Chapter 7

Basil Bernstein on pedagogy

Basil Bernstein wrote extensively on a number of related issues, but principally his work focused on three key areas: language and social class, the construction of the curriculum, and knowledge development. For Bernstein, sociologists of education foregrounded the contents of the curriculum and attempted to build theories which explain how power relations are relayed externally through the formal mechanisms of education: for example, how social class relations persist across generations. In contrast, his major concern has been the internal or intrinsic features of pedagogic discourse that structure the content of the curriculum and how it is differentially distributed between different social groups. Knowledge or indeed different types of knowledge are therefore not relayed in an unmediated fashion from the external world to the internal environment of the school and thence to the pupils, but are recontextualised in terms of the way pupils pedagogically access them. The focus is therefore on the pedagogic device, rather than the contents of the curriculum per se; and this pedagogic device works according to distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation rules. These rules are constructed in terms of the strength of the boundaries between different organising ideas. As Diaz (2001, pp. 84–5) argues:

> there is a close relation in Bernstein between boundaries, power, social groups, and forms of identity. Bernstein's analysis of power and boundaries provokes questions about their force, duration of spacing, ordering of internal forms and sites for knowledge, flows of identity, and relations with changes in the collective basis of society.

These boundaries refer to both knowledge and contexts. In terms of the latter, it is possible to see how recognition rules operating within school settings serve to advantage some children at the expense of others, not, it should be noted, because those children who are disadvantaged are unable to use the different modes of thought, but because recognition and realisation rules are differentially distributed.

Moore (2005, p. 140), for example, suggests the following:

> What are differentially distributed between groups are the recognition and realisation rules and orientations to meaning whereby they can successfully distinguish between that which can be assumed and taken for granted and that which is calling for a demonstration of understanding within a specific context such as a classroom, tutorial or examination. These issues of recognition and realisation become problematic for many children when the ideology of the pedagogy (as with progressivism) denies that such demands are being made, as if the child is free to be the 'author' of the text.

It is their understanding of, and ability to respond in an appropriate manner to, these recognition and realisation rules which structure the pedagogic regime within formal schooling, and not their ability to respond in appropriate ways to the contents of the curriculum.

These recognition and realisation rules, then, are crucial to the success or otherwise of various strata of children within schooling, and mark the way power operates to maintain boundaries between different fractions of the school population, and consequently structures relations within society. As Bernstein notes, contexts have different properties and the relations between these different contexts can be codified in terms of a number of key concepts. Classification is one such concept, as Bernstein, looking back on previous work, makes clear:

> I started with classification because classification, strong or weak, marks the distinguishing features of a context. For example, some children when they first go to school are unaware or unsure of what is expected of them. They fail to recognise the distinguishing features which provide the school/classroom with its unique features and so particular identity. Such a failure in recognition will necessarily lead to inappropriate behaviour. On the other hand, some children are extensively prepared and are aware of the difference between the family context and the school context. In this case they are able to recognise the distinguishing features of the school, or class, even if they are not always able to produce the range of behaviour the school expects. Inasmuch as some children recognise the distinguishing features of the school, relative to the children who do not, those that do are in a more powerful position with respect to the school. It is likely that those who do recognise the distinguishing features of the school are more likely to be middle class children than lower working class children. The basis of such recognition is a strong classification between the context of the family and the context of the school. In our example the strong classification between the family and the school is a product of

> the symbolic power of the middle class family. This power is translated into the child's power of recognition with its advantageous outcomes. . . . We can therefore set up a relationship between the principles of classification and the recognition rules for identifying the specificity or the similarity of contexts. As the classification principle is established by power relations and the relays of power relations, then recognition rules confer power relative to those who lack them.
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> (Bernstein, 2000, pp. 104–5, quoted in Moore, 2005, p. 138)

Though Bernstein was extensively criticised for the deficit nature of his theory – certain fractions of the working class do not have the capacity to access the rules which underpin formal schooling – he consistently denied that this was his intention. His purpose was to understand how children's embeddedness in specific contexts has meant that their responses, or at least the way they access recognition and realisation rules within formal settings, serves to disadvantage some at the expense of others.

