

Why democratising education is possible

David Rose
University of Sydney

In his last book, Bernstein presents us with a contradiction. He starts with a message of hope, 'a simple, if not naïve condition for effective democracy', which includes three 'pedagogic democratic rights of 'enhancement', 'inclusion' and 'participation'. But he also tells us that 'the school necessarily produces a hierarchy based on success and failure of students', and that because 'the school must disconnect its own internal hierarchy of success and failure from ineffectiveness of teaching', so 'failure is attributed to inborn facilities (cognitive, affective) or to the cultural deficits relayed by the family' (2000:xxiv-v). If this hierarchy is a necessary product of the school, how can we ever achieve the conditions for democracy?

The answer I think lies within Bernstein's criticism, that we have to stop attributing failure to differences in students' 'abilities' or their language or cultural backgrounds, and admit instead that failure is a consequence of ineffective teaching. It is not good enough to value students' 'differences' in the primary school when these differences translate to failure in the high school, nor to blame students' failure in the high school on ineffective teaching in the primary school, nor to blame the ideologies of the education system or the curriculum. We should insist instead, that all teachers need to know how to teach all their students to succeed, here and now, whatever their contexts.

This paper offers a program designed in three parts to offer teachers these skills. The first part is a model of teaching and learning as a social process, not just between a learner and teacher, but between a teacher and thirty or more students in a classroom. The second is a model of teaching and learning as a hierarchy of activity, from the level of curriculum programs, to lesson activities, to cycles of interaction between teachers and learners. The third is a model of pedagogic modalities, including spoken interaction, reading and writing, and visual and manual modes of meaning. To make the program successful, teachers need a lot of new knowledge about pedagogy and language. But more importantly, they need the skills to analyse the tasks they expect of students, the texts they expect them to read and write, and the activities they use to teach them. The core of the program then, is to make teachers into researchers of their own practice.