

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes for Students**

### **Education and Training**

**Differential Educational Achievement (3)**

### A. Inequality Within The School.

1. In this final set of notes we are going to look at the way schools in Britain are socially organised as a means of exploring differential educational achievement. Specifically, we will discuss the idea that schools, as a form of social organisation, do have some measurable effect upon the life chances of children of different classes, genders and ethnic groups.

- It is important, when looking at the way schools are socially organised, to keep in mind the idea that factors operating outside the school (home life, class background, racial and sexual discrimination, etc.) do not cease to have an influence once a child enters the school. Schools alone are clearly not responsible for the creation of different levels of educational achievement.

2. When considering the factors involved in differential achievement we need to recognise that the social characteristics of by different children have an affect on the way they are treated within the education system. Simply because we may reject the idea that something like "parental attitudes" alone does not explain differential achievement does not mean that, in the context of the way in which teachers behave towards children in the school, for example, such factors are unimportant.

3. Before we look in some detail at the above, it would be useful to briefly return to the question of "intelligence" versus "environment" as a source of educational differentiation - if only to sensitise you to the idea that the crucial variable involved in educational success or failure is the social environment into which a child is born.

- As we have seen, one form of explanation for differential educational achievement is that children inherit different levels of intelligence genetically:

In simple terms, the more intelligent the parents, the greater the likelihood of their having intelligent offspring:

- Middle / upper class children are seen as inherently more capable of dealing with abstract, academic, knowledge than their working class peers - and this seems to be confirmed by looking at relative success and failure rates in education.

- However, it is important that we do not confuse the appearance of something with its reality. Simply because there is a correlation between measured intelligence, social class and educational success does not mean that the latter is necessarily caused by the former (the reverse might also be a valid interpretation).

- Psychologists such as Jensen and Eysenck, however, argue that the relationship between the three is quite clear-cut:
  - People of higher intelligence achieve educational success
  - Educational success gives the ability to move into higher status work.
  - High status employment is, by definition, middle class.
- In this respect, social class is simply a dependent variable - it results from the relationship between intelligence and education - not a crucial variable in its own right. In this sense, social class is not a factor in differential educational achievement since it is the product, not the cause, of such differences.

4. Sociologically, it is important that we do not treat this relationship uncritically - that we do not simply "take it as given". We need to devise a way of testing this hypothesis to discover whether or not social class, for example, is either a crucial factor in determining educational success or simply a product of the relationship between innate intelligence and the education system.

- One test of this hypothesis is to compare the educational experiences of children of the same measured intelligence, but from different social classes. For example:

"Class and sex differences also have a major influence on access to higher education. Evidence of this was provided by the Robbins Committee Report on higher education [1963]. The committee found that, of the children born in 1940-41, 45% from professional groups went into higher education compared with only 4% of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers. When measured IQ was held constant there were very significant social class differences: Of those pupils with very high IQ (130 or more), children from non-manual families were twice as likely to do a degree course as working-class children".

- Michael Williams ("Society Today", 1986) has noted:

"It is worth emphasising that the gender distribution of achievement cannot be explained in terms of 'intelligence'. The marked disparity in the educational performance of girls and boys exists in spite of the fact that the average IQ levels of the two groups are virtually identical. This information alone should make us sceptical of claims that IQ is strong determinant of patterns of educational success."

5. We need to outline the reasons for the belief that schools do have some affect upon pupils' ability to achieve educational qualifications and, in this respect, we can begin by outlining a basic "input - output" model of the relationship between a child's social background and the organisation of the school.

**B. Input and Output.**

1. One way to discover whether or not schools are neutral agencies or actively engaged in the differentiation of children on the basis of class, gender and ethnicity - is to look at an "input-output" model of the educational system:

- Children bring into the school environment different cultural inputs (family and class background, etc.).
- If the output from the educational system (educational achievement) more or less reflects differences in input, we can conclude that the school environment has little or no effect on educational achievement.
- If educational output is significantly different, we can conclude that schools do have a marked affect upon educational achievement.

2. As we have seen in relation to the relative achievement levels between children of the same measured intelligence and different social class, it is evident that the school environment does have an impact upon achievement. To paraphrase Nell Keddie ("Tnker, Tailor: The Myth of Cultural Deprivation", 1973), if we, as sociologists, focus our attention on the supposed deficiencies of children (in terms of cultural deprivation, for example), we may fail to notice the shortcomings of schools.

3. We have also seen that the educational performance of pupils is not necessarily fixed over the time that they are in the school environment. If this were the case, working class pupils would always do relatively badly within the school and middle / upper class pupils would always do relatively well.

