

Knowledge and the Sociology of Education

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Abstract. This paper does not go into detail concerning the current debate around the idea of “powerful knowledge”, however, a brief account of the history and context of the sub-discipline as it has developed in England, is presented. For that purpose, some references to the important works of Basil Bernstein are explicated. It was he after all, following the critical reception of his early work on linguistic codes, who first argued that knowledge, or as it is sometimes expressed “the stuff” and not just “the who” of education, was crucial to any serious debate. Some hot points in the debate between Bernstein and Michael Young are presented. The suggestion is given that differently from Bernstein ideas to take into account „pedagogical code“ in the knowledge reproduction we have to begin with the distinction between *memorisation of knowledge* which is close to the idea of consumption, and *developing a relationship to knowledge* which has more affinity with *becoming a member of a community*.

Keywords: sociology of education, knowledge, Bernstein.

Žinojimas ir švietimo sociologija

Santrauka. Straipsnyje Michael Young pateikia švietimo sociologijos debatus apie žinias ir jų perdavimą mokykloje. Analizuojama žinojimo produkavimo analizės, kuri gali būti skaidoma į žinojimo sociologiją ir švietimo sociologiją, kontekstas bei naujosios žinojimo sociologijos atsiradimas, taip pat *curriculum* sociologiniu aspektu istorija ir kritika. Labiausiai susitelkiama į Anglijos kontekstą. Pasitelkdamas Basilo Bernsteino ir kitų švietimo sociologų įžvalgas, straipsnio autorius persvarsto žinių perdavimo klausimą praktikoje ir kaip tai skiriasi ar nesisiria priklausomai nuo pasirinktos teorijos. Įvertinęs Bernsteino indėlį pateikiant pedagoginio kodo, kontrolės, galių ir socialinių klasių išsamią analizę žinių perdavimo procese, autorius komentuoja savo ankstesnį ginčą su Bernsteino ir atskleidžia dabartinį savo požiūrį, kuriuo pabrėžia „žinojimo galios“ konceptą ir sampratą. Galiausiai jis siūlo atsitraukti nuo žinių įsiminimo, prioritetą teikti santykiui su žiniomis. Pastarasis, anot autoriaus, atsiranda tik bendruomenės veikloje.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: švietimo sociologija, žinojimas, Bernstein.

1. Sociology of education: The historical and international context

The question of knowledge and what knowledge students have a right to gain access to during their schooling has become a policy as well as a research issue in recent years. However, although the question of knowledge might appear to be an obvious topic for the sociology of education, it has, with the recent and notable exception of the English so-

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ciologist, Basil Bernstein, and those, such as Rob Moore and Johan Muller, who have followed in his footsteps, been largely neglected. Furthermore, when a sociological approach has been directed to policy or practice, it has turned out to raise far more difficult questions than Governments or teachers are able to deal with. This paper does not go into detail concerning the current debate around the idea of “powerful knowledge”, however, I thought a brief account of the history and context of the sub-discipline as it has developed in England, would be useful to Lithuanian readers of this journal, together with some reference to the important work of Basil Bernstein. It was he after all, following the critical reception of his early work on linguistic codes, who first argued that knowledge, or as it is sometimes expressed “the stuff” and not just “the who” of education, was crucial to any serious debate. A detailed discussion of contemporary debates is something I would be happy to undertake in a later paper.

2. Sociology and the sociology of education – the beginnings

Sociology of education has a history almost as old as sociology itself – initially in France. The term was invented by Comte, but the discipline only really took off through the work of Emile Durkheim, mostly in the first decade of the 20th Century. Durkheim was never a Professor of Sociology. However, he saw education not as a set of phenomena to which sociology could be applied but as central to his theory of modern society and how it was changing.

I do not read French well enough to know why Durkheim’s work, despite the debt to him that Bourdieu acknowledged, has not had the influence in France that one might have expected. The celebration in France, of centenary of his death in 2017, which I had been privileged to be invited to contribute to, did not materialize – something to do with divisions within the French academic community, I understand.

