

Meritocracy in uk education: bernstein and bourdieu



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‘ Education policy in the UK now contributes to a more meritocratic society’. Discuss the various explanations that sociologists have offered for differences in educational outcomes

Introduction

Many policy developments regarding education have had as their express aim the need to make the education system fairer (including the 1870 and 1944 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act, which introduced the National Curriculum): that is, to achieve a position in which educational achievement reflects children’s innate ability. ^[1] However, despite these manifest aims the basic pattern of educational achievement remains stratified along lines of class, race and gender: in general, children from middle and upper class families (as defined by the occupational grouping of the father) tend to achieve both a longer and more qualified education (see Douglas, 1964 or Halsey et al, 1980). Similarly, race differentials of attainment are also evident (see Orr, 2003). Finally, educational outcomes, despite successive attempts to overcome them, remain gendered: girls tend to be concentrated within the ‘ feminine’ subjects such as English, whilst boys tend to do better in mathematics and the sciences (see Thomas, 1990). However, the largest factor affecting educational outcomes in the UK remains class: this is not to say that all working class children *fail* educationally; however, there remains a strong correlation between social class and achievement levels.

Thus, despite a widespread belief in the meritocratic nature of modern western society this belief may in fact be little more than a legitimating ideology: it is therefore the *unequal* educational outcomes of children with similar ‘ natural’ abilities that social theorists have sought to explain.

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However, as many theoretical approaches have been utilised in this attempt as the number of theorists so involved: theorists with liberal, conservative, feminist and socialist leanings may further show actor-centred, structuralist or functionalist tendencies to their explanatory schemas. In this essay I have decided to concentrate on the work of two theorists, Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, my reasoning is threefold: firstly, space limitations negate the feasibility of a broader survey; next, though Bernstein was previously influential within educational theory, it is the work of Bourdieu that now appears ascendant and to have wider applicability; finally, whilst both Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein have been associated with class-based analysis, it is that of Bourdieu that has subsequently been more widely adopted, therefore they provide neatly contrasting explanations of educational differentials.

In the next section I outline the educational theory of Basil Bernstein; in the following that of Pierre Bourdieu. In the conclusion, I critically assess both approaches, arguing that, whilst at first glance they appear similar in that they both aim to account predominantly for the class-based dimension to educational differentials, in fact it is the more subtle and nuanced theory of Bourdieu that is better able to account for educational differentials of a wider type: those based on gender, race, *and* class.

Basil Bernstein: The Elaborated and Restricted Codes

Basil Bernstein (1925-2000) initially developed his account of the elaborated and restricted codes during his time teaching young men motorcycle repair in the 1960s. It was then that he noticed the different ways in which language was used by the tutors and pupils, leading him to conclude that it

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was in fact two different forms of language that were being used: the restricted and elaborated codes. He defined the 'restricted' code as being inherently context bound, emotion based and reliant on condensed symbols: 'restricted codes are more tied to a local structure and have a reduced potential for change' (Bernstein, 1972: 164). In contrast, the 'elaborated' codes 'orient their users towards universalistic meanings' (Ibid.) and are defined by Bernstein as utilising rationality and logic; 'elaborated' codes are thus described by Bernstein as being context-free; it is the elaborated code that Bernstein takes to be dominant within education.

Bernstein believed that the elaborated language code is the norm for the middle classes, whilst the restricted code is usually used both within working-class and middle-class families, with differences the result of the 'cultural transmission', via socialisation, that turns the biological infant into a cultural being (Bernstein, 1972: 162). He argued that the process of socialisation naturalises the social order and occurs via social institutions such as the family and school. He identified two family types: the 'positional' and the 'person-centred', and these are likely to utilise specific modes of interaction (Bernstein, 1972: 170). Arguing that all children have access to the restricted code, Bernstein believed that it is only those from the person-centred family type (the middle-class families) who are likely to have had regular contact with the imaginative and interpersonal language of the elaborated code *outside* of formal education, giving them an advantage *within* education:

Historically and now, only a tiny percentage of the population has been socialised into knowledge at the level of meta-languages of control and
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innovation, whereas the mass of the population has been socialised into knowledge at the level of context-tied operations (Bernstein, 1972: 163).

In short, the language used within the home gives middle class children an advantage at school; they ‘speak the same language’ as the teachers.

Bernstein does not argue that either mode is better than the other, his aims to be a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, account; instead he argues that it is the educational system itself that favours one code above the other and thus privileges the children of one group, middle-class children.

Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Capital

Similar to Bernstein, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) developed his theory of cultural capital as part of an attempt to explain the class-based educational differentials between children with similar natural abilities. Two concepts are central to this schema: those of cultural capital and cultural reproduction. In the first, culture is viewed as similar to power (Bourdieu, 1986: 243) because, like money, one is able to inherit it and it can be translated into other social resources, including wealth and status (Bourdieu, 1986: 244-5). It is this transferability of cultural capital that leads to the second key concept, that of cultural reproduction: for in this schema the class that dominates economically is also able to dominate culturally and ideologically; thus, similarly to Bernstein, schools play a key role in socio-cultural reproduction by valuing middle-class culture more highly than that of the working-classes.