4. To explore the possible effect that teachers have on the educational performance of their pupils (and, by extension, to test the relative influence that factors external to the school contribute to a child's educational success or failure) Nash ("Keeping In With Teacher", 1972) argues that we should place teachers in a central role in the educational process.

- However, rather than seeing the teaching role in relatively passive terms (such as the role proposed by Marxists such as Althusser, Bowles and Gintis and so forth), Nash argues that we should see this role as a more active one; a role, in short, that helps to create and perpetuate educational differences.

5. Nash suggests that one way of empirically exploring the teaching role is to use Kelly's "Personal Construct Theory". This involves the idea that an individual views significant events and people in their life through what are called "personal bi-polar constructs". That is, in terms of a dichotomy between two, opposed, ideas (for example, in terms of "good or bad", "clever or stupid", "quiet or noisy").

- The first step in the process of understanding how teachers view their pupils is to find out how an individual views the relative value of two ideas (for example, does a teacher value a quiet pupil rather than a noisy pupil; do they value a clever pupil over a stupid pupil and so forth). These values are personal (subjective) in that they are created by individual teachers; however, since we are also talking about a teaching role we would expect a broad convergence between individual teachers about the things they have learned to value while performing the role of teacher (the majority of teachers, for example, would value quietness over noisiness in their pupils because the former makes the teaching process much easier for the teacher).

- Once the relative values have been established, it is then possible to apply a four-point scale to each pair of possible values. For example:

1. Is someone (quiet / clever / good)?
2. Does someone tend to be (quiet / clever / good)?
3. Does someone tend to be the opposite of (quiet / clever / good)?
4. Is someone the opposite of (quiet / clever / good)?

- In the statistical interpretation and presentation of teacher attitudes, each paired quality is scored (1 to 4) on the basis of the above. Thus, if a teacher values a quiet pupil more than a noisy pupil, then the former scores 1 and the latter scores 4 in relation to the "quiet / noisy" dichotomy. Overall, the pupils who score the lowest across a range of valued qualities are the ones who the teacher regards most highly.

6. Nash argues that this "teacher regard" is translated, through classroom interaction, into higher educational achievement. Those children who are most highly regarded by the teacher are the ones who eventually achieve educational success in terms of the various qualifications that they achieve.

7. Nash argues there is a strong (positive) correlation between a child's "construct rank" (the way a teacher perceives them) and their achievement. However, contrary to the theories that we have looked at earlier (especially Conflict theories), he argues that there is a weak correlation between social class background and achievement.

- For Nash, the most important variable here is the perception a teacher has of a pupil's social class (their subjective interpretation of a pupil's class background).

- Nash found that this perception tends to be put in terms of home background rather than in specific class terms (a dichotomy between a "good" and a "bad" home background). The implication is that a "good home background" correlates to being middle / upper class and a "bad home background" correlates with being working class - but the fit is not perfect. A child from a working class home can be perceived by their teacher as being from a good home, just as the opposite might be the case. All kinds of subjective interpretations will come into play in the perception of a child's home background (how the child is dressed, how it speaks, the teacher's contacts with a child's parents and so forth).

8. Thus, while objective social class is invariably found to be important, Nash argues that the relationship between social class and achievement is opaque, rather than transparent. That is, social class tends to be filtered through a teacher's perception of the child's home background and, therefore, the way the teacher identifies and interprets this background is going to be the most important factor in a child's eventual educational achievement. The implications of this argument are clear:

- If a working class child can, through their behaviour, appearance, etc., convince a teacher they are from a "good background", their chances of educational success are enhanced. Since a "poor home background" is associated in the mind of the teacher with low ability, the labelling of a child in this way leads to a progressive interpretation and confirmation (in the teacher's mind) of a child's ability.
- Bad behaviour, for example, is taken to be indicative of a poor home background which is taken, in turn, to be indicative of low ability.
- A child has low ability because of their poor home background which results in bad behaviour - a classic example of what Interactionists term a self-fulfilling prophecy (a teacher believes something to be true and this belief leads him / her to make it come true)...

9. Nash's overall conclusion is worth noting before we investigate further themes relating to the part played by schools in the process of educational differentiation.

"Certainly children of low social origin do poorly at school because they lack encouragement at home, because they use language in a different way from their teachers, because they have their own attitudes to learning and so on. But also because of the expectations their teachers have of them".