The other country where sociology of education has had an almost as long but very different history was the United States. Initially it was established at the University of Chicago. There, it was interpreted as an extension of GH Mead’s symbolic interactionism and developed by Howard Becker in his famous studies of school teachers and medical students. At Harvard, Durkheim was interpreted very differently by Talcott Parsons who like Durkheim saw education as integral to his theory of society. However, with two exceptions – Aaron Cicourel and John Kitsuse’s **The Educational Decision Makers** in the 1960’s and half a century later, David Baker’s **The Schooled Society**, sociology of education never really developed as a distinct specialism within either educational studies or sociology. Lastly, there is the English Language tradition that I have been associated with and is the main topic of his paper. An important point is that while it began in England, it is no longer English in the narrow sense – flourishing variants of it can be found in other English speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

3. Sociology of Education in England – early beginnings

Like sociology itself, sociology of education was almost entirely a post-World War 2 development in England. Karl Mannheim was the first Professor in 1946, appointed to the University of London's Institute of Education; however, he died after a year in post and it did not emerge in England until the 1950's when it grew out of the demographic studies undertaken by David Glass at the London School of Economics. Jean Floud and AH Halsey extended Glass's findings and focused on the social class basis of educational inequalities. Their research showed how our system of selection for grammar schools at 11+ and the IQ tests of Cyril Burt masked the extent to which the selection was based on social class. It was not until 1960's that Basil Bernstein became our second Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education. Bernstein's early work extended Floud and Halsey's focus on selection through his sociolinguistic studies, but he became established as leader of the discipline following his keynote address to the British Sociological Association in 1970. This was published later as one of his most well known papers – **The classification and framing of educational Knowledge** (Bernstein, 1971).

It was the earlier revelations of the social class basis of educational inequality that established the sociology of education as a distinct field and led to two developments in the 1970's – both were attempts to explain and more ambitiously to overcome educational inequalities. The first attempt were the cultural and social reproduction theories of Bourdieu, Althusser and the American economists Bowles and Gintis. They located the persistence of educational inequalities in the society rather than in the educational system; Althusser and Bowles and Gintis assumed that overcoming them would depend on class struggle in the Marxist sense. However, their ideas were interpreted in a highly deterministic way, and treated teachers as having an essentially passive and conservative role and likely to resist any revolutionary change.

4. Knowledge and Control, and the “new sociology of education”

The second development, which became known as the New Sociology of Education (NSOE) and developed from my book **Knowledge and Control** (Young, 1971), combined a critique of the social class basis of existing educational provision with a sociological analysis of the prevailing system and its dominant categories such as curriculum, pedagogy and ability. Its anti-determinist approach linked an analysis of the radical potential of the classroom practice of teachers with the struggles of other subordinate groups such as trade unionists and argued that together they could be potential agents of change within schools and beyond. This argument was put in two books that I edited with Geoff Whitty (Whitty and Young, 1976; Young and Whitty, 1977); their titles were **Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge** and **Society, State and Schooling**. The election of a right wing Conservative Government in 1979 put an end to the over-optimistic hopes expressed in these books. A result was the fragmentation of sociology of education which has remained with us to this day.

5. Basil Bernstein's critique and the concept of relay

It was the failure of the earlier traditions – reproduction theory and the NSOE – to offer an adequate analysis of educational inequalities in the new phase of neo-liberal capitalism that concerned Bernstein. He distanced himself from both – most sharply from the NSOE despite his initial support – and developed a framework for an alternative approach which was little noticed at the time. His analysis focussed primarily on the dominant reproduction theories of Bourdieu (1973), Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Althusser (1970) and set out to show “what such theories and approaches presuppose, what is not addressed, and, perhaps inadvertently, what cannot be addressed as a consequence of the form these reproduction theories take” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 168).

Bernstein set himself two tasks:

- to describe the presuppositions of the reproduction theories he was criticizing, and
- to link what they do not discuss to the form they take

His critique of the New Sociology of Education (NSOE), which later in the USA became the critical pedagogy tradition and was inspired initially by Michael Apple's **Ideology and Curriculum** (Apple, 1976), was not straightforward. He shared their concern with the unequal distribution of educational opportunities, but not with how they explained it. What the NSOE did was to challenge and question prevailing practices, and problematize the nature of knowledge and its transmission, acquisition and evaluation in schools. In other words, it focused directly on the internal operation of the schools themselves through an “analysis” of the “curricular, pedagogic and assessment categories held by school personnel, the teacher-student interactions, and above all, the curriculum”.

