

ARTICLE

BASIL BERNSTEIN AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION¹

MANOEL AYUSSO MARTINS¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5254-346X>
<manoel.ayusso@gmail.com>

JEFFERSON MAINARDES¹

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0401-8112>
<jefferson.m@uol.com.br>

¹ Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa (UEPG). Ponta Grossa, PR, Brazil.

ABSTRACT: This theoretical article aims to describe the internal disorder within the Sociology of Education since 1970 and to indicate the extent to which Bernstein's work moved in the opposite direction of that disorder. It is argued that Bernstein's work, both theoretically and methodologically, is characterized by strong conceptualization, a high level of abstraction, and the capacity to describe and explain empirical objects, aligning more closely with strong grammar and vertical knowledge structures. With this argument, the article seeks to demonstrate the uniqueness and relevance of Bernstein's work, to question epistemological relativism, and to engage with the most recent book by Stephen J. Ball and Jordi Collet-Sabé.

Keywords: Basil Bernstein, knowledge structures, Sociology of Education.

BASIL BERNSTEIN E A SOCIOLOGIA DA EDUCAÇÃO

RESUMO: Este artigo, de natureza teórica, tem por objetivo descrever a desordem interna da Sociologia da Educação desde 1970 e indicar em que medida a obra de Bernstein caminhou no sentido contrário a essa desordem. Argumenta-se que a obra de Bernstein, teórica e metodologicamente, é caracterizada pela forte conceptualização, pelo elevado nível de abstração e pelo poder de descrever e explicar os objetos empíricos, aproximando-se mais das estruturas de conhecimento de gramática forte e verticais. Com esse argumento, pretende-se demonstrar as singularidades e a relevância da obra de Bernstein, questionar o relativismo epistemológico e dialogar com o mais recente livro de Stephen J. Ball e Jordi Collet-Sabé.

Palavras-chave: Basil Bernstein, estruturas de conhecimento, Sociologia da Educação.

¹ Article published with funding from the *Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* - CNPq/Brazil for editing, layout and XML conversion services.

BASIL BERNSTEIN Y LA SOCIOLOGÍA DE LA EDUCACIÓN

RESUMEN: Este artículo, de naturaleza teórica, tiene como objetivo describir el desorden interno de la Sociología de la Educación desde la década de 1970 e indicar en qué medida la obra de Bernstein avanzó en sentido contrario a ese desorden interno. Se argumenta que la obra de Bernstein, teórica y metodológicamente, se caracteriza por la fuerte conceptualización, un elevado nivel de abstracción y por el poder de describir y explicar los objetos empíricos, aproximándose más a las estructuras de conocimiento de gramática fuerte y verticales. Con este argumento, se busca demostrar las singularidades y la relevancia de la obra de Bernstein, cuestionar el relativismo epistemológico y dialogar con el libro más reciente de Stephen J. Ball y Jordi Collet-Sabé.

Palabras clave: Basil Bernstein, estructuras de conocimiento, Sociología de la Educación.

INTRODUCTION

This theoretical article seeks to outline the internal disorder within the Sociology of Education since 1970 and to indicate the extent to which Bernstein's work moved in the opposite direction of that disorder. We draw on Ana Maria Morais's (2002) concept of "internal disorder," which she associates with the proliferation of parallel approaches that are disconnected from one another and lack the strength to describe their empirical subjects.

The research problem was formulated as follows: What are the characteristics of the internal disorder of the Sociology of Education since 1970, and to what extent has Bernstein's work countered this disorder? By "Bernstein's work," we refer to the following levels: (a) theoretical, based on underlying premises, without delving into conceptual specifics; and (b) methodological, considering his sociological method for educational research. Part of the answer to this problem involves continuing Ball's (2008) discussion. Although the history of the Sociology of Education sometimes points to convergences, this history is predominantly marked by internal fragmentation and changing relationships with politics. To explore this internal fragmentation/disorder, we will use the horizontal knowledge structures of weak grammar as a theoretical reference (Bernstein, 1998, 2000). The other part of the response to the problem involves continuing the work of the vast group of Bernsteinians dedicated to disseminating, discussing, applying and, above all, improving Bernstein's models for education (Atkinson, 1985; Díaz, 1991; Kwok; Singh, 2024; Maton, 2014; Maton; Moore, 2010; Moore, 2001, 2013b; Morais, 2002, 2006; Morais; Neves, 2010; Sadovnik, 1991; Singh, 2015, 2020).

We argue that Bernstein's work, theoretically and methodologically, is characterized by strong conceptualization, a high level of abstraction, and the power to describe and explain the empirical, bringing it closer to knowledge structures with strong grammar and vertical structures. The possible contributions of this argument are as follows:

- It shows the reader the singularities and relevance of Bernstein's work. This contribution is important because "no other British sociologist has been so poorly understood and, often, so willfully misrepresented as Basil Bernstein" (Moss; Erben, 2000, p. 1).
- It questions epistemological relativism, understood here as a way of treating knowledge "[...] as having no inner structures with properties, powers and tendencies of their own, as if all forms of knowledge are identical, homogeneous and neutral" (Maton, 2014, p. 2). Bernstein's work highlights the need to examine an approach primarily from its internal empirical and theoretical perspectives, and not solely from its generating interpretations and power relations. This contribution is important because epistemological relativism is often endorsed as a mere fad (Apple, Oliveira, Oliveira, 1997).
- It seeks to establish a dialogue with ideas from the book *Against School: Thinking Education Differently* (Ball, Collet-Sabé, 2025). The dialogue is based on the explication of the ontological differences between Bernstein's work and the new way of researching, writing, and teaching the

Sociology of Education suggested by the authors. This contribution is significant in the Brazilian context, given Ball's significant influence on educational research in Brazil, especially in the realm of educational policy.

