

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Education and Training

7. The Hidden Curriculum (3): Pupil Subcultures.

Issue: The Development of Pupil Sub-cultures.**Introduction.**

- In this final section we need to look briefly at possible explanations for the development of **pupil sub-cultures**. In the main this involves sub-cultures that develop around an **anti-school** theme (pupils who reject the values and norms perpetuated through the school system), but you should also be aware that conformist sub-cultural groups also exist within schools.
- The basic issue we are going to confront, therefore, is the idea that different pupils experience the educational process in different ways and schools usually contain a variety of different pupil groups with different orientations towards learning.
- In general, the basic ideas and explanations we are going to discuss here come under the general heading of a hidden curriculum.

1. WHAT theory / concept might explain this idea [Knowledge]?

- **Labelling theory.**

2. WHY is this theory / concept significant [Interpretation]?

- Labelling theorists have argued that pupil sub-cultures develop out of the way schools **label** and **categorise** different pupils into **types**. These types ("intelligent", "stupid", "well-motivated", etc.) then become the basis for the development of **pupil responses** to **teacher labelling**.

3. HOW is this theory / concept significant [Application]?

- **David Hargreaves** ("Social Relations In A Secondary School", 1967) suggests that **deviant sub-cultures** develop as a pupil reaction to labelling. In the school he studied, he found a delinquent sub-culture developed as a reaction to - and reinforcement of - a labelling process.
- The pupils who developed a deviant / delinquent sub-culture did so on the basis of their labelling as "multiple failures":
- They attended a secondary modern school widely seen to be the type of school that non-academic pupils attended.
- They were streamed in the school and were invariably in the lowest stream.
- They were selected-out from the lowest stream and identified as "louts" and "trouble-makers".
- **Hargreaves** suggests that, as a consequence of negative labelling pupils, sought-out each other's company as a means of "fighting back". Pupils who formed a **delinquent sub-culture** did so because they accepted their label and tried to transform its negative connotations into positive connotations.
- For example, the low status these pupils were given was transformed, within the

pupil sub-culture, into high **inter-personal status** through deliberate attempts to see who could gain the most prestige within the group by breaking the rules. By doing the things that teachers regarded as deviant - playing truant, disrupting lessons, making teachers appear foolish, cheating and so forth - pupils were able, in each other's eyes, to gain some form of status within the sub-cultural group.

- Conversely, Hargreaves found that a non-deviant (**conformist**) pupil sub-culture also developed for the opposite reasons; pupils who were relatively successful within the school also sought-out each other's company.

- **Paul Willis** ("Learning To Labour"), studied a group of 12 boys in their last 18 months at secondary school and their first few months of work. He argued that "the lads" (as they identified themselves) formed a distinctive "**counter-school sub-cultural grouping**" characterised by its **opposition** to the values and norms perpetuated throughout the school. This group:

- Felt superior to conformist pupils (labelled as "ear oles").

- Showed little interest in academic work, preferring instead to amuse themselves as best they could through various forms of deviant behaviour ("having a laff" became the main objective of the school day).

- Tried to identify with the non-school, adult world as they saw it - smoking, drinking, emphasising a strongly sexist and racist set of attitudes.

- **Willis** concludes that, on the evidence of his study, the school was failing to produce the type of "ideal workers" that various Functionalist and Marxist writers have claimed is the main **function** of the education system.

- **Colin Lacey** ("Hightown Grammar", 1970) found a similar process to the one described by **Hargreaves** in a very different type of school. As grammar school pupils, it might be assumed that the fact they had achieved a relatively high level of academic status by being accepted into a higher status school would not result in a deviant sub-culture developing.

- However, Lacey found the process whereby the school attempted to differentiate pupils on the basis of achievement (high, middle and low streams, for example) created a sense of failure in the lowest streams, even though at the age of eleven such pupils had been positively labelled as academically bright.

- This study illustrates the idea that the process of **educational differentiation** seems to be the most important factor in the development of pupil sub-cultures. The implication to be drawn from these very different types of study is that it is the educational process itself (the way it is organised to reflect particular social values and ideals) that creates pupil sub-cultures.

4. BUT what criticisms have there been of this idea [Evaluation]?

- In general, the usual criticisms of labelling theory apply. That is, there tends to be little **empirical** evidence available to confirm labelling theories of deviance. In addition, by focusing on small-scale systems of social interaction (the school in this instance), labelling theorists tend to ignore, overlook or play down the significance of cultural / structural factors. For example:
- **Willis** argues that his study shows evidence to suggest that the pupils he studied were not particularly well-socialised into the values and norms of the school and, by extension, society as a whole (the argument that the secondary socialisation process in the school was not very efficient).
- However, a different interpretation might be that since "the lads" he studied were destined for semi and unskilled labour in their working lives the school had indeed produced pupils who were reasonably well-orientated and accepting of their future adult roles.
- Finally, **Pete Woods** ("The Divided School", 1979) argued that while pupil sub-cultures do develop in schools, the situation is more complex than the above studies have suggested. Woods argues that rather than seeing pupil sub-cultures as either conformist or deviant, it is more realistic to see a variety of possible adaptations / responses to the schooling process.
- **Woods** loosely adopted Merton's adaptation categories, developed as part of his **Strain theory** of deviance. While Merton outlined five basic categories of **response** to social strains (Conformity, Innovation, Retreatism, Ritualism and Rebellion), Woods identified eight possible responses in descending order of conformity:
- Ingratiation (pupils who try to earn the favour of teachers - the most positive adaptation)
- Compliance (pupils who conform for instrumental reasons).
- Opportunism (those who fluctuate between teacher and peer approval).
- Ritualism (pupils who "go through the motions").
- Retreatism (not consciously opposed to school values, but not seriously concerned with achieving success).
- Colonisation (pupils who avoid trouble, but who will deviate if there is little chance of punishment).
- Intransigence (indifferent to school goals and more likely to deviate without being too bothered about the consequences).
- Rebellion (pupils who have little regard for school values and reject the things the school is trying to teach).

- As with Merton's analysis, this is basically an "ends and means" argument. Various pupil types accept, reject or try to change the officially prescribed ends and means to educational success.
- 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.
- 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."

5. CONCLUSION [Evaluation].

- In this section of the course we have looked at the concepts of a **hidden curriculum** and **pupil sub-cultures** within the school and the nature of the relationship between **structural imperatives** and **social interaction**.
- The hidden curriculum should not be seen as some kind of conspiracy dreamt-up by middle class teachers and Capitalists as a means of "keeping the working class, women and ethnic minorities in their place". It is hard to imagine that such a "conspiracy" could be maintained over time to any great extent.
- However, it is clear that some form of hidden curriculum is involved in the education system, whereby factors other than "ability" seem to play a part in educational success or failure (in the next section of the course we will look at some other factors involved in "differential achievement" in the education system). In this respect, we can note that:
 - a. The general behaviour of teachers, pupils and the like within the education system is constrained by structural imperatives (such as an examination system that forces a differentiation between pupils).
 - b. In an economically-unequal society, powerful status and interest groups are able to exert an influence over the way in which the curriculum is defined (in terms of the selection, organisation and stratification of knowledge).
 - c. This influence is reinforced by the transmission of norms and values within the classroom, whereby teachers attempt to socialise pupils into the dominant norms and values that prevail in society at any given time (according to both their understanding of these norms and values and the structural pressures placed upon teachers and pupils alike).
 - d. The hidden curriculum is part and parcel of the interaction process within the school and, as such, reflects different class, status and power relationships within both society as a whole and the education system in particular.
- 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 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.