“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes for Students

Education and Training

4. Shaping The Formal Curriculum.

Introduction

1. So far, we have focused on the ideas that education exists to:

    1. Prepare children for their wider adult roles in society.
    2. Provide knowledge, skills, etc. required by people in their adult lives.

In this next series of notes (grouped under the title of "Shaping The Curriculum") we can develop some of the above ideas by looking in more detail at the nature of educational institutions in modern societies. This will involve looking at a range of ideas relating to education which can be grouped under two main headings:

a. The **formal school curriculum**.

- This refers to all of the planned experiences provided by schools for their pupils. This mainly involves the teaching of various subjects (English, Maths, Art and so forth) as part of a formal system of learning.

b. The **hidden curriculum.**

- This refers to what pupils learn through the experience of being in school. For example, the norms and values propagated in the education system in an informal way (that is, not necessarily explicitly taught by teachers).

2. The separation between the formal and informal curriculum is, sociologically, somewhat artificial, since in reality it would be difficult to distinguish between them.

- For example, the formal curriculum could be seen as part of the hidden curriculum, since subjects that appear on the formal curriculum have been selected from amongst many possible subjects. Someone (or some group) has decided that some subjects are more important than others - and this perhaps makes the formal curriculum just one more aspect of the overall hidden curriculum.

The Formal Curriculum

1. We need to begin by considering some of the factors and forces that combine to create a system of formal and informal schooling.

- As we have seen, education systems are closely integrated into the institutional network in any society. Thus, to understand the possible ways the content of schooling is shaped in any society, we must understand the relationship between education and other institutions (shared, stable, patterns of behaviour) in society.

- Thus, in order to understand the nature of schooling - what is taught, how it is taught and why it is taught - we need to look the social forces involved in the shaping of the curriculum. We can begin by looking at three major areas of society that play a part in the shaping of both the educational system and, by extension, the school curriculum.

A. Education and Work.

1. One of the major institutional relationships in our society is that between education and the economy. One function of education is to provide a system of secondary socialisation geared to the production of future adult workers (people with appropriate levels of skill and knowledge to enable them to participate in their society's economy). In this respect, the socialisation process has to take account of:

- The nature of the overall production process in society.

  For example, small-scale, agricultural, societies have different needs to large-scale, industrial, societies.

- The level of technological development in a society.

  The socialisation process has to reflect the level of technological sophistication in a society. For example:

  - In pre-industrial societies, little, if any, technological training is required since such societies are not technologically sophisticated. It is rare, or even unknown, for educational systems to develop in such societies since there is little or no economic demand for an educated workforce.

  - In industrial societies, greater technological knowledge is needed since people are working with machinery that requires technological knowledge. In such societies we see the initial development of educational systems as the economic demand grows for a workforce that has a basic level of literacy and numeracy needed for the operation of machinery.

  - In modern, computerised, societies (sometimes called post-industrial societies), the workforce (or at least some part of it) requires relatively high levels of technical knowledge to work fully with sophisticated machines. In such societies education is an important for society since the ability to use and work alongside sophisticated technology requires a skilled workforce.

2. One of the first things to consider when discussing the relationship between education and work is the purpose of education.

- Education is a secondary socialising process and the implication is that although training people for their future work roles in society is clearly important, people play other roles in their life that are not necessarily related to work for which they must also be socialised. The question, therefore, is which is most significant. Is education's primary role (that is, most important purpose):

  a. To train people for work?
  b. To prepare people for their future adult lives?

3. Sociologists differ over their answers to these questions and although these two ideas might seem to be the same thing, a closer look shows how they differ.

- Training, for example, means learning how to perform a specific economic task or job. You train to be a plumber, stockbroker or nurse.

- Adult roles, on the other hand, encompass a much wider set of ideas and relationships, since in their adult lives people have to deal with:

    - Economic problems (work and the need to physically survive, which will clearly encompass training / education in some form).

    - Political problems (the ability to make informed decisions about personal / social politics, conformity to and deviation from rules of behaviour, etc.).

    - Family problems (which relate to the socialisation of children, male / female relationships within the family group and so forth).

