller examines Bernstein's (1992) analysis of Durkheim's (1938/1977) exploration of the emergence of the medieval university and its curriculum structure—a paper that reflects Bernstein's early interest in knowledge within the curriculum. This examination reveals Bernstein's early classification of disciplines: humanities, characterized by narrative governance, partial subsumption of particulars, allowance for diverse knowledge collection, and non-hierarchical organization; and sciences, characterized by maximal subsumption into abstract concepts, hierarchical knowledge sequencing, and explicit evaluative criteria.

Building on this, Muller draws implications for what is referred to as the 'knowledge-centric curriculum'. He argues that curriculum content must be selected and sequenced to reflect the organization and structures of knowledge within academic disciplines. These 'structures', he asserts, 'foster or restrict the conditions for entry, access, and progress in the pedagogic situation' (p. 19), shaping 'the structural possibilities and limits of different knowledge fields' with respect to access to and acquisition of knowledge (p. 20).

Seeking to build on Muller's article (on Bernstein), Michael Young, in 'Reflections on sociological approaches to the question of knowledge in education', revisits the early work of Durkheim to uncover insights that, he believes, can 'help us to be clearer about the questions about knowledge in education that curriculum theorists need to take account of' (p. 25). He begins by reflecting on earlier attempts, particularly those influenced by Marxism and phenomenology, which reduced knowledge to merely a social construct and failed to address issues concerning knowledge and the curriculum. Young then argues that Durkheim's sociology provides a novel approach to understanding knowledge as a social product. Questions of knowledge and truth, he contends, are not viewed primarily as 'abstract philosophical questions' but as 'sociological issues' tied to 'shared social norms' that 'constituted the solidarity of human beings', 'held societies together' (p. 26), and relied on the 'interdependence' of people on one another. Furthermore, Young highlights what he regards as

'Durkheim's most original idea': the distinction between the *profane*—everyday concepts learned through socialization to meet basic survival needs, such as food and shelter—and the *sacred*, which encompasses abstract concepts existing independently of everyday experiences shared by members of a society or clan.

From this analysis, Young argues that, for Durkheim, knowledge 'was not only social but real' (p. 28) and that sociology was 'to be established as a science studying society and how it is changing' (p. 30). Durkheim, Young asserts, 'was not just a founding father of sociology and the sociology of education but someone who offered a completely new way of thinking about human beings and society and hence about the role of education' (p. 30).

Six response articles

In the first response article titled 'Accessibility and specialization in the work of Michael Young', George Duoblys, a school physics teachers in England, provides a commentary on a paper presented by Young at the 2023 KOSS network meeting, rather than the paper included in this symposium. Duoblys challenges the conflation of Young's concept of powerful knowledge with those of Hirsch (1987, 2007) and the cognitive psychology popularized by Daisy Christodoulou (2014, 2016), arguing the critical aspect of Young's concept—the 'process of specialization'—has been overlooked. He suggests that Young's work should be understood as 'part of an ongoing attempt to address two related problems: how to make academic knowledge accessible to students and how to motivate students to study in the first place' (p. 33). To address the gap between the ideal of powerful knowledge for all and the realities of the classroom, he advocates for a pedagogy that accounts for the process of specialization—how disciplinary knowledge is generated and classified—drawing on the insights of both Durkheim and Vygotsky.

The second response article, 'Towards a shared reality for liberal democracy', is authored by American scholar Walter Parker, who applies social realism to address the epistemic crisis facing liberal democracy in the United States. This crisis stems from the absence of a shared standard of truth for distinguishing facts from falsehoods. He argues that schools play a vital role in addressing this crisis by 'teaching the truth about the world and how to find it' (p. 38) and that the sociology of knowledge, developed by Durkheim and Bernstein and further clarified and extended by Young and Muller, offers a promising direction for tackling these challenges. This approach necessitates the principled selection and organization of curriculum content guided by social realism. As an illustration, he outlines two curricula—one that teaches skills of sourcing and corroboration alongside content (history) and the other that helps students develop these skills as well as concepts underpinning liberal democracy (civic curriculum). In conclusion, Parker underscores 'the necessity of bringing powerful knowledge and its social realist underpinnings to the foreground in education' (p. 43) to address the epistemic crisis currently confronting Americans.