To prepare this article, the following works by Bernstein were used: (a) the chapter “*The Sociology of Education: A Brief Account*” (Bernstein, 1975); (b) the chapter “*La investigación y lenguajes de descripción*” (Bernstein, 1998)²; and (c) the chapter “*Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An Essay*,” included in the second edition of “*Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity*” (Bernstein, 2000). These three texts concentrate his formulations on both knowledge structures and languages of description (his sociological method), justifying their selection for this study. From the beginning of his career, Bernstein devoted himself to studying education; in these texts, he predominantly writes “Sociology” (and not “Sociology of Education”), but all his criticism and demonstrations deal with facts and ideas related to the latter. In this work, we refer exclusively to it, with no interest in expanding the argument to the field of Sociology.

In the next section, we present the knowledge structures. Then, we describe the internal disorder of the Sociology of Education since 1970. Finally, we indicate the extent to which Bernstein's work moves in the opposite direction of this internal disorder.

KNOWLEDGE STRUCTURES

Basil Bernstein began his critique of British Sociology of Education in 1975, when he proposed that it is a discipline “[...] extraordinarily prolific in approaches” (Bernstein, 1975, p. 137), that is, it gives life to an extensive number of distinct approaches. He also proposed that sociological theories in education are “less to be examined and explored at conceptual and empirical levels, but are to be assessed in terms of their underlying models of man and of society” (Bernstein, 1975, p. 137), indicating that ideological and axiological aspects are prioritized to the detriment of empirical and theoretical ones. One effect of this is that “[...] students are socialized into approaches rather than encouraged to create news” (Bernstein, 1975, p. 137), that is, the student learns more to indicate which “look” belongs to which approach than to use the approach to deal with the empirical reality ahead. In other words, one looks more at “where we came from” than at “where we are going.”

In the 1990s, Bernstein (1998, 2000), in his work on the Sociology of Knowledge, revisited and expanded his critique of British Sociology of Education by introducing the concept of “knowledge structures.” He highlighted the internal principles of discourses, examining not only the relationships between different types of knowledge but also their specific forms and subdivisions. He distinguished between horizontal discourse and vertical discourse. Horizontal discourse is widespread and produces knowledge that is context-dependent, organized, and transmitted in a segmented manner; for instance, tying your sneakers as your parents instruct (one context) or dressing in a way that aligns with your neighborhood friends' preferences (another context). In contrast, vertical discourse is formal and results in specialized symbolic structures, such as those found in science, which are distributed across time and space among various groups. This discourse includes recontextualizing rules that select and integrate different knowledge elements to create new units, such as methods, concepts, or texts. Vertical discourse is characterized by formal organization and transmission, exemplified by schools and scientific conferences. Within vertical discourse, hierarchical knowledge structures stand in contrast to horizontal knowledge structures. Additionally, within horizontal discourse, strong grammar horizontal structures differ from weak grammar horizontal structures³.

In hierarchical knowledge structures, one attempts to create “[...] very general propositions and theories, which integrate knowledge at lower levels, and in this way shows underlying uniformities across and expanding range of apparently different phenomena” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 162). In other words, there is a strong motivation to unify the empirical and theoretical aspects of existing theories and prior research to develop new, more integrated knowledge that operates at increasingly abstract levels. The experimental sciences serve as a prime example of this. Since theories and approaches do not necessarily imply a break

² Spanish edition of the first version of *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity* (Bernstein, 1996).

³ On vertical and horizontal discourses and strong and weak grammars, see Mainardes and Stremel (2010).

from previous ideas, the speaker tends to grasp the rules of recognition more readily than those of realization. Internal development occurs through either the rejection or integration of outdated models to formulate new ones.

Horizontal knowledge structures, on the other hand, take the form of “[...] a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and criteria for the construction and circulation of texts” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 162). Thus, each approach has its own theories, perspectives, and procedures, with a struggle for hegemony between new and old approaches. The Sociology of Education is an example, as are all the Social Sciences; among the languages are positivism, interactionism, phenomenology, Marxism, and so on. Since the transition from one to the other implies rupture, there is difficulty in acquiring both the rules of recognition and those of realization. Internal development occurs through the introduction of new, parallel languages.

Finally, in horizontal structures characterized by robust grammar, there exists “[...] explicit conceptual syntax capable of ‘relatively’ precise empirical descriptions and/or generating formal modelling of empirical relations.” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 164). This approach fosters the development of strong conceptualizations that exhibit high levels of abstraction, alongside significant empirical descriptive and explanatory power, making them transferable across different contexts. Fields such as Economics, Linguistics, and certain areas of Psychology exemplify this model. Conversely, in horizontal structures with weaker grammar, the conceptual syntax remains implicit, resulting in diminished descriptive and explanatory capabilities. Sociology of Education, Social Anthropology, and Cultural Studies serve as examples of this category⁴.

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

In this section, we will answer the characteristics of the internal disorder of the Sociology of Education since 1970, demonstrating that it is a horizontal knowledge structure with a weak grammar.

In a broader context, viewing society as a fundamental system, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber can be recognized as the principal founders of modern sociological theory (Parsons, 2010). The foundations of the Sociology of Education were established in England during the late 1930s at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), drawing insights from demography, political arithmetic, and the influences of industrialization. Political arithmetic, notably influenced by Francis Bacon's empiricism, focused on identifying patterns within societal structures, including marriage, labor, religion, social class, population, and housing—particularly in light of demographic considerations (Petty, 1888). This framework underpinned educational research conducted by figures such as Hogben (1938) and Douglas (1964), which aimed to uncover causal relationships between children's backgrounds and their educational outcomes. These studies examined factors influencing children before formal schooling (such as social class, types of parental care, age, gender, and socialization) and assessed results following schooling (particularly results from prevalent "intelligence tests"). Given that educational processes were largely taken for granted and largely unexamined, the observed disparities were mainly attributed to familial influences and individual students. This perspective contributed to the creation of a political climate that favored compensatory education models, which were critiqued by Bernstein (1982).

