

## **Investigating the interface between policy and practice: The usefulness of Bernstein's binary categories.**

Shan (Santhini) Haines

Drawing evidence from a recent empirical study, this paper argues that Bernstein's corpus of work offers a language of description and analysis to investigate the disjuncture between policy and practice in contemporary educational reform. It is argued that the disjuncture is often the result of practitioners having to enact reforms with somewhat contradictory expectations such as meeting external accountability demands while building capacities at the local level.

Using a case study methodology, the study discussed in this paper, investigated, through teacher voices, the interface between policy and practice in the lived experiences of a group of secondary teachers teaching early adolescents. It was a retrospective investigation of a trialled direction in policy whereby a government-initiated standards-based reform project also aimed at school renewal and building capacity at the school level. The stated purpose of this reform was to facilitate a re-conceptualisation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in order to enhance the capacity of schools to respond more effectively to the teaching and learning demands of the new millennium and the knowledge society. As such, this reform can be viewed as a pragmatic attempt to reconcile two orientations to reform. Teachers interviewed for the study gave their accounts of planning a futures-oriented, transdisciplinary curriculum for early adolescents, collaborating across subject departments, creating new professional identities and professional learning communities and aligning curriculum and pedagogy to mandated assessment. Analysing these accounts required theoretical frames that had the capacity to interrogate changes in teachers' conceptions of knowledge, professional identities and in secondary school structures and cultures. The paper argues that Bernstein's work provided the necessary frames for a theoretical framework that was tailored for this study.

The framework used the concepts of pedagogic identities (official/local; prospective/therapeutic), pedagogic discourse (vertical/horizontal, instructional/regulative discourses), pedagogic models (competence-based/performance-based) and educational knowledge codes (collection/integrated). These key concepts were chosen because they offered useful lenses with which to analyse the following five elements central to the study's focus on reconceptualising secondary schools for the knowledge society: changing conceptions of educational knowledge, pedagogic changes, building capacities in early adolescents, aligning curriculum and pedagogy to mandated assessment and taking learning outside the school to sites of knowledge application. In particular, Bernstein's concept of boundaries proved to be especially useful when analysing teachers' accounts of planning a transdisciplinary curriculum, forging professional identities across subject departments, taking learning outside the school walls and reconceptualising curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in order to build futures-oriented capacities in early adolescents.

The analysis of the empirical data through the theoretical frames derived from Bernstein was able to reveal that the enactment of reform in a school involved a dynamic interplay of several dimensions: structures, cultures, identities, beliefs, pedagogic practices and contexts of learning, both inside and outside of the school. In particular, a disjuncture was identified between the official reform and the enacted reform in all of these dimensions. The paper links the contradictions and tensions described by the teachers in their accounts to the tensions between the oppositional modalities of collection and integrated codes, between prospective

and therapeutic pedagogic identities, between horizontal/vertical discourses, between instructional/regulative pedagogic discourses and between performance-based and competence-based pedagogic models.

The theoretical framework constructed with binary categories was useful for the researcher, who was also a teacher-practitioner. It enabled her to interrogate her colleagues' accounts in a critical manner, to establish critical distance from what she had been part of and to generate critical perspectives on the enacted reform. The paper argues that the use of Bernstein's binary categories helped the researcher to identify the multidimensionality of enacted reform and the diversity in the lived experiences of teachers. The analysis revealed that transformational change was hampered by inflexible structures, lack of time and the absence of conceptual tools to guide reflection and dialogue in teacher professional learning communities. The argument that is advanced by the paper is that sustained intellectual work is needed when questioning and reconceptualising current practices, structures and cultures in schools. Shared ownership of any reform can only emerge from sustained intellectual work. For that to occur, teachers have to be provided with conceptual tools to analyse critically the contradictions in their work contexts and practices, so that these can be resolved in a way that contributes to improved student engagement and student outcomes. Consequently, there is a need for teachers to adopt the roles of reflective practitioners and researchers. The author puts forward the suggestion that the binary categories drawn from Bernstein are useful conceptual tools that can also help secondary teachers to interrogate practices and the systems of belief on which these practices are based and that conceptual tools are necessary for the development of teacher professional learning communities. In the empirical data, there was a tendency among the teachers interviewed to accept the status quo with passive resignation. If bold questioning of current structures and cultures of secondary schools is to occur, teachers need conceptual frames to guide dialogue and reflection. The binary categories offer the common language and analytical lenses that are needed in professional conversations. This intellectual work is necessary for the transformation of a secondary school into a learning organisation in the new millennium.