Language and social class

It is the relations between language and social class that we need to address first. This is the most widely known part of his work and formed the principal part of his thinking in the first period of his career. In typical Bernsteinian fashion he developed a series of codes to explain the relation between language use and school relations. Though his work on language codes underwent some modification, not least in the terminology he used, he settled eventually on describing two language codes: a restricted or public code and an elaborated or private code. These codes differ from each other in a number of distinctive ways.

A restricted code is particularistic, context-free and implicit, whereas an extended code is universalistic, context-free and explicit. These are the principal differences between the two types of code, though Bernstein does suggest other ways by which they can be distinguished, but these are less important. The first of these, the particularistic/universalistic dichotomy, relates to the way language is used to refer in the first instance to a local set of circumstances, and in the second instance to a wider or more universal set of circumstances. Bernstein illustrates these with reference to a classification experiment that was performed whereby the child using a particularistic form of language, when asked to relate together types of food, replied that these were the types of food that they ate at breakfast or that were cooked at home. The child who responded in a universalistic way described them as vegetables or seafood. In the first case reference is made to a particular and familiar setting; in the second to the formal and universalistic way they are defined, without reference to the particular setting that is familiar to the child. It is important here not to suggest that one form of code is a more correct way of classifying than the other, only that reference is made to different ways of classifying.

There is no suggestion in Bernstein's work that ways of classifying and contextualising objects in the world can be arranged in a hierarchical fashion; he only observes as an empirical fact that there exist different ways to classify objects in the world. In a previous chapter the issue of classifying events and experiences in the world was examined, and the argument was made that particular systems of classification do not have a transcendental quality but are conventions generated through countless decisions made by groups of people living in societies. However, within the context discussed here, the point is that two groups of children with different backgrounds and family experiences chose to classify common and familiar objects in different types of ways. The second point to be made about classifications is that regardless of their correctness or not, they have powerful effects; and thus if the different ways of classifying can be shown to apply to different types of children, and further that the schools to which these children go can also be shown to operate through systems that favour one type of classifying scheme over another, then a possible explanation for the relative social disadvantage of one group over another is provided. However, with regard to this experiment Bernstein is careful to argue that when asked to reclassify, the children who in the first instance chose to operate with a particularistic code were then able to switch to a universalistic code and vice versa. It was therefore not the capability of the children that was the determining factor in their choices, but their immediate concerns and preoccupations. In other words, the answer they gave was the one that they considered to be most appropriate in the circumstances.

The two other dichotomies, context-bound/context-free and implicit/explicit, can be explained as sub-sets of the first dichotomy. The first of these is where the specific context of the action is the referential point for the speaker, rather than in the more elaborated code, where specific context is reduced and the language used refers to or could refer to a wider range of contexts, which are frequently implicit. The second of these is where the description of an action makes some assumptions about the context of the story which they are telling – assuming these to be understood and therefore not in need of an explicit rendition. They are literally implicit. Bernstein's point is that in school, children are required to use a language code which is universalistic, context-free and explicit. Again, it is not that some children do not have a capacity to use such a language, it is that when a task is set for them in school, they understand the task as being one in which a restricted code is sufficient, and this is clearly in conflict with what is expected in school. He argues this point in the following way:

> It is not that the working-class children do not have in their passive vocabulary the vocabulary used by the middle-class children. Nor is it the case that the children differ in their tacit understanding of the

> linguistic rule system. Rather, what we have here are differences in the use of language arising out of a specific context.
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> (Bernstein, 1975, p. 179)

As a result of choosing to adopt different codes, the two sets of children use language in different ways. So, for example, a restricted code-user is inclined to use more catchphrases, with the implicit understanding that meaning is shared, and more pronouns; an elaborated speaker will introduce longer pauses between phrases and use fewer pronouns. Indeed, these logically follow from the characteristics that have been used to define the two types of language codes.

