

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes for Students**

### **Education and Training**

#### **3. The Formal Curriculum.**

**A. Introduction.**

1. In this set of notes we are going to look at the specific content of the curriculum and to analyse it in terms of two ideas:

- a. What is taught, seen in terms of the knowledge-base of the curriculum.
- b. The possible relationship between the nature of the school curriculum and inequalities of educational opportunity.

2. We are moving towards an understanding of differential educational opportunity and achievement. Thus, we are looking at the question of a possible relationship between what happens within schools (the teaching and learning process) and levels of differential achievement based around concepts of class, gender and ethnicity.

- By differential achievement sociologists do not simply mean that children attain different levels of success and failure in the educational system. Rather, what concerns sociologists most is the question of why children with similar levels of measured intelligence, but different social characteristics, tend to achieve different levels of success or failure within the education system.
- Differential achievement will be dealt with in detail in later notes. The focus here is on the role played by schools in preparing children for their future adult roles. This involves focusing on the ideological aspects of differential achievement (how children, for example, are encouraged to take inequality for granted). Subsequent notes will focus on the political and economic dimensions of this concept (how children, for example, are systematically advantaged and disadvantaged on the basis of social characteristics such as class, gender and ethnicity).

3. Functionalist sociologists, such as Parsons, have argued that schools should be institutions that guarantee “equality of opportunity”. Each individual should be able to compete and prove themselves against others on the basis of merit - hence the idea of a meritocracy (what pupils achieve is conditioned by their personal abilities). This is necessary because modern industrial societies require people of proven ability and potential to occupy the most functionally important positions.

4. Marxists, on the other hand, have argued that, even where education systems do not openly discriminate between pupils on the basis of class, gender and ethnicity, equality of opportunity within the education system is not possible in modern Capitalist societies. They argue this for two main reasons:

- Firstly, Capitalist societies are highly class structured. Our society, for example, is stratified into a number of different classes. Stratification is reflected in the nature of economic activity (work), since different occupational levels correlate with different classes. Since education is seen correspond to the requirements of work, Marxists argue that the education system is stratified to reflect class differences.

Whether you express this idea in Functionalist terms (the need for society to differentiate in order to allocate different occupational roles) or Marxist terms (the need for a ruling class to reproduce its political and economic domination over other classes and groups), the close relationship between education and work makes educational stratification inevitable. This leads to a second point.

- One problem faced by a ruling class is how to ensure their economic and political domination of society continues over time. Thus, how can this class ensure:
    - a. That their children assume positions of economic and political power.
    - b. That the most able and compliant individuals from other social classes can be co-opted into the values of a ruling class.
  - In the past, the first of these was not a particular problem. The Bourgeoisie could be - and were - quite open in their belief that discrimination was necessary, right and proper. In the 19th century, for example:
    - The working class received little, if any, education. Formal schooling was reserved for the (male) offspring of the upper and middle classes.
    - Women were largely excluded from formal education.
    - Ethnic groups were treated as being biologically and socially inferior.
  - As democracy has developed (women and the working class achieved legal and voting rights, for example), open forms of discrimination have become less socially enforceable. It is no-longer acceptable to view women as biologically inferior (although this is not to say that such groups are not discriminated against). As these overt forms of differentiation have declined, we find in their place more covert forms of differentiation that, whilst serving a similar purpose, provide a sense of opportunity that is missing from overt forms of differentiation.
5. Thus, in Marxist terms, a ruling class in Capitalist societies are faced with:
- a. An economic problem, namely how to ensure that Capitalism continues.
  - b. A political problem, namely how to ensure that their class interests continue to paramount in society.
6. In this context we can start to look at the concept of the formal curriculum, not simply as a means of preparing people for their future adult roles but also as part of a process of differentiation and discrimination in modern Capitalist societies.

**B. Differential Achievement: The Ideological Dimension.**

1. The subjects formally taught in schools seem to exist in a taken for granted world, whereby their presence on the school curriculum seems to be logical, consistent and inevitable. Until the 1970's, the same was probably true of sociologists, concerned as they largely were to look at the broader economic and political factors and processes involved in the thorny question of differential levels of achievement.