This type of research saw the internal properties of knowledge as the secure and reliable foundations of reality, and was conducted primarily through quantification, deduction, demonstration, and comparison. The first generation of English professional sociologists was trained using this method at the LSE in the post-war period (1950s) such as Bernstein, A. H. Halsey (1982), and Olive Banks (1972).

Beyond these internal aspects, externally, a fruitful relationship developed between the Sociology of Education under political arithmetic and the Keynesian Welfare State, which favored the autonomy of the nascent discipline, its incentives, and its funding is highlighted. A substantial part of this relationship was the belief that it would be possible to rationalize social policy through social research (Cohen; Garet, 1975; Rein, 1971); sociological surveys and government reports worked hand in hand.

⁴ For more details on Bernstein's work, see Díaz, Mainardes and Martins (2025).

Thus, the structuring logic of the Sociology of Education as a discipline emerged from the 1950s onwards: empiricist, founded on epistemological objectivism, quantitative, and politically oriented.

Despite its notable contributions, political arithmetic left gaps, as it focused only on the external and superficial variables that determined observed educational disparities (Apple, 1978). With the publication of the collection *New Directions in the Sociology of Education* (Young, 1971), a “new” Sociology of Education was inaugurated. Based on symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, it focused on the internal form and content of education. Simmel (1910), with his cognitive syntheses, was one of the authors who directly influenced the “new” sociological research in education, and Heidegger (1985), with his a priori consciousness, was one of the indirect influences. Statistical macroanalyses concerned with the causal relationships between education and the empirical structure of society gave way to ethnographies focused on microinteractions in classrooms and human agency in the production of meaning. As a result, analytically, the harsh social and educational realities were reduced to interpretations (by teachers, students) about them, as in Esland's study (1971).

However, what occurred in this context was not only the introduction of new specialized languages with specialized modes of interrogation (Bernstein, 2000), with interactionism and phenomenology competing for hegemony with the traditional method: the “new” interpretive Sociology of Education had problematized sociological knowledge, its creation. If social and educational reality were nothing more than a product of consciousness and cognitive syntheses, the sociological knowledge produced would become nothing more than the subjectivities that produced it. What emerged, then, was an absolute hegemony of epistemological relativism, which not only broke with the epistemological objectivism of traditional Sociology of Education but also began to associate it with pejorative qualities. As Halsey (1982) wrote, students in training at the time deemed it unnecessary to read classic works (and essential in the discipline) due to the nicknames their authors received; Émile Durkheim, considered essentially a conservative anti-hero, is one of the most notable examples. The epistemological relativism completely neglected knowledge as an internal structure, and as a result, it was reduced to a mere point of view and the product of external generative relations, such as power, the economy, ideology, and the state. The collapse of knowledge was established, to the detriment of the knower (Barrett, 2024; Maton, 2014; Moore, 2013a, 2013b).

In this context, sociological theories in education began to be increasingly examined based on their axiological and ideological aspects, that is, based on the projected image of the human being and the social, and the Sociology of Education became extraordinarily prolific in approaches; a “chaos of conflicting ideologies,” in Halsey's (1982) terms. The foundations for the incommensurability between approaches had been laid. This epistemological relativism has been recontextualized since 1980 with studies of race, gender, disability, and other “standpoint epistemologies,” in Ball's (2008) terms. It has reached worrying levels, with speakers ready to empty the content of the message and evaluate it based on the author's genetic inheritance (Toniol, 2025). As Bernstein (1975) denounced, once the ideological position is exposed, it is as if the entire work can be discarded.

Still in the 1970s, a new specialized language emerged, and consequently, new power relations between approaches. The concern with microinteractions and meanings was judged excessively naive for suggesting that changes in interpretation would be enough to bring about real change in education (Whitty, 1985). As a result, many sociologists took refuge in grand models and their macro-explanations about the maintenance and reproduction of order and control. As Young (2022) recently noted, there was no other available at the time than the Marxist ones.

Thus, in the United States, Bowles and Gintis (1976) published *Schooling in Capitalist America* and, with their correspondence thesis, eliminated any possibility of change regarding curriculum, consciousness, and inequalities that did not first involve a socialist revolution in general political and economic institutions. If empirical microsociology was judged as excessively naive, this theoretical macrosociology was judged as excessively deterministic, establishing a dichotomy that would come to mark the discipline negatively and permanently from then on (Whitty, 1985).

Epistemological relativism had become so deeply ingrained that, despite the contradictions between micro and macrosociologies, a common thread emerged: in both perspectives, knowledge was regarded as socially and ideologically constructed (Sadovnik, 1991). Additionally, both these sociological approaches are distanced from politics, viewing it as a primary contributor to observable problems. This

stance is against the connection that the Sociology of Education at LSE maintained with the Keynesian welfare state.

In the 1980s, following Thatcherism, its attacks on the autonomy of the Sociology of Education, the training of sociologists, and the critical content of research, the Sociology of Education witnessed a flight of its practitioners into politics (Dale, 2001). Technical studies emerged, committed to taking governments' educational problems for granted and offering “solutions” to them—in other words, to producing, based on external political and economic demands, knowledge reduced primarily to biased quantifications and government reports. This produced the speaker Tenti-Fanfani (1994) calls the symbolic analyst.

This new approach to efficiency diverges from both the founding epistemological objectivism of the Sociology of Education and the epistemological relativism that emerged in the 1970s. It is atheoretical, disregards the knowledge produced in the discipline as relevant, and deems it useless. It is concerned with issues of education management, efficiency, and quality, and is therefore supposedly neutral. While traditional Sociology of Education maintained a close relationship with the State, and the new Sociology of Education has distanced itself from it, there is now a rapprochement with the State to promote a defense of public education against the depredations of neoliberalism and to clarify the strong boundaries between Sociology of Education/efficiency studies and sociologists of education/symbolic analysts (Ball, 2008; Lauder; Brown; Halsey, 2009).