In the third response article, 'Knowledge without disciplines', American scholar Keith Barton provides a compelling critique of social realism, referencing Muller's article in this issue and Young's earlier work. Since his paper has been inadvertently published in No 3, Vol 56, I provide a detailed summary here. Readers are urged to download the full article (Barton, 2024). The critique focuses on three key aspects. Barton begins by acknowledging a core premise of social realism: 'schools must engage students with knowledge that deepens and extends their understanding, rather than simply reproduce what they learn in everyday life '(p. 235). He then argues that social realists overlook the societal purposes of schooling—career preparation, socialization, civic education, and more. He asserts, 'Given that schools cannot teach all worthwhile knowledge, what goals should guide the selection of curriculum content … is one of the central questions of curriculum theory' (p. 236). In the context of social and civic education, Barton emphasizes the importance of helping students develop their 'understanding of the social world' and their ability to 'become participants in civic life', enabling them to 'take deliberatively informed action in pursuit of social justice and critical harmony' (p. 236). He argues that a fundamental task of the curriculum is to 'help

students consider how best to address such issues by engaging them in thoughtful deliberations that will enable them to reach well-informed conclusions' in a world afflicted by war, environmental disaster, oppression, poverty, hunger, disease, and homelessness (p. 236). Achieving these goals, Barton contends, necessitates the critical contribution of knowledge.

The second aspect of the critique addresses the primary task of curriculum theory, which Young describes as '"bringing knowledge back in", with a focus on what is taught and learned in schools' (Barton, 2024, p. 237). Barton argues that this characterization of curriculum theory is 'somewhat oversimplified', as it overlooks the critical connection between the selection and organization of content and the intellectual and moral development of students. Citing Deng (2015), he observes that curriculum theorists 'have gone further than critics such as Young in identifying the "essential concepts, principles, methods and habits of mind" that would lead to students' intellectual development'. This is particularly evident in 'social and civic education, which has a long tradition of such curriculum theorizing, and in which contemporary debates over the proper content and form of the knowledge component of curriculum continue to animate the field' (p. 238).

The final aspect of the critique challenges a central tenet of powerful knowledge: that disciplinary knowledge forms the foundation of the curriculum. Barton argues that academic disciplines lack definite, stable, and uncontested boundaries and coherence as claimed by social realists. Moreover, privileging disciplinary knowledge over everyday, experiential, and practical knowledge leads to 'offensive and borderline-racist characterizations of non-disciplinary knowledge' (p. 241). The claim that disciplinary knowledge is inherently more 'powerful' than other forms of knowledge is also described as 'demonstrably false'. Additionally, the assertion that school subjects are formulated and organized according to academic disciplines is highly problematic. Such an approach, with its predominantly cognitive and epistemic focus, neglects 'such important elements as emotions, attitudes, convictions, and moral and ethical action' (p. 242).

In 'On the intellectual horizons of social realism', British scholar Jim Hordern provides a response to Barton. His rejoinder primarily addresses to the third aspect of the critique, arguing that social realism offers '*a more nuanced view of disciplines* than Barton (2024) assumes' (p. 48, italics original). The social realist conception emphasizes 'boundary maintenance as prior to boundary crossing' and highlights the 'permeability and changeability of boundaries', viewing disciplines as 'socio-epistemic constructions' that adapt and evolve in response to emerging challenges, with objectivity achieved through shared, reliable methods of generating truth. In this context, disciplinary (powerful) knowledge is described as 'systematically revisable', 'emergent', 'real', and 'both material and social'.

Furthermore, Hordern argues that the relationships between academic disciplines and school subjects are not as straightforward as Barton claims regarding social realism. He highlights Bernstein's work on recontextualization which involves the 'selection', 'appropriation', and 'transformation' of knowledge from a range of sources in addition to academic disciplines. In addition, he challenges Barton's claim that social realism is influential only in England and its former colonies, emphasizing the school's significant impact in the European context and beyond. Drawing on a body of international literature, Hordern demonstrates that this influence extends to questioning problematic conceptions of knowledge and educational reforms, contributing to curriculum research and development in higher and vocational education, and engaging researchers from other traditions such as *Didaktik* and subject matter *Didaktik*.

The last two response articles are written primarily from the *Didaktik* tradition. In 'On powerful knowledge as a policy concept and sociological theory', Michael Uljens, a Finish educational theorist, responds to both Muller's and Young's articles. He observes that the mode of theorizing, particularly evident in Muller's work, primarily offers an epistemological analysis of forms and conceptual structures within academic disciplines, from which it derives 'practical recommendations or prescriptions' for content selection and classroom teaching. However, this approach is reductionist because it is devoid of a pedagogical analysis of content. In contrast, *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* emphasizes both epistemological and pedagogical analyses of content, focusing on its educative value and its treatment in terms of *Bildung*, with respect to the experiences of learners.