10. We can widen the scope a little further by looking at the Interactionist perspective on education a little more closely. Bilton ("Introductory Sociology", 1987), for example, argues, in relation to the type of Interactionist ideas put forward by writers such as Keddie, that:

"Action theorists [Interactionist sociologists] insist upon the capacity of teachers and pupils for rational action based upon their own understanding of the experience of school. The 'failure' of working-class children, or of girls, or children of West Indian origin, they would say, is not predetermined by their abilities or their attitudes, nor by their place in the sexual and social division of labour. This failure has to be 'created' anew for each new generation of pupils, and in the act of creation the interaction of teachers and of pupils themselves will play an important part. Schools, then, do not merely react to children with varying capacities and qualities in a neutral way; they play an active part in creating children who are more or less educable, more or less knowledgeable, and more or less manageable."

### Streaming

1. Under the tripartite system of post-war educational organisation in Britain, the effects of attempting to distinguish between children on the basis of "intelligence" could be clearly seen, since pupils were allocated to different schools (Grammar, Secondary Modern or Technical) on the basis of an intelligence test:

- Grammar schools, with their emphasis upon academic attainment and the benefits this endowed in terms of entrance to Higher Education, professional employment and so forth, rapidly came to develop a reputation as "good" schools - the kind of (State) school that your child needed to attend if he / she was to have any real hope of advancement. In consequence, competition for (limited) places was intense and, overwhelmingly, the intake of such schools was from the middle and upper classes.
- Secondary Moderns, with their limited academic choice and their emphasis upon "practical" expertise, came to be seen as the kind of schools to which potential educational failures went. Their intake was overwhelmingly working class.

2. Almost regardless of the educational qualities of such schools, each type became associated with a different form of status. Compounding this status differential, Yates and Pidgeon ("Admission To Grammar Schools", 1957), amongst others, pointed-out that the selection process at 11 was not as "objective" as commonly supposed.

- They calculated, for example, that approximately 70,000 children each year were allocated to the "wrong" type of school because of inaccuracies and administrative errors in the examination. These errors, they argued, disproportionately penalised working class children.

3. Partly as a result of the association between Grammar schools (with their limited number of places) and social status, academic excellence, etc., increasing numbers of middle class parents began to find that their children were being excluded from entrance to such schools. It is within this scenario we can see the development of Comprehensive schooling, in terms of pressure for change building-up "from below".

- However, whilst Comprehensive Schools were supposedly designed to remove much of the social stigma involved in the tripartite system, they do not seem to have redressed the imbalance in differential educational achievement. Part of the reason for this is the practice of streaming - allocating children to different levels within the school on the basis of academic performance.
- A major problem in the general development of Comprehensive schooling in Britain was that, although they removed some of the worst aspects of social stigma attached to the tripartite system, they reproduced the basic assumptions involved in differential education by adopting a system of streaming. In effect, the streaming of pupils effectively meant that the distinctions implicit in the tripartite system were not removed, they were simply relocated (and hidden) under one roof...

4. David Hargreaves ("Social Relations in a Secondary School", 1967), for example, noted that boys were streamed on the basis of "academic ability" from their first year onwards. After their first year, the streams (five in all - A to E) took-on a rigid character, such that it was almost impossible for a boy allocated to the bottom (E) stream to move into the top (A) stream. As Hargreaves notes:

"During the four years which a boy spends at Lumley school, it is quite possible for him to change streams several times. One of the boys in the present 4A began his career in the school in 1E, but such cases of movement from one extreme to the other are exceptional. It is more common for a boy to move one or two streams up or down; it is not unusual for a boy to move up or down one stream and then return to his original stream."

- Not only did Hargreaves find that there was a close correlation between social class and streaming (middle class children in the top streams, working class children in the bottom), but he also found that the experience of streaming helped to confirm each child into a self-perception as either a "success" or a "failure".
- Additionally, because there was little movement between streams, pupil sub-cultures developed, which led not only to conflicts between teachers and pupils but also to "inter-stream", pupil-to-pupil, conflicts. In this respect, Hargreaves notes:



"The organisation of the school imposes severe restrictions on opportunities for interaction between boys from different streams, and is thus a major factor influencing the formation of friendships... Clint [a boy from the 4D stream], as "cock" of the school, and Adrian [a boy from the 4A stream], as school captain, are well-known and highly visible as leaders of their groups. They become representatives of their groups, embodiments of the values they support, and thus targets to their opponents."

5. Similarly, Lacey's study of "Hightown Grammar" (1970) noted the way streaming affected the behaviour of differently-streamed children and, in turn, affected their educational achievement. Lower stream pupils - mainly from working class backgrounds - increasingly came to adopt anti-academic attitudes and behaviour. Perhaps one of the most surprising aspect of this study is that this should have involved children who, at aged 11, were being classified educationally as amongst the most academically-able in the country as a whole.

