Theories of schooling and inequality

As we saw from Shaun's story at the start of this chapter, education and inequality are related. Shaun came from a poor background, and didn't get into the school his mother wanted him to. He then had to struggle to get on in class, when most of his friends were uninterested or even hostile to academic achievement. This section reviews a number of different ways in which sociological theorists have attempted to account for social inequalities in education. They can all be seen as concerned with 'social reproduction' in and through education, but in rather different ways. Ivan Illich stresses the effects informal processes at work through, what he calls, 'the hidden curriculum'; Basil Bernstein emphasizes the significance of language; Pierre Bourdieu examines the relationship between the cultures of school and home; and Paul Willis looks at the effects of cultural values in shaping pupil attitudes to education and labour. The later thinkers discussed in this section, Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, draw upon all these ideas in various ways, but develop them further in terms of culture and the complexities of identity construction (including sexuality and ethnicity) in the modern world. It should be noted how strongly cultural issues are focused upon these different approaches.

Ivan Illich: the hidden curriculum

One of the most controversial writers on educational theory was Ivan Illich (1926–2002). He is noted for his criticisms of modern economic development, which he described as a process whereby previously self-sufficient people are dispossessed of their traditional skills and made to rely on doctors for their health, teachers for their schooling, television for their entertainment and employers for their subsistence.

Illich's views on health were discussed in chapter 8, 'Health, Illness and Disability', p. 262.

Illich (1973) argued that the very notion of compulsory schooling – now accepted throughout the world – should be questioned. He stressed the connection between the development of education and the requirements of the economy for discipline and hierarchy. He argued that schools have developed to cope with four basic tasks: the provision of custodial care, the distribution of people among occupational roles, the learning of dominant values and the acquisition of socially approved skills and knowledge. In relation to the first, the school has become a custodial organization because attendance is obligatory, and children are 'kept off the streets' between early childhood and their entry into work.

Much is learnt in school which has nothing to do with the formal content of lessons. Schools tend to inculcate what Illich called 'passive consumption' – an uncritical acceptance of the existing social order – by the nature of the discipline and regimentation they involve. These lessons are not consciously taught; they are implicit in school procedures and organization. The hidden curriculum teaches children that their role in life is 'to know their place and to sit still in it' (Illich 1973).

Illich advocated deschooling society.

Literacy in global focus

Literacy is the 'baseline' of education. Without it, schooling cannot proceed. We take it for granted in the West that the majority of people are literate, but, as has been mentioned, this is only a recent development in Western history, and in previous times no more than a tiny proportion of the population had any literacy skills.

In some countries only a small minority of the population have any reading or writing skills. This can be partially explained by the absence of universal education in some countries. Yet even if the provision of primary schooling were to increase with the level of population growth, illiteracy will not be much reduced for many years, because a high proportion of illiterates are adults. The absolute number of those who cannot read or write is actually rising.

Illiteracy has a strong gender dimension, especially in the poorest countries of the world. High rates of female illiteracy are linked strongly to poverty, infant mortality, high fertility rates and low levels of economic development. A combination of traditional culture and economic pressures keep many girls out of school: rural families tend to be more traditional and less supportive of women's education. But in large families, it is expensive to educate all the children, so girls are often sacrificed in favour of educating boys.

Although many countries have instituted literacy programmes, these have made only a small contribution to a problem of large-scale dimensions. Television, radio and the other electronic media can be used, where they are available, to skip the stage of learning literacy skills and convey educational programmes directly to adults. But educational programmes are usually less popular than commercialized entertainment.

During the period of colonialism, the colonial governments regarded education with some trepidation. Until the twentieth century, most believed indigenous populations to be too primitive to be worthy of educating. Later, education was seen as a way of making local elites responsive to European interests and ways of life. But to some extent, the result was to foment discontent and rebellion, since the majority of those who led anti-colonial and nationalist movements were from educated elites who had attended schools or colleges in Europe. They were able to compare first-hand the democratic institutions of the European countries with the absence of democracy in their lands of origin.