Furthermore, Uljens argues that the social realist approach to theorizing is radically different from the type of theorizing employed by Bernstein and Durkheim. Bernstein's approach aims at developing 'a non-prescriptive, descriptive-analytical framework focusing on the mechanisms of knowledge transformation processes' (p. 59), whereas Durkheim's approach seeks to construct 'a comprehensive conceptual system or theory that addresses the challenges arising from the transition between pre-modern and modern societies' (p. 60). In conclusion, Uljens challenges educationists to integrate the Durkheimian and Bernsteinian approaches to theorizing, along with their sociological insights, in the pursuit of constructing educational theories in their own right.

Like Uljens, Zongyi Deng, a UK-based curriculum and *Didaktik* scholar, focuses particularly on the mode of theorizing exemplified in Muller's paper in his 'Knowledge and curriculum: toward an educational and *Didaktik*/curriculum way of thinking and theorising'. He argues that Muller's work reflects the social realist perspective on the curriculum, which holds the primary goal of schooling as access to knowledge, the curriculum as a selection and sequencing of knowledge, and classroom pedagogy as comprising strategies enabling knowledge access. This perspective is well aligned with Bernstein's views. Furthermore, Deng reveals that the social realist approach to curriculum theorizing centres on analysing Bernstein's contributions and exploring their implications for the curriculum. This way of thinking and theorizing, he argues, is sociological rather than educational or curricular, bringing with it both promise and limitations.

Drawing on *Pädagogik* and *Didaktik*, Deng proposes an educational and *Didaktik*/curriculum-oriented way of thinking and theorizing which accounts for the promise while addressing the limitations inherent in the social realist approach. This perspective on the curriculum is characterized by *Bildung* as the central goal of education, a theory of content that informs content selection and organization, and classroom teaching as a 'fruitful encounter' between students and the content. Furthermore, he observes that the approach to theorizing in *Didaktik* 'starts with a specific concept of education (*Bildung*) and considers practice within the institutional context of schooling, where educational purposes and the institutional curriculum are integral' (p. 69). This alternative, Deng argues, provides a foundation for articulating a model of a future-oriented, knowledge-rich curriculum.

Social realism, *Didaktik* and curriculum theory: three distinctive ways of thinking and theorizing

From this set of papers, three distinctive ways of thinking and theorizing about education, curriculum, and classroom pedagogy—associated with social realism, *Didaktik*, and American curriculum theory—can be discerned. To understand their differences, it is useful to situate these three traditions within the broader 'knowledge traditions in the study of education' (Furlong & Whitty, 2017). According to Furlong and Whitty, the development of education as a field of study has varied significantly across countries, giving rise to several distinctive knowledge traditions. Foremost among these are the Anglo-American 'disciplines of education' and the continental 'education as a discipline', both of which have been particularly influential globally.

Social realism, as discussed in the writings of Muller, Young, and Hordern in this symposium, should be understood as having been developed within the 'disciplines of education' tradition in England. This tradition views education as an applied field that primarily draws on theoretical and methodological inputs from the foundational disciplines (philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history of education) and related fields (e.g. economics, and international and comparative education). Education is not recognized as a discipline in its own right; consequently, there is no uniquely educational way of thinking or theorizing (Biesta, 2011).

In the social realist school, Basil Bernstein's sociological theory—particularly his later work on discourse and knowledge structures, as well as his earlier theory of the pedagogic device—is used to understand the purpose of schools, curriculum, and classroom teaching. Within this framework, the primary purpose of education is viewed as the transmission of, or access to, knowledge. The

curriculum involves 're-contextualizing' an academic discipline into a school subject—selecting, sequencing, and pacing academic knowledge in alignment with the coherence of the discipline and the developmental stages of students (Young, 2013; Muller, this issue). Classroom pedagogy primarily comprises strategies designed to enable access to this knowledge. In other words, education is defined from an external perspective, rather than being recognized as an endeavour in its own right. Similarly, curriculum and classroom teaching are portrayed from this external perspective, rather than being viewed as practices with their own intrinsic integrity.

The social realist approach to curriculum theorizing, as noted by Uljens (this issue) and Deng (this issue), involves a socio-epistemological analysis of the forms and structures of knowledge—particularly within academic disciplines—based on Bernstein, and then derives practical implications and recommendations for the selection and organization of curriculum content and classroom teaching. This approach is primarily *sociological* – rather than educational, curricular, or *Didaktik*.

