

SOCIAL THEORY AND RESEARCH IN MES

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AIMS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

In this symposium we intend to explore the ways in which theoretical frameworks drawn from the field of sociology may and do inform research in mathematics education. We will consider the various ways in which current research by MES participants makes use of theory associated with, for example, the work of Bernstein, Bourdieu or Foucault and will discuss how such frameworks can shape our research questions and methodologies and form a basis for change in mathematics education. The symposium will also consider the importance and influence of the various ideological stances of researchers in identifying research questions, designing research projects and interpreting research data.

RATIONALE FOR RELEVANCE TO MES

The MES community encompasses a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to research in the area of mathematics education and society. This is perhaps inevitable within a multidisciplinary field such as mathematics education and much is to be gained from the contributions of these different perspectives. There is a danger, however, of 'cherry picking' ideas from theories arising within diverse disciplines such as sociology, psychology or anthropology without following through the implications of the theoretical frameworks within which the ideas were originally situated. While this can lead to useful insights, its explanatory and predictive power tends to be limited and it is unlikely to provide adequate support for action to effect change.

Our interest in proposing this symposium is to develop a fuller understanding of the contribution that sociological theories make to work in mathematics education and to consider what might be the characteristics of a framework with strong potential to support our understanding of mathematics education within its societal and political context. In particular, we aim to:

1. appreciate the influence that social/sociological perspectives have had on the development (and activity) of mathematics education as a field of research;
2. ask questions that we believe are significant in searching for a more principled, sociologically informed framework. These questions include:
 - What issues does a given framework sensitise us to - and what does it not allow us to address?

- What kind of research questions does it enable us to raise about mathematics education within its social context?
- How does it support us to explore issues in mathematics education systematically?
- Does it provide us with new or alternative insights into important issues in mathematics education?
- Does it provide a basis for formulating proposals for change in mathematics education?

PROPOSED CONDUCT OF THE SYMPOSIUM

There will be two sessions of the symposium. The first session will centre around discussion of the question “Why use sociological frames?” Reading(s) will be provided in advance through the MES website.[1] The second session will take as its starting point current work in mathematics education that makes use of sociological theories. A common theme in both sessions will be a ‘case study’ of a research problem or practical situation within mathematics education. Participants will work with chosen theoretical constructs to formulate research questions and to design approaches to data collection and analysis.

NOTE

1. The readings have yet to be finally agreed but current suggestions are:

Nash, R.: 2002, ‘Numbers and Narratives: further reflections on the sociology of education’. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23(3), 397-412.

Nash, R.: 2006, ‘Bernstein and the explanation of social disparities in education: a realist critique of the socio-linguistic thesis’. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27(5), 539-553.