However, critique is not the same as explanation. The NSOE assumed that somehow criticising a social phenomenon would lead to its inevitable collapse – a form of idealism that denies any real forces in society that have to be identified and struggled against. Bernstein's criticism of my book **Knowledge and Control** (Young, 1971) (despite supporting its publication and having his paper included in it!) and the “new sociology of education” that it led to was that my position was just critique and I did not undertake any “systematic account of the distinguishing feature of schooling- the transmission and acquisition of knowledge” (Bernstein, 1990). On reflection, I think he was right, but the reasons for this failure was that to develop a theory of schooling and the transmission of knowledge was an extremely difficult and ambitious task. Furthermore, there were no potential theories available at the time, except Marxism which had been developed in an earlier phase of capitalism that preceded the emergence of mass education and the growth of the state.

In relation to cultural reproduction theories like that of Bourdieu, Bernstein's approach was different and he is sometimes assumed to have himself adopted a similar approach. However, Bernstein worked on the issue of the reproductive role of education from a very different direction to Bourdieu. He argued that what reproduction theory set out to do was to show how existing structures of education, to quote him “legitimated the assumptions

of the prevailing culture and disguised the power relations which they transmit through the exercise of symbolic violence” (Bernstein, 1990) – to use Bourdieu’s term.

However, for Bernstein this does little more than describe and at best “diagnose” education as a “pathological device” (something bad) and the school as “a site of this pathology”. In other words, it treats schooling as a kind of “social disease”. This, he argued, specifies education as a form of “distorted communication” but fails to describe what a “non-pathological” or “un-distorted form” might involve.

How did he suggest reproduction theory did this?

- By privileging the interests of a dominant group, in their analysis, and by
- underestimating and misrepresenting the “culture, practice and consciousness of the dominated groups” (Bernstein op. cit.).

Bernstein’s argument was that “theories of cultural reproduction lack an explicit theory of communication” which they take for granted. This means they cannot generate possible alternative approaches to pedagogy and curriculum. The Reason is that theories of cultural reproduction view education as a carrier of power relations external to education—this is the key point that I take from Bernstein. In other words, education is treated as “an amplifier” of certain features and relations of the culture for the purpose of the legitimating social class relations. Thus, it is a vacuum which has no internal structures, forms and rules.

As a consequence of this emptiness of education in reproduction theory, it approaches education from the outside rather than the inside. It focuses on how external power relations are carried by the system of education rather than by the internal principles that regulate pedagogic practice. Education remains a “black box” and the perennial problem of the failure of such systems to educate the majority of students remains unexplained.

Bernstein’s original insight is expressed in the distinction he makes between what is relayed by education – for example, social class inequalities – and the content of the “relay” itself.

From the point of view of the cultural reproduction theories, pedagogic discourse (his term for curriculum and pedagogy) is itself no more than a relay for power relations external to itself and has no consequences for what is relayed.

In contrast, as Bernstein argues, “it is the structure and logic of the (pedagogic) discourse which provides the means whereby external power relations can be carried by it” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 3). Unfortunately, what is absent in reproduction theories which have dominated and still do dominate much sociology of education, is an internal analysis of the structure of the relay itself – pedagogic discourse.

Bernstein argued that there is an “overwhelming similarity” of the intrinsic rules that account for all educational systems and education practices, no matter how different they appear to be from one society to another. Furthermore, these rules are stable over long periods of time. This is a point that has been made recently by the American sociologist of education, David Baker in his book **The Schooled Society** (Baker, 2014).

Because of their overwhelming similarity and relative stability, it is possible to establish a theory of the internal logic of pedagogic discourse that is “independent of the

dominant ideology” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 170). It may explain why, as I recently did, one can go to China and present ideas about knowledge and the curriculum and they can recognise them as not the same but similar to the expanding system in China – despite our vastly different histories.