In contrast, *Didaktik*, as discussed in the papers by Uljens and Deng, was developed within the 'education as a discipline' tradition. In Germany and Nordic countries, *Pädagogik* – of which *Didaktik* is an integral part—is regarded as an autonomous discipline, with its own ways of thinking and theorizing that are distinctively educational and *Didaktik*/curriculum-oriented. As noted in Deng's paper, the central goal of education is defined in terms of *Bildung* – the formation of the individual and cultivation of human powers and dispositions. With respect to curriculum-making, the selection and organization of content is guided by *Didaktik* (or curricular) thinking, which considers what content is, its educational potential for *Bildung*, and how this potential can be disclosed and actualized in the classroom. Classroom teaching is understood not as the transfer of knowledge but as a 'fruitful encounter' between students and content, facilitated by teachers, aiming to promote *Bildung*.

Theorizing does not originate from the perspectives and analyses of knowledge in other disciplines, such as sociology and philosophy. Instead, it begins with an engagement with the fundamental question of what education is—specifically in terms of *Bildung* (education as formation) and *Erziehung* (education as purposeful activities)—and then proceed to theorize the role of knowledge, the selection and organization of content, and classroom teaching, as discussed in Deng's paper. Furthermore, practice constitutes the essential point of reference for theorizing. As Gundem (2000) contends, the 'only legitimate approach to theory building is to examine the educational phenomena as they exist in the practice of teaching and schooling' (p. 241).

Now we turn to the third tradition. Like England, education in the United States is regarded not as an autonomous discipline but as an applied field. Unlike England,[3] however, the United States has established a distinct tradition of curriculum theory, where traditional curriculum theory and theorizing focus on the development of curricula for schools or school systems taking into account the social, political, and personal goals of education. Furthermore, curriculum theory addresses the reform of curricula in response to various political, social, cultural, and educational needs and challenges. This is achieved through a principled approach to curriculum planning as exemplified in the Tyler Rationale (see Tyler, 1949; Westbury, 2000).

These two orientations or commitments of curriculum theory are evident in both Parker's and Barton's papers. The curriculum is developed with careful consideration for the economic, civic, and personal goals of education, including career preparation, citizen formation, self-fulfilment, and human flourishing (Barton, 2024). Furthermore, curricula need to be constructed to equip students to confront current cultural, environmental, and political challenges—such as epistemic crises, environmental disasters, racial and gender oppression, poverty, and disease—and to make deliberative and responsible decisions (Parker, this issue).

It is worth noting that in *Didaktik* and curriculum theory, *content* or *subject matter*, rather than knowledge per se, is the term used to refer to the knowledges that are selected into the curriculum. These knowledges, not confined solely to disciplinary and academic domains, take on educational and curriculum or *Didaktik* meanings once they become content or subject matter (Deng, 2021). Content or subject matter has long been a central focus of research and

inquiry in both the *Didaktik* and curriculum traditions, supported by two bodies of sophisticated scholarship (for *Didaktik*, e.g. Hopmann, 2007; Klafki, 2000; Lüth, 2000; Menck, 2000; for curriculum, e.g. Bruner, 1960; Ford & Pugno, 1964; Schwab, 1964; see also Deng & Luke, 2008). In this context, it is unsurprising that the concept of powerful knowledge, along with the social realism underpinning it, has gained little to no traction in the United States, Germany, and other German-speaking countries. Barton (2024) specifically makes this observation regarding the United States:

> Although the knowledge component of the curriculum has always been one prominent strand of U.S. curriculum theory (not to mention practical curriculum development), the term *powerful knowledge* has had little traction in the United States. Precisely because educators in the country always have focused on knowledge, they have had little need of a rediscovery of the idea, and talk of a 'knowledge turn' would make little sense there. This is particularly the case in the settings in which most curriculum work takes place—specific subject areas. There is no shortage of curriculum theory (mostly focusing on knowledge) in mathematics, science fields, the arts, and so on . . . . Given that U.S. curricula already focus on knowledge (in specific subjects), and that the idea of 'disciplinary knowledge' has influenced curricula for over a century, the social realist position provides little added value. Most U.S. educators would likely respond to the ideas of Young and Muller by saying, in a puzzled way, 'We already do that'. (p. 238)