- Perhaps the first sociologist to start to question the ideological nature of the formal curriculum in any great detail was M.F.D. Young ("Knowledge and Control", 1971). Until Young started to develop a "sociology of the curriculum", sociologists had tended to take for granted the idea that "success" or "failure" in any education system involved such factors as:
- Family background (See, for example, J.W.B.Douglas et al "The Home and the School", 1963) or
- Class background (See, for example: P.Bourdieu and J.Passeron "Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture", 1971).

2. Young argued it was important to question the assumption that what is taught in schools has no effect on different levels of pupil achievement. The way knowledge about the world is categorised, presented and studied is significant (as are the resulting categories such as "ability" and "achievement", since these categories are social constructions that derive from the way knowledge is categorised).

- For Young, as for many other Marxists, the ability to get people to take for granted ideas that are the result of a long and complex process of social construction is an important consideration. This idea goes some way to explaining how a ruling class is able to solve the two problems (economic and political) that I noted earlier. We can start to see this in the following way:

3. If people believe that it is possible to clearly identify the "most important" areas of knowledge in society, then some form of consensus is manufactured. On this consensus can be built a system of testing and evaluation. Individuals can be evaluated against their knowledge and understanding in a way that appears:

- Objective - since there is agreement about what constitutes knowledge, any tests we devise can be measured against known standards of competence.
- Fair - with such basic agreement, people can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they reach or fail to reach certain standards.
- Fundamentally individual - success or failure in reaching agreed standards can be expressed in terms of individual characteristics. If standards exist and children have an equal opportunity to try to achieve them then success or failure is down to individual levels of effort, motivation and so forth.

4. Empirically, Young attempted to show the various ways the school curriculum reflected clear social interests. He highlighted three aspects of the social construction of knowledge that we might usefully explore next, namely:

- a. The idea that knowledge has to be selected. Decisions have to be made about such things as:
  - Which subjects will appear on the curriculum.
  - The content of each subject.
  
- b. The idea that knowledge is socially organised or managed. This involves decisions being made about such things as:
  - How teachers teach (alone or in groups, for example).
  - How pupils should work (competitively or co-operatively, etc.).
  - Classroom organisation (who is in control, for example).
  
- c. The idea that both knowledge itself and access to different forms of knowledge is stratified within the classroom, the school and society. This involves ideas like:
  - Why theoretical knowledge is superior to practical knowledge.
  - The division between vocational and academic subjects (for example, the division between GNVQ and A-level in our society).
  - How subjects are compartmentalised (that is, taught separately) rather than integrated (that is, related to each other).
  - Teaching children different levels of knowledge, based upon assessments of their ability.

### C. The Selection of Knowledge

1. Human knowledge is vast and varied and some kind of selection process is necessary in an education system. Sociologically, we are interested in ideas such as:

- Who selects this knowledge?
- Why some forms of knowledge are selected whilst others are ignored?
- Which forms of knowledge will be selected for inclusion on the curriculum?

2. Governments, educationalists, etc. make judgements about the selection of knowledge for the school curriculum. This selection process involves two main areas:

- a. What subjects will be taught?
- b. The knowledge content of each subject.

- Since 1988, both of the above have been decided by the government as part of the National Curriculum. GCSE, A-level, and GNVQ are examinations offered by privately-owned examination boards. Each board decides the syllabus it will offer for each subject and, apart from the government dictating a maximum level of non-examined work, each board is free to decide upon the syllabus it will offer.

3. A further dimension here might be the choices made by teachers in the classroom about the way in which they present knowledge to their pupils.

- The everyday knowledge of pupils is not highly valued in the classroom. The teaching emphasis is on the learning of things that are not immediately useful in pupils everyday lives. The type of knowledge selected for inclusion on the curriculum is different to the everyday. Whether or not you see this as significant will perhaps depend upon your interpretation of the purpose of education.
- In schools that use streaming or setting, different levels of knowledge are selected for different types of pupil. Selection is reflected in the different types of qualifications (GCSE, A-level, GNVQ) and the different levels within these examinations. GCSE, for example, has Higher and Foundation levels - the highest grade in the Foundation level equals the lowest pass grade in the Higher level.
- Selection is also evident in terms of the way pupils are expected to speak. The National Curriculum directs teachers to encourage their pupils to speak Standard English - a form of English that emphasises strict grammatical correctness. Again, this brings us back to the purpose of education - to prepare people for their adult lives or to prepare them for a work role in Capitalist society.
- A final example was identified by Vulliamy (1978) when he noted that in music lessons the type of music selected for approved teaching tends to be that of Classical (white) European composers. Other forms of music (American Blues, Country, Popular, Rock etc.) either do not feature on the curriculum or are downgraded in terms of their significance.