The education that the colonizers introduced usually pertained to Europe, not to the colonial areas themselves. Educated Africans in the British colonies knew about the kings and queens of England, read Shakespeare, Milton and the English poets, but knew next to nothing about their own countries' history or past cultural achievements. Policies of educational reform since the end of colonialism have not completely altered the situation even today.

Partly as a result of the legacy of colonial education, which was not directed towards the majority of the population, the educational system in many developing countries is top-heavy: higher education is disproportionately developed, relative to primary and secondary education. The result is a correspondingly overqualified group who, having attended colleges and universities, cannot find white-collar or professional jobs. Given the low level of industrial development, most of the better-paid positions are in government, and there are not enough of those to go around.

In recent years, some developing countries, recognizing the shortcomings of the curricula inherited from colonialism, have tried to redirect their educational programmes towards the rural poor. They have had limited success, because usually there is insufficient funding to pay for the scale of the necessary innovations. As a result, countries such as India have begun programmes of self-help education. Communities draw on existing resources without creating demands for high levels of finance. Those who can read and write and who perhaps possess job skills are encouraged to take others on as apprentices, whom they coach in their spare time.

The links between literacy and development are also discussed in chapter 11, 'Global Inequality', pp. 398–400.

Figure 17.5 Adult literacy rates worldwide (15 years and older)

Source: UNDP (2003) (2001 data)

Compulsory schooling is a relatively recent invention, he pointed out; there is no reason why it should be accepted as somehow inevitable. Since schools do not promote equality or the development of individual creative abilities, why not do away with them in their current form? Illich did not mean by this that all forms of educational organization should be abolished. Everyone who wants to learn should be provided with access to available resources – at any time in their lives, not just in their childhood or adolescent years. Such a system should make it possible for knowledge to be widely diffused and shared, not confined to specialists. Learners should not have to submit to a standard curriculum, and they should have personal choice over what they study.

What all this means in practical terms is not wholly clear. In place of schools, however, Illich suggested several types of educational framework. Material resources for formal learning would be stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories and information storage banks, available to any student. 'Communications networks' would be set up, providing data about the skills possessed by different individuals and whether they would be willing to train others or engage in mutual learning activities. Students would be provided with vouchers, allowing them to use educational services as and when they wished.

Are these proposals wholly utopian? Many would say so. Yet if, as looks possible, paid work is substantially reduced or restructured in the future, they appear less unrealistic. Were paid employment to become less central to social life, people might instead engage in a wider variety of pursuits. Against this backdrop, some of Illich's ideas make good sense. Education would not be just a form of early training, confined to special institutions, but would become available to whoever wished to take advantage of it.

Illich's ideas of the 1970s became fashionable again with the rise of new communications technologies. As we have seen, some believe that computers and the Internet can revolutionize education and reduce inequalities.

Basil Bernstein: language codes

Like Illich, the sociologist Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) was interested in the way in which education reproduces inequalities in society. Drawing on conflict theory (introduced on pp. 14–17) Bernstein (1975) examined inequality in education through an analysis of linguistic skills. In the 1970s Bernstein argued that children from varying backgrounds develop different codes, or forms of speech, during their early lives, which affect their subsequent school experience. He was not concerned with differences in vocabulary or verbal skills, as these are usually thought of; his interest was in systematic differences in ways of using language, particularly in the contrast between poorer and wealthier children.

The speech of working-class children, Bernstein contended, represents a restricted code – a way of using language containing many unstated assumptions that speakers expect others to know. A restricted code is a type of speech tied to its own cultural setting. Many working-class people live in a strong familial or neighbourhood culture, in which values and norms are taken for granted and not expressed in language. Parents tend to socialize their children directly by the use of rewards or reprimands to correct their behaviour. Language in a restricted code is more suitable for communication about practical experience than for discussion of more abstract ideas, processes or relationships. Restricted code speech is thus characteristic of children growing up in lower-class families, and of the peer groups in which they spend their time. Speech is oriented to the norms of the group, without anyone easily being able to explain why they follow the patterns of behaviour they do.