In broad strokes, I have outlined the three distinctive approaches to thinking and theorizing associated with social realism, *Didaktik*, and curriculum theory. Given the limited space at my disposal, some omissions and oversimplifications were unavoidable. Nevertheless, this suffices to demonstrate that *Didaktik* and curriculum theory fundamentally differ from social realism in their beliefs about the purpose of education, the selection and organization of curriculum content, the nature of classroom teaching, and their approaches to curriculum theorizing. This distinction rejects the claim that *Didaktik* and curriculum theory can be assimilated or subsumed into the theoretical framework of social realism (Lilliedahl, 2015; also see Rata, 2024), as noted earlier. Such a claim ignores the substantial differences in the ways of thinking and theorizing about education, curriculum, and classroom pedagogy between social realism on the one hand and *Didaktik* and curriculum theory on the other.

Additionally, the claim overlooks the fact that *Didaktik* and curriculum theory were developed and embedded within distinct social, cultural, and institutional contexts, each shaped by unique concerns and tasks. *Didaktik* emerged in Continental Europe in response to the establishment of compulsory schooling, alongside centralized curricula and corresponding teacher education. Its primary task was to develop professional tools for teachers to interpret state curriculum guides, bridging the gap between teaching as an institutionalized practice and as 'personal intercourse' in the classroom (Kunzli, 1998; Westbury, 2000). By contrast, American curriculum theory was developed within a locally controlled school system, with a central concern for creating an institutional curriculum that 'is serviceable to youth and meets the function of general education' (Dewey, 1902/1990). The primary task of American curriculum theory is to provide tools and frameworks that assist curriculum developers in deliberative thinking about curriculum development, addressing the social, cultural, and organizational needs and challenges of schools (Westbury, 2000). *Didaktik* and curriculum theory, as Hopmann (2015) argues, are '*historically evolved forms of reflection within the social system*', each with specific tasks to perform within its unique social and institutional context (p. 14, italics original).

Unlike *Didaktik* and curriculum theory, social realism primarily emerges within the theoretical context of the sociology of education. It is driven by concerns about the negative impact of social constructivism on education, particularly its relativistic stance on knowledge and the consequent erosion of the role of knowledge in teaching and learning. Social realism positions itself as a *theoretical project* aimed at developing a social realist theory of knowledge to address the shortcomings of social constructivism and to provide a robust foundation for theorizing curriculum purposes and the selection, organization, and sequencing of knowledge (Wheelahan, 2023; Young, 2013). Focusing on this theory of knowledge and its curriculum implications tends to divert attention

from the socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which the curriculum is embedded and functions. This focus risks overlooking the societal and educational purposes of school education, as well as the complexity and sophistication of curriculum making as a practical, deliberative endeavour (see Westbury, 2008).

Toward reciprocal learning

Arguing that social realism is fundamentally incompatible with both *Didaktik* and curriculum theory does not imply that it has nothing to offer them, or that they have nothing to offer social realism. Rather, I contend that these three traditions can provide substantial insights and knowledge to one another. Since the potential for *Didaktik* and curriculum theory to learn from one another has been thoughtfully discussed in Westbury (2000) and Hopmann and Riquarts (2000), I conclude this introductory essay by addressing *reciprocal learning* between social realism on the one hand and *Didaktik* and curriculum theory on the other. The term 'reciprocal learning' refers to learning between two or more traditions in a multidimensional and mutually beneficial manner. This learning needs to be informed by the ways of thinking and theorizing inherent in traditions, as well as the social and institutional contexts of schooling in which these ways are embedded (Connelly & Xu, 2019; Deng, 2019).

Let us start with what curriculum theory and *Didaktik* can learn from social realism. As highlighted in the articles by Young, Parker, and Hordern, a basic tenet of social realism is that *knowledge is not only social but real*. This assertion refutes the 'anything goes' relativism (Young, this issue) that has plagued much of contemporary curriculum theory (Deng, 2018). Social realism reaffirms the continued relevance of a curriculum built on developed fields of knowledge, as it provides 'firm foundations for young people to move on in their life beyond school' (Yates, 2022, p. 60). Such a curriculum offers 'the grounds for democracy' and 'the means through which society conducts its conversation about itself and debates what it should be like in the future' (Wheelahan, 2023, p. 91). It can help address the epistemic crisis currently confronting the United States (Parker, this issue)—and the whole world.

