

Basil Bernstein, Open Concepts, and the Possibility of Change

Basil Bernstein, conceitos abertos e
a possibilidade de mudança

Basil Bernstein, conceptos abiertos
y la posibilidad del cambio

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Reflexión derivada de investigación

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Abstract

In this reflection we make the argument that Bernstein's theory offers an exceptionally powerful resource for analyzing social systems such as education, which critical realists as well as Bernstein have described in similar ways as "open." Bernstein's work has two significant features that contribute to this power, namely its capacity to conceptualize deep structures and organizing principles of education, teaching, and learning, as well as the possibilities it opens for imagining and accounting for alternatives and change through "open concepts." Bernstein's work is thus especially valuable both for analyzing

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educational inequality as well as for developing and testing measures for mitigating it in policy and practice. We argue that one reason for the limited success of many contemporary education reforms has been a tendency to conceive of education as a closed system with causal mechanisms that, ostensibly, always produce the same effects, and where curriculum and instruction can be effectively scripted to produce equitable and reliable opportunities and results. We aim to expose some of the problematic assumptions of these closed conceptions of educational practice through an example of teacher education reform in England and highlight some essential features of Bernstein's sociology of education that can be drawn upon in charting a way back to a more open future for educational thinking.

Keywords:

Basil Bernstein; critical realism; educational theory; educational reform

Resumo

Nesta reflexão, argumentamos que a teoria de Bernstein oferece um recurso excepcionalmente poderoso para analisar sistemas sociais como a educação, que tanto os realistas críticos quanto o próprio Bernstein descreveram de maneira semelhante como “aberto”. A obra de Bernstein possui duas características significativas que contribuem para esse poder: sua capacidade de conceituar estruturas profundas e princípios organizadores da educação, do ensino e da aprendizagem, bem como as possibilidades que abre para imaginar e explicar alternativas e mudanças por meio de “conceitos abertos”. O trabalho de Bernstein é, portanto, especialmente valioso tanto para analisar a desigualdade educacional quanto para desenvolver e testar medidas para mitigá-la em políticas e práticas. Argumentamos que uma das razões para o sucesso limitado de muitas reformas educacionais contemporâneas tem sido a tendência de conceber a educação como um sistema fechado com mecanismos causais que, ostensivamente, sempre produzem os mesmos efeitos, e onde o currículo e o ensino podem ser efetivamente planejados para produzir oportunidades e resultados equitativos e confiáveis. Nosso objetivo é expor algumas das premissas problemáticas dessas concepções fechadas da prática educacional por meio de um exemplo de reforma da formação de professores na Inglaterra e destacar algumas características essenciais da sociologia da educação de Bernstein que podem ser utilizadas para traçar um caminho de volta a um futuro mais aberto para o pensamento educacional.

Palavras-chave:

Basil Bernstein; realismo crítico; teoria educacional; reforma educacional

Resumen

En esta reflexión, argumentamos que la teoría de Bernstein ofrece un recurso excepcionalmente poderoso para analizar sistemas sociales como la educación, que tanto los realistas críticos como Bernstein han descrito de forma similar como “abierta”. El trabajo de Bernstein posee dos características significativas que contribuyen a esta potencia: su capacidad para conceptualizar estructuras profundas y principios organizadores de la educación, la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, así como las posibilidades que abre para imaginar y explicar alternativas y el cambio mediante “conceptos abiertos”. Por lo tanto, el trabajo de Bernstein es especialmente valioso tanto para analizar la desigualdad educativa como para desarrollar y probar medidas para mitigarla en las políticas y la práctica. Argumentamos que una de las razones del éxito limitado de muchas reformas educativas contemporáneas ha sido la tendencia a concebir la educación como un sistema cerrado con mecanismos causales que, aparentemente, siempre producen los mismos efectos, y donde el currículo y la instrucción pueden ser diseñados eficazmente para producir oportunidades y resultados equitativos y confiables. Nuestro objetivo es exponer algunos de los supuestos problemáticos de estas concepciones cerradas de la práctica educativa a través de un ejemplo de reforma de la formación docente en Inglaterra y destacar algunas características esenciales de la sociología de la educación de Bernstein que pueden utilizarse para trazar un camino de regreso hacia un futuro más abierto para el pensamiento educativo.