4. Across the curriculum, decisions are made about knowledge and they represent conscious attempts to influence the way knowledge is culturally transmitted.

- The 1944 Education Act, for example, specified only Religious and Physical Instruction as compulsory elements in the curriculum.
- In 1988 the National Curriculum (consisting of 10 basic subjects, taught to all children in the State system up until the age of 14) was introduced in Britain. The government specified which subjects should be taught (in State-maintained schools) as part of the curriculum. In addition, the amount of time to be spent studying each subject was also specified as follows:

- “Core subjects” that take-up between 30 - 40% of the timetable.
  - **English**
  - **Maths**
  - **Science**
- Additional subjects taking up about 50% of the remaining time on the timetable
  - **Technology**
  - **History**
  - **Geography**
  - **Music**
  - **Modern Foreign Language.**
  - **Physical Education**
  - **Art**

- The remainder of the timetable (between 10 and 20% of time available) can be used for a range of subjects, such as Religious Education and so forth.

5. Although the National Curriculum specified, for the first time, the subjects to be legally taught in State-maintained schools, this does not mean there was a radical departure from all that had gone before. As Trowler (“Investigating Education and Training”, 1995) notes:

“In terms of content, though, the National Curriculum is a very traditional curriculum, reproducing almost exactly the curriculum prescribed by the 1904 Board of Education regulations”

- In 1904, **Trowler** notes, the curriculum consisted of the following subjects:

English,  
Maths,  
Science,  
History,  
Drawing,

Geography,  
Manual Work,  
Physical Exercise,  
Foreign Language,  
Domestic subjects (for girls).

Music was added shortly afterwards.

6. With the exception of manual work (which we could perhaps equate with the various forms of work experience built into the school curriculum), little seems to have changed in the eighty-odd years between the two curricula.

- One way of explaining the similarity is to note that the core functions of an education system, (one that is designed to be closely related to the demands of employers), have not changed in this period. This may be because the basic demands of employers have not changed significantly (although the specific types of skills and knowledge required may well have changed to reflect economic and technological changes in society). Thus suggests, there is a correspondence between education and work, with the educational emphasis being on the preparation of individuals for their future adult work roles.

7. However we view the selection of the school curriculum, selection does not simply stop at the subjects chosen to be part of the curriculum. A further dimension we could examine is the nature of the knowledge selected for inclusion within each subject.

- An example here might be the study of History as prescribed under the National Curriculum. The government, for example, has decided that History:
  - a. Will involve an emphasis on a knowledge of historical events and dates.
  - b. Will not include reference to events later than 20 years ago.

#### D. The Organisation of Knowledge.

1. We can note a number of ways knowledge is organised in our education system.

- One aspect of the way knowledge is organised is through the concept of differential ability. Children are assumed (rightly or wrongly) to possess different aptitudes; some being more “academic” than others (more able to handle relatively complex, abstract, ideas). Non-academic children, on the other hand, tend to be considered to be more practically orientated. As is often the case with such crude distinctions, there is very little educational overlap between these extremes - either a child fits into one category or they fit into the other.
- This type of pupil categorisation leads to the idea that pupils have different needs based on their different abilities. Common educational practices such as streaming, banding or setting of pupils within the school reflects this (ideological) belief.
- Streaming refers to the way that a pupil is assigned to a particular group (stream) within the school - usually one of three; top, middle or bottom. The child stays within that stream until they are tested at the end of a school year. On the basis of such tests, pupils may be moved into other streams for the following school year.
- Setting refers to a similar but more flexible system. Each subject, rather than each year group, has two or more different sets (for example, top, middle and bottom) and children can be placed in different sets for different subjects. A child may be in the top English set, the middle set for History and the bottom set for Maths.
- In streamed schools, access to knowledge is restricted in various ways. Pupils in a top stream are encouraged to develop academic interests, while pupils in the lowest streams are encouraged to develop more practical / vocational interests. Different streams within the same subject may be taught differently. The emphasis in the upper streams is on preparation for public examinations (GCSE, A-level, GNVQ) and future professional employment. The emphasis in the lowest stream is on preparation for lower status occupations.

