

Education study-guide 9

Sociological factors that focus on internal or school-based explanations for the underachievement of working-class pupils.

Further possible explanations for the underachievement of working-class pupils and students focus on what goes on **internally in schools**. Studies of what goes on in classrooms have highlighted the **role of teacher-student interaction**, and particularly **the labelling or negative stereotyping of students by teachers** and its **effect on their self-esteem**.

The student-teacher relationship

Interactionist sociologists are interested in **how the day-to-day interaction between students and teachers can shape educational success or failure**. Becker (1971) argues that teachers operate in the classroom with an **'ideal pupil' stereotype** in their heads which they use **to judge and label students either positively or negatively**. For example, middle-class teachers may erroneously judge working-class students from council estates or one-parent families as potentially troublesome. They may judge pupils on **on appearance** because working-class pupils may not conform to uniform rules **or because they have had a negative experience with an older sibling in the past**. **Becker therefore suggests that these judgements and the negative labels that result from them have little to do with merit – the working habits, the ability or intelligence of the labelled pupil.**

Pygmalion in the Classroom – Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968)

Rosenthal and Jacobson carried out a classic **social experiment** in order to **investigate the effects of teacher labelling**. They told teachers in a particular school that they had used an IQ test to identify 20 per cent of pupils in a particular class as especially bright (these kids were referred to as **'the bloomers'**). However the researchers had conducted **no** such IQ tests. Rosenthal and Jacobson **lied** to the teachers. **The bloomers were actually randomly selected**. A year later, Rosenthal and Jacobson returned to the school and tested all the children. They found that **the 'bloomers' had made significantly more progress than the other 80 per cent of pupils**. They claimed that this was because **teachers had responded positively to the 'bloomer' label and given those pupils more attention and encouragement than the others**. The bloomers allegedly reacted to this positive interaction and labelling by working harder and making more progress. Rosenthal and Jacobson referred to this effect as the **'self-fulfilling prophecy'** – the prophecy contained in the

label (bloomers) was somehow conveyed in the actions of the teachers and fulfilled – the kids actually became bloomers or successes.

Class debating issue – can you identify any ethical problems with this research?

Becker suggests that **teachers see middle-class students, especially girls, as closest to the ‘ideal pupil or student’ in terms of academic performance, classroom conduct, attitude and appearance. Working-class pupils, especially boys, are seen as furthest from this ideal and are more likely to be negatively labelled by teachers.** Becker claims, like Rosenthal and Jacobson, that teacher interaction with students on the basis of these stereotypes, is likely to result in a **self-fulfilling prophecy.**

For example, **middle-class ‘ideal’ pupils may develop a positive self-image. This motivates them to work hard and to concentrate in the classroom because interaction with the teacher suggests the teacher respects them and views them as having academic potential. The teacher makes it clear that they trust the student to work independently.** There is also verbal praise accompanied by positive teacher behaviour such as smiling. In contrast, **negatively labelled working-class boys may develop a negative self-image from their interaction with their teacher.** They may feel that they are frequently told-off and criticised. Teachers may verbally convey their distrust of such pupils and insist that such pupils can only work under strict supervision. This negative interaction may produce anti-social behaviour because such pupils are de-motivated.

The labelling process

- Teacher forms opinion of pupil based largely on non-academic factors.
- The pupil is negatively labelled which means all of their actions are interpreted by the teacher in a negative or deviant context
- The pupil becomes aware of the label via everyday interaction with the teacher.
- The pupil internalises the negative teacher label.
- The pupil resigns him/herself to the label or feels it is unfair, and is less-motivated to work hard.
- **The disaffection that results from the label may encourage the pupil to ‘live-up to’ the label in order to attract status from his or her peers.** The pupil eventually ‘becomes’ the deviant pupil that the teacher predicts, thus fulfilling the initial teacher prophecy.

Streaming, identity and subcultures

Most schools separate students into different ability groups called 'sets' or 'streams'. Interactionist sociologists view streaming as a form of **institutional labelling**.