Palabras clave:

Basil Bernstein; realismo crítico; teoría educativa; reforma educativa

Introduction

Education can have a crucial role in creating tomorrow's optimism in the context of today's pessimism. But if it is to do this then we must have an analysis of the social biases in education. These biases lie deep within the very structure of the educational system's processes of transmission and acquisition and their social assumptions. (Bernstein, 2000, p. xix)

Bernstein, to a unique degree, is primarily the theorist not of reproduction but of interruption: of the principles and possibilities of disordering and disruption, of the structuring of change. (Moore, 2013a, pp. 36-37)

We begin this reflection with two quotations: one made *by* Basil Bernstein, and another made *about* him. Together, they serve to frame our central argument here: that Bernstein's theory offers an exceptionally powerful resource for analyzing social systems such as education, which critical realists (e.g. Bhaskar, 1975) as well as Bernstein (2000, p. 139) himself have similarly described as inherently "open."¹ The quotations point towards two particularly significant features of Bernstein's theorizing that we believe contribute to its power in doing so: (1) its conceptualization of deep structures and organizing principles, and (2) the possibilities it opens for imagining and accounting for alternatives and change. We suggest that these characteristics were rather unique within the sociology of education of Bernstein's time and remain so today, a quarter century after his passing. They are, however, also *replicable* and we argue that, due to their potential for uncovering some of the biases located deep within the structure of education and the processes of teaching and learning, efforts to do so can prove especially valuable both for analyzing educational inequality as well as for developing and testing measures for mitigating it within a policy context that to this point has proven, at best, only marginally successful in accomplishing these aims.

We contend that one reason for the limited success of many contemporary education reforms has been a tendency among them to conceive of education as a closed system wherein various causal mechanisms that, ostensibly, always produce the same effects can be isolated and where curriculum

and instruction can be effectively scripted to produce equitable and reliable opportunities and results. In what follows, we seek to expose some of the problematic assumptions of these closed conceptions of educational practice and to highlight some essential features of Bernstein's sociology of education that can be drawn upon in charting a way back to a more open future for educational thinking.

In contrast to "closed" conceptions of education currently popular among policymakers across the globe (Hordern & Brooks, 2023, 2024, 2025), it is impossible to negate all the events and processes that interact in open social systems to isolate and determine the effects of one causal mechanism. Critical realists have contended that this is because "what happens in an open system is the effect of a conjunction of forces, it is not what one would have predicted from any of those forces taken in isolation" (Collier, 1994, p. 35). Education can be considered a paradigmatic example of an open system: one where factors that include – but are certainly not limited to – teacher quality, curriculum design, and the social backgrounds of students in the classroom are inevitably variable and can be seen to have interdependent yet not-entirely-predictable influences on students' learning opportunities and outcomes. The contingent and unpredictable interactions between multiple variables in open systems make it impossible, for example, for "pedagogic communication" to be "programmed ... and made uniform" (Bernstein, 1990, p. 174) such that a specific educational intervention or teaching strategy can be expected to produce the same effect in any given classroom or with any given student. The "openness" of social systems such as education thus presents a perennial problem for social scientists endeavoring to analyze them.

In considering the significant challenges of researching open systems, critical realists (e.g. Bhaskar, 2015) offer a depth ontology that distinguishes between the realms of the "real," the "actual," and the "empirical." The realm of the "real" encompasses all that *could* happen through the interaction of various natural and social forces, each with differing powers and liabilities, in open social systems. The realm of the "actual" is the site of what in fact *does* happen or emerge out of the myriads of possibilities under different conditions in open systems. And the realm of the "empirical" represents those events and outcomes that happen to be observed and experienced by humans in open social systems (and therefore typically serve as the inherently limited resources that humans draw on in attempting to *explain* these events and outcomes) (Moore, 2013b).

¹ See chapter 7 of Bernstein (2000) for an especially detailed exposition of his effort "to sketch an account which places, in the centre of research, the role of description, especially in the case of ongoing 'open' contexts" (p. 139) such as education. While critical realists use the term "open systems" and Bernstein here uses "'open' contexts," we believe that they are used to capture conditions that are largely similar.

In its efforts towards a more complete “explanatory science of open systems” aimed at discovering “generative mechanisms underlying and explaining” phenomena that have been captured empirically (Collier, 1994, pp. 209-210), critical realism can be considered in part as an attempt to theorize the organizing principles of phenomena that – under various conditions and through interaction with other contingent and not-always-predictable variables in open systems – emerge and can present empirically in different ways and forms. We have termed the concepts capable of supporting such a theorization “open concepts” (Barrett & Hordern, 2026).