2. Basil Bernstein (“On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge”, 1971) notes some further aspects of the organisation of knowledge within the school.

- Children are expected to work individually rather than co-operatively. This reinforces the idea that knowledge is both private property and a commodity that can be used to make an individual powerful.
- The way classrooms are physically organised reflects a desire to monitor and control children’s behaviour. Teachers, for example, police the learning process through their insistence upon being in control within the classroom. Teaching is also an individual process - it is rare for teachers to teach in pairs, for example (team teaching) - which reinforces the idea that knowledge is a source of power.



- As children get older their work becomes more individualised and centred on the teacher as a “giver of knowledge” rather than as a facilitator of learning (helping the child to learn, for example, through enquiry and discovery).
- These ideas echo those of Bowles and Gintis, especially the idea that it is only when pupils are at an advanced level in their schooling (typically post-16) that they are encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning. This, they argue, reflects the idea that such pupils are those who are destined for professional occupations that require people to make independent decisions.
- Bernstein concludes that the focus of the education system in our society is not “learning”, as such, but the socialisation of children into conformity through control of the teaching and learning process. The primary purpose of schooling is control, since only by conforming to the organisational process is the child allowed to learn the things considered valid and useful by teachers, employers, etc.

3. Bernstein puts these ideas into a sociological context by arguing we can outline two idealised ways in which the formal curriculum can be organised and taught. He argues that the way knowledge is organised (or in his terms “classified and framed”) has consequences for the kinds of messages children receive about the nature and purpose of education. We can outline Bernstein’s basic framework in the following way.

**Characteristics of Strongly Classified and Strongly Framed knowledge.**

1. There are right answers and these are already known
2. The personal experience of the pupil is largely irrelevant (unless specifically requested as an example and then it will either be right or wrong)
3. Knowledge is divided into subjects. When one subject is being studied, other subjects are irrelevant.
4. Education is defined as what goes on within the school.
5. Teachers determine the time and pace of lessons.
6. Education involves matching the individual performance of pupils against fixed standards.

**Characteristics of Weakly Classified and Weakly Framed knowledge.**

1. There are no right answers. Education is a process of explanation and argument.
2. The personal experiences of pupils are always important.
3. Subject boundaries are artificial / contrived. Pupils are encouraged to make links between various forms of knowledge.
4. Education is something that never stops. It happens everywhere.
5. The pace of learning is determined by the pupil and their interests.
6. Education is seen as a process of personal development.

### E. The Stratification of Knowledge.

1. The third element in our classification involves the idea that knowledge is stratified within the curriculum. That is, the idea that knowledge and access to different types of knowledge is organised hierarchically within the school and education system. Both Young and Bernstein relate this stratification process to the way subjects are organised to reflect power relationships in wider society.

- One major form of stratification is the way different subjects are stratified in terms of the value placed on them in the education system. Categories such as:
  - Academic (stressing “theoretical” knowledge) and
  - Vocational (stressing “practical” knowledge)

reflect the belief that one form of knowledge is superior to another. Young argues that there is no absolute way of demonstrating that theoretical knowledge is inherently superior to practical knowledge.

