"A" Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Education and Training

6. The Hidden Curriculum (2)

A. Introduction

1. In these notes we can look in more detail at a number of different aspects of the hidden curriculum as a way of illustrating the various ways it plays a part in shaping both the educational experiences and outcomes of pupils. In organisational terms, we can focus these examples around three major sociological concepts, namely:

- **Social class**,
- **Gende**r and
- **Ethnicity**.

2. The organising theme adopted in this section of the course has been the idea that the concept of the hidden curriculum has to be understood in relation to the overall structural imperatives acting upon the education system in our society.

- If this were not the case, the hidden curriculum would simply involve a series of random social effects that would be highly-dependent on the personalised nature of teacher-pupil relationships within the classroom. It would not, in short, be possible to identify overall patterns of behaviour within schools. If one thing is clearly evident it is that the content of the hidden curriculum is highly structured in terms of such things as class, gender and ethnicity.

3. Teachers' behaviour has to be understood within the structural context of that behaviour - views about such things as "success", "failure", "adult roles" and so forth which lead teachers to interpret forms of behaviour, aptitude and ability in terms of their overall view of both wider society and the role of education within that society.

- The values held by teachers reflect not just their socialisation, but also their understanding of the purpose of education and the social constraints that act on them in the course of their work. The hidden curriculum, therefore, represents a combination of assumptions about both:

  - The nature of the social world (in terms of the structure of adult roles).
  - The individual (in terms of concepts of ability, intelligence and so forth)

4. To put this another way, consider the following quotation from Andy Hargreaves ("Classrooms and Staffrooms", 1984):

"'Structural' and 'Interactionist' questions should no longer be dealt with as separate issues. Such a false separation leads to a continuation of...a wild oscillation between two poles of sociological explanation. From systems theories [e.g. Functionalism] to interpretative brands of sociology and back again to a structurally-based Marxism; almost no time has been spent in taking the opportunity to analyse how classroom matters may relate to the nature of the socio-economic and political structure and the functions which the educational system performs within this structure...We certainly need to know what goes on in classrooms. But at the same time we need to question...just what sort of society it is in which we live.".

5. With the above in mind, it would be useful to look at some of the ways the hidden curriculum operates in terms of the categories outlined above. As you do this it is also important to keep in mind that the question of different levels of success and failure (achievement) within the education system are closely related to the concept of the hidden curriculum. Theories that attempt to explain differential achievement will be more thoroughly discussed when we look at theories of differential achievement.

B. Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum.

1. There are a number of ways class differences are related to the hidden curriculum.

- One of the main ways is through the relationship between the values and norms propagated through the school and those held by the pupils in the education system. Since schools are, by definition, middle class institutions (involving values that derive from middle class experiences and concerns) a pupil's social class will have important consequences in terms of their potential educational career.

- One of the basic assumptions I have used throughout this section of the course is that educational success or failure has less to do with such things as "innate intelligence" than with the ability of pupils to get themselves "in tune" with what happens in schools. While conformity to dominant norms of behaviour doesn't necessarily guarantee educational success, it does appear to make it much more likely that the child who conforms, willingly and "naturally", has a far greater chance of achieving educational success than the child who, for whatever reason, finds him / herself unable or unwilling to conform to school norms.

- As I've just noted above, schools are largely middle-class institutions - in terms of both the norms and values that they perpetuate and the personnel that they employ (professional teachers who have themselves been through the educational socialisation process). Various sociologists have argued that this is significant in the understanding of differential achievement in general and, more specifically, in terms of an understanding of why the hidden curriculum seems to play such a significant part in the educational process.

