Pedagogic discourse: a language for the description and analysis of international curriculum implementation

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Abstract

International Baccalaureate and other programmes of study used in international education are inscribed with discourses of power and control. Bernstein (1975, 2000) offers a theory of pedagogic discourse that can be used to characterise power and control relations in the curriculum in terms of classification and framing. This article discusses how Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse may be applied to the description and analysis of international education curricula and their implementation.

Introduction

How can the structure and content of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma programmes and the Career-Related Certificate be described and analysed? How can valid and reliable comparisons be made between IB programmes in their implementation, either within the same school or across different schools? How can IB programmes be compared with other programmes of study such as the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), College Board Advanced Placement (AP) or those offered by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE)? Various programmes of study may be discussed by reference to the age ranges of students that they serve but, more importantly, they can also be characterised in terms of the relationships they demonstrate between different areas of knowledge, how knowledge is selected, sequenced and paced for use in school, and how learning is assessed (Singh, 2002). This article proposes that the theory of pedagogic discourse developed by the late British educational theorist Basil Bernstein (1924-2000) offers a valuable conceptual tool that may be applied to the description and analysis of IB and other cognate programmes and their implementation.

Ross (2000) introduces his book on curriculum studies with discussion of a variety of metaphors for education based on a horticultural theme. Two metaphors are salient in this context. One is the image of the baroque garden (for example, Hampton Court), with *parterres,* clipped box hedges and gravel paths in well-defined and orderly arrangements. Boundaries are explicit in this style of garden design. Such gardens are full of discontinuity. By contrast, boundaries are

conspicuous by their absence in English landscape gardens (for example, Stowe). There is the illusion of continuity between the garden and its surroundings because the boundaries are invisible to the observer. The key structural feature of the English landscape garden is the ha-ha, a sunken wall in a ditch, which functions as an effective barrier but is invisible from points of view within the garden. Power and control are exerted in both styles of garden design but, whereas they are made visible in the former, they are rendered invisible in the latter.

Hence discourses of power and control may be said to be inscribed in contrasting ways in the style of each garden. The point made by Ross (2000) is that power and control relations are inscribed in the design of school curricula. Different styles of curricula exert power and control in contrasting ways. Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse offers a language for the description and analysis of those power and control relations.

Classification and framing

Underlying the theory of the pedagogic discourse are Bernstein's concepts of *classification* and *framing*. Bernstein (1975, 2000) argues that the construction of the curriculum is based on relations between different forms of knowledge. In some contexts, there are strong boundaries insulating the different school subjects so that the forms of teaching and learning that go on in the modern foreign languages classroom, for example, are separate from, and unrelated to, what goes on in the science laboratory. In the high school or upper secondary school, there are frequently strong boundaries and, hence, strong classification between the academic subjects. In the primary school, on the other hand, classification between curriculum contents, and the boundaries insulating the different subjects, can be weak. For example, cross-curricular themes in teaching and learning can bring together diverse strands such as literacy and numeracy in the context of the same lesson.

The internal organisation of school subjects can also show considerable variation. In some subjects, teaching and learning must be approached in a particular sequence – and no other - because subject knowledge is hierarchically ordered. For such subjects, learning in cumulative and it is necessary for learners to build on their experience. In other subjects, learning may not be so dependent upon prior knowledge or experience so that content can be taught in any of a variety of different sequences. Relative strength of selection, sequencing, and pacing of curriculum contents are indicators of framing.

Collection and integrated codes

Bernstein (1975, 2000) proposes two ideal codes that describe relationships *between* and *within* contents of the curriculum. The 'collection code' has strong

classification and strong framing, whereas the 'integrated code' has weak classification and weak framing. Other combinations of weak and strong classification and framing are possible in theory but they are rarely if ever found in practice. The strong classification and framing of collection codes means that pedagogic discourses and practices may vary between subjects, and that individual teachers may have divergent ways of addressing their particular subjects in terms of selection of content, order, pacing, and assessment. This means that teachers can operate with considerable autonomy under a collection code.

Bernstein (1975: 101) argues that the integrated code, with weaker classification and weaker framing, 'will not permit the variations in pedagogy and evaluation that are possible within collection codes'. He suggests that 'there will be a pronounced movement towards a common pedagogy and a tendency towards a common system of evaluation [that is, educational assessment] ... integrated codes will, at the level of the teachers, probably create homogeneity of teaching practice' (Bernstein 1975: 101, note in parentheses added). Moreover, 'integrated codes may require a high level of ideological consensus, and this may affect the recruitment of staff' (Bernstein 1975: 107). That is to say, teachers in schools that implement an integrated curriculum may be expected to require and to receive access to continuing professional development courses that coordinate their practice in order to be most effective.