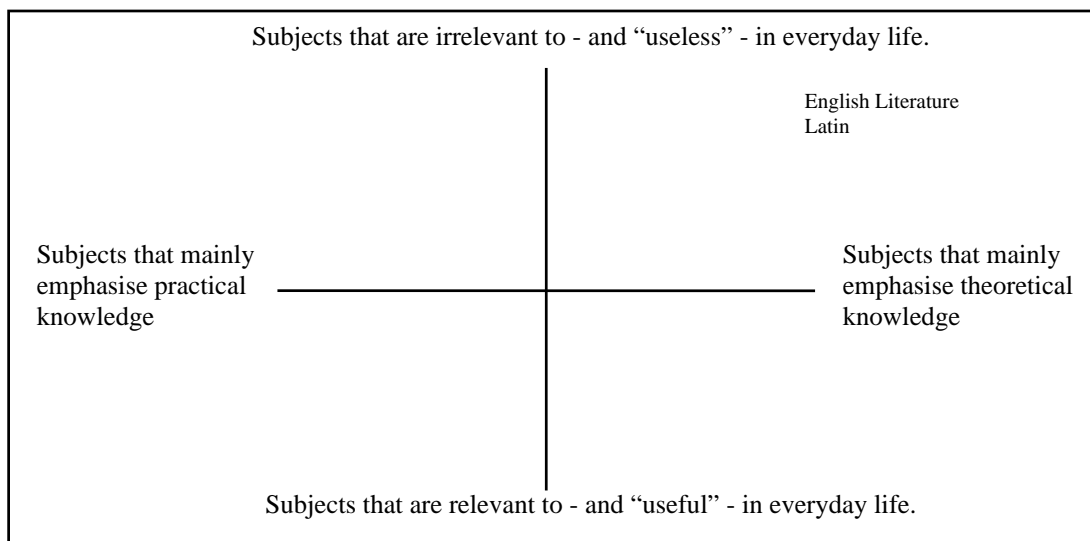
- The distinction is culturally relative in that it depends for its existence on the way powerful social groups can develop and maintain the general belief that one form of knowledge is inherently superior to another. There are numerous reasons suggested to explain this form of stratification.
- Illich, for example, has argued that the emphasis on the mastery of abstract, theoretical knowledge reflects the interests of professional groups in society. These groups are economically powerful in society and are able to translate this form of power into an influence over the school curriculum.
- Bowles and Gintis suggest that it reflects the power of a ruling class to set the
- Bernstein, on the other hand, suggests that this stratification of knowledge has developed out of educational traditions established over many centuries. Medieval forms of education, restricted mainly to the aristocracy for example, placed great emphasis upon abstract knowledge, written rather than oral traditions and the importance of individual rather than group effort.

2. We can also note the stratification of subjects on the basis of their “strict” relationship to the world of work. For example:

- English, Maths and Science have a higher status in the curriculum than subjects such as Sociology, Psychology, Art and so forth, mainly because they appear to have greater relevance to the type of basic skills required by people in their adult lives. We could further refine these categorizations into such areas as “respectable” or “established” subjects as against “non-respectable” or “non-established” subjects, etc.

- This is a difficult argument to sustain. Whereas it is clearly useful to have a knowledge of language, mathematics and science, schools do not merely provide children with a simple level of basic knowledge sufficient for their adult needs. Rather, such subjects take on a life of their own, almost independent of the strict needs of all but a small, academic, elite (those who will, eventually, enter professional employment in their adult lives).
- These are the people for whom such narrow, detailed, levels of knowledge are necessary and functional. The majority of the adult population has little need for such narrow levels of subject detail and this provides us with evidence for the idea that schools are doing more than simply educating individuals for their adult lives. It indicates that schools are more about preparing small elites for their future adult working lives.

3. A practical example of the stratified curriculum is provided by Pat McNeill (“The Core Curriculum” in *New Society*: 02/10/87). He suggests the following method of assessing the extent to which knowledge is stratified within our education system:



- Subjects that have a high theoretical content, are largely irrelevant to and practically “useless” in everyday life are those that have the highest status in the education system. This may be so for two main reasons:
  - a. These subjects are relevant and practical for academics, educationalists and teachers (people who have an interest in professional status).
  - b. They are the kinds of subjects that it is possible to study at higher levels in the education system (for example, at University).
- The stratification of knowledge cannot be accidental. On the contrary, it has to be caused by something and, in this instance, one possible cause is that it is determined and directed by powerful interest groups in our society.