    - Cultural problems (relating to such things as levels of education to pursue, religious / moral beliefs, the ability to use and interpret a wide range of media and so forth).

- People, for example, have a part to play in the political organisation of their society, as well as roles that relate to family life. Learning how to be a member of the society in which you live is, perhaps, an equally important role of the education system if a society is to produce people who take a full and active part in the cultural life of their society.

- Whatever the answer, education systems do reflect the nature of work in any society, although as societies become more complex in their level of technology and social relationships the nature of the education system evolves to meet these requirements in different ways. We can look at a further aspect of curriculum shaping in terms of the nature of the society in which educational systems develop.

B. Education and Society.

1. In a complex industrial society such as Britain there are many occupational roles that have to be filled. These range from doctors, lawyers and accountants, through teachers, plumbers and electricians to road sweepers, traffic wardens and shop assistants. Our society, therefore, is occupationally-stratified.

- There are not only a multitude of different types of occupation in our society, but also these occupations are ranked differently in terms of income, status and the like. Doctors are ranked higher than teachers who, in turn, are ranked higher than shop assistants.

- In our society, the stratification system is a relatively open one. People can achieve different levels (or statuses). They be socially mobile up or down the stratification system. This is not always the case with systems of stratification. For example:

    - In slave societies, such as the American South in the 19th century, the slave is legally owned by their master and their position in society is fixed.

    - In Caste societies, such as India, position in the stratification system is fixed at birth and no social mobility is allowed.

    - Similarly, in Feudal societies, such as Europe or Japan in the 15th century, social position is fixed at birth. People could not move up the social scale.

2. The significance of this is that in stratification systems where social mobility exists, the education system is important because it provides the means (qualifications) by which people can demonstrate their abilities in an objective, testable, way.

- Similarly, objective qualifications are important in a society where people are not usually closely known to each other. Educational qualifications provide a means through which employers, for example, can reasonably differentiate between and select people on the basis of merit and achievement.

3. These ideas are significant in terms of the development of the school curriculum, since schools are pressurised into developing a system of testing in order to differentiate them from each other (that is, to make them socially different).

- In any society that is occupationally stratified, the education system will be forced to develop a method or methods of differentiating children.

4. In addition, occupational stratification will necessitate three further things:

- Firstly, the kinds of subjects offered as part of the curriculum will be related to the types of work available in a society.

- Secondly, since different occupations require different levels of skill and knowledge the curriculum must reflect these differences in its system of testing.

- Thirdly, the content of the subjects taught is rarely going to involve the teaching of skills that suit an individual for only one type of work. Rather, subject content is likely to be unrelated to specific workplace skills since, in a modern economy people may be required to do very different things at different times in their working lives. The content of the curriculum is likely to reflect this by focusing upon general, abstract abilities. In this respect, the educational system will act as a sifting and sorting mechanism. Some children will complete the lowest levels, whilst others will continue to the higher levels and this is likely to be reflected by their future occupational destinations.

C. Education and Politics.

1. One of the most important areas to look at in relation to the factors and forces that help to shape the school curriculum is that of power; in this case, the various forms of political power that combine to actually determine things like:

a. The general nature of the curriculum (whether or not children will be tested, whether they will be encouraged to achieve different levels of success, whether there will be a written National Curriculum and so forth).

b. The specific nature of the curriculum (what subjects will be taught and for how long, the content of the subject syllabus and so forth).

2. In democratic societies, decisions as to the specific content of the curriculum tend be taken by two main groups:

a. Educationalists.

In England and Wales, before the 1988 Education Act, for example, schools were basically responsible for deciding which subjects would be taught. In practice schools tended to offer a very similar mix of subject options simply because they have to reflect the occupationally structure of our society.

b. The Government.

Since 1988 in England and Wales, the government, through a National Curriculum, has decided which subjects will be taught in State maintained schools (schools not privately owned) up to the age of 16.