Since 1970, the Sociology of Education has consolidated as a horizontal knowledge structure with at least five specialized languages, specialized modes of inquiry, and specialized criteria for the production and circulation of texts (Bernstein, 2000): political arithmetic, interactionism, phenomenology, neo-Marxism, and technical studies. Each approach has its references, founding fathers, and axiological frameworks, and competes for hegemony with one another. The hypercontingencies of qualitative and empirical microsociology, with its knowledge restricted to the generative context, and the inability of quantitative and theoretical macrosociology to address human interactions and agency attest to the non-transferability of these approaches, their weak conceptualizations, their low level of abstraction, and their weakness in generating formal models of empirical relationships. In other words, these aspects attest to the Sociology of Education as a horizontal knowledge structure with a weak grammar.

BERNSTEIN'S WORK

In this section, we will address the extent to which Bernstein's work moved against the horizontality and weak grammar of Sociology of Education, demonstrating the relationship between the theoretical and methodological elements of his work and the horizontal structures of strong grammar and vertical forms

The theoretical framework of Bernstein's work can be characterized by the “[...] structural aspects of his sociological project.” (Sadovnik, 1991, p. 51), which reflect his interest in unifying macrosociology and microsociology. Scholars such as Alan Sadovnik (1991), Paul Atkinson (1985), Mario Díaz (1991), and Paul Dowling (1999) regard this premise as a defining feature of Bernstein's theorizing as structuralist. However, there is no consensus on this perspective, as noted by Best (2007). It can be inferred that Bernstein's theoretical endeavor is highly integrative, aiming to harmonize traditionally incommensurable approaches within the discipline, as demonstrated in the previous section. According to Davies (2020), no other modern sociologist has transcended the individual experiences within the classroom (micro) to address the organizational and institutional aspects (meso) and even the broader power structures of society (macro).

However, his integrative theoretical project was not without contradictions. As Hinojal (1980) wrote, integrating the macrosociological (structural) and the microsociological (interactional), as well as the intermediate (institutional) levels, was one of his main thematic crossroads, which led to his rejection in the field. After all, historically, speakers in the Sociology of Education have always been socialized horizontally.

A strong indication of this structural and integrative theoretical project is its central concern: class relations and the processes of cultural reproduction, with a particular emphasis on the role of schooling—encompassing curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Kwok; Singh, 2024; Singh, 2020). The

project explores both the class relations that dictate what is transmitted and distilled into codes, a significant issue in macrosociology, and the cultural transmission of these codes that shape consciousness and communication within the family, and subsequently in the educational context, a key concern in microsociology. The integrating element in this framework is the sociolinguistic and educational code, which serves as a condenser of empirical patterns of similarity, difference, and relationship.

The influences on Bernstein indicate such integration. There is much to draw from sociolinguistics, social anthropology, sociology, epistemology, and psychology⁵. Bernstein's concepts of framing and classification are good examples: while framing is influenced by interactionism, classification has Durkheimian roots, preventing culture from being stripped of its social base. Classification and framing are capable of “[...] hold together and specify both interactional and structural relations” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 93). It is precisely this multiple theoretical influence that led Bernstein to reject what he called “epistemological botany” (Bernstein, 1996), responsible for the placement of theories in “nests” (“this” or “that” epistemology, “this” or “that” founding father).

In methodological terms, an equally integrative purpose is evident. Bernstein's sociological method can be described as a scheme for developing languages of description; a language of description “[...] is a translation device by means of which one language is transformed into another” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 160-161):

IL → EL → reality → EL → IL → EL → reality → EL → IL → EL...

IL = internal language of description, which is the “[...] syntax through which a conceptual language is created” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 161). This refers to the theoretical level, to the meanings gathered into a concept or conceptual structure; it refers to the invisible. Here we are talking about knowledge.

EL = external language of description, which is the “[...] syntax through which internal language can describe something other than itself” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 161, our translation). Although EL is also situated at the theoretical level, it needs to be a kind of intermediary between IL and reality; it is EL that activates IL toward the empirical, thus LE has the means to make the invisible visible. Here we are talking about how knowledge is used by the researcher to become research.⁶ If IL refers to a concept or theory used by the educational sociologist in their research, EL refers to the problem, hypotheses to be demonstrated, objectives, categories of analysis, indicators, descriptors, and interpretation of results. All these theoretical and methodological elements of research must be coherently derived from IL so that the researcher can adequately address reality. Obviously, any discussion of syntax must consider the speaker, but that is beside the point here; our intention is precisely to explore the *what of* (“the stuff”) knowledge, not just the *who*, as is customary.

As we can see, the dialectical relationship between theory and practice is fundamental to Bernstein's sociological method for educational research: IL (theoretical framework) guides the EL, which structures the research and provides the researcher with a framework for approaching the empirical. Conversely, the results, a more immediate representation of reality, can be incorporated into the EL to improve the model, such as changes in indicators. In turn, changes in the EL can provide new elements for the sophistication of conceptual language (IL), which becomes stronger, more abstract, and more powerful in describing the empirical. This dialectical relationship allows for the integration of increasingly more empirical and theoretical elements into the IL, resulting in comprehensive, extracontextual theories and potentially generating increasingly consistent external languages of description that can be applied to various research situations and in different contexts.