We now come to the identification of the two types of code-users. For Bernstein, these two codes corresponded to fractions of working- and middle-class children. Indeed, his theory of linguistic codes was underpinned by a theory of class. Furthermore, since his work was empirically based, the identification of these class fractions was not dependent on their propensity to use elaborated or restricted codes. Such identification was a result of other work-related and positional factors, and Bernstein's theory seeks to explain why one set of children was relatively successful at school, whereas the other was less so. Class, and the consequent placing of children, persons and families in class categories, is perhaps a more fluid concept than it once was. For example, Ball (2003, p. 11) writes that:

> As should already be apparent my discussion of class here does not rest primarily upon any 'independently defined structure of positions' (Parkin, 1979, p. 113) but rather collective modes of social action and social practices are taken as the defining features of class.

And thus self-attribution is considered at least by Ball to be an essential element in such categorisation. However, what Bernstein is seeking to do is identify an example of a social practice which is not shared by all children in formal education.

Classification and framing

The second principal theme of Bernstein's work, closely related to the first, was the relations between different items of knowledge. The two most important types of relations are: the degree of integration between different knowledge domains; and progression within the domain itself. The first of these is the degree of knowledge integration. A curriculum may be understood as strongly or weakly classified and as strongly or weakly framed. A strongly classified curriculum is defined by Bernstein (1990) as having clearly delineated domains of knowledge with strong boundaries between them; conversely, a

weakly classified curriculum is understood as having weak boundaries between the different knowledge domains. A strongly framed curriculum, on the other hand, is defined as a programme of study in which teacher and student have limited control over the selection of items and the way it is organised in respect of the pedagogical relationship. A weakly framed curriculum is characterised by greater control by teacher and student over the selection of content, the way it is organised and its pacing. Bernstein, in relation to the first of these principles, classification, identifies two types of curricula: 'collection codes' where strong boundaries between domains are present, and 'integrated codes' where weak boundaries are in evidence.

Fogarty (1991) has identified ten models of curriculum integration and these range from strongly classified and strongly framed curricula, as in the traditional approach, to weakly classified and weakly framed or networked approaches to curriculum planning. Between the two extremes – traditional and networked approaches – she identifies eight other points on the continuum: connected, nested, sequenced, shared, webbed, threaded, integrated and immersed. Fogarty (1991) then provides in her book *The Mindful School: How to Integrate the Curriculum* more detail about these different approaches:

1. *A fragmented curriculum*: here there are clear boundaries between the different subjects and thus this first type cannot reasonably be thought of as integrated in any sense. Subject delineations are clear-cut, they are taught in separate blocks on the timetable, they have their own formal knowledge structure, and content is treated as distinctive and belonging to the specific area.
2. *A connected curriculum*: reference is made to other content areas, connections are sought and suggestions are made as to how knowledge in another domain can supplement and contribute to knowledge in the specified domain.
3. *A nested curriculum*: a distinction is made between generic skills and specific content. This form is only partially integrated as the content of the subject area is still treated as specific to a curriculum area; however, some common skills are identified which cross the boundaries between different content areas and these are taught across the curriculum.
4. *A sequenced curriculum*: here deliberately planned topics are arranged to be taught at the same time so that children moving between different subject areas are taught the same concept albeit that reference is made to a different application and a different discipline in two or more different contexts. For example, statistical probability is taught in mathematics and in social science to reinforce the learning of the concept and to allow students to understand how it can be used in different contexts.
5. *A shared curriculum*: a particular topic is chosen which has a number of different disciplinary strands. Teachers from different subject disciplines are partnered and teach different aspects of the topic.