The language development of middle-class children, by contrast, according to Bernstein, involves the acquisition of an elaborated code – a style of speaking in which the meanings of words can be individualized to suit the demands of particular situations. The ways in which children from middle-class backgrounds learn to use language are less bound to particular contexts; the child is able more easily to generalize and express abstract ideas. Thus middle-class mothers, when controlling their children, frequently explain the reasons and principles that underlie their reactions to the child's behaviour. While a working-class mother might tell a child off for wanting to eat too many sweets by simply saying 'No more sweets for you!', a middle-class mother is more likely to explain that eating too many sweets is bad for one's health and the state of one's teeth.

Children who have been given reasons and explanations for their behaviour are more likely to be able to master the elaborate language codes used in school, which is the key to academic success.

Children who have acquired elaborated codes of speech, Bernstein proposes, are more able to deal with the demands of formal academic education than those confined to restricted codes. This does not imply that working-class children have an 'inferior' type of speech, or that their codes of language are 'deprived'. Rather, the way in which they use speech clashes with the academic culture of the school. Those who have mastered elaborated codes fit much more easily into the school environment.

There is evidence to back up Bernstein's theory, although its validity is still debated. Joan Tough (1976) studied the language of working-class and middle-class children,

finding systematic differences. She backs up Bernstein's thesis that working-class children generally have less experience of having their questions answered, or of being offered explanations about the reasoning of others. The same conclusion was reached in subsequent research by Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes (1984).

Bernstein's ideas help us understand why those from certain socio-economic backgrounds tend to be 'under-achievers' at school. The following traits have been associated with restricted code speech, all of them inhibiting a child's educational chances:

1 The child probably receives limited responses to questions asked at home, and therefore is likely to be both less well informed and less curious about the wider world than those mastering elaborated codes.
2 The child will find it difficult to respond to the unemotional and abstract language used in teaching, as well as to appeals to general principles of school discipline.
3 Much of what the teacher says is likely to be incomprehensible, in language used in a way the child is not accustomed to. The child may attempt to cope with this by translating the teacher's language into something she or he is familiar with – but then could fail to grasp the very principles the teacher intends to convey.
4 While the child will experience little difficulty with rote or 'drill' learning, she or he may have major difficulties in grasping conceptual distinctions involving generalization and abstraction.

Pierre Bourdieu: education and cultural reproduction

Perhaps the most illuminating way of connecting some of the themes of these theoretical perspectives is through the concept of **cultural reproduction** (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1986, 1988). Cultural reproduction refers to the ways in which schools, in conjunction with other social institutions, help perpetuate social and economic inequalities across the generations. The concept directs our attention to the means whereby, via what Illich called 'the hidden curriculum' (see above), schools influence the learning of values, attitudes and habits. Schools reinforce variations in cultural values and outlooks picked up early in life; when children leave school, these have the effect of limiting the opportunities of some, while facilitating those of others.

Bourdieu's view on class and social capital are discussed in more detail in chapter 9, 'Stratification and Class', pp. 321–4.

The modes of language use identified by Bernstein no doubt connect with such broad cultural differences, which underlie variations in interests and tastes. Children from lower-class backgrounds, and often from minority groups, develop ways of talking and acting which clash with those dominant in the school. Schools impose rules of discipline on pupils, the authority of teachers being oriented towards academic learning. Working-class children experience a much greater cultural clash when they enter school than those from more privileged homes. The former find themselves in effect in a foreign cultural environment. Not only are they less likely to be motivated towards high academic performance; their habitual modes of speech and action, as Bernstein holds, do not mesh with those of the teachers, even if each is trying their best to communicate.

Children spend long hours in school. As Illich stresses, they learn much more there than is contained in the lessons they are officially taught. Children get an early taste of what the world of work will be like, learning that they are expected to be punctual and apply themselves diligently to the tasks which those in authority set for them (Webb and Westergaard 1991).

Learning to labour: Paul Willis's analysis of cultural reproduction

A celebrated discussion of cultural reproduction is provided in the report of a fieldwork study carried out by Paul Willis in a school in Birmingham (1977). Although the study was conducted three decades ago, it remains a classic sociological investigation.