- While there is not a perfect fit between the status of highly abstract, practically useless, subjects and higher levels of education (engineering may be highly theoretical and practically useful), the stratification of knowledge does exist. In the world of work, theoretical knowledge remains more highly-valued in our society than knowledge that is “tainted” with practical applications (think about the differences in status, pay and so forth between an engineer and a lawyer...).
4. Finally, a stratification process is reflected in the way that access to knowledge is restricted within the education system. This involves such things as breaking the syllabus down into distinctive subjects, rather than trying to integrate various subjects so that ideas can be easily related to one another. For example, integrated subjects (such as Humanities) lose their identity in a stratified curriculum and are devalued in the eyes of parents, children, employers, etc.
- Access to knowledge is further restricted by testing and money (the ability to pay for music lessons is a form of stratification). Testing, in the sense of trying to ensure understanding, may or may not be necessary within the school, but testing brings with it a ranking system, both in an individual and institutional sense.
    - Individually, pupils are encouraged to measure their worth against each other on the basis of a narrow range of skills and tests.
    - Institutionally, all schools and colleges in Britain publish their GCSE and A-level results. Institutions are ranked in terms of their “success” or “failure” and schools that “fail” their pupils are identified on the basis of poor exam results. The government openly encourages parents to see the worth of schools in terms of their exam results - “good schools” equate to high exam pass rates, “bad schools” equate to low exam pass rates.
  - This narrow empirical measurement - quality measured in statistical terms - ignores other possible measures of quality and reflects the idea that the function of schools is primarily to prepare children with the skills and knowledge they require for a working life, rather than for their adult life in general.
5. The stratification of knowledge in the curriculum is significant in three respects:
- a. It has implications for what Parson’s termed the “fair access to opportunity” - if knowledge is stratified, will there be equality of opportunity in education?
  - b. It negates the idea that the primary role of education is to “prepare people for adult life” (much of what is formally taught and learnt in schools is “practically” not very useful to us as functioning members of society).
  - c. The stratification of knowledge reflects a political process in any society - one in which some groups in society are able to impose their conceptions of valuable forms of knowledge on all other groups in society.

- As Bernstein argues:  
“How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control.”.
- In the above respect, Bernstein notes that there are three different elements involved in the social construction of knowledge within the school:
  - The formal curriculum:  
This defines valid knowledge.
  - Pedagogy (That is, the teaching process):  
This involves the transmission of knowledge and definitions of valid ways of transmitting knowledge (how it is organised and taught).
  - Evaluation:  
This involves ideas about what counts as a valid realisation of knowledge by pupils.

6. As we have seen, therefore, both Young and Bernstein are arguing that there is some form of relationship between what is taught in schools (the formal curriculum), how it is taught (the hidden curriculum) and the institution of work. For such writers this follows because the primary objective of the education system is seen as being preparation for some form of work in Capitalist society.

## **F. The Significance of Selection, Organisation and Stratification in the Curriculum.**

1. We need now to look briefly at the relationship between the curriculum and the wider society within which it develops. By understanding the school curriculum sociologically, we can see the theoretical relationship between social class and achievement. We can also start to answer the question of how a ruling class reproduces its domination of other classes over time.

- Within the school, knowledge is defined from a middle class point of view. Valid knowledge is knowledge relevant and useful to the middle classes. If we look at the school as a social system that has its own cultural values and norms, it is evident that those children whose social background and general orientation (values, beliefs, attitudes and so forth) familiarises and prepares them for active participation within this system will have an immediate cultural advantage over those whose social background does not prepare them sufficiently for active participation within this system.
- Thus, middle and upper class children enter education with a direct, tangible, advantage over their working class peers. It is easier for middle class children to achieve within the education system because they fit easily into this culture. Thus, it is more difficult for working class children to fit into the system, although it is not impossible. Working class children can orientate themselves to the demands of the school and achieve success as the school defines this concept.
- You could test this idea by thinking about what the situation would be like if valid knowledge within the education system was defined in terms of the ability to carry-out detailed manual work. In this instance, practical knowledge would be defined as valid and theoretical knowledge defined as invalid. Middle and upper class children would then find themselves at an initial disadvantage within the school because they would be forced to adapt to a very different social environment.

2. Selection, organisation and stratification matter because if we recognise that they exist within the school then we recognise the idea that knowledge is whatever a society defines it as being. If knowledge is a culturally relative concept (that is, there is no absolute definition of what constitutes knowledge), then the most powerful groups in any society will be able to define as valid knowledge the ideas that are most relevant and beneficial to themselves. Knowledge, in this respect, becomes a form of social control and a valuable source of power.

- The conclusion we can draw from this is that the way in which knowledge is selected, organised and stratified has consequences for the education process. There are two basic views we can apply here:

a. Firstly, if you accept the idea that, in any stratified society, it is necessary to allocate adult roles on the basis of some form of selection procedure, whereby children are differentiated on the basis of their mastery of what society considers to be valid knowledge, then you will lean towards an elitist view of education.