Open concepts work to navigate the contingencies inherent within open social systems by theorizing underlying principles that allow for both a dynamic account of the “empirical real” – the real as it has been experienced – as well as of a multitude of alternative outcomes that might be possible within the realm of the “real” – an “open multiplicity from which that which does not yet exist (or, at least, has not yet been recorded) can appear as an ‘event’, ‘news’ or as ‘fresh air’” (De Queiroz, 2011, p. 57; see also Muller, 2004; Rochex, 2011). Open concepts can help researchers traverse and explain relations between different realms within a depth ontology. While it is not possible to accurately predict *exactly* how different phenomena will emerge or present within open systems, open concepts provide a basis for explaining their emergence or presentation as well as for imagining alternatives. For these reasons, we have argued that research into open systems is likely to be best supported by the development and implementation of open concepts (Barrett & Hordern, 2026).

Basil Bernstein’s open concepts

Among the sociologists both of his time and of today, Basil Bernstein’s approach to theory, methodology, and research remains rather unique. Though Bernstein never explicitly articulated an ontology or epistemology – and despite his apparent disinterest in suggestions by others that his theory might reflect a critical realist interpretation of these matters – Rob Moore has described him as a “realist, but without a theory of realism” (2013a, p. 190).² This is because Bernstein developed his theory explicitly through the creation of an internally coherent conceptual

language and the consistent provision of models to support empirical research. The findings generated by this research are subsequently able to “speak back” to the theory to facilitate conceptual refinement and increased explanatory power. According to Moore, such a theory presupposes a realist ontology in that it “addresses (‘engages with’), rather than merely discursively *constructs*, an object which *announces* itself from *outside* the theory” (2013a, p. 125).³ The ability of the real to “announce itself” to the theory means that the theory is always open to further development.

In an especially innovative and insightful effort to describe a condition that characterizes *any* research involving theory and data, Bernstein (2000) described a “discursive gap” that exists between the two. This is the idea that there is always “distance” between concepts and their empirical referents or realizations. Bernstein suggested further that productively navigating this gap in research requires the development of two different but related “languages of description”: one “internal” and one “external.” The internal language is designed to conceptualize or model the organizing principles of practices and the external language to describe “what is to count as an empirical referent” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 133) in the real world. In other words:

The internal language of description refers to the syntax whereby a conceptual language is created. The external language of description refers to the syntax whereby the internal language can describe something other than itself. [...] Internal languages are the condition for constructing invisibles, external languages are the means of making those invisibles visible, in a non-circular way. (Bernstein, 2000, pp. 132-133).

According to Moore, what Bernstein’s theory does “*in the first instance* is to generate from within its *internal* language of description a range of *possible* ‘somethings’ ... any of which may or may not be realized in actuality in the world in a particular time and place” (2013b, p. 127). The theory’s external language of description is developed to provide

² Moore was a student and contemporary of Bernstein. He became one of the principal founders of social realism as a pragmatic application of some of critical realism’s core philosophical principles to the sociology of education’s more substantive concerns with educational practice. For more on Moore’s contributions here, see Barrett (2024a).

³ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that it may not be possible to map Bernstein’s theory directly onto a critical realist account of the realms of the real without some recontextualization. In what follows, we present Bernstein’s conceptualization of an internal language of description (theory) as a means for engaging with the realm of the “real,” his conceptualization of an external language of description as a means for engaging with the realm of the “empirical,” and the discursive gap that exists between languages of description as representative of the possibilities that can emerge within the realm of the “actual.”

criteria for *recognizing* these “somethings” should they present empirically while acknowledging that anything experienced in the realm of the empirical real is but one realization of a multitude of possibilities (Muller, 2004).

An internal language of description represents a conceptual language that works to specify objects for analysis at a theoretical level. However, to avoid tautological analyses of these objects, the theory also requires an external language of description to “provide the rules for their empirical recognition, description and modalities of realisation (that is the different forms the same object can take)” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 91). In other words, it must be “open” to and able to engage with a range of empirical referents. As a “data-near device,” an external language of description serves to accomplish this by establishing what are to count as “identifiable instances ... that can unambiguously be translated into the conceptual categories of the internal language” (Moore & Muller, 2002, p. 634). Each language of description thus serves as a “translation device” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 132) for “reading” between theory and data or vice versa in open social systems such as education.