The question Willis set out to investigate was how cultural reproduction occurs – or, as he put it, 'how working-class kids get working-class jobs'. It is often thought that, during the process of schooling, children from lower-class or minority backgrounds simply come to see that they 'are not clever enough' to expect to get highly paid or high-status jobs in their future work lives. In other words, the experience of academic failure teaches them to recognize their intellectual limitations; having accepted their 'inferiority', they move into occupations with limited career prospects.

As Willis pointed out, this interpretation does not conform at all to the reality of people's lives and experiences. The 'street wisdom' of those from poor neighbourhoods may be of little or no relevance to academic success, but involves as subtle, skilful and complex a set of abilities as any of the intellectual skills taught in school. Few if any children leave school thinking, 'I'm so stupid that it's fair and proper for me to be stacking boxes in a factory all day.' If children from less privileged backgrounds accept menial jobs, without feeling themselves throughout life to be failures, there must be other factors involved.

Willis concentrated on a particular boys' group in the school, spending a lot of time with them. The members of the gang, who called themselves 'the lads', were white; the school also contained many children from West Indian and Asian backgrounds. Willis found that the lads had an acute and perceptive understanding of the school's authority system – but used this to fight that system rather than work with it. They saw the school as an alien environment, but one they could manipulate to their own ends. They derived positive pleasure from the constant conflict – which they kept mostly to minor skirmishes – they carried on with teachers. They were adept at seeing the weak points of the teachers' claims to authority, as well as where they were vulnerable as individuals.

In class, for instance, the children were expected to sit still, be quiet and get on with their work. But the lads were all movement, save when the teacher's stare might freeze one of them momentarily; they would gossip surreptitiously, or pass open remarks that were on the verge of direct insubordination but could be explained away if challenged.

The lads recognized that work would be much like school, but they actively looked forward to it. They expected to gain no direct satisfaction from the work environment, but were impatient for wages. Far from taking the jobs they did – in tyre-fitting, carpet-laying, plumbing, painting and decorating – from feelings of inferiority, they held an attitude of dismissive superiority towards work, as they had towards school. They enjoyed the adult status that came from working, but were not interested in 'making a career' for themselves. As Willis points out, work in blue-collar settings often involves quite similar cultural features to those the lads created in their counter-school culture – banter, quick wit and the skill to subvert the demands of authority figures when necessary. Only later in their lives might they come to see themselves as trapped in arduous, unrewarding labour. When they have families, they might perhaps look back on education retrospectively, and see it – hopelessly – as having been the only escape. Yet if they try to pass this view on to their own children, they are likely to have no more success than their own parents did.

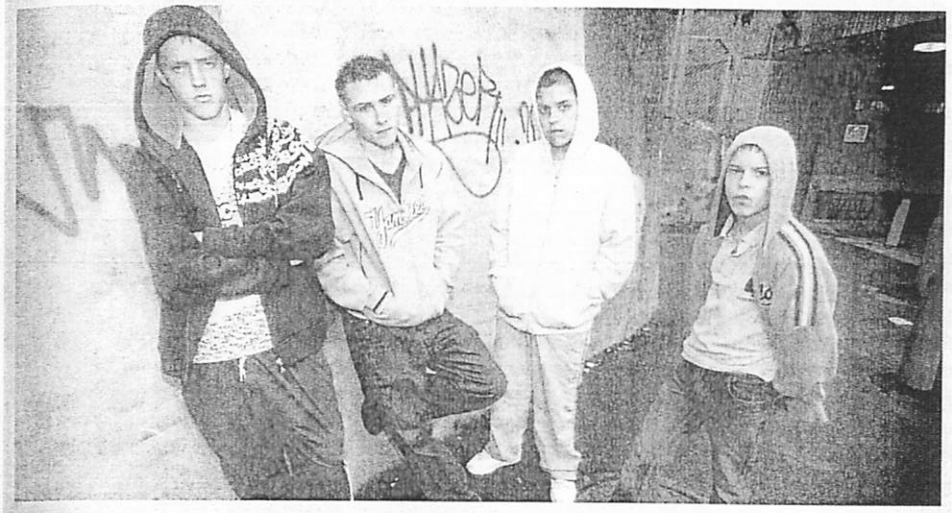
Learning not to labour: 'macho lads'