2. **Basil Bernstein** ("Social Class and Linguistic Development: A Theory of Social Learning", 1961) has argued that one way the hidden curriculum comes into play is through the language codes that a child uses. In simple terms, Bernstein argues that one form of language code (elaborated) is the norm for middle class adults (such as teachers) and their children, whilst another form (restricted) is the norm for working class adults and their children. **Haralambos** ("Themes and Perspectives") notes a number of characteristics of these different types of language code as follows:

> **"Restricted codes are a kind of shorthand speech. Those conversing in terms of the code have so much in common that there is no need to make meanings explicit in speech. Married couples often use restricted codes since their shared experience and understandings make it unnecessary to spell out their meanings and intentions in detail...restricted codes are characterised by short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences...Meaning and intention are conveyed more by gesture, voice intonations and the context in which the communication takes place...the meanings conveyed by the code are limited to a particular social group, they are bound to a particular social context and are not readily available to outsiders".**

> **"An elaborated code explicitly verbalises many of the meanings which are taken for granted in a restricted code. It fills in the detail, spells out the relationships and provides explanations omitted by restricted codes...the listener need not be plugged in to the experience and understanding of the speaker since they are spelled out verbally.".**

- Since middle class children are more likely to have been socialised in a home environment that creates an elaborated language code.

  - Middle class children and their teachers "speak the same language" within the school. Working class children have to learn this "new" language code, which puts them at an immediate disadvantage to their middle class peers.

  - Within the school the skills a child is required to show are more likely to be bound-up with the use of elaborated codes of speech (since a pupil will have to show an ability to communicate through their verbal and written work with an audience that is not part of their immediate social group).

- **Bernstein** is not saying that one form of language use is inferior to another form; he merely argues that the two codes are sufficiently different to give middle class children an advantage within the education system.

3. Bernstein's ideas have been criticised by **Labov** who has argued it is mistaken to assume that simply because a working class child uses a restricted code in their relationship with adults and middle class professionals (such as linguists and psychologists) they are unable to employ an elaborated code in their speech.

- Although criticism of Bernstein has concentrated on showing that working class children can express themselves in abstract conceptual terms, within the classroom middle class teachers are likely to be less tolerant of children who do not express themselves clearly and concisely (for whatever reason) and in ways that conform to the language norms held by the teacher.

4. Another form of the hidden curriculum that has implications across the class structure is that of the relative social standing ("status") of different types of school. We can see this idea most clearly in relation to the 1944 Butler Education Act which attempted to establish a tri-partite system of universal education in Britain:
  - **Grammar schools.**
  - **Secondary Modern schools.**
  - **Technical schools.**

- Grammar schools focused on an academic form of education, while Secondary Modern's focused on explicitly vocational forms of education. The basic philosophy underpinning this system was:

  a. Different types of pupil would benefit from different forms of education (this idea was based largely on the work of **Sir Cyril Burt** in the late 1930's - much of which has now been questioned / discredited).

  b. Grammar and Secondary Modern schools would be viewed as "**separate but equal**" in status.

- That this did not happen (Grammar schools almost immediately became associated with higher status) came about because of the association between academic skills / qualifications and access to Higher education, professional forms of high-status employment, etc. In this respect, a dual form of status difference became apparent:

    - Failing the 11-plus intelligence test required to enter Grammar schools established a status divide between "academically-able" pupils and those not considered "academically-able".

    - Grammar schools became dominated by the middle / upper classes as it became apparent that it was vital for children to receive this type of education if they had aspirations to highly-paid professional employment.

5. Comprehensive schooling was intended to negate class and status differences by providing an environment within which all children - regardless of "ability" - could be educated within a common system:

    • Same buildings,
    • Same resources
    • Same standard of teachers.

- Comprehensive schools developed in the early 1950's in Britain, but it wasn't until the 1976 Education Act that the (Labour) government attempted to make Comprehensive schooling compulsory. This Act instructed all Local education Authorities (L.E.A.'s) to "produce plans for Comprehensive schooling", with the aim that, by 1980, all schools in England and Wales would be Comprehensives.

- Tameside Council in Manchester (at that time under Conservative control) successfully argued in the House of Lords that, whilst it was a legal requirement to produce plans for comprehensivisation, there was no requirement under the Act to actually put those plans into operation.

- At present we have a system of education in Britain that is mainly Comprehensive, but which, in some areas (notably Bournemouth and Poole) still retains the bi-partite system of selection at 11, Grammar schools and Secondary Moderns.