As Morais and Neves (2007) point out, it is interesting to interpret Bernstein's sociological method as a type of rationalism: knowledge, which must contain increasingly higher levels of abstraction, guides research toward the reality at hand. In research, knowledge is applied, tested, and, if necessary, modified by empirical elements for greater sophistication. This is a common method in experimental sciences and demonstrates that, for Bernstein, (a) what matters are always the empirical educational

⁵ Among the authors who influenced Bernstein are Ruqaya Hasan, Michael Halliday, Mary Douglas, Geroge Mead, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and others; however, the most significant influence was the Social Anthropology of Émile Durkheim, which offered Bernstein not only a broad conceptual framework (classification, ritual, sacred, profane, visible, invisible), but also the very logic of opposite pairs that underpins his theorizing.

⁶ There is a fundamental distinction between knowledge and research that, for post-structuralist language, for example, does not exist: there is no knowledge, only subjectivity and the text.

problems (where we are going) rather than the approach (where we came from), and (b) both research without a theoretical model and a theoretical model that cannot be refined through research and empirical evidence are unfeasible.

Therefore, although the relationships between Sir Karl Popper's Epistemology and Bernstein's Sociology are underexplored in the literature, and although there are many differences, common elements are detectable. Bernstein's sociological method for educational research, like the deductive testing of theories (Popper, 1962), values the empirical testability of theory and the consequent falsification or corroboration of such theory based on research results. This is a fertile path for the growth and development of knowledge.

When examining both the theoretical and methodological aspects in tandem, it becomes evident that his structural theoretical project, which integrates available macrosociological and microsociological theories, has enabled him to develop a highly robust internal language (IL) over the decades. This framework is notably abstract in its capacity for diagnosis, description, transfer, prediction and explanation. His commitment to applying knowledge (IL) to address empirical educational problems has allowed him to create explicit conceptual syntaxes that made the objects under study visible. Consequently, not only allowed him to develop new languages of description (EL), precise empirical descriptions and/or formal models of empirical relationships – from the macro to the micro, the structure to agency, and from quantitative to qualitative aspects -, but allowed the sociologists who engaged with his theories the conditions to do the same. It is essential to evaluate any approach from these empirical and theoretical levels rather than the ideological level (Bernstein, 1975). These theoretical and methodological elements suggest that Bernstein's work is characterized by a strong grammar, leaning more towards vertical than horizontal forms of knowledge.

As early as the 1940s, Parsons (1949) wrote that one of the most disappointing aspects of sociological theory was its lack of accumulation and integration. Students were taught to study “this” or “that” author without any sense of how they might be useful for their research. The inevitable effect of this was that research results, whether positive or negative, lacked meaningful significance for a sufficiently generalized and integrated body of knowledge. Bernstein, in addition to addressing this gap in both the 1970s and 1990s, offered the means to bridge it. Unfortunately, not all scholars in the field of Sociology of Education saw it this way.

Some of Bernstein's leading commentators categorize his work as ontologically socially realist, as it begins with the distinction between knowledge and reality. Reality is perceived as all-encompassing and contradictory, existing independently of knowledge while continuously interacting with it. It consistently surpasses knowledge, remaining “one step ahead.” Reality announces itself, and it is the responsibility of knowledge to endeavor to incorporate it as comprehensively as possible, despite the inherent gap between the two. It is in this gap that the potential arises to make the invisible visible and the unthinkable thinkable; in other words, to convert theoretical terms in empirical ones (Barrett, 2024; Maton, 2014; Moore, 2013a, 2013b). Bernstein's commitment to social realism is evident at both the theoretical and methodological levels of his work. As we have discussed, this is demonstrated through his delineation between internal (IL) and external (EL) languages of description and his endeavor to strengthen his IL, making it more comprehensive and elevated in abstraction to facilitate the development of other languages toward reality.

It is precisely Bernstein's social realism that has enabled him to resonate broadly across the globe and in various fields—including sociolinguistics, education, didactics, the sociology of education and knowledge, and educational policy. This resonance has fostered the development of a vast network of scholars engaged, to varying degrees, with his work. As a social realist, one of Bernstein's primary concerns was the ability of his theory to be applied to concrete realities and to describe and explain them; in his own words, to “tell a story about reality.” The fact that Bernstein formulated “[...] big theories publicly available as empirically testable and refutable propositions” (Halsey, 2001, p. 125) has allowed new generations of education sociologists and scholars from other disciplines to utilize his work in their research, testing, refining, and, when necessary, rejecting his ideas.

As an example, we can cite the professors of the Sociological Studies in the Classroom (ESSA) group at the University of Lisbon, especially Ana Maria Morais, who maintained a very close academic and personal relationship with Bernstein. Within the Science Education field, based on years

of research, Morais and colleagues incorporated their findings into Bernsteinian theory and created the concept of “mixed pedagogy” (Morais; Neves, 2010), expanding the concepts of “visible pedagogy” and “invisible pedagogy” and continuing one of the main concerns of Bernstein's theory: the explication of the own rules and nature of pedagogy. Also, in the Sociology of Knowledge, both Karl Maton's (2009, 2014) Legitimation Code Theory (LCT)⁷ and Michael Young's “powerful knowledge” (Young, 2008; Young; Muller, 2013) derive from Bernstein's (1996, 2000) discourses and knowledge structures and point to the need to consider knowledge beyond the knowing subject, deviating from epistemological relativism, but without falling into essentialisms.

In the Sociology of Education, there are many examples. Stephen Ball has mentioned that Bernstein is “[...] the only general sociological theorist that British sociology of education has ever produced” (Ball, 2001, p. 41), due to his interest in theoretical growth and development. He also mentioned that *On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge* (Bernstein, 1971), besides being the best text ever written in the Sociology of Education, was one of the three texts that inspired him to become a sociologist of education. It is also relevant to highlight that his method for critical analysis of educational policies, the policy cycle (Ball, 1994; Bowe; Ball; Gold, 1992), was profoundly influenced by Bernstein's theory, especially the concept of “recontextualization,” despite Ball's notable and announced inclination towards Foucault's poststructuralism. This inclination becomes clear in the new way of researching, writing, and teaching Sociology of Education, proposed by Ball and Collet-Sabé (2025), as we will mention below.

