

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **Teaching Notes for Students (AQuIRED Format)**

### **Education and Training Differential Achievement (2).**

## Introduction

- 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.
- When considering the factors involved in differential achievement we need to recognise that the social characteristics of 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.

## Theories and Explanations

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

- **The Hidden Curriculum**

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

- The concept of a hidden curriculum that runs alongside the formal curriculum in schools is a very broad one. It encompasses a wide range of different ideas and concepts (*labelling theory, self-fulfilling prophecies, status differences*, etc).
- In basic terms, the concept is significant in the context of differential educational achievement because it suggests that schools - and in particular teachers - play a central role in determining the success or failure of pupils. In this respect, the argument here is that teachers make assumptions about their pupils, based upon their knowledge and experience, that are transmitted to - and picked-up by - pupils. These assumptions and the behaviour which they reflect are seen by many sociologists to be crucially important in explaining the process of differential achievement.

- Although this set of notes focuses on the school environment, it is clear that schools do not exist in isolation from the rest of society. The concept of the hidden curriculum can only 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)
- As Andy Hargreaves ("Classrooms and Staffrooms", 1984):
  - "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."

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

- **Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum.**
- One of the main ways class differences are related to the hidden curriculum is through the relationship between the values and norms propagated through the school and the values and norms held by the pupils within the education system.
- The basic idea here is that since schools are, by definition, middle class institutions (involving values that derive from middle class experiences and concerns and norms that reflect these values) a pupil's social class will have important consequences in terms of their potential educational career.

- Educational success or failure has less to do with "innate intelligence" than with the ability of pupils to get "in tune" with what happens in schools. While conformity to dominant norms doesn't guarantee success, it makes it more likely that the child who conforms has a greater chance of achieving success than the child who, for whatever reason, is unable or unwilling to conform to school norms.
- **Bernstein** ("A Theory of Social Learning", 1961) argued that the hidden curriculum comes into play through the *language codes* that a child uses. He argued that an *elaborated* language code is the norm for middle class adults (such as teachers) and their children, whilst a *restricted* form 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 using this 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."
- Upper and Middle class children are more likely to have been socialised in a home environment that creates an elaborated language code. Thus:
  - 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.

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

- **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.

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

- Another form of the hidden curriculum that has implications across the class structure is that of the *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, Secondary Modern and Technical schools).
- Grammar schools focused upon a mainly academic form of education, while Secondary Modern's focused upon 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 "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.

- Comprehensive schooling was intended to rid schools of class and status differences by providing an environment in which all children - regardless of "ability" - could be educated in a common system. These schools developed in the early 1950's in Britain, but it wasn't until the 1976 Education Act that the (Labour) government tried to make such schools compulsory. This Act told all Local Education Authorities to "produce plans for Comprehensive schooling", with the aim that, by 1980, all schools in England and Wales would be Comprehensive.
- Tameside Council in Manchester 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.

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

- 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...).

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

- Further **status differences** between schools in the State-maintained sector have arisen over the way schools are funded. The (Conservative) government has:
  - Encouraged 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.

- 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.

- 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.

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

- **Teacher Labelling and Stereotypes (Hidden Curriculum).**

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

- Teachers are *agents of socialisation* and they are significant actors in the educational drama that unfolds within the classroom. In this respect, teachers are powerful players within the education system precisely because they are in a position to judge the success or failure of the children they teach. In this respect, teachers are, to paraphrase **G.H.Mead**, *significant others* in the life of the pupil.
- Because teachers occupy this potentially powerful position in the lives of their students, many sociologists (especially Interactionists), have argued that teachers play a central role in the educational process.

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

- **Nash** ("Keeping In With Teacher", 1972) argues that we should see the role of teachers as being highly active; that is, a role that helps to create and perpetuate educational differences.
- Although **Nash's** research evidence is complex, he basically argues that all teachers categorise their pupils on the basis of the attributes that they value most and least in their pupils. For example, if a teacher places most value on being attentive in class, then the pupil who listens carefully will be highly valued, whilst the pupil who never seems to listen will be least valued.
- 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 learnt 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).