6. Comprehensive schooling still maintains status differences in relation to:

    a. Streaming, banding / setting within schools, where pupils of "different abilities" are given different classes and different teachers for various subjects.

    b. The fact that the catchment areas for different schools make some "more desirable" than others. Comprehensives in some areas get a reputation for being "good" (i.e. they achieve good examination results), whilst others get a reputation for being "bad" (i.e. they don't produce good exam results...).

7. Further status differences between schools in the State-maintained sector have started to arise over the way schools are funded. The (Conservative) government has:

- Attempted to encourage schools to "opt-out" of LEA control by introducing a system of direct funding of schools from central government resources. These schools are called "grant maintained" schools.

- Introduced City Technology Colleges into the education system.

- Published "league tables" of raw examination results to provide parents with information about the examination successes / failures of schools.

- The extent to which these changes will reinforce status differences within the education system is not clear, although the implications are that status differentials will be further enhanced by these changes.

8. While status differences exist in the State-maintained educational sector, perhaps the largest status differences exist between State schools and the fee-paying Independent schools (approximately 2000 schools are currently part of the Independent sector). This sector can be divided into two basic categories:

> a. Well-known Public schools such as Eton, Harrow, Winchester, etc.
> b. Lesser-known Independent schools.

- Within the Independent school sector, therefore, status differences occur between those (elite) schools who are part of the Headmasters' Conference of Public Schools (a kind of pressure group or Professional Association accounting for approximately 200 schools) and those who are not.

- Approximately 7% of all pupils are taught in the Independent sector, although this proportion increases with age. For example, according to "Social Trends", 1994, 18% of boys and 15% of girls aged 16+ are taught in this sector.

- The significance of these figures in class terms, given the fact that Independent schools cater mainly for the sons and daughters of the upper and middle classes, is the relationship between such schools, Higher Education and high status employment. In basic terms, pupils who attended Independent schools have:

> a. A far greater chance of reaching Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge (the highest status Universities in Britain).

> b. A far greater chance of achieving high status, professional, employment.

- The Assisted Places scheme, introduced in the 1980 Education Act, provided State funding for bright children of "poor parents" to attend Independent schools. By 1990, 34,000 children were part of this scheme. Although the ideological rationale for the scheme was to help "disadvantaged" children attend Independent schools (with the implicit idea that such schools provided a higher standard of education than State schools - another aspect of the hidden curriculum):

- Selection for a school place involves interviews with parents and children, which places working class families at a disadvantage.

- There is evidence to suggest that it is the middle classes who predominate on the scheme, rather than children from working class backgrounds.

- One reason for this is that middle class parents are better-placed to take advantage of the scheme (knowing of its existence, for example)

- Another is to do with the norms existing in such schools. Children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to find the experience of attending a private school populated by the sons and daughters of the wealthy socially daunting and educationally disruptive.

9. In Higher Education in Britain, clear status differences exist between:

   a. Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Higher Education (although this distinction has been largely abolished, with all such institutions being able to call themselves "Universities").

   b. Different Universities: Oxford and Cambridge ("Oxbridge"), for example, have a higher social status than Universities such as Kent, Lancaster and York. The latter have higher status than the "new" Universities (ex-Polytechnics) such as Bournemouth.

C. Gender and the Hidden Curriculum.

1. In the past, the sociology of education has looked at examination differences between males and females to illustrate various outcomes of the hidden curriculum. Over the past few years, however, both males and females seem to perform equally well (or equally badly) in both GCSE and A-level examinations.

2. The focus now has moved away from educational performance to a less apparent manifestation of the hidden curriculum, namely a "gendered curriculum". This is the idea that males and females are encouraged to study different subjects. Some subjects becoming seen as male, some as female and some as gender neutral.

- Over the past 100 years, explicit curriculum differences have been progressively eliminated. As Taylor et al ("Sociology In Focus", 1996), for example, note:

   "The 1902 Education Act made domestic subjects such as cookery and needlework compulsory for girls but not for boys…During the 20th century…the tradition of girls doing home economics and boys woodwork and metalwork has been largely replaced by technology for all pupils.".