3. The political role of government is significant, since it is clear that the objectives of education, from a political viewpoint, are not simply confined to training people for work. On the contrary, we can briefly note the following additional objectives:

a. The socialising of individuals into the general values and norms of the society in which they live.

b. The attempt to promote racial and sexual equality.

c. Expansion of education as a means of eliminating youth unemployment.

d. The attempt to eliminate the advantages and disadvantages that are seen to stem from an individual's social class background.

e. The attempt to control behaviour through education, both physically in the form of school discipline and ideologically in the sense of rewarding children with qualifications for their conformity, hard work and so forth.

4. Whilst the above are clearly going to be significant in terms of the precise content of the school curriculum, we need to remember that many of the basic reasons for the development of a universal system of education in Britain stem not from the desire to create well-informed, well-rounded, politically-aware, individuals able and willing to participate fully in a mature democratic process. Rather, they related to the requirements of the economy - the need, in short, for a literate, numerate, obedient workforce, willing and able to take its place in the production process.

5. Having outlined various ways that the education system is related to other social institutions, it would be useful to look at a couple of sociological attempts to theorise the relationship between education, the curriculum and wider society.

Shaping the Curriculum: Models of Power

- Power is the ability to influence events, such as the content of the official school curriculum. This is a very simple definition of power, but it is one that will be sufficient for our present purpose.

- A model, in sociological terms, is an idealised representation of reality (much like a model car or plane is an idealised representation of reality).

1. The first model of power relating to the shaping of the curriculum that we can consider is a pluralist or Weberian model. Pluralist writers stress the idea that different groups in society compete against one another to try to realise their own particular interests.

This type of model, in broad terms, argues that there are a variety of social factors and social groups involved in the shaping of the curriculum. These social factors include things like:

• The economic and political nature of the society within which an education system develops.

• The technological levels of development within a society.

The various social groups in Britain we can identify as having an interest and input into the shaping of the school curriculum include:

- Parents,
- Employers,
- Teachers, academics, administrators,
- Government,
- Political parties,
- Non-education professionals.

2. Different groups - at different times - influence curriculum development (although all operate within the broad constraints imposed by the social factors noted above).

- Each of these competing interest groups, although broadly definable as groups in their own right, do not act alone or without reference to one another. In any modern social system the interconnected nature of power, control and influence needs to be stressed.

3. Within this model, the role of the government is clearly important, since it is government that actually decides the format of the official curriculum. In this respect, the focus of competing interest groups is that of trying to influence government policy in ways that are broadly favourable to the interests of such groups (even though such interests may be expressed, ideologically, in terms of "the national interest", "freedom to choose", "equality of opportunity" and so forth).

- In this respect, we can see that the ability to control aspects of curriculum development relates to two main ideas:

a. The structural location of competing interest groups.

This means the position of such groups within the general structure of social relationships that characterise a particular society. This structural position is related to things like:

• The power they have to exert influence.
• The extent of their involvement and legitimate interest in the educational process.

b. The relationship between differing interest groups.

In this respect we need to consider the way in which they conflict or compliment each other, the type of alliances that different groups are able to form and the like.

4. Although government is central to the question of who shapes the curriculum, government decisions are not taken in a social vacuum. Rather, they reflect the balance of power between such social groups as:

• Political parties.
• The electorate,
• Business interests,
• Professional groups (both academic and non-academic) and so forth.

- Within this model, therefore, power is distributed relatively widely but unequally. Some groups are more powerful and influential than others and some groups are able to forge alliances and power blocks to try to ensure that their interests receive greater consideration. In this way, we can explain two things:

Firstly, the fact that the curriculum has been broadly unchanged, for the past 40 -50 years (perhaps longer), in terms of its main elements.

Secondly, the way in which such changes as have occurred reflect changing perceptions of the relative importance of specific subjects in relation to the perceived needs of society as a whole.

Pluralism In Action.