- The idea here is that some occupational roles are more socially-necessary than others. This view accepts the idea that access to certain subjects and levels should be limited to those who have proven their excellence within the education system.
- However, if it were simply the case (as theorists such as Davis and Moore (“Some Principles of Stratification”, 1967) argue), that the education system had to be stratified to ensure that:

“...the most talented and able members of society are allocated to those positions which are functionally most important for society”,

there might be a reasonable case for going along with this kind of argument. However, two critical points are relevant here:

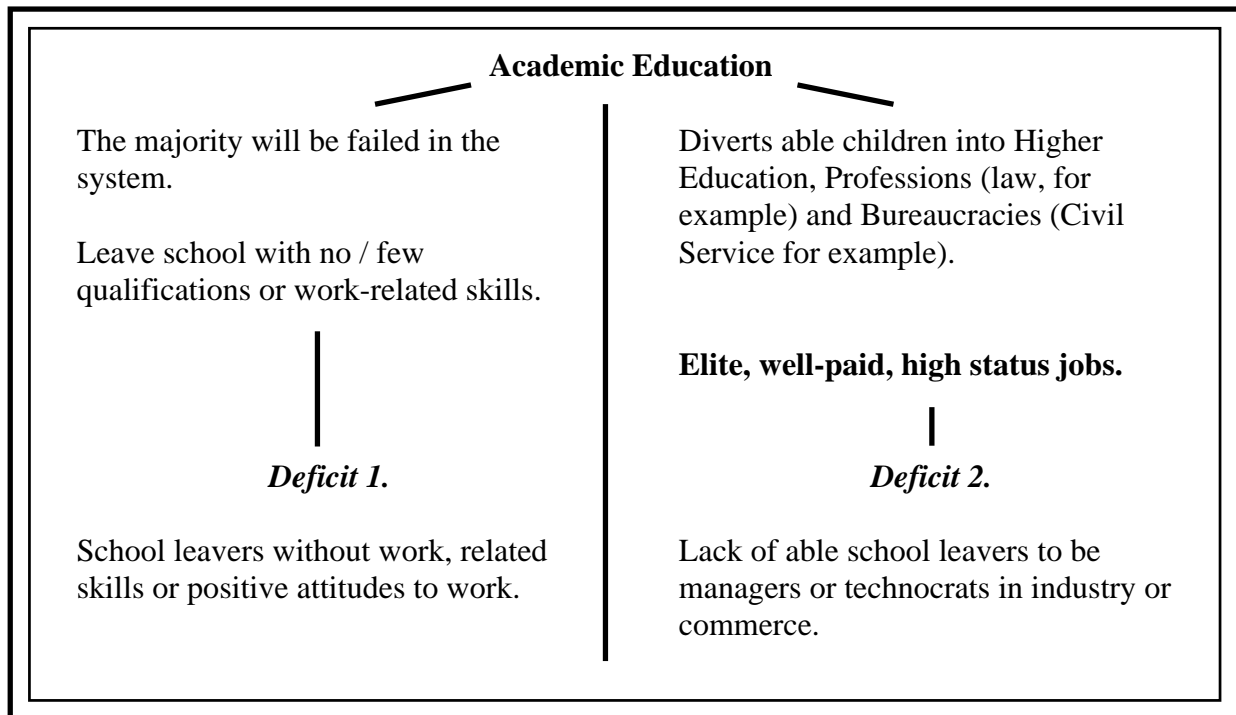
- Firstly, how do we decide which positions in society are “most functionally important”. What criteria do we use, for example?

How functionally important is a rubbish collector in relation to a financial analyst, for example?

- Is it simply a case of the “most talented and able” using the education system to their best advantage, whilst the untalented, lazy and so forth simply fail (get their just desserts for being unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities offered)?

b. If you accept that powerful groups within Capitalist society attempt to define and monopolise access to knowledge, then you lean towards a “pool of talent” view of education (the idea that there are far people in society capable of achieving success than is allowed for by the elitist view - much of this potential talent being wasted...).

- We can express this idea diagrammatically in terms of the idea of an educational deficit created by the emphasis in our society on a highly abstract and academic curriculum.



3. The argument here is that this form of educational organisation, where the emphasis is placed on training a relatively small elite and discarding those unable to cope with the demand of such academic training, has serious consequences for the society in which it occurs.

- This is because it tends to create a highly inventive and innovative society in which the economic exploitation of this inventiveness and innovation is not carried out.
- The economic exploitation of these ideas tends to be carried-out by other societies (such as Japan, Singapore and the like), organised educationally to produce a far better balance between the academic and the vocational aspects of work.