3. One explanation for the fact that girls perform as well as boys academically but tend to avoid certain subjects) is that when girls enter education they have a problem:

> a. They are taught, as part of the secondary socialisation process in schools, that they are the equal of boys and that their eventual achievement will be on merit (that is, girls are not actively discriminated against - although there is evidence of passive forms of gender discrimination).

> b. Their primary socialisation has taught them that there are some areas of the social world that are not considered, in our society, to be feminine.

- This is a problem of anomie. In this instance a conflict over role expectations and the ideology that surrounds male and female social roles. For example:

  - As a schoolgirl, a girl is expected to try her best to achieve academically.

  - As a female, girls are not expected to enter areas of the curriculum (and by extension the workforce) associated with masculine gender characteristics.

- In this situation, girls are secondary socialised into a set of ideological assumptions that stress the need to compete and succeed at school. Girls' primary socialisation has taught them that some areas of the social world - and hence the curriculum - are effectively off-limits. If they insist upon studying those areas then they must run the risk of attracting a deviant label ("unfeminine").

- Girls in general resolve this problem by avoiding certain subjects classified as masculine (such as the natural sciences), whereas in subjects that are classified as either feminine (such as modern languages) or socially neutral (such as English literature) they achieve as much, if not more, than boys.

- In the case of males the above process also holds true, except they study subjects classified as masculine or gender neutral and avoid subjects classified as feminine.

- The significance of a gendered curriculum is that boys and girls become segregated within the school in a way that channels girls into a relatively narrow range of future occupations (usually those that reflect social stereotypes about women and affective roles - the teaching, nursing and social work professions, for example).

4. Abbot and Wallace ("Feminist Perspectives") identify four major areas of the hidden curriculum that disadvantage girls:

a. The academic hierarchy.

- The highest positions in schools are mainly occupied by men. Women, although in the majority in the teaching profession, mainly occupy lesser authority roles. Children, therefore, are surrounded by role models that suggest positions of highest status should be occupied by men.

b. Stereotyped attitudes.

- **Stanworth**, in a study of FE A-level pupils found pupils underestimated girl's academic performance, capability and intelligence. Teachers also tended to see girls' futures in terms of marriage, child-rearing and domestic work. Possible future careers were similarly stereotyped into secretarial and "caring" work.

- Estimations of capability and intelligence were also based on how students responded in class. Boys demand more attention from teacher's in class and teacher's are more-likely to deliver lessons that they feel will capture the attention of boys. In this situation, boys are tacitly encouraged to contribute more to classroom interaction and consequently appear more intelligent to teachers.

c. Textbooks.

- Writers such as **Lobban**, **Stanworth**, **Spender** and **Reynolds** have shown how children's books are gender-stereotyped in terms of the messages they convey to pupils. Males appear more frequently; are more likely to be shown in active rather than passive roles and there are clear stereotypes about how males and females should look and behave. **Lobban** has noted how stereotyping is more pronounced in children's books than in reality and Spender has argued that women are frequently "invisible"; they rarely appear in textbooks aimed at maths and science pupils.

d. Subject choice and activities.

- Although we have looked at the idea of a gendered curriculum in terms of subject choice, sports' activities and subjects such as cookery, woodwork and metalwork remain gendered where pupils are given a choice.

- **Clarricoates** observation of primary school teaching noted that because boys require more control and discipline they have more contact with teachers and, again, lessons are organised and structured around assumptions about the kinds of things and activities that will keep the interest of - and help to control - boys.

5. **Trowler** ("Education and Training") notes language is a significant discriminatory medium in both education and society. English, generally favours masculine forms of expression ("dustman", "postman", "spokesman") as well as using the term "man" to signify humanity as a whole ("mankind", "man-management").

