

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes for Students (AQuIRED Format)

**Education and Training
Differential Achievement (3).**

Theories and Explanations

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

- **Anomie Theory**

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

- 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.
- 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.”.
- 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.

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

- This situation creates a problem of anomie. In this instance a *conflict* over *role expectations* and the *ideology* that surrounds male and female 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.
- Thus, girls are secondary socialised into *ideological assumptions* about competing and succeeding at school. Primary socialisation, however, teaches them that some areas of work (and the curriculum) are off-limits. If they insist on studying those areas then they run the risk of attracting a deviant label ("unfeminine").
- Girls resolve this problem by avoiding certain subjects classified as masculine (such as the natural sciences) and opting for subjects classified as feminine (such as modern languages) or socially neutral (such as English literature). For males the above process also holds true, except it is largely reversed.
- 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. BUT what criticisms have there been of this idea [**Evaluation**]?

- Although this theory explains why some boys and girls take certain types of subject, the fact that not all boys and girls stick to gender appropriate subjects indicates that the theory cannot fully explain the gendered curriculum.
- Additionally, at GCSE level and below a National Curriculum has meant that blatant forms of gender association are no-longer as much in evidence, since all pupils are expected to follow the same basic curriculum. This may eliminate some forms of gender association (especially in GCSE subjects such as maths, which all children are now expected to take).
- It is not clear why some subjects, such as sociology and psychology should be female gendered. One explanation - that they are seen as easier - is plausible since it keys into traditional assumptions about the relative abilities of males and females. However, if this were the case, as evidence of female achievements become more widely known, we would expect this situation to change.
- Alternatively, the association with social science and social work, teaching, nursing and so forth might explain the gendering of these subjects, since such careers are still highly gendered in our society.

5. CONCLUSION [Evaluation].

- Anomie theory does seem to offer a general explanation as to the process of the curriculum becoming gendered, especially in the higher levels of the education system where students are free to pick the subjects they want to follow.
- In particular, one of the strengths of this theory is that it relates events in the wider world (work, general socialisation of males and females) to individual choices and shows how wider social structures influence such choices. In this respect, anomie theory can be used to explain why patterns of gendered subjects develop.

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

- **Hidden Curriculum**
- **Abbot and Wallace** (“Feminist Perspectives”) identify four major areas of the hidden curriculum that disadvantage girls:
 - a. The academic hierarchy.
 - b. Stereotyped attitudes.
 - c. Textbooks.
 - d. Subject choice and activities.

These ideas develop some aspects of the concept of a hidden curriculum, so it makes sense to discuss these in turn.

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

- The basic idea underpinning all of these ideas is that children learn about the world and their place in it through their experiences within both the school and the wider social world.
- Thus, through their socialising experiences, both boys and girls develop an understanding of the nature of society - how to conform to social expectations, the consequences of deviation and so forth. In basic terms, the idea here is that children are sent messages from the world around them and, by and large, they internalise these messages.

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

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.
- **Trowler** ("Education and Training") notes language is a significant discriminatory medium in both education and society. English, for example, 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").

- 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 simply fail to feature in many books).
 - The insignificance of women (for example, history books that focus exclusively on male exploits in wartime).

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

- All of the above aspects of the hidden curriculum are significant, especially in relation to the concept of a gendered curriculum. However, it seems difficult to relate them to the fact that girls generally now out-perform boys in the education system.
- In this respect it seems difficult to see how stereotyping, gendered roles and so forth (considered as aspects of the hidden curriculum) can explain this fact. If anything, the type of ideas noted above suggest that boys are greatly advantaged within the school (probably true in many respects) - yet this does not square with an overall worsening of boys’ academic performance.
- Clearly, teacher labelling and stereotyping may be changing as perceptions of female academic performance change - but again this fails to adequately explain how the change in performance could have started if it is simply related to school factors.

5. CONCLUSION [Evaluation].

- All of the above aspects of the hidden curriculum are significant in terms of explaining the gendering of curriculum choice, but much less plausible in explaining the declining relative performance of boys.
- Overall, therefore, it would seem reasonable to conclude that factors outside the school, such as the increasing number of women working, the development of greater levels of female independence and emancipation from male domination and the like seem to be much more significant in achievement terms. Additionally, economic changes and cycles (especially high levels of unemployment amongst men) may have a significant impact on boys’ perception of the relationship between academic achievement and work.

If we consider that unemployment levels have dramatically increased in areas of traditional male employment and increased in newer service areas of the economy, these structural changes in society may be having more impact upon educational achievement levels than school-based factors.