

Reproduction of Social Class: the Role of Educational Underachievement

Key Concepts:

- Sociological Reproduction (dynamic of maintenance)
 - Social class leading to (for many) educational underachievement
- Agents of reproductive maintenance:
 - family, peer group, school, work
- The Social Distribution of Knowledge:
 - Language competence (ability) of children:
 - Elaborated and Restricted codes

Sociological Reproduction is about how existing institutions or socialising agents like family, peer group, school and work maintain themselves into the next generation.

Social class is a determinant of what kind of socialisation takes place; but it is socialisation that reproduces social class. Educational underachievement is one aspect of this socialisation.

Educational underachievement is the sociological dynamic of the **Social Distribution of Knowledge**.

Competence in language gives skill to handle knowledge.

In order to do higher value work, reach across managers and workers, and to deal with complex information, children must gain **elaborated codes**:

- Generate meanings available to outsiders
- Carry to other people complex contemporary meanings
- Speak in a way that does not take experience for granted
- Accept difference between people and speak towards consensus

But many people, due to family, their peers, school curriculum and work expectations are restricted to communalised speech-behaviour of **restricted codes**:

- Readily understood within the group, but not performing for outsiders
- Culturally alive speech, but its meanings are context-tied.

Middle and upper class children can handle *both* elaborated and restricted speech codes. They can text, read “red tops” and also learn to handle complex information. Many working and under class children only handle restricted codes alone. They are destined to disadvantage and to certain types of work. Thus social class reproduces itself.

Educationalists know that if socialisation can be subjected to intervention, social class becomes fluid and a child from a lower social class can have the opportunity to change and advance.

Exercises

1. **By way of background** briefly *discuss an imaginary biography of a child growing up in 1860 Smedley Village* (a fictitious place). The work expectation is a craft, or farm labouring. What do they need to learn? What sort of schooling is available pre-1870? What kinds of children do other children meet? What about girls being different from boys?
2. **More substantially** look at Smedley Suburb in 2000 with its distribution of urban living and construct a biography of a child who either succeeds at a professional route or is restricted to a less skilled vocational outcome. Remember that still today most education is academic; most successful education is of those who can do subjects. *Give the key points of such a child's life* in terms of **family background**, **peer groups** and **school attended**. Always consider "reproduction of social class" and the language skills being developed.
3. **Extended thinking**: how can the cycle be broken where social class reproduces educational underachievement and educational underachievement therefore reproduces social class? In the information age, and in the vital performance of language, how crucial is the social distribution of knowledge? Is a large measure of educational underachievement an aim of a modern economy?
4. **Try to bring complex issues together**: urban choice, vocational and academic, family background, peer groups, school resourcing, work expectations, needs of an information economy (having a large measure of "useful" underachievement or does the information age now repudiate this?)

Sources

Bernstein, B. (1971), 'Social Class, Language and Socialization', in Cashdan, A. et al. and the Language and Learning Course Team (1972), *Language in Education: A Source Book*, Open University, 102-110, reproduced from Bernstein, B. (1971), *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol. 1, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 170-189.

Swift, D. F. (1971), 'Social Class Analysis', in Cosin, B. R. et al. and the School and Society Course Team (1972), *School and Society: A Sociological Reader*, 180-184, reproduced from Swift, D. F. (1968), 'Social Class and Educational Adaptation', in Butcher, H. J. (ed.), *Educational Research in Britain*, London: London University Press, Vol. 1, 289-296.

Smedley, N. (1977), *East Anglian Crafts*, London: B. T. Batsford.

Smedley Village and Smedley Suburb are creations of Adrian Worsfold.