Performance and competence in educational assessment

Educational assessment exerts a backwash effect on pedagogic practice. That is to say, how the curriculum is taught is greatly influence by the manner in which learning is assessed. Two contrasting models of pedagogic assessment can be distinguished. These models are assessment of *performance* and *competence* respectively. The performance model 'places the emphasis upon a specific output of the acquirer [that is, the learner], upon a particular text the acquirer is expected to construct and upon the specialised skills necessary to the production of this specific output, text or product' (Bernstein 2000: 44, note in parentheses added). The performance model has been described as 'the dominant, established model ... with the focus upon acquirers' past and future accomplishments, with strong apparent progression and pacing, evaluation focused on what was missing from their texts in terms of explicit and specific criteria of which they were made aware' (Fitz *et al* 2006: 6).

In a competence model of pedagogic practice, by way of contrast, the learners 'apparently have a great measure of control over selection, sequence and pace... The emphasis is upon the realisation of competences that acquirers already possess, or are thought to possess' (Bernstein 2000: 45). Fitz *et al* (2006: 7) propose that competence models may be identified with 'liberal/progressive',

learner-centred approaches to education. However, such approaches are expensive to produce and maintain because of the time required for the development of resources, communication with students and parents, and personalisation the learning of individuals.

Pedagogic discourse applied to IB programmes

Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse has been applied to the description and analysis of International Baccalaureate programmes (Cambridge 2011a, 2011b). IB programmes of study are inscribed with contrasting degrees of integration and collection. Compared with the IBDP, the IB Middle Years (MYP) and Primary Years (PYP) programmes are inscribed with weaker classification and framing and, hence, show greater integration. This is exemplified by the transdisciplinary themes that underpin the IB PYP. There are no mandated formal examinations. Educational assessment in the PYP and MYP may be identified with a competence model, with school-based judgements about learning based on students' project work in integrated 'areas of interaction'. In contrast, assessment in the IBDP may best be identified with a performance model, with judgements about students' learning made independently of the school in the context of formal examinations in 'traditional' academic subjects.

The contrast between the integrated code of primary and junior secondary education and the collection code of senior secondary education appears to be commonplace. Fitz *et al* (2006: 100) observe that:

> As Bernstein noted ... the strong preference, particularly of the new middle class, was for primary classrooms where boundaries between work, play and the subjects were weak and pedagogy 'invisible', aiding teacher discovery of the multiple talents of their progeny while, for secondary schools, their preference, given that their abilities had now been made explicit, was for strong subject boundaries in traditional knowledge domains.

Furthermore, Bernstein (2000) argues that distributive rules govern the ways in which knowledge is made accessible to different groups in society. A common way of implementing differential access to knowledge in school is to impose some form of educational selection. Cambridge (2011a) proposes that a school might identify the IBDP as a programme of study that is most appropriate for 'gifted and talented' students. Only those deemed to be in this category would be considered capable or worthy of having access to the IBDP. 'Gifted and talented' programmes may be organised as a 'school within a school' (Matthews and Kitchen, 2007). In other words, certain students may attend a particular school but be segregated from their fellows as a consequence of curriculum

arrangements. This is a powerful example of the relationship between 'the formal organization of the school and the disciplinary organization of knowledge' (Siskin 1994: 37). The way in which a school is organised reproduces and embodies discourse about the structure of knowledge, in terms of the composition of academic subject departments. Hence, implementation of IB programmes inevitably has the effect of reproducing and embodying discourse about division of labour and social stratification by regulating access to knowledge, academic subjects, and programmes of study.

Students following the IBDP in different schools may not be pursuing the same programme of study because 'one school might be non-selective, offering an open access whole-school programme, whereas another might be selective, offering a restricted access school-within-a-school programme. The values and assumptions underlying the criteria for entry on to the programmes of study are different in either case' (IB, 2008: 22). Cambridge (2010: 211) explains this distinction in Bernsteinian terms by proposing that 'the non-selective, open access approach is inscribed with a discourse of weak classification and weak framing, whereas the restricted access, school-within-a-school represents a discourse of strong classification and strong framing'.

The curriculum can be used to widen access to and participation in education by weakening classification. For instance, Kugler and Albright (2005) discuss how the IBDP can be used as a means of broadening access to high school education for 'underserved' (*eg* Afro-American and Hispanic) communities in the USA. They describe how the IBDP was introduced into a public high school with the intention of increasing inclusion by encouraging greater enrolment from 'minority cultures' in high school classes. This was achieved by changing policy 'from the "gifted and talented" model that admitted students mainly on the basis of their performance in standardized tests to an "honors" approach that focused on students' motivation and performance in class' (Kugler and Albright, 2005: 43).

