ANALYZING THE CURRICULUM

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Abstract – The paper presents a general description of curriculum studies made in sociology of education and comparative education in the past decade. It discusses what the author thinks are examples of general areas of this research, falling under the headings of (1) structural/functional studies; (2) studies in the ‘new’ sociology of education; and (3) ethnomethodological studies. The author argues that the first two areas take, as resources, items which need to be made topics of study. He further contends that ethnomethodology provides the most heuristic approach to curriculum studies because it makes the ontology of the curriculum and all its features problematic.

Résumé – L'article présente une description générale des études sur le curriculum faites dans les domaines de la sociologie de l'éducation et de l'éducation comparée au cours de ces dix dernières années. L'auteur traite de ce qu'il estime être des exemples de domaines généraux de cette étude se rangeant sous les rubriques des (1) études structurelles/fonctionnelles; (2) études portant sur la ‘nouvelle’ sociologie de l'éducation; et (3) études ethnométhodologiques. L'auteur soutient que les deux premiers domaines utilisent comme ressources des points dont on doit faire des sujets d'étude. Selon lui, l'ethnométhodologie offre le moyen le plus heuristique d'approcher les études sur le curriculum parce qu'elle fait problématique l'ontologie du curriculum et de toutes ses caractéristiques.


Introduction

The purpose of the following discussion is fourfold: first, it is to describe a small number of examples from the last decade of work in sociology of education and comparative education, devoted to analyses of the curriculum; secondly, it is to discuss in a critical fashion the conceptual bases which
underlay this work; thirdly, it is to present a radically new perspective in sociology of education which suggests a quite different approach to conceptualizing and studying the curriculum; and fourthly, it is to discuss the possible contribution which this new approach might be able to make to the quandary of relating theory and practice in the study of education.

In any endeavor of this kind, there are bound to be serious omissions and oversights in respect to the work selected for analysis. Apologies are offered in advance to colleagues whose work ought to have been mentioned but has not been, either through error or choice, or because of the limitations of time and space under which we all must labor.

I have chosen to comment on work in those sociological and comparative studies of the curriculum which are most familiar to me — and which I feel represent some of the most significant trends and fashions in this area of research. In this respect, I have drawn heavily on the work of Torsten Husén and the IEA studies; the work of Michael Young, beginning with his publication of *Knowledge and Control* (1971), and that of those associated with Young and his approach — such as Pierre Bourdieu (1974), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976), and Michael Apple (1978), the work of John Eggleston (1977) and Marten D. Shipman *et al.* (1974), and that of Paul H. Hirst (1975).

It is immediately evident from the above list that most of the work to be discussed has been done in Britain or North America. Bourdieu is the major exception. However, the intellectual foundations for this work reflect a more extensive European/North American inheritance found in the work of Durkheim and Marx, as appropriate. In other words, it can be shown that the theoretical and conceptual models underlying choice of research topic and method of study derive both from the assumptions of Durkheim — that the world of social phenomena exists “out there” in the natural order of things, objects available for study — and from Marx’s concern with knowledge as an epiphenomenon of social class interests.

However, rather than attempting to provide an interpretation (or possibly a misinterpretation) of these eminent social theorists, I will instead treat them when necessary for a sound discussion of the work at hand. The main thrust in so doing will be to argue that the theoretical formulations of work on curriculum in the past ten years has generally proceeded along two lines simultaneously — structural functionalism and neo-Marxism — which together have constituted the mainstream of sociological and comparative work in both Europe and North America. I will also argue that a third formulation is developing which is heuristically and practically preferable. This formulation has developed from the work of Edmund Husserl in phenomenology, Alfred Schütz in phenomenological sociology, and Harold Garfinkel, Harvey Sacks and Emmanuel Schegloff in ethnomethodology and conversational analysis.