### **G. Education and Social Control**

1. As we have seen, Marxists see the over-riding purpose of the selection, organisation and stratification of knowledge within the formal curriculum to be that of social control. Just as access to knowledge is structured, so too is access to opportunity highly structured.

- Whilst Functionalists such as Talcott Parsons and Davis and Moore argue that access to opportunity (the chance we have of being educated) is basically fair across the class structure (everyone has a more-or-less equal access to education in our society, regardless of class, gender or ethnic background) - and, therefore, access to knowledge is open to all who have the wits or desire to take advantage of it - Marxists such as Bowles and Gintis argue that the reverse is the case.



- They argue that powerful groups in our society (such as Capitalist owners, professionals and so forth) are able to stratify access to knowledge and, by so doing, act to limit access to opportunity. This idea - namely that the curriculum is tightly controlled and highly stratified - has significant implications for the way in which we are able to view the ideas of success or failure in the education system.

2. Educational success or failure is seen as having little to do with such things as:

- Individual motivation
- Individual intelligence or
- Teacher labelling,

since the stratification of knowledge operates on a structural, not an individual level. Thus, what matters for the continuation of Capitalism is that:

- a. A majority of pupils “fail” academically (whilst still receiving the minimum form of education necessary to play a part in the production process).
- b. Those who “succeed” are, by and large, either recruited from the sons and daughters of a Capitalist ruling class or from the most well-adapted elements from the middle and working classes.

- The way work is structured will be reflected in the way education is structured and, given that the institution of work is structured in a highly unequal way in our society, we would expect the education system to reflect this structural inequality.

3. If this structural analysis is valid, we would broadly expect to see such things as:

- Upper class children, in the main, being very successful in school.
- Working class children, in the main, being least successful.
- Males generally doing much better than females generally (although class factors might skew the results in this category).
- Whites generally doing much better than blacks (although, once again, class factors might “distort” this general expectation).

4. To complete this section of the course, two further Marxist Conflict theorist’s contributions to stratification of knowledge debate are worth noting.

- Anyan (“Ideology and United States History Textbooks”: Harvard Educational Review 49 (3),1979) argued, in her analysis of textbooks used in American schools, that such books presented a view of American history and society that reflected the views and interests of politically and economically dominant groups. This was reflected through such things as:

- Choice of material used.
- The degree of emphasis given to particular events.
- The explanation of those events.

- In this respect, she saw the ideological framework within which such books were written as a form of social control:

The ideological control of knowledge represented a kind of “invisible policing”, whereby pupils were only presented with information favourable to the views, interests and values of a Capitalist ruling class.

Knowledge that was presented to pupils as “politically neutral” was, in Anyan’s opinion, highly selective in its interpretation of history.

- In a similar vein, there was a degree of political controversy in Japan during the mid-1980’s when the government decreed that history books should not portray the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (China) in 1933 in terms of the well-documented atrocities committed by the Japanese army against Chinese peasants. All reference to “alleged atrocities” was to be removed from school history books.
- Apple (“Ideology and the Curriculum”, 1979) argues that forms of social and economic control are maintained in schools through the forms of meaning that schools perpetuate. In this respect:

- a. Schools are involved in a process of selection and role allocation.

This involves the reproduction of existing relations to economic production and, therefore, the attempt to maintain the status quo.

- b. This process is hidden and legitimated by the pervading ideology of “equal opportunity”

If people fail within the system, then it is their own fault, rather than being caused by systematic, class-based, inequalities.

- c. The form that schooling takes and the ideologically-determined form of knowledge that is perpetuated both play a part in maintaining social control.

## H. Conclusion.

1. The main argument put-forward by writers such as Young and Bernstein is that the control of the content of the official curriculum involves not just the control of knowledge but also the control of opportunity in two ways:

- a. Knowledge processing - control over its selection, organisation and stratification
- b. People processing - control over their selection, organisation and stratification

- To use Young's phrase, knowledge is not "free floating" in society. Rather it is:
  - a. Defined in terms of what constitutes "valid" knowledge.
  - b. Categorised into different types of knowledge (useful / useless, valid / invalid, etc.).
  - c. Owned by different groups who lay claim to conceptions of what does and does not constitute valid knowledge.
  - d. Controlled through grading, examinations and so forth.
  - e. Patrolled by teachers, academics, professionals, governments and so forth.