The adoption of this approach meant rejecting the implementation of 'a diploma-only program as a school-within-a-school' (Kugler and Albright, 2005: 43). However, Cambridge (2011a) argues that a conclusion that may be drawn from this example is that a quality such as 'inclusiveness' is not implicit in a programme of study such as the IBDP. Such a quality is an outcome of the policy environment in which the programme is implemented and not an attribute of the programme itself. Under different circumstances and in different contexts, different policy outcomes could be achieved using a similar programme of study. In other words, the school a student attends and the policies it implements are (at least) as important as the programme of study followed by that student.

Pedagogic identity

The term pedagogic identity refers to 'the result of embedding a career in a collective base. The career of a student is a knowledge career, a moral career and a locational career. The collective base of that career is provided by the principle of social order … expected to be relayed in schools and institutionalised by the state. The local social base of that career is provided by the orderings of the local social context' (Bernstein 2000: 66). Bernstein proposes a four-fold typology comprising retrospective, prospective, decentred (market) and decentred (therapeutic) pedagogic identities. They constitute 'an official arena … for the projecting of pedagogic identities, through the process of educational reform. Any one educational reform can then be regarded as the outcome of the struggle to produce and institutionalise particular identities' (Bernstein 2000: 66).

Retrospective and prospective pedagogic identities are generated by centring resources managed by the state. Such resources are drawn from centralised, often considered national, discourses. The two decentred pedagogic identities are generated by institutions beyond the centralised state with some autonomy over their resources. 'Decentred resources are drawn from local contexts or local discourses and focus upon the present, whereas centred discourses focus upon the past' (Bernstein 2000: 66). Bernstein's (1999, 2000) theory of pedagogic identities has been applied independently to the characterisation of the IB Diploma Programme by at least two researchers.

Pedagogic identity applied to IB Programmes

Cambridge (2010) proposes that contrasting pedagogic discourses construct contrasting retrospective, prospective, decentred (market) and decentred (therapeutic) pedagogic identities. At different times and in different geographical locations the IB Diploma Programme has been projected on to a variety of pedagogic identities. Cambridge (2010) argues that, in the earliest years of the development of the IB, there appears to have been vacillation between a weak form of retrospective identity, expressed as nostalgia for a grouped curriculum that prevailed before the introduction of A level in England, and a conservative educational discourse projecting selected elements of the past into the future.

A 'progressive' decentred therapeutic identity, exemplified by the IB Learner Profile (IB, 2006), is the version the IB currently appears to project. However, the IB is also assailed by market forces and the IB Diploma programme is being driven towards a neo-liberal decentred (market) identity. This latter conclusion appears to be consonant with the work of Julia Resnik (2008, 2009) who argues that the IB Learner Profile (IB, 2006) may be interpreted as a template for the production of the ideal worker in the Global Knowledge Economy.

The analysis proposed by Cambridge (2010) may be triangulated with a study conducted in Australia by Catherine Doherty (2010) who concludes that the IB Diploma Programme can be characterised as a fulfilling a 'market' orientation at the level of school strategy, but its internal principles of curricular selection and assessment characterise it as a 'prospective' orientation because it presents a curriculum re-centring around fairly conservative principles (page 6). However, Doherty (2010: 5) argues that the market identity is 'an empty signifier, contingent on external conditions, through which the other identities can speak, according to their "market value" or desirability in the economic, political and cultural fashions of the times'. Doherty (2010: 6) describes this situation as an 'ironic marriage of neo-conservatism (re-asserting centralised power) and neo-liberalism (divesting power from the centre to the market)' in which the IB Diploma 'thrives in this ideological space of being both a market/choice strategy and a fashionably conservative solution at the same time'.

Conclusion

The structure and content of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma programmes and the Career-Related Certificate (IBCC) can be described and analysed in terms of the strength of the boundaries *between* academic subjects (classification between curriculum contents) and *within* subjects (framing). The IB PYP and IB MYP exemplify integrated codes with weak classification and weak framing. In contrast, the IB DP exemplifies a collection code with comparatively strong classification and framing. It is interesting to speculate which pedagogic code will be inscribed in the IBCC. This will only be determined when the IBCC is implemented in practice. The implementation of IB programmes can be studied either within the same school or across different schools. However, an important variable to be considered is whether access to a programme of study is open (weak classification) or closed and subject to entry criteria (strong classification).

IB programmes can also be compared with other programmes of study such as the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), College Board Advanced Placement (AP) or those offered by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). In each case, it would be valuable to develop methods of characterising and evaluating the relative strengths of classification and framing in each programme of study.

The role of curriculum in the production of pedagogic identity is also acknowledged. It may be argued that IB programmes are ambiguous because at different times and in different geographical locations they have been projected on to contrasting pedagogic identities.

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