Michael Apple explains that when he published *Ideology and Curriculum* (Apple, 1979), he had not yet encountered Bernstein's 1970 texts, due to the obstacles imposed by the tradition of sociological research in education in the United States. The author said: “When I first read Bernstein's essays that ultimately went into *Class, Codes, and Control Volume 3*, it was as if I had discovered an entire branch of my own family that I had never known existed.” (Apple, 2001, p. 92). Despite the differences between Bernstein's and Apple's *Sociologies of Education*, the influence and relevance of the former on the latter are unquestionable.

Bernstein's social realist ontology has made his legacy vast and highly inspiring. He is unquestionably one of the most relevant minds the Sociology of Education has ever seen. How, then, does the social realist ontology of Bernstein's work diverge from the new way of researching, writing, and teaching the Sociology of Education suggested by Ball and Collet-Sabé (2025)? Since 2020, Stephen J. Ball and Jordi Collet-Sabé have been presenting outlines for thinking about education in a different, non-school-based way, toward self-formation as a shared activity. The authors conceive of education as a set of activities that begin and end with discomfort as the first step toward caring for oneself, others, the community, and the environment (Ball, 2020; Collet-Sabé; Ball, 2024, 2025). Undoubtedly, these are fundamental contributions to thinking about education amid multiple crises of various kinds. However, they are limited to the reality of central countries. Recontextualizing these suggestions to Brazil's national, regional, and local realities requires considering many variables that the authors did not have to consider.

The authors' suggestions are the logical product of a critique of the ontology not only of Bernstein's work, but also of the founding of modern science itself: reality is external to the rational knowing subject, and must be object of its control, explanation, and improvement. For the authors, this model of conducting Sociology of Education has failed, as it has done nothing more than colonize education, with its ideal theories about “[...] how humans ought to act” (Ball; Collet-Sabé, 2025, p. 33), and restrict it to cycles of hope for possible reforms and despair in the face of challenging situations.

They called all this previous sociological knowledge paraphernalia produced from a redemptive intent, and suggested abandoning it. Instead, they suggested that sociologists of education embrace themselves as moral subjectivities “[...] historically produced in and through technologies and relations of power” (Ball; Collet-Sabé, 2025, p. 32). They advocated a new intellectual practice that is not only intellectual but experiential, one that abandons the attempt to repair education and accepts its irreparable contradictions. In our view, this is a symptomatic critique of poststructuralism, for which the distinction between subjectivity and objective knowledge collapses. It is an ontology that, by understanding that reality is not related to knowledge but is constituted by it, underestimates the harshness of the world and overestimates change through meaning.

⁷ Original: “*Legitimation Code Theory (LCT)*.”

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The irony of this article lies in the necessity to look "back" in order to emphasize the significance of looking "forward." In the second and third sections, we have shown that the Sociology of Education typically functions as a horizontal knowledge structure with a weak grammar, whereas Bernstein's work, when considered in both its theoretical and methodological dimensions, represents a strong grammar, with aspects of vertical forms of knowledge. We aim to establish the unique qualities and significance of Bernstein's contributions, which must be interpreted beyond the tainted readings or, as Moss and Erben (2000) articulate, the frequent intentional misinterpretations and distortions. Furthermore, we believe that the reasons for these misunderstandings have now become evident.

We hope that this discussion has underscored the importance of examining a theory from both its empirical and theoretical dimensions, focusing on its inherent strengths—its conceptual robustness, degree of abstraction, and ability to generate diagnoses, descriptions, transfers, predictions and explanations related to their empirical objects. It is essential for the theory (II) to maintain coherence and to be capable of generating additional languages (ELs) beyond itself. While it is indisputable that the organization, transmission, and acquisition of knowledge rely on social foundations and on the experience, we must clarify that there is a significant distinction between extracting knowledge from the world and merely reducing it to external relationships, as is often seen in epistemological relativism.

Finally, we hope that the ontological differences between Bernstein's work and the new ways of researching, writing, and teaching the Sociology of Education, suggested by Ball and Collet-Sabé (2025), have become clear. While the former conceives that knowledge will relate to reality, the latter conceive that knowledge constitutes reality. In our view, it is Bernstein's social realism that gives due attention to knowledge and the harshness of society and education.

REFERENCES

APPLE, Michael. Ideology, reproduction and educational reform. *Comparative Education Review*, Chicago, v. 22, n. 3, p. 367-387, out. 1978. <<https://doi.org/10.1086/445993>>

APPLE, Michael. *Ideology and curriculum*. New York: Routledge, 1979.

APPLE, Michael. Recontextualizing Basil Bernstein. In: POWER, Sally; AGGLETTON, Peter; BRANNEN, Julia; BROWN, Andrew; CHISHOLM, Lynne; MACE, John (ed.). *A tribute to Basil Bernstein 1924-2000*. Londres: University of London, 2001. p. 91-93.

APPLE, Michael; OLIVEIRA, Neiva Afonso; OLIVEIRA, Avelino da Rosa. Poder, significação e identidade: sociologia crítica da educação nos EUA. *Cadernos de Educação*, Pelotas, n. 9, p. 5-37, jul./dez. 1997. Disponível em: <<https://periodicos.ufpel.edu.br/index.php/caduc/article/view/29029>>. Acesso em: 23/06/2025.

ATKINSON, Paul. *Language, structure and reproduction: an introduction to the sociology of Basil Bernstein*. London: Methuen, 1985.

BALL, Stephen John. *Education reform: a critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994.

BALL, Stephen John. On first reading... In: POWER, Sally; AGGLETTON, Peter; BRANNEN, Julia; BROWN, Andrew; CHISHOLM, Lynne; MACE, John (ed.). *A tribute to Basil Bernstein 1924-2000*. Londres: University of London, 2001. p. 41-42.