6 *A webbed curriculum*: this is very much like a shared curriculum, the difference being that there is a greater degree of integration. The curriculum is divided into themes and each theme is treated in a different way by different subject teachers. Thus the integrity of each discipline is retained, and the methods and approaches that are distinctive to these disciplines are taught even if the generic subject matter is the same.
7 *A threaded curriculum*: the emphasis is on the process of learning, or on what might be called a meta-theoretical process. The content is subordinated to the teaching of these skills and a curriculum is devised which cuts across the traditional disciplines and focuses on common skills. In this scenario, the traditional and highly classified curriculum is abandoned for a new set of delineations and boundaries, based round different types of skill. Clearly within each discipline in the traditional curriculum skills were featured; these skills, however, were content-specific. A threaded curriculum offers a weakly classified curriculum in that skills and content are treated as separate.
8 *An integrated curriculum*: here disciplinary boundaries begin to dissolve, as teachers work in inter-disciplinary teams to plan units round overlapping concepts and themes.
9 *An immersed curriculum*: integration becomes the responsibility of the learner as they focus on a particular topic or theme, and they borrow ideas, theories, skills and the like from different disciplines. There is little evidence here of any adherence to the methods and protocols embedded within particular disciplines. The disciplines themselves are treated as impediments to the development of knowledge and this strong classification is transgressively dissolved.
10 *A networked approach to curriculum planning*: Kysilka (1998, p. 199) suggests that such an approach 'requires learners to reorganise relationships of ideas within and between the separate disciplines as well as ideas and learning strategies within and between learners'.

Each of these forms of integration can be positioned along a continuum, with a fragmented curriculum in Bernstein's terms being strongly classified and framed, in contrast to networking approaches to curriculum planning which are weakly classified and weakly framed.

However, for Bernstein, such typologies were never enough; indeed, he sought to distance himself from the notion of an ideal type. His concern was always with power distributions in society, identity formation as a result of these power distributions and how social control was exercised: 'How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control' (Bernstein, 1971, p. 47).

Three message systems, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation, are implicated in these principles of social control: 'Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as the valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realisation of knowledge' (Bernstein, 1971, p. 48). In relation to the curriculum, Bernstein is referring to the boundary between various contents that delineate one form of knowledge from another. If there is a strong degree of insulation between them, then Bernstein is inclined to describe the resulting curriculum as closed. If there is a weak degree of insulation, then the curriculum can be defined as open. Further to this a curriculum which exhibits a strong degree of insulation can be called a collection type, whereas a curriculum which displays the opposite features can be called an integrated type.

For Bernstein, what distinguishes a collection from an integrated type of curriculum is the strength of the boundaries between the contents. Classification and framing provide the means by which these can be understood. Bernstein is here referring to the relationship between contents and not the contents themselves. Strong classification then refers to a curriculum in which the various parts are strongly insulated from each other. Weak classification refers to a curriculum where there is weak insulation between the various parts. Furthermore, classification refers to the structure of one of the message systems, the curriculum. A second message system, pedagogy, is to be understood in terms of framing and again this should be understood not in terms of the content of the pedagogy in use but the degree of insulation between the different forms; in the case of pedagogy, it refers to the relationship between the teacher and the learner. Thus Bernstein provides us with a clear definition of framing. It 'refers to the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organisation and pacing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship' (Bernstein, 1971, p. 51).

In addition, there is a further relationship which Bernstein wishes to bring to our attention. This is the relationship between everyday knowledge and the knowledge which is transmitted in school as part of the pedagogical exchange. Again, this can be understood as either strongly or weakly framed, depending on the degree of insulation between the two contents. The various strengths of the code in relation to classification and framing may vary independently of each other, so a curriculum may be strongly classified, yet weakly framed; or it may be weakly classified and strongly framed. Furthermore, framing, being defined in terms of selection, organisation and pacing, may vary between these three sub-elements. Thus pedagogy may be strongly organised but weakly paced. However, the identification of these pedagogic forms can be misleading. A type of pedagogy which on the surface allows considerable licence for the pupil in the development of the knowledge subset may in reality be strongly framed, because the teacher is highly skilled in eliciting answers from her pupils that are commensurate with what was intended in the first place. The pupil is being led to certain conclusions even though on the surface this would not be constituted as a transmission form of pedagogy.