6. Boundary as sociology of education’s “deep metaphor”

In his last book **Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity** (Bernstein, 2000), Bernstein developed a criterion for the theoretical work in sociology of education. It was that it should start with “a metaphor operating at a deep level”. Without a deep metaphor, there is no way in which the sociology of education can describe the distinctive, features, and practices which constitute the school or how they change. The deep metaphor for Bernstein which can be traced back to the influence on him of Durkheim’s work on religion is “boundary” (inside/outside, intimacy/distance, here/there, near/far, us/them).

It is this idea of a boundary as the deep metaphor for describing education in capitalist society that I think is Bernstein’s most lasting and unique contribution to sociology of education and that has shaped my thinking implicitly and explicitly in the last decade. It is expressed in how I have approached the curriculum and come to see it as the central problematic for sociology of education. It points to but has not yet adequately conceptualised what I see as one of sociology of education’s core theoretical issues. I express this in the following question: “how is knowledge that is inherited from the past and developed by research and scholarship, re-contextualised as subjects that are transmitted by the pedagogy of teachers?”

Bernstein’s work proposes the task for the sociology of education as a key component of the broader aims of the sociology of knowledge and its project to explain the relationship between:

- the production of new knowledge through research and scholarship in academic disciplines, and
- the recontextualization of this knowledge as academic subjects transmitted by teachers in schools.

The first issue – *the production of knowledge* – has historically been separated as the sociology of knowledge and its sub-fields, the sociologies of science, literature, history etc. This has, arguably in a misguided way, completely separated the production and transmission of knowledge into two specialisations – sociology of knowledge and sociology of education.

The second issue – *the recontextualization of disciplinary knowledge* as school subjects – has been the focus of my recent work since 2007 and the publication of my book **Bringing Knowledge Back In** and the books of Rob Moore at the University of Cambridge and Johan Muller at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. However, despite the influence of Bernstein, this work has tended to treat the recontextualization of disciplinary knowledge as separate from its transmission by teachers and focus only on the stipulation of knowledge in curricula. Unless the theory of knowledge focuses

also on the process of transmission, the “acquisition of knowledge” can become, for students in many schools with a knowledge-led curriculum in England, little more than the memorization of bits of information, as if the minds of student’s were computers. The “pedagogisation of the curriculum by teachers” is as important as its recontextualisation from disciplines if its acquisition is to enable students to develop a “relationship to knowledge” and become neophyte members of communities of subject specialists.

7. Reconceptualising the transmission of knowledge: first steps

As a consequence of the new emphasis on knowledge not only in the sociology of education but in curriculum theory and policy, the issue of transmission has become a key, but neglected and largely un-theorised issue. It is either avoided, taken for granted or equated with memorisation when it needs to be analysed as a social process involving the relations that teachers develop with their students. It has come to be at the centre of my current concerns. If we leave pedagogic practice un-theorised and un-explained, we are back with the un-resolved issues of reproduction theory identified by Bernstein of how and why societies which start with the principle of “equal access to knowledge for all” distribute knowledge and educability so unequally.

We have to begin with the distinction between *memorisation of knowledge* which is close to the idea of consumption, and *developing a relationship to knowledge* which has more affinity with *becoming a member of a community*. This requires us to recognise the two distinct meanings of a school subject or academic discipline. Both are bodies of related concepts, and rules for investigating their object of enquiry. However, it also requires us to see such bodies of knowledge as “communities of enquirers” (to use a phrase used by the American philosopher C.S. Pierce). What follows is a theory of curriculum which posits students as “becoming members”, initially very junior members, of a range of subjects as “communities of enquiry” within which they engage with teachers and senior students as more knowledgeable members. This points to a new programme of research for sociologists of education, not as individual specialists but as specialists collaborating with subject and disciplinary specialists. It also implies a new approach to the initial and further professional development of teachers becoming subject specialists¹.

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¹ Two initiatives that pick up some of these issues are the Specialist Subject Research Group at the UCL Institute of education and the ROSE Project at the University of Karlsbad in Sweden. These groups are currently collaborating on a COST Partnership concerned with the application of the concepts of epistemic quality and powerful knowledge. Both in relation to the initial education of teachers and to the secondary curriculum.

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