Some possibilities of translating between internal and external languages of description have been clearly demonstrated in studies (e.g. Barrett, 2017; Hoadley, 2006, 2008; Morais, 2002; Morais & Neves, 2001, 2011; Morais *et al.*, 2004) drawing on Bernstein’s (1977) concepts of classification and framing. Classification refers to the degree of boundary maintenance or insulation between different contexts or categories. In terms of education, classification may refer to the degree of insulation between the school and factors external to it, such as students’ everyday experiences. It can also refer to relations internal to the school, such as the strength of the boundaries between subjects in a curriculum, and even to how students and teachers are organized in terms of classroom space. Framing refers to the locus of control within contexts or categories. When applied to contexts of teaching and learning, framing can conceptualize the relative “degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship” (Bernstein, 1977, p. 89). Classification (C) and framing (F) may each be relatively stronger (+C, +F) or weaker (-C, -F) and may vary independently of each other (e.g. +C, -F; -C, +F).

As an internal language aimed at theorizing organizing principles of educational practice, the concepts of classification and framing are rather abstract

but remain “open” for application in the empirical analysis of dynamic social systems. However, an external language or translation device is necessary to identify what stronger or weaker classification and/or framing might “look like” in practice. Such devices have been created in research drawing on classification and framing (as well as in other work, such as that drawing on concepts from Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014), adopting a realist methodology)⁴ and “typically comprise a concept, indicators of how the concept is realized empirically, criteria against which relations with data can be decided, and examples from the data” (Maton & Chen, 2016, p. 31). For example, a table (6.2, p. 79) that details an external language of description created by Morais *et al.* (2004) as a translation device to support their analysis of framing (internal language of description) includes indicators ranging from very strong (F++) to very weak (F--) framing, criteria for determining what would “count” as each of these “varieties” of framing if encountered empirically (e.g. “The teacher explores contents according to a rigid order which is never altered even when children intervene” for very strong framing, F++), and examples from transcripts (e.g. “Ronaldo reads aloud the material needed for the realization of an experiment planned by his group. David, who is part of another group, wants to ask a question. ‘No, sorry, we are leaving doubts to the end’ (Teacher)” for very strong framing, F++).

The dynamic relationship between internal and external languages of description detailed here allows for translation between theory and data in open systems (Bautier, 2011), the lack of which is often bemoaned across the sociology of education more broadly. Further, the discursive gap between languages of description that stand in open relation to one another (Davies, 2011) allows for new possibilities and understandings to emerge (Moore & Muller, 2002) based on the ways that phenomena conceptualized as possible within the realm of the real appear or behave when actualized and encountered in the realm of the empirical. Therefore, the theory always remains open for testing, revision, and development. The relationship between languages of description allows for engagement with the “chaos” (Hasan, 2005, p. 52) inherent in open systems: what Bernstein referred to as “the ambiguity which lies

⁴ See Maton & Chen (2016) for a detailed and exceptionally lucid account of the development of an external language of description as a translation device to support educational research; see especially Table 2.2 within the chapter (p. 44) for an example of how the translation device can be clearly and simply presented in a table form that is easily available for critique and replication by other researchers.

at the heart of the social" (2000, p. 92). In Moore's summation, the relationship between Bernstein's languages of description lends the "methodological 'depth'" (which can be recontextualized as it relates to the ontological depth present in critical realist conceptualizations of the three levels of the real discussed earlier) that makes it possible to "reach out from the theory into the world is a way that is rarely the case with other theorists" (Moore, 2001, p. 368) and, perhaps more importantly, is less rigid and more realistic than the closed conceptualizations of educational practice adopted by the recent reforms to teacher education detailed next.

A closed system in action – and how Bernstein can expose its problematics

The features of Bernstein's theory highlighted thus far carry considerable potential for impacting contemporary policy and practice in education systems beyond the level of critique. However, while authors such as Beck (2009) and Singh (2015) have exemplified the use of Bernstein's work to generate nuanced and powerful analyses of problematic assumptions embedded in educational reforms, it is often the case that policymakers appear to bypass the type of theorizing offered by Bernstein and other scholars in the sociology (and philosophy) of education to instead advance "closed" conceptualizations of educational practice and educational research. Recent reforms to teacher education in England provide an apposite illustration of this "closing of educational thought" (Barrett & Hordern, 2026), as will be discussed below. The assumptions underpinning such reforms illustrate a view of education as formulaic and deconceptualized (or "programmed" and "made uniform" as Bernstein (1990, p. 174) put it), with limited scope for the recursiveness and moral intent that Biesta (2015) emphasizes as characterizing the ontology of educational practice or the openness and possibility that Bernstein's (1990, 2000) work suggests.