More than two decades after Willis conducted his study on 'the lads' in Birmingham, another sociologist, Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, investigated the experiences of young working-class men at the Parnell School in the West Midlands (1994). Mac an Ghaill was particularly interested in how male students develop specific forms of masculinity in school as part of their passage to manhood. His account was influential on Diane Reay, whose account of Shaun's transition from primary to secondary school began this chapter. Mac an Ghaill was intent on understanding how working-class boys in the early 1990s viewed their own transitions to adult life and prospects for the future. Unlike Willis's lads, the boys at the Parnell School were growing up in the shadow of high unemployment, the collapse of the manufacturing base in the region, and cutbacks in government benefits for young people.

Mac an Ghaill found that the transition to adulthood for young men at the Parnell School was much more fragmented than that experienced by Willis's lads twenty-five years earlier. There was no longer a clear trajectory stretching from school into wage labour. Many of the boys in the school saw the post-school years as characterized by dependency (on family in particular), 'useless' government training schemes, and an insecure labour market not favourable to young manual workers. There was widespread confusion among many of the students as to how education was relevant to their futures. This confusion manifested itself in very different responses to schooling – while some of the male peer groups tried to chart upwardly mobile paths for themselves as academic achievers or 'new enterprisers', others were openly hostile to schooling altogether.

Of the four peer groups Mac an Ghaill identified at the school, the 'macho lads' were the most traditionally working-class group in the school. The macho lads had coalesced as a group by the time they became teenagers; the group's members were in the bottom two academic 'sets' for all subjects. Their attitudes towards education were openly hostile – they shared a common view that the school was part of an authoritarian system that placed meaningless study demands on its captive students. Where Willis's 'lads' had found ways to manipulate the school environment to their advantage, the macho lads were defiant about their role within it.

The macho lads were seen by the school administration as the most 'dangerous' anti-school peer group at Parnell School. Teachers were encouraged to deal with them using more overtly authoritarian means than they might



with other students. The macho lads' symbolic displays of working-class masculinity – such as certain clothing, hairstyles and earrings – were banned by the school administration. Teachers were involved in the 'surveillance' of students, by constantly monitoring them in the hallways, instructing them to 'look at me when I'm talking to you' and telling them to 'walk properly down the corridor'.

Secondary school for the macho lads was their 'apprenticeship' in learning to be tough. School was not about the 3 R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), but about the 3 F's (fighting, fucking and football). 'Looking after your mates' and 'sticking together' were key values in the macho lads' social world. School became a contested territory, much like the streets. The macho lads regarded teachers in the same way they did law enforcement (with open disdain) and believed that they were the main source of conflict within the school. They refused to affirm the teachers' authority within the school setting, and were convinced that they were constantly being 'set up' to be punished, disciplined or humiliated.

Like Willis's 'lads', the macho lads also associated academic work and achievement with something inferior and effeminate. The students who excelled scholastically were labelled 'dickhead achievers'. Schoolwork was rejected out of hand as inappropriate for men. As one macho lad, Leon, commented: 'The work you do here is girls' work. It's not real work. It's just for kids. They [the teachers] try to make you write down things about how you feel. It's none of their fucking business' (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p. 59).

Mac an Ghaill's work demonstrates how the 'macho lads', more than other male peer groups, were undergoing a particular 'crisis of masculinity'. This is because they were actively developing an 'outdated' working-class masculinity that centred around manual waged labour – at a time when a secure future in manual labour had all but disappeared. According to Mac an Ghaill, the macho lads continued to fantasize about the 'full employment' society which their fathers and uncles had inhabited. Although some of their behaviours came across as hypermasculine and therefore defensive, they were grounded squarely in a working-class world-view which had been inherited from older generations.

The formation of masculinity is discussed in chapter 12, 'Sexuality and Gender', pp. 462–7.