BALL, Stephen John. Some sociologies of education: a history of problems and places, and segments and gazes. *The sociological review*, Oxford and Malden, v. 56, n. 4, p. 650-669, 2008. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00809.x>>

BALL, Stephen John. The errors of redemptive sociology or giving up on hope and despair. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, London, v. 41, n. 6, p. 870-880, 2020. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1755230>>

BALL, Stephen John; COLLET-SABÉ, Jordi (ed.). *Against School: thinking education differently*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2025.

BANKS, Olive. *The sociology of education*. London: B. T. Batsford LTD, 1972.

BARRETT, Brian. *Basil Bernstein: code theory and beyond*. New York: Springer, 2024.

BERNSTEIN, Basil. *Class, codes and control: theoretical studies towards a sociology of language*. Volume 1. London: Routledge, 1971.

BERNSTEIN, Basil. *Class, codes and control: towards a theory of educational transmission*. Volume 3. 1. ed. London: Routledge, 1975.

BERNSTEIN, Basil. A educação não pode compensar a sociedade. In: GRÁCIO, Sérgio; STOER, Stoer (ed.). *Sociologia da Educação - II: antologia: a construção social das práticas educativas*. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 1982. p. 19-31.

BERNSTEIN, Basil. *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: theory, research, critique*. 1. ed. London: Taylor & Francis, 1996.

BERNSTEIN, Basil. *Pedagogía, control simbólico e identidad: teoría, investigación y crítica*. 1. ed. Tradução: Pablo Manzano. Madrid: Ediciones Morata, 1998.

BERNSTEIN, Basil. *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: theory, research, critique*. 2. ed. London: Taylor & Francis, 2000.

BEST, Shaun. Basil Bernstein: agency, structure and linguistic conception of class. *Education, Knowledge & Economy*, London, v. 1, n. 1, p. 107-124, mar. 2007. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496890601128233>>

BOWE, Richard; BALL, Stephen John; GOLD, Anne. *Reforming education and changing schools: case studies in policy sociology*. London: Routledge, 1992.

BOWLES, Samuel; GINTIS, Herbert. *Schooling in capitalista America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.

COHEN, David; GARET, Michael. Reforming educational policy with applied social research. *Harvard educational review*, Cambridge, v. 45, n. 1, p. 17-43, fev. 1975. <<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.45.1.816r0525w1283044>>

COLLET-SABÉ, Jordi; BALL, Stephen John. Without school: education as common(ing) activities in local social infrastructures – an escape from extinction ethics. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, v. 72, n. 4, p. 441-456, 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2298776>>

COLLET-SABÉ, Jordi; BALL, Stephen John. The school is irredeemable: proposing discomfort for a different future. In: PINK, William *et al.* (ed.). *Innovative school reforms: international perspectives on*

- reimagining theory, policy, and practice for the future for education. New York: Springer, 2025. p. 185-199.
- DALE, Roger. Shaping the sociology of education over half-a-century. In: DEMAINE, Jack (ed.). *Sociology of education today*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. p. 5-29.
- DAVIES, Brian. Durkheim and the sociology of education in Britain. *Sport, education and society*, London, v. 25, n. 7, p. 712-734, ago. 2020. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1794536>>
- DÍAZ, Mario. Basil Bernstein: el estructuralismo entre la sociolingüística y la educación. *Revista Lenguaje*, Cali, n. 18, p. 47-64, maio 1991. <<https://doi.org/10.25100/lenguaje.v0i18.13925>>
- DÍAZ, Mario; MAINARDES, Jefferson; MARTINS, Manoel Ayusso. Contribuciones de Basil Bernstein a la investigación en educación: entrevista con Mario Díaz Villa. *Práxis Educativa*, Ponta Grossa, v. 20, p. 1-13, 2025. <<https://doi.org/10.5212/PraxEduc.v20.25467.059>>
- DOUGLAS, James. *The home and the school*. London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964.
- DOWLING, Paul. *Basil Bernstein in frame: 'oh dear, is this a structuralist analysis?'*. 1999. Disponível em: <<https://www.pauldowling.me/publications/kings1999/index.html>>. Acesso em: 23/06/2025.
- ESLAND, Geoffrey. Teaching and learning as the organization of knowledge. In: YOUNG, Michael. (ed.). *Knowledge and control: new directions for the sociology of education*. London: Collier Macmillan, 1971. p. 70-115.
- HALSEY, Albert Henry. Provincials and professionals: the British post-war sociologists. *European Journal of Sociology*, Cambridge, v. 23, n. 1, p. 150-175, 1982. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975600003830>>
- HALSEY, Albert Henry. Basil Bernstein. In: POWER, Sally; AGGLETTON, Peter; BRANNEN, Julia; BROWN, Andrew; CHISHOLM, Lynne; MACE, John (ed.). *A tribute to Basil Bernstein 1924-2000*. Londres: University of London, 2001. p. 125-126.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin. *History of the concept of time: prolegomena*. Tradução: Theodore Kisiel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- HINOJAL, Isidoro. Bernstein en la encrucijada de la sociología de la educación. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, Madrid, n. 11, p. 55-74, jul./set. 1980. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/40182820>>
- HOGBEN, Lancelot (ed.). *Political arithmetic: a symposium of population studies*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938.
- KWOK, Henry; SINGH, Parlo. Interpreting and using Basil Bernstein's sociology of education. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, Oxford, p. 1-20, abr. 2024. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1741>>
- LAUDER, Hugh; BROWN, Phillip; HALSEY, Albert Henry. Sociology of education: a critical history and prospects for the future. *Oxford review of education*, Oxford, v. 35, n. 5, p. 569-585, 2009. <<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03054980903216309>>
- MAINARDES, Jefferson; STREMEL, Silvana. Teoria de Basil Bernstein e algumas de suas contribuições para as pesquisas sobre políticas educacionais e curriculares. *Revista Teias*, Rio de Janeiro, v. 11, n. 22, p. 31-54, maio/ago. 2010. Disponível em: <<https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/index.php/revistateias/article/view/24114>>. Acesso em: 23/06/2025.