Between the years of 2019 and 2025 the UK Government introduced a number of reforms to initial teacher education and early career professional development, including the "accreditation" of all initial teacher programs through a centralized process controlled by the Department for Education (DfE) and the introduction of the Core Content Framework (CCF) and Early Career Framework (ECF), which were latterly amalgamated into the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (see Hordern & Brooks, 2024, 2025; Mutton & Burn, 2024). The

CCF, ECF, and ITTECF are notable in that they set out a centrally controlled framework for determining teacher competence in a set of specified domains (e.g. "managing behaviour" and "adaptive teaching") and a list of recommended academic literature detailed in the documents and underpinning the approach taken to teacher development (Hordern & Brooks, 2023, 2024). Teacher educators are expected to design programs aligned with this centrally prescribed selection of educational knowledge to meet the expectations of Ofsted, the inspection agency, and maintain the continued accreditation of said programmes (DfE, 2022a, 2022b).

The selection of literature in CCF, ECF and ITTECF is notable for its focus on certain types of educational research – particularly that identified by Furlong and Whitty (2017) as a "new science" of educational knowledge alongside various influential popular texts, and for the *absence* of references to sociological, philosophical, and historical research into education (with the exception of one paper) (Hordern & Brooks, 2023). There is also an absence of research that might be described as distinctively *educational* in the terms of Biesta (2015), Deng (2020), Noddings (2003), or other internationally renowned writers on pedagogical and curriculum matters. The overall impression of these reforms is of an attempt to "close" the range of educational ideas and practices made available to novice teachers as part of a broader process of narrowing the focus of teaching activity to "improving" measurable attainment in specified areas to the exclusion of wider consideration of socialization, subjectification, and individual formation (Biesta, 2015; Hordern & Brooks, 2024). There are some parallels here with attempts to control pedagogy through scripted lesson plans, which Shalem (2017) discusses in the context of South Africa. Shalem notes the importance of teachers' "strong conceptual knowledge" in identifying what "evaluative criteria should count in the topic of the lesson and how to make these explicit" (2017, p. 185), but this can be deemed superfluous if schools and education systems rely on scripting pedagogy or narrowing teachers' professional knowledge to a set of (supposedly universal) cause-effect mechanisms.

In Bernsteinian terms, the teacher education and professional development reforms in England are remarkable for several reasons. Firstly, they introduce a form of "official pedagogy" that illustrates the contemporary dominance of the official over the pedagogic recontextualizing fields in teacher education in England (Hordern & Brooks, 2024), a controlling of the pedagogic device through a narrowing of what it is possible to select, appropriate, and trans-

form (i.e. recontextualize) within teacher education. Rather than introducing novice teachers to the notion that teaching is a thoughtful process involving a range of possible pedagogic modalities (as outlined by Barrett, 2017; Hoadley, 2008; Morais & Neves, 2011) that requires a degree of openness and pedagogical judgement, the CCF, ECF, and ITTECF assert that teaching is a linear input-output process that suggests that “intervention” x will lead to “outcome” y . The implication is that the only “research” that is needed is technical prescription that ignores the complex dynamics that exist between student motivation and interest, content, and teaching practice. Thus, any type of more nuanced educational research that involves considering the relation between internal or external languages of description and the discursive gap between theory and data is deemed irrelevant (at least for consideration by teachers).

The selection of literature, as noted above, ignores the “foundations of education” or “educational foundations,” disciplinary traditions of educational research that have been developed over many years in the UK, USA, Australia, and other countries, and the continental European traditions. The emphasis is on reinforcing a *strong classification* between the work of teachers in schools and the educational ideas produced in higher education. This can be interpreted as an exercising of state power over the pedagogic device so that longer term reforms that align educational practice closely with the assumed needs of the economy can continue without the potential distraction of more “open” educational thinking offered by more sociological or philosophical perspectives (see Hordern, Muller & Deng, 2024).