- **Nash's** research used a range of attributes to arrive at an index of *teacher regard* and this is translated, through classroom interaction, into 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.
- **Nash** argues there is a strong (positive) correlation between the way a teacher perceives a pupil 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).
- 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)...

- **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".

- Finally, **Rosenthal and Jacobson** ("Pygmalion In The Classroom") conducted an experiment into the possible effects of teacher labelling and expectations on pupil's academic performance. They claimed to have found a way of predicting which children in a class would develop academically and informed the class teacher accordingly. The pupils they identified as academically bright showed clear signs of pulling ahead of the rest of their class academically.
- This, they argued, was due to the fact that the teacher perceived these children as being of higher intelligence, when the reality of the matter was that **Rosenthal and Jacobson** had simply identified such children randomly.

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

- There are general criticisms that can be made of labelling theory, although Nash's use of the concept is a particularly sophisticated version.
  - a. Children may reject the label advanced by the teacher. For example, a child may not care very much about what a teacher thinks about them.
  - b. Most labelling theory tends to assume that labelling is invariably negative in its effect (the teacher somehow tells the child they are stupid and the child somehow believes it). However, negative labelling may have the effect of making a child try harder in order to prove the teacher wrong.

#### **5. CONCLUSION** [**Evaluation**].

- 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** ("Tinker, 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.

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

- **Streaming**

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

- The decline of the tri-partite system of schooling in Britain and its replacement with a Comprehensive system removed some of the worst aspects of social stigma attached to the Grammar School - Secondary Modern divide. However, sociologists have argued that Comprehensive schools reproduced the basic assumptions involved in differential education by adopting a system of streaming. In effect, the streaming of pupils meant that the distinctions implicit in the tripartite system were not removed, they were simply relocated (and hidden) under one roof.
- In this respect, the streaming of pupils was seen to be a significant source of differential educational achievement by labelling pupils within the school as academic / non-academic. By so doing, this practice reproduced the inequalities inherent in the former system.

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

- **David Hargreaves** ("Social Relations in a Secondary School", 1967) 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.
- Not only did **Hargreaves** find that 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."

- Similarly, Lacey's study of "Hightown Grammar" (1970) noted the way streaming affected both the behaviour and educational achievement of differently-streamed children. 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.

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

- Proponents of streaming have argued that, applied properly and with reasonable safeguards, it represents a means of ensuring that pupils of differing abilities are taught in ways that are sympathetic to their abilities and interests. In this respect, therefore, the argument is that children can be allowed to develop academically at a pace that suits them. Academically bright children, for example, are not "held back" by those of lesser ability, whilst lesser ability children are not intimidated by those of higher ability.

#### **5. CONCLUSION [Evaluation].**

- Whether or not you view streaming as a good or bad idea seems to depend to some extent upon the concept of ability. Advocates of streaming tend to argue that children have different relative levels of ability (which relates to the idea of fixed levels of inherited intelligence), whereas those who argue that streaming is educationally divisive and damaging tend to argue that "ability" is something that is related to a variety of school and non-school factors.
- The sociological evidence seems to suggest that the latter is a more accurate representation of the effects of streaming, but it should be noted that many psychologists argue that the possible benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

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

- **Banding and Setting**

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

- 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. A pupil may be in the top set for physics, a middle set for biology and the bottom set for French.

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

- Setting in particular avoids the worst consequences of streaming in terms of:
  - a. The way in which the school is organised. Pupils, for example, tend not to develop the strong sub-cultural groupings associated with streaming.
  - b. The difficulties pupils in the lowest streams have in moving up the streaming system. With a setting system movement is much easier because pupils are not so clearly identified as being successful or unsuccessful.
  - c. The stigma attached to being in the lowest streams. Because setting is not an "either / or" process (either you are in the top stream or you are a failure) pupils may avoid being labelled as stupid.

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

- Neither banding nor setting avoids the problem of educational differentiation based upon class. Setting in particular seems to perpetuate class-based forms of differentiation in a similar fashion to streaming. Although students are allocated to sets on a subject by subject basis the overall outcome tends to be very similar - working class children predominantly end-up in the lower sets for each subject.

**5. CONCLUSION** [**Evaluation**].

- 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 (*the hidden curriculum*).