Ray Rist (1970) studied a US primary school class. He found that **the teacher used information gleaned from the children's home background (rather than testing or ability) to segregate them by placing them on particular tables;**

The Tiger table contained students who were considered by the teacher as 'neat and tidy' middle-class children who were 'fast' learners. This table was placed closest to the teacher's desk. Children on this table were frequently praised by the teacher for their efforts.

The Cardinal table was mainly composed of working-class children of middling ability.

The Clown table mainly comprised working-class children who the teacher defined as those who would not and could not learn. They were placed on a table furthest from the teacher and labelled 'troublesome'.

Rist concluded that **the tiger, cardinal and clown labels became fixed in both the minds and actions of the teachers and the children as pupils moved into their second year of schooling.**

Stephen Ball (1981) found that **grouping by ability leads to greater social class inequality**. His study of **Beachside Comprehensive** found that students were placed in bands on the basis of information supplied by their primary schools. The first band contained the most-able students and the third, the least-able. However **Ball found that non-academic factors had influenced where children were placed. For example, he found that working-class children were disproportionately allocated places in the bottom streams. Children in this stream often felt demeaned by their teachers and consequently suffered from low self-esteem and were apathetic about school and lessons. In order to compensate, they were often disruptive.**

Keddie (1971) examined the effects of streaming in a London comprehensive. She was interested in the ways streaming affected how teachers transmitted subject knowledge to pupils. **She found that highly valued abstract knowledge was conveyed to those in the top streams because teachers regarded them as 'bright enough' to handle it. The same knowledge was denied to those in the bottom streams because teachers expected less of those students in terms of ability.** Keddie observed that the very real street knowledge and experience of pupils in the bottom streams was often dismissed as 'irrelevant' by teachers.

Educational triage

Triage is a medical term which refers to when nurses and doctors rank injuries when **sifting and sorting patients** especially in 'disaster' situations. **Gillborn and Youdell (2001) claim that schools and teachers use a similar method of triage when streaming pupils.**

- Middle-class students are often **labelled 'university- material'** and placed in top streams where they receive positive teacher support.
- Some middle-class and working-class pupils are seen as C-D borderline students and given extra help. Note that there has been controversy over the practice of **off-rolling** where **schools drop students who are predicted to fail either GCSE or A-level exams.** This off-rolling means that these students often do not take their exams and consequently their failure does not impact on the school's achievement statistics or affect the school's league table position.
- **Working-class pupils are often labelled as 'hopeless' and placed in the bottom streams. Their experience of teaching is one of controlled babysitting rather than learning.** The school does not expend a great deal of teaching or resources on them.

Anti-school subcultures

Studies by **Ball (1981)** and **Mac an Ghail (1994)** found that those in the bottom streams react to their perceived 'inferior' status by forming **delinquent anti-school or counter-cultures. These award status to their members on the basis of anti-school activity such as being disruptive in lessons or disobeying school rules.** Students who develop a negative self-image may turn to **deviant subcultures such as territorial street gangs that also operate outside school hours.** Such subcultures may dispense status for masculinity and aggression. However **membership is also a form of self-fulfilling prophecy because it confirms the school's view of the pupil as a 'failure'.**

Class identity

Many students in bottom streams **deliberately adopt particular dress codes. These attract respect and status from their peers but often bring them into conflict with the school authorities because such dress rarely conforms to the rules of the school.** For example, **Archer's (2010) study of a comprehensive school found that some working-class students deliberately chose to break school dress rules by embracing a street style of appearance and behaviour focused on wearing high-end sports' brands copied from working-class TV celebrities.**

Young (2012) conducted a survey of 3000 15-year-old pupils in 22 Scottish schools and found evidence of a working-class subculture known as NEDS

(non-educated delinquents). **NEDS generally thought school was a waste of their time and consequently they often tranted.** They often came from deprived areas in which there was little prospect of finding work. **Some students chose the NED identity because they were proud of their working- class roots. The NED label was regarded as 'cool' and consequently attracted peer respect.**

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