- It is evident therefore, that the effects of streaming are pronounced, in terms of the child's self-perception as either "bright" or "dim", even when "objectively" the child is certainly not the latter.

### **Banding and Setting**

1. Two forms of educational differentiation associated with streaming include banding (pupils are allocated different "bands" when they enter secondary school on the basis of reports from teachers in their primary schools) and setting.

- In this instance, pupils are streamed on a subject-by-subject basis. Thus, a pupil may be in the top set for physics, a middle set for biology and the bottom set for French. This system - whilst avoiding some of the worst consequences of streaming in terms of the way in which the school is organised (pupils tend not to develop such strong sub-cultural groupings) - does not avoid the problem of educational differentiation based upon class, gender and ethnicity.

2. Whilst streaming practices are clearly part of a social process within schools that serve to heighten or diminish a child's expectation of educational success or failure, this is not the whole story.

- Associated with streaming is the set of attitudes, perceptions and beliefs that teachers have about the children that they teach. In this respect, streaming, banding and setting practices help to both confirm and to generate the ideas that teachers hold about their pupils. These, in turn, are transmitted to pupils (consciously and unconsciously) through classroom interaction.

### **Mixed Ability Teaching**

1. Given that streaming practices appear to accentuate / perpetuate differential educational achievement, the development of oppositional pupil sub-cultures and so forth, one way of attempting to overcome these problems might be to adopt a "mixed-ability" system of teaching (a situation in which pupils are taught the same subjects in the same classes).

- Keddie's study ("Classroom Knowledge", 1971) illustrated the way classroom interaction affects both the self-perception and performance of children. In the school she studied, a humanities course was introduced, to be taught to all pupils of a particular age group. Although the school streamed pupils on the basis of educational ability, this particular course was designed to be taught to pupils of all abilities, in mixed-ability classes. Thus, although the school itself was streamed, no streaming by ability took-place on this particular course.
- What Keddie found was that teachers brought to the classroom a range of personal, social and work-related experiences that informed their perceptions of a child's ability. Thus, the fact that a pupil had attracted the label as an "A stream" or a "C stream" pupil informed teacher expectations of the respective abilities of each type of student. In addition, the way different pupils behaved in the classroom further served to confirm teacher expectations and behaviour.

2. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, given our everyday, taken-for-granted, assumptions about "high ability" students, Keddie observed that:

"There is between teachers and A pupils a reciprocity [mutual exchange] of perspective which allows teachers to define, unchallenged by A pupils, as they may be challenged by C pupils, the nature and boundaries of what is to count as knowledge. It would seem to be the failure of high-ability pupils to question what they are taught in schools that contributes in large measure to their educational achievement."

### C. Bringing It All Together.

1. In looking at the question of differential educational achievement, we have looked at a number of factors - both inside and outside the educational system - that contribute to the differentiation of children in the education system.

- In this respect, we have looked at such things as concepts of intelligence, home and family backgrounds, the social organisation of schools and the nature of classroom interaction. Although we have, for the sake of conceptual clarity, looked at such ideas in relative isolation from one another, it is evident that, if we are to approach the question of differential educational achievement sociologically, we must take advantage of one of the main strengths of sociological analysis - namely, the ability to combine the disparate elements outlined in the above analyses into a body of knowledge that allows us to see the connections between the various factors:

Political,  
Economic,  
Psychological,  
Historical,  
Geographic,  
Social,

that affect educational achievement.

2. Thus, while it is very easy, as we have seen, to identify such things as "sub-cultural values" (cultural deprivation theory), streaming or teacher labelling as being of significance, the argument about their relative importance in the differential educational equation is frequently in danger of dissolving into sterile arguments about whether it is the "home" or the "school" that is the key to understanding educational success or failure.

- One of the main justifications for approaching the question sociologically, however, is that by so doing we can understand not just the mechanics of individual parts of the process, but that we can also see the nature of the process itself.
- That is, we can understand the way in which the individual parts both fit together and, by extension, interact with one another.
- While it is evident that what goes-on inside the school clearly does make a contribution to differential educational achievement, it would be a mistake to argue that it is "the school" or "teachers" who are somehow solely "to blame" for educational differentiation. Teachers, like any other social actors, are subject to the wide variety of structural pressures that exist in any society and, in this respect, their contribution to differential achievement must be seen in this light.

