

Bernstein's sociological theory of pedagogic device and its relevance for researching curriculum politics in Hong Kong

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1. Aim

This paper is a heuristic piece which largely explores the methodological possibilities lying inherent in the theory of pedagogic device developed by the late British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1924-2000) during the Thatcher years and its empirical relevance for studying the politics of school curriculum in the wider Asian-Pacific context, with particular reference to a highly controversial school subject in Hong Kong senior secondary curriculum – Liberal Studies, which was made a statutory core subject for Grades 10-12 students since 2009.

2. Data & Methods

Partly inspired by Chomsky's hypothesis of language acquisition device, Bernstein's model of pedagogic device and other pertinent concepts such as 'pedagogic discourse', 'classification' and 'framing', 'official recontextualising field' (ORF) and 'pedagogical recontextualising field' (PRF), provide a structural framework that helps identify key policy actors and sites for sociological enquiry during the process of political socialisation, and hence, map the control and power relations from macro social levels to micro interactional levels at work, with greater epistemological and ontological soundness.

3. Results

In this paper, I argue that although Bernstein's original conceptions of ORF and PRF still remain sufficient for examining the politics of curriculum knowledge in the case of Liberal Studies in Hong Kong, the political complexity of Hong Kong which is situated in the 'one country, two systems' constitutional ambivalence in its postcolonial political order may invite further refinement. A particular expansion on notions such as 'state', 'policy actors', etc. in the model proposed by Bernstein is much needed, if the dynamics of power and control relations during the process of curriculum recontextualisation are to be understood.

4. Conclusion

Whilst the generative power of Basil Bernstein's sociological theory is witnessed for the numerous research studies it spawns all over the world – for example, in the Legitimation Code Theory in Australia and the Social Realist school of sociology of knowledge in Britain and South Africa, it still awaits more critical attention in the Asia-Pacific sociological community. With this aim in mind, this paper attempts to contribute to this sociological scholarship with Bernsteinian message couched in an Asian voice.

Selected References

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