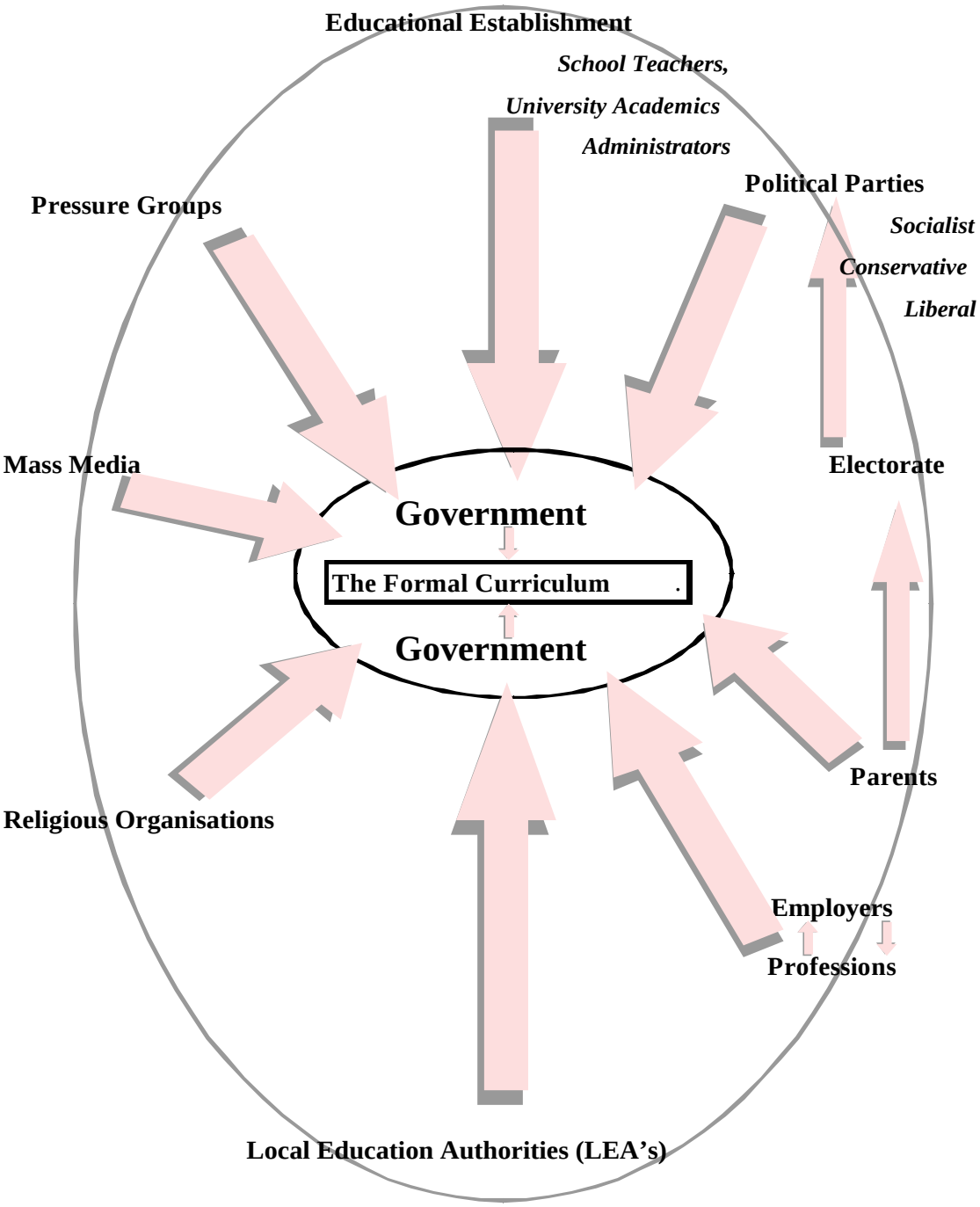
1. The schematic model on the following page outlines some of the basic inputs from various status / interest groups in relation to curriculum development.

- An interest group can be defined as any group that has a legitimate stake in a decision-making process. Parents, for example, might constitute an interest group in the sense that their children are the ones being educated in schools.

- A status group is one concerned with the decision- making process as a means of preserving or enhancing the status of its members. Teacher Trade Unions might be considered an example of such a group.

Shaping the Curriculum:

A Pluralist Model.



2. As I have suggested, levels of input into curriculum development are related to the structural location of competing groups and the nature of their relationship to one another. Thus:

- Whilst the government is relatively powerful in terms of controlling the content of the curriculum, it is clear that the power of governments is conditioned by reference to various powerful groups in society:

    - Employers,
    - Professionals,
    - Political Parties,
    - Mass Media and so forth.