MATON, Karl. Cumulative and segmented learning: exploring the role of curriculum structures in knowledge-building. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, London, v. 30, n. 1, p. 43-57, jan. 2009. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690802514342>>

MATON, Karl. *Knowledge and knowers: towards a realist sociology of education*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

MATON, Karl; MOORE, Rob. *Social realism, knowledge and the sociology of education*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.

MOORE, Rob. Basil Bernstein: theory, models and the question of method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, London, v. 4, n. 1, p. 13-16, 2001. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570121578>>

MOORE, Rob. *Basil Bernstein: the thinker and the field*. London: Routledge, 2013a.

MOORE, Rob. Social realism and the problem of the problem of knowledge in the sociology of education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, London, v. 34, n. 3, p. 333-353, 2013b. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.714251>>

MORAIS, Ana Maria. Basil Bernstein at the micro level of the classroom. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Abingdon, v. 23, n. 4, p. 559-569, 2002. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569022000038413>>

MORAIS, Ana Maria. Basil Bernstein: sociology for education. In: TORRES, Carlos Alberto; TEODORO, António (ed.). *Critique and utopia: new developments in the sociology of education*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. p. 121-130.

MORAIS, Ana Maria; NEVES, Isabel Pestana. A teoria de Basil Bernstein: alguns aspectos fundamentais. *Práxis Educativa*, Ponta Grossa, v. 2, n. 2, p. 115-130, jul./dez. 2007. <<https://doi.org/10.5212/PraxEduc.v2i2>>

MORAIS, Ana Maria; NEVES, Isabel Pestana. Basil Bernstein as an inspiration for educational research: specific methodological approaches. In: SINGH, Parlo; SADOVNIK, Alan; SEMEL, Susan (ed.). *Toolkits, translation devices and conceptual accounts: essays on Basil Bernstein's sociology of knowledge*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. p. 11-32.

MOSS, Gemma; ERBEN, Michael. Introduction to the linguistics and education: special issue on Knowledge, Identity, and Pedagogy - themes from the work of Basil Bernstein. *Linguistics and Education*, Amsterdam, v. 11, n. 1, p. 1-5, 2000. <[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0898-5898\(99\)00014-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0898-5898(99)00014-5)>

PARSONS, Talcott. *Essays in sociological theory*. Los Angeles: The Free Press, 1949.

PARSONS, Talcott. *A estrutura da ação social: um estudo de teoria social com especial referência a um grupo de autores europeus recentes*. V. I – Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim. Tradução: Vera Joscellyne. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2010.

PETTY, William. *Essays on mankind and political arithmetic*. London: Cassell & Co, 1888.

POPPER, Karl Raimund. *Conjectures and refutations: the growth of scientific knowledge*. Nova York: Basic Books, 1962.

REIN, Martin. Social policy analysis as the interpretation of beliefs. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Abingdon, v. 37, n. 5, p. 297-310, 1971. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367108977836>>

SADOVNIK, Alan. Basil Bernstein's theory of pedagogic practice: a structuralist approach. *Sociology of Education*, Washington, v. 64, n. 1, p. 48-63, 1991. <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2112891>>

SIMMEL, Georg. How is society possible? *American Journal of Sociology*, Chicago, v. 16, n. 3, p. 372-291, nov. 1910. Disponível em: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2763090>>. Acesso em: 23/06/2025.

SINGH, Parlo. Performativity and pedagogising knowledge: globalising educational policy formation, dissemination and enactment. *Journal of Education Policy*, London, v. 30, n. 3, p. 363-384, 2015. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.961968>>

SINGH, Parlo. *Basil Bernstein, code theory, and education: women's contributions*. London: Routledge, 2020.

TENTI-FANFANI, Emilio. Del intelectual orgánico al analista simbólico *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, Buenos Aires, n. 1, p. 19-28, nov. 1994. Disponível em: <https://ridaa.unq.edu.ar/handle/20.500.11807/1287?locale-attribute=pt_BR>. Acesso em: 23/06/2025.

TONIOL, Rodrigo. O cancelamento de Maria Rita Kehl e as armadilhas do identitarismo. *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, 12 fev. 2025. Disponível em: <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2025/02/o-cancelamento-de-maria-rita-kehl-e-as-armadilhas-do-identitarismo.shtml>>. Acesso em: 25/06/2025.

WHITTY, Geoff. *Sociology and school knowledge: curriculum theory, research and politics*. London: Methuen, 1985.

YOUNG, Michael. (ed.). *Knowledge and control: new directions for the sociology of education*. London: Collier Macmillan, 1971.

YOUNG, Michael. *Bringing knowledge back in: from social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education*. London: Routledge, 2008.

YOUNG, Michael. Knowledge, curriculum and the sociology of education. In: ALMEIDA, Silvia de; SOUSA, Francisco; FIGUEIREDO, Maria (org.). *Curriculum autonomy policies*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2022. p. 15-21.

YOUNG, Michael; MULLER, Johan. On the powers of powerful knowledge. *Review of Education*, London, v. 1, n. 3, p. 229-250, out. 2013. <<https://org.doi.10.1002/rev3.3017>>

Submitted: 07/11/2025

Preprint: 07/03/2025

Approved: 09/13/2025

Section editor: Suzana dos Santos Gomes

DECLARATION OF DATA AVAILABILITY

The underlying content of the research text is found in the manuscript.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 - Work planning, literature review, and writing.

Author 2 - Work planning, literature review, and writing.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest at any stage of the preparation and execution of this work.