- In Britain, for example, the behaviour of teachers is constrained by such things as:
  - An examination system
  - The expectations and demands of employers
  - The expectations and demands of parents
  - The expectations and demands of school governors, administrators.
  
- In this respect, teachers are under pressure to differentiate children and, as various interactionist writers have shown, this is exactly what teachers do within the school and the classroom. Some kind of differentiation is a structural imperative placed upon the education system in Britain.
  
- The main argument, in relation to the above, is that educational differentiation involves two main elements:
  - a. The structural imperative to differentiate children.
  - b. The need to find ways of creating this differentiation.
  
- Whilst teachers may claim to achieve differentiation on the basis of children's differing levels of ability, it is clear that the whole question of what constitutes "ability" or "intelligence" is a social construct:
  
- On a general level, different societies develop different conceptions of such things (what constitutes "ability" and "intelligence" in one society may not necessarily be considered as such in another society).
  
- On a specific level, it is evident that conceptions of "ability" are constructed from a general set of socially-constructed ideas concerning such things as:
  - Appropriate behaviour for someone playing the role of pupil / student:
  - What counts as valid forms of knowledge.
  - The precise form of interaction between teachers / pupils.
  - Pupils understanding of the education process and its relationship to wider society.

In this respect, some pupils fit more readily into the social construction of what constitutes an "able" student.

- In addition, children bring into the classroom a cultural history developed, initially, through their socialisation process within the family - but the socialisation process does not begin and end within the family. On the contrary, it is a continuous process of learning and, as such, develops throughout a child's school career.
- Thus, what we have, here, is a situation in which:
  - a. Schools are forced to achieve some form of differentiation.
  - b. The basis for this differentiation is (nominally) ability.
  - c. What constitutes ability is itself a social construction involving various attributes possessed or not possessed by children.
  - d. In their interpretation of ability, teachers use as their reference points conceptions of what they believe are relevant indicators of ability:
    - Attentiveness / interest
    - Willingness to learn
    - Motivation
    - Demonstrations of ability
    - Respect for authority
    - Respect for the knowledge of the teacher
  - e. In addition, since teachers live in the social world (hard to believe I know), their construction of ability involves references to their experiences - the knowledge that:
    - We live in an unequal, highly-structured, society.
    - Education is part of the social differentiation process (and teachers are paid to do this)
    - Many occupations are effectively male-dominated (relatively closed to female participation)
  - f. Finally, through their work and experience, teachers develop conceptions about what is required of pupils if they are to learn. In short, they develop working conceptions about the "ideal pupil" - a taken for granted notion about appropriate pupil behaviour. Pupils who learn to conform to (or at least display signs of having internalised the norms of), this ideal, come to be seen as "having ability", whilst those who do not conform are seen to "lack ability".
- It is in this idea, perhaps, that we can see the key to understanding differential educational achievement as it is affected by the relationship between what a child brings into the school (by way of its socialisation, normative expectations and cultural tradition) and the school itself.

- If teachers operate (in their social construction of ability) with reference to a broad pattern of idealised reference points concerning how to identify talent, ability and so forth, then it is evident that the child who is most closely able to match these references (these teacher expectations), will be the one who benefits the most in terms of encouragement, help and so forth.
- Whilst teacher expectations will differ slightly from teacher to teacher, the structural location of teachers, as a social group, will mean that, in a broad sense, their expectations will be generally similar. Thus, the social background of children, their gender, their ethnicity and so forth, will be vital components of a teacher's educational reference points.
- This explains why "middle class" children achieve more in the educational system (because the social attributes they bring to the school fit most closely to those held by the teacher), whilst also explaining how working class children can also, on occasions, succeed (since they are not simply prisoners of their social background they may be able to recognise - adapt themselves to - classroom imperatives).
- Thus, whilst cultural / class background is significant in this respect (insofar as children "innocently" bring with them into the school a learned culture), it is not the whole story, since the significance of a child's cultural background is mediated through the various culturally-derived reference points that teachers use in their day-to-day construction and reconstruction of "ability". Finally, therefore, in looking at the question of differential educational achievement sociologically, we can see that there is nothing particularly inherent in either the social background of children, or their particular educational experiences, that dooms some to failure whilst others succeed.
- What is clear, however, is that, in the social construction of ability (as seen by teachers), all kinds of social and interpersonal factors play a part in determining the specific outcome of the educational process. In this respect, a factor such as a child's social background is clearly a crucial variable, since it is on the basis of social background that teachers (consciously or unconsciously) are able to measure the extent to which various pupils fit - or fail to fit - into their social construction of a "good" or "ideal" pupil.