3. Governments do not take decisions without reference to the interests of these powerful groups (as we have seen with the development of the National Curriculum).

- In addition, power is not distributed equally throughout the social structure:

    a. Some groups have more power to influence decision-making than others.

    b. Alliances between different groups may also increase their respective levels of power to influence decision-making. For example:

    - Employers, professional groups and political parties form a tacit alliance in relation to curriculum development to ensure that their views are reflected in its development (possibly to the detriment of less powerful groups - such as parents, pupils and so forth).

Powerful Status Groups - An Example.

1. According to Ivan Illich ("Deschooling Society", 1973) one of the most powerful status groups in terms of the development of the curriculum are professionals. This includes those whose professional knowledge relates directly to education:

- Teachers,
- Academics and the like,

and those whose professionalism develops out of the application of different kinds of specialist knowledge. For example:

- Doctors,
- Lawyers,
- Dentists and so forth

2. Illich characterises professionals as powerful groups who:

- Monopolise certain types of knowledge. Members of a particular group try to claim their qualifications and expertise give them a special right to practice a particular occupation. Non-members are thus excluded from practising this occupation.

- Ensure that "non-professionals" / "non-members" of Professional Associations are not in a position to judge the value of this status group's work. Regulation of a status group's activities is done by the members themselves.

- Sell their knowledge - they are able to persuade others that the knowledge and skills they possess are valuable.

- Sell their skills as expensively as possible by using devices such as:

  • Professional Closure (Controlling intake and regulating the numbers of qualified professionals).

  • A selection process.

  • Training and examinations.

  • Anti-competition laws (For example, only qualified doctors / accountants etc. can work in these professions).

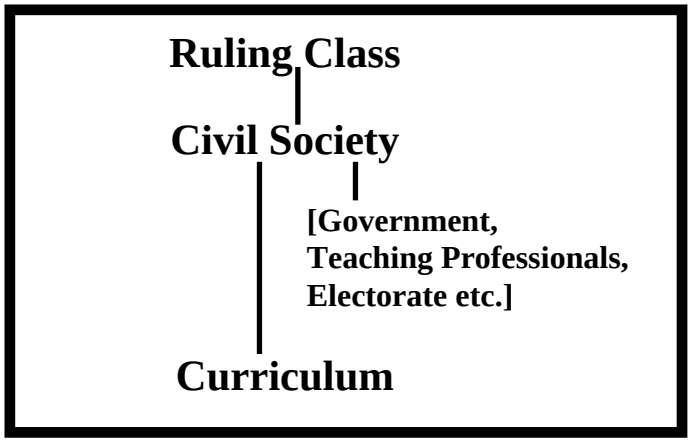
3. Illich argues that there is a "professional conspiracy" surrounding the nature of knowledge and curriculum development in the education system.

- One possible response to Illich's argument is that "professional knowledge" represents a different form of knowledge to "everyday knowledge".

  The general public, for example, need to be sure that professionals are properly qualified to carryout certain forms of labour (such as the practice of medicine) for the benefit and protection of all.

Marxism In Action...

1. An alternative way of looking at the relationship between power and the shaping of the curriculum is to use a Marxist model, such as the one proposed by Bowles and Gintis ("Schooling In Capitalist America", 1976). Bowles and Gintis argue that the major determinant of the curriculum is the needs of employers. A model of power that expresses this idea might be as follows.



2. An alternative Marxist model might be one employed by both Poulantzas and Giroux, employing the concept of relative autonomy. This involves the idea that the values of a ruling class determine the basic shape and extent of the education system (for example, the type of curriculum taught, the relationship between academic and vocational subjects and the like) but the day-today (normative) running of education is left in the hands of various competing groups (for example, academics and teaching professionals).

- Having looked in broad terms at various ideas relating to the shaping of the school curriculum, we need to move on to consider a related argument, namely that control of the content of the official curriculum involves not just the control of knowledge but also the control of opportunity. To do this, we will need to look more closely at the nature of the formal curriculum.