Bourdieu isolates three distinct types of cultural capital, embodied, objectified and institutionalised: the first describes the way that cultural

capital becomes incorporated into the very body of the individual (Bourdieu, 1986: 244-5); the second refers to artefacts which may be inherited (Bourdieu, 1986: 246); whilst the third refers to those academic qualifications which allow an individual access to economic capital via the job market (Bourdieu, 1986: 247). In this way schools, along with other institutions, help to both naturalise and perpetuate inequality. Like economic capital for Karl Marx, for Bourdieu cultural capital has the capacity to reproduce itself 'in identical or expanded form' (Bourdieu, 1986: 241).

In short, for Bourdieu education plays a key role in legitimising and naturalising social inequality; for if all children are believed to have equal opportunities to succeed according to their ability then any failure must be a result of differences in their level of ability: it must be their own fault rather than the fault of the system as a whole. Bourdieu posits the educational shortcomings of the working classes on their situational constraints in two ways; firstly, the objective class position of the children's family is used to provide the basis for assumptions regarding the kind of cultural resources they therefore hold; secondly, their social position limits the amount and type of capital an individual is likely to accrue and pass on to their children. Within Bourdieu's theory, each economic class is thus assumed to have developed a 'class culture', or way of both acting in and perceiving the social world, and in this way social inequality is internalised or embodied as it is also naturalised.

Analysis and Conclusion

The two approaches appear similar at first glance; both concentrate on the class-based aspects of educational inequality, and, as such, both are open to <https://assignbuster.com/meritocracy-in-uk-education-bernstein-and-bourdieu/>

the criticism that they fail to account for other educational differences, such as those resulting from race or gender (McCall, 1992: 851). Further, both approaches are liable to be criticised for their economic determinism: John Frow has argued that with Bourdieu's approach the cultural resources of an individual are merely assumed from their class position (Frow, 1995: 63) and this criticism might equally be applied to Bernstein. Finally, both approaches entail the idea that differential educational achievement is best explained with references to 'barriers' to achievement: both posit the way that society is organised, the education system in particular, as itself limiting the ability of some children to succeed.

However, Bernstein's theory has been criticised empirically, theoretically and ideologically; first, little empirical is cited to support his hypothesis and he conducted no participation observation of either middle or working class family homes (Rosen, 1974: 10). Theoretically, Bernstein utilises a crude conception of class analysis which ignores the ruling class entirely whilst also concentrating solely on the unskilled section of the working class (Rosen, 1974: 6). He fails to address the relations between the two classes (Ibid.), further, by concentrating on the role of the family his theory fails to acknowledge other institutions or the role of peer groups or the media (Rosen, 1974: 7). Finally, he fails to acknowledge the effect that the attitude of the teacher toward their students may have on their education. Whilst there is a 'grain of truth' to his argument, in that there *are* differences in the language use of the various social classes, by attributing the failure of working class children solely to their language-use Bernstein misses the point: it is not the language that inherently contains power, but rather it is

the broader education system that, by imposing middle-class culture via pedagogic authority, limits the ability of working class children to succeed. Although he aims to only *describe* the differences between the two language types, Bernstein himself falls into the ethno-linguistic trap of believing his own language use to be the superior form (Rosen, 1974: 6). Finally, as Deborah Cameron states: 'the theory of codes could be boiled down to a political truism, those who do not speak the language of the dominant elite find it difficult to get on' (Cameron, 1985: 159-160).

Bourdieu's approach is more subtle; although he agrees, similarly to Bernstein, that language plays a key role in the under achievement of the working classes, Bourdieu's explanation involves many other factors, including the development of a specific habitus, or set of predispositions, and the social, cultural and economic capitals. Thus Bourdieu does not point to language as the *sole* cause of working-class children's educational failure, but instead describes a complex process that not only attempts to account for this failure but also its internalisation. Indeed, Bourdieu's theory is supported by in-depth participation-observation, rather than the assumption and anecdote of Bernstein, reflecting his recognition of the complexity of the causes of unequal educational achievement.

In recent years Bernstein's theory, though once influential, has fallen out of favour within educational sociology, as a quick survey of recent articles reveals, whilst the theory of cultural capital has become increasingly influential (Burkett, 2001). Whilst at first glance the theories appear similar, in fact it is the theory of Bourdieu that is better able to account for

educational differentials of a wider type: those based on gender, race, *and* <https://assignbuster.com/meritocracy-in-uk-education-bernstein-and-bourdieu/>

class and many theorists have sought to thus extend the theory to account for these wider differentials (see, for example, McNay, 1999; Reay, 2004). Indeed, Ben Fine has argued that academia has been gripped by a kind of ‘capital’ mania (in Burkett, 2004: 234), in part, at least, attesting to the strength of the explanatory schema.

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Footnotes

[1] See David Warren Piper (1984) for a discussion regarding the feasibility of attaining true ‘ fairness’ in education.