Likewise, engaging with *Didaktik* and curriculum theory offers social realists three key areas of learning, one of which focuses on the goals of school education in relation to knowledge. While passing on worthwhile knowledge to future generations is an important purpose of school education, this task must be guided and motivated by a concern for the formation of individuals which constitutes a central goal (Deng, this issue). By influencing individual development, schools are expected to contribute to economic growth, citizen formation, social cohesion, and human flourishing, among other goals. Achieving these goals requires the contribution of knowledge that extends beyond strictly disciplinary or academic domains (Deng, this issue; Barton, 2024).

Another area addresses the task of content selection and organization. Since education involves far more than mere access to knowledge, this task 'cannot be answered only from within a body of knowledge, no matter how reliable' (Yates, 2022, p. 60). The selection and organization of content is itself a deliberative endeavour that must consider the needs of the society, culture, and students in a particular milieu, while being informed by clearly articulated educational goals (Barton, 2024; Deng, 2015). If we accept that the central goal of education is the formation of individuals through the cultivation of human powers (Deng, 2022), we must go beyond a solely socio-epistemic analysis of the forms and structures of knowledge within academic disciplines—as emphasized by Muller (this issue)—and instead pursue an analysis *for* educational and *Didaktik*/curriculum purposes. This analysis aims to identify forms of knowledge or ways of knowing, along with their substantive elements, that contribute to this cultivation and foster meaningful encounters between students and classroom content. The elaboration of the 'structures' in academic disciplines and related fields, as observed by Fenstermacher (1980), serves the purpose of bringing students into an encounter with content in ways that 'enlarge their knowledge and understanding, their autonomy and authenticity, and their sense of place in the past, present, and future of the human race' (p. 196).

The third area pertains to classroom pedagogy. It is incorrect to separate curriculum from classroom pedagogy or to view what teachers are doing as merely transmitting knowledge from academic disciplines. As Deng argues (this issue), teachers are curriculum makers in that they work with the institutional curriculum, interpreting and transforming it to create meaningful encounters between students and content. Teachers 'author' instructional events by adapting and interpreting the content within the institutional framework, taking into account students' existing knowledge and experiences. These events are fundamentally *curricular* because a piece of content is being interpreted and transformed for educative purposes (Doyle, 1992). At the heart of curriculum making is the process of interpreting and unpacking the meaning and significance of the content to unlock its educational potential.

From this perspective, what a teacher does in the classroom carries social and cultural significance that extends beyond the immediate demands of the classroom. By helping students acquire a body of worthwhile knowledge, skills, and values, a teacher is, in effect, contributing indirectly to broader educational goals—citizen formation, human flourishing, economic development, and more (Deng, 2024).

To conclude, this symposium aims to further the conversation on knowledge and curriculum, recently reignited by the concept of powerful knowledge, by calling for engagement with social realism, as well as *Didaktik* and curriculum theory. This engagement involves acknowledging three distinct ways of thinking and theorizing about education, curriculum, and classroom teaching that underpin these traditions. Moreover, it necessitates recognizing the diverse socio-cultural and institutional contexts in which these approaches are embedded and operate.

Notes

1. The disciplinary knowledge is regarded as 'the foundation of the conceptual structure leading to understanding and expertise' and is essential for 'understanding the world' (OECD, 2019, p. 6).
2. The KOSS network brings together three cross-disciplinary educational research groups from Sweden, Finland, and England. Led and administered by Karlstad University, the network was financed from 2019 to 2021 with funding from the Swedish Research Council. See more details at the Karlstad University website: https://www.kau.se/en/rose/external-relations/knowledge-and-quality-across-school-subjects-and-teacher-education-koss.
3. England has developed its own curriculum (theory) tradition very different from the one in the United States, characterized by two main strands: the 'Method' and 'school curriculum development'. The first strand, developed largely by subject specialists in science, mathematics, and technolology, focuses on learning and inquiry methods. It primarily addresses questions of how students learn and how teaching should be conducted. The second strand, notably advanced by Laurence Stenhouse, views curriculum development in schools as a dynamic, teacher-driven process. This approach highlights reflective practice, teacher autonomy, and the role of teachers as active contributors to curriculum development (Moon, 1995, 2004). Whether in the Method or school curriculum development strand, constructing an institutional curriculum for a school or school system in response to social and cultural needs or problems is not a primary concern for curriculum developers and theorists. A principled approach to institutional curriculum development—grounded in educational philosophies and values, emphasizing long-term goals, ensuring coherence across subjects, and aligning with idealistic visions of education—is largely absent (Moon, 2004; Reid, 1997).

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