6. Finally, Scott ("Patriarchy in School Textbooks") found three basic themes in her analysis of curriculum materials:

- The derogation of women (women portrayed in subordinate or decorative roles).
- The invisibility of women (women simple fail to feature in many books).
- The insignificance of women (for example, history books that focus exclusively on male exploits in wartime).

D. Ethnicity and the Hidden Curriculum.

1. Two points need to be noted before we look in more detail at the issue of ethnicity and the hidden curriculum.

- Sociologists use the concept of ethnicity rather than "race" because the validity of "race" as a classification concept has been rejected by scientists. The concept of "race" is a socially-constructed one. Ethnicity, therefore, refers to the cultural identity of different groups (values, norms, traditions and so forth).

- Many of the points made in relation to class and gender differences can be equally applied to ethnic group experiences in our education system. This should be kept in mind when considering this area of the course.

2. In basic terms, we can look at the hidden curriculum as it applies to different ethnic groups in terms of two main concepts:

a. Racial Discrimination.

- There is evidence to suggest schools discriminate against pupils on the basis of pupil's ethnic background. There is a distinction to be made between systemic discrimination (discrimination that results from the way society is organised) and individual acts of discrimination. The focus here is mainly on the former.

- Where schools select pupils on the basis of characteristics other than strict IQ tests or written examinations, there is evidence that ethnic groups suffer disadvantages. Where selection is done by interviews, for example, the Commission For Racial Equality has found that Asian and West Indian pupils are less likely to:

  - Be admitted into a school.
  - Be admitted into the top streams or sets.

- This is becoming increasingly significant following the successive Education Acts from the mid-1980's onwards, where schools are allowed to select a proportion of their intake on the basis of interview.

- Wright ("Early Education") found evidence in primary schooling that teachers' viewed children from non-white ethnic minorities differently from white children. Asian children, for example, were more likely to be viewed as "a problem", received less teacher attention and were more likely to be excluded from classroom discussions.

- Afro-Caribbean boys were more-likely to be seen as aggressive and unruly and subjected to negative labelling and sanction.

- Gillborn ("Race, Class and School Effects") found similar instances in his study of secondary schooling. In particular, teachers tended to have different perceptions of non-white children and, consequently, tended to treat them differently.

- One major way the hidden curriculum is manifested is in exclusions from school. Since the mid-1980's, exclusions have risen, partly as a result of schools having to publish examination results and truancy rates. Pupils with a reputation for being "difficult" or "uncooperative" are more likely to be excluded from school now than in the past - and non-whites are more likely than whites to attract such labelling.

- Government figures for 1991, for example, show that Afro-Caribbeans made up 8% of school exclusions whilst constituting 2% of the school population. Two main reasons have been suggested for the above:

  - Teachers are more likely to define non-white children as being "a problem".

  - Ethnic minorities are more likely to experience frustration with racism and poverty and consequently display behavioural problems in the classroom.

b. Stereotyping.

- Racial stereotypes about IQ still persist in our society. Generally there is a clear perception that ethnic minorities have lower levels of IQ than their white peers.

- Figueroa suggests that racial stereotypes affect pupil performance in three ways:

  a. Misassment of pupils - assessment procedures may be used that are culturally / racially biased and serve to confirm stereotypes held be teachers.

  b. Misplacement - this involves teacher assessments of ethnic minority children placing them in lower streams / sets than should be the case if performance tests alone were used.

  c. Channelling - this involves teachers encouraging ethnic minority children to participate fully only in stereotypical areas of the curriculum. For example, the idea that Afro-Caribbean boys are "naturally good at cricket or running".

- Finally, **Brandt** ("The Realisation of Antiracist Teaching") argues that our society systematically discriminates against ethnic minority children, similar to the way it discriminates against all children who do not conform to the stereotypical "good" pupil (by which is generally meant the middle class pupil). This discrimination is expressed in three main ways:

  - The curriculum (what counts as knowledge, the materials used, etc.).
  - The teaching process (teacher expectations and stereotypes, etc.)
  - The culture of the school (where little attention is paid to the cultural background of ethnic minority pupils).