It is worth dwelling here a little on what these reforms to teacher development, with their technicist and scientific assumptions, suggest about the relationship between educational practice and research, and why this is problematic. In so doing we should consider why it is important that education is seen as an open system that might be most effectively analyzed by educational research drawing on open concepts such as those developed by Bernstein (as well as why this should be introduced to teachers). Educational practice is best seen as involving “recursive” processes (Biesta, 2015) that can be prepared for but not definitively predicted, and that always involve the exploration and making of meaning (Smeyers & Smith, 2014). Hopmann (2015) and curriculum scholars such as Gericke *et al.* (2018) draw our attention to the dynamic relation between students, content, and teacher practice as explored in the *didaktik* tradition, and this can be seen as central to the meaning-making process. Noddings (2003)

asserts wisely that education concerns the generation of “intellectual enthusiasm” but also the development of students as whole persons and “relations of care and trust” (pp. 249–250), a view that coheres well with Biesta’s notion of “subjectification” as the development of “our freedom as human beings and, more specifically, our freedom to act or to refrain from action” (2020, p. 93). For Biesta, at least, the distinctiveness of educational practice opens up the notion that some activities that take place within educational institutions or which are labelled as education could in fact be “non-educational” (Biesta, 2015; see also Hordern, 2023), and thus could be particularly apposite for some of the excessively closed examples of scripted pedagogy in South Africa (Shalem, 2017), and the recent reforms to teacher education in England (Hordern & Brooks, 2023, 2024).

All these valuable insights suggest that educators need to be inducted into the making of well-grounded judgements on the basis that educational practice has goods and purposes that take account of the diverse communities which schools serve and of the diverse interests and motivations that students bring to schools. Educational researchers thus need “open” theories that can explore the openness of this educational reality, navigating and unpacking the realms of the empirical, actual, and real, and raising questions of equity, power, and the changing nature of educational knowledge (Moore, 2013b; Barrett, 2024b). To grasp the educational practice of which they are a constituent part, and to make good judgements within that practice, teachers in schools and colleges need induction into such “open” theorizing and its concomitant “open” concepts.

Conclusion

Bernstein posited a relationship between the macro level of social structure, the meso level of educational institutions, and the micro level of classroom practice that shapes what gets taught, how, to whom, and with what consequences (Singh, 2018). In adopting this focus, Bernstein concluded that education plays a significant role in the reproduction of social inequality. He was far from alone in doing so within the sociology of education at that time; this has remained an abiding interest since its inception. However, Bernstein’s approach to addressing this perennial issue was unique within the field. While Bernstein appreciated the sociology of education’s efforts to explore the ways in which the structure and practice of schooling contributed to unequal opportunities and outcomes for different groups of students, he felt that its explanations too often tended towards

superficiality. Bernstein's code theory endeavored to dig below the surface and reveal the principles underlying the relationship between schooling and inequality (Barrett, 2024b).

As a result of the relationship that his theory demands between internal and external languages of description, Bernstein's concepts often, though not always,⁵ aim at theorizing organizing principles – the deep structures intimated in the first epigraph that began this article – of practices that, when actualized, can be captured empirically in any number of “conceptually specifiable” (Moore, 2004, p. 135) manifestations. These practices are contingent upon social, historical, and political conditions, but they are not fully determined by them. Others – including the “previously unthinkable and the not yet thought” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31) intimated in the second epigraph that began this article – can be imagined, developed, and implemented in efforts towards social and educational equity. Bernstein's ideas can thus be used not only to explain how social inequalities are reproduced through schooling but also to think about what sort of interventions might work in *challenging* these processes. This, we might argue, is vitally important for teachers and educational researchers alike, and should be a constituent element of educational reform processes.

Further, the relationship between internal and external languages of description can work to strengthen what Bernstein (2000) termed the “grammar” – essentially, the relationship between ideas or concepts and their referents – of the sociology of education, a field that Bernstein saw as “conceptually weak” (Moore & Muller, 2002, p. 628). A strengthened grammar can support not only more thorough and responsive analyses of open social systems but, perhaps most importantly, their ongoing replication and revision as the methods, concepts, and translation devices employed in them are made explicitly available for other researchers to use and adapt (Maton & Chen, 2016).

In summary, we have argued here that Bernstein's work is indispensable for the exploration of the “open” system of educational practice and is essential in the process of considering and critiquing proposals for educational reform. Bernstein's open concepts provide a grip on the empirical while unpacking and problematizing the actual and outlining the real.

⁵ This is because Bernstein's concepts have different forms and functions. Some are clarifying ideas, internal to the theory, which are somewhat removed from and less capable of being enacted on data. Others are more capable of driving research because of their ability to target organizing principles and account for change (Barrett, 2024b).

They are the antithesis of the “closed” approaches to educational research and practice that appear to be increasingly preferred by policymakers in some jurisdictions as discussed above. We therefore greatly value the opportunity to contribute to this special issue as a means of furthering the international discussion on the ongoing potential and possibility of Bernstein's work.

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