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Knowledge and knowers: towards a realist sociology of education, by K. Maton, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, 256 pp., £85, ISBN: 978-0-415-47999-8 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-203-88573-4 (ebook)

This highly stimulating volume explores and develops a framework to understand knowledge in education and education policy. It departs from the observation by Bernstein (2000) that the core dimension of education, namely knowledge, has been analytically under-explored in the empirical sociology of education. This is the case because, with regards to knowledge, the sociology of education has remained

caught between a Scylla of positivism (i.e. naïve realism) and a Charybdis of constructivist relativism (i.e. radical ‘post’-epistemological stances). Whereas the former may analytically reduce a knowledge claim to its logical and procedural properties, the latter may be seen as analytically prone to reducing knowledge claims to an epiphenomenon of power relations amongst socially positioned actors. In this book, the prolific Australian sociologist Karl Maton addresses Bernstein’s concern by proposing a framework to address this perennial problem. He calls this sociology of knowledge and education *Legitimation Code Theory* (LCT). In short, LCT assumes that actors claim ‘legitimacy for what they are doing or, more accurately, for the organizing principles embodied by their actions’ (pp. 23–24). Thus, in each period, within each intellectual field, practices are underpinned by (tacit) organizing principles which grant legitimacy to actors and their claims to what counts as (realizations of) valid knowledge. To explore these principles and their consequences, LCT offers an evolving conceptual toolkit.

In ‘Knowledge and Knowers’, the development of Maton’s train of thought can be followed through 10 well-written chapters which offer a fluid interaction between theoretical explorations and a wide range of empirical illustrations. In a lucid manner, Maton discusses the aims, grounds, conceptual developments and practical applications of LCT, demonstrating how an analytical re-centering of knowledge in the study of educational phenomena enables a fuller and wider understanding of policy options, threats and challenges. For example, Maton analyses the emergence, growth and later demise of Cultural Studies in British higher education through the lens of specialization, exploring how academics have positioned themselves by means of claims to specialized knowledge (epistemic relations to knowledge) or rather by claims to possessing the characteristics of a perceived ideal knower (social relations to knowledge). Maton’s research points to the weakness of the latter, arguing that in academic fields, the latter approach –of which standpoint theories are the strongest incarnation– makes fields vulnerable. Where identity-based or anti-canonical stances, in spite of their emancipatory aims, become a core generative principle of an intellectual field, opposed to principles delineating how one can build on previous knowledge, the field will be prone to fragmentation and policy pressures. In a comparable vein, other chapters discuss the premises and continuing development of LCT, both in relation to theoretical and empirical concerns, for instance the question of how the (implicit) principles underpinning the basis of achievement in secondary schools are refracted by ill-conceived curricular policy documentation, hindering cumulative learning.

For everyone interested in understanding why and how educational knowledge and its recontextualization through policy can be studied through the lens of an empirical sociology, this book is a must-read. Furthermore, the chapters reflect on how they may address knowledge-blindness in existing research and how LCT’s gaze enables the opportunities to uncover how the structuring of educational knowledge is linked with the reproduction of social inequalities in education. In this light, Maton’s re-interpretation through LCT’s concepts of a classical study by Janet Holland which explored social class in relation to the context dependency of meanings in primary schools – as discussed in Bernstein (2000) – forms a fascinating contribution. By reading the book, various advantages of LCT as an analytical toolkit are likely to emerge to the reader, such as its applicability to several policy contexts or levels (e.g. compulsory and higher education) and its capacity to be operationalized through different methods (qualitative or quantitative).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the appreciation of this volume may still be linked to the question of whether the reader feels an intellectual kinship with the type of theorizing which is proposed and advanced. In the first instance, by explicitly following Bernstein's path in developing a code sociology, LCT is inevitably vulnerable to axiological denouncements, such as 'objectivist', 'positivist', or 'structuralist'. However, it is precisely the careful reading of the book (and of Chapter 8 in particular) which will inform the reader why such an axiological approach to meta-theorizing is a self-defeating endeavor within the sociology of education. In the second instance, in spite of Maton's appropriate description of LCT as a toolkit rather than a grand theory of education, the book explicitly develops Bernstein's later concerns with the construction of a *comprehensive* sociology of educational transmissions. The third chapter of Maton's volume, for instance, forms an explicit expansion of Bernstein's framework of the pedagogic device. In this way, LCT forms, to paraphrase Richard Rorty, an attempt to build a *systematic* sociology of education with strong explanatory power with regards to knowledge in education and policy, rather than an *edifying* sociology, as LCT does not principally aim to be merely reactive *against* existing education policies or practices. On the contrary, the book makes clear in several instances how social justice in education is better served by an explicitly analytical approach in the sociology of education. For this reason, this fascinating, wide-ranging, and internally coherent book will be of the greatest interest to sociologists and education policy scholars, and in particular to those appreciating the need to question how and why the state of the sociology of education and its impact can and should be enhanced.

Reference

Bernstein, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research and Critique*. 2nd ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Ernst Buyl
Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Educational Support Office,
Ghent University, Belgium
Ernst.buyl@ugent.be

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