Classification is an easier form to understand since it refers to the boundaries between classes of curriculum content. Two points need to be made about it. First, it produces a subject loyalty amongst teachers and thus strong boundaries between subjects are likely to be maintained at the school because previous socialisation into the subject discipline has already occurred: 'Any attempt to weaken or change the classification strength may be felt as a threat to one's identity and may be experienced as a pollution endangering the sacred' (Bernstein, 1971, p. 59). The second point is that the formation of these specific identities, resulting in a desire to maintain strong boundaries between subjects, is likely to be reflected in control over the type of framing that is instituted; and indeed, the relationship between classification and framing is the key to understanding the different types of curriculum forms that exist.

It is here that Bernstein's definition of framing is misleading, notwithstanding his note that the various parts of the framing device can vary independently of each other. Attaching the strength of a frame to the control that teachers and pupils can exert over the selection, organisation and pacing of knowledge creates a tendency to view framing as extending to teachers and pupils operating in conjunction with each other. There may be a situation where the pedagogic relation between teachers and pupils is such that framing constitutes a disjunction between them.

Knowledge systems

The third area of concern for Bernstein (1996) relates to the way knowledge is constructed. He developed a set of categories to delineate different types of symbolic systems. He distinguished between horizontal and vertical forms of discourse, and then added a further distinction within the latter between hierarchical and horizontal knowledge forms. Horizontal forms of discourse are described by Bernstein (1996, pp. 170–1) as: 'the form of knowledge usually typified as everyday, oral or common-sense knowledge [which] has a group of features: local, segmental, context dependent, tacit, multi-layered, often contradictory across contexts but not within contexts'.

Vertical discourses, by contrast, are defined in terms of two characteristics: verticality and grammaticality. Verticality denotes the way theory is developed and it can take two forms. The first of these is hierarchical where the constructs that form the mode of knowledge can be arranged in a hierarchical fashion, starting at the base of the pyramidal structure with more concrete propositions and moving upwards to more general and abstract principles which are effectively integrated within a hierarchical structure. However, some knowledge bases have a horizontal structure which consists of the proliferation of more and more specialised forms or languages which are incommensurable with each other. An example of this might be the field of education. For Bernstein, this weak horizontal structure has certain consequences, principally that

> every new approach becomes a social movement or sect which immediately defines the nature of the subject by re-defining what is to be admitted, and what is beyond the pale, so that with every new approach the subject almost starts from scratch.
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> (Bernstein, 1977, p. 167)

Whereas this type of knowledge form is concerned with internality – the relations between the parts of the discourse that are internal to itself – Bernstein develops a further relation which attempts to connect it to the empirical world – grammaticality. Some knowledge bases then have a weak capacity to 'generate empirical correlates' (Moore and Muller, 2002) and therefore a weak capacity to progress as a form of knowledge; whereas others have a strong relationship with the empirical world, have developed a strong language for confirming or disconfirming theory, and therefore have a greater capacity for progression.

This approach by Bernstein is very different from that adopted by Hirst and the foundationalists. For them, the issue of curriculum is dominated by the question of knowledge. Children's differential ability to access that knowledge can be explained either by the different capacities those different children have (innate abilities); or by the different curricula different types of children are exposed to (structural arrangements); or by the different personal dispositions that they have acquired (i.e. immediate as opposed to deferred gratification traits). For Bernstein, the issue of differential access to the curriculum lies with the different abilities and inclinations those children have to recognise and realise the rules that constitute the pedagogic discourse they are confronted with in schools.

The issue that we are then immediately confronted with is the status and constitution of those rules. If Bernstein is merely sketching out a meta-theory to contextualise the specific rules found in specific schools, and these specific rules are differently constituted in different schools, both actual and possible ones, then the same relativist and contextualised description applies to both the specific realisation of those rules and to the general theoretical framework developed by Bernstein.

It is also important not to lose sight of the degree to which the contents of the curriculum and type of knowledge that underpins it actually shape the specific realisation and recognition rules in operation in specific settings. As Stenhouse has suggested, pedagogic forms which stress inquiry-based modes of realisation are underpinned by a different conception of knowledge, what it consists of and how it can be used, from knowledge which is better expressed through didactic modes of realisation. A further influence on the advocacy of what Bernstein has called an integrated code was the early work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and in particular his locating of learning in the social sphere.