

Inside School Factors

The explanations covered so far in this unit offer valuable and useful insight into the ways in which social class might affect educational achievement. However they offer us, at best, only part of the explanation of how children from less affluent backgrounds come to underachieve within education. Such explanations attribute differential achievement almost entirely to factors related to the child; either their genetic make-up or their home-background². Such explanations ignore the impact that schools have on educational success and in the final section of notes in this topic; we will examine alternative perspectives that take into account this factor.

Do Schools Make a Difference?



Look back at the evidence at the very beginning of this series of handouts.

1. What have been the effects of policy reforms on educational attainment?
2. Have these addressed class differences?
3. What can you conclude from this evidence about the impact of educational reform on class difference?
4. Can you offer any counter-arguments to this claim?

Throughout the 20th century, there have been numerous reforms to the education system – many of which explicitly aimed to provide equality of opportunity. However class inequalities, “seem to reappear in a new guise but fundamentally unchanged as the educational environment changes around them” (Anthony Heath). On the surface, this seems to suggest that the school system has little impact on educational attainment.

Other studies, however, have indicated that schools can have very real impact on attainment – showing that schools with similar social class intakes can vary considerably in terms of exam results.

- **Rutter (1979)** examined 12 inner-London secondary schools. He found that – despite being only a few miles apart taking children from similar social backgrounds – they produced very different results. He attributed this difference to the ethos of the schools, with the best results being well organised with an emphasis on academic achievement for all students. Teachers were dedicated and well prepared, and there was use of praise and encouragement rather than criticism and punishment

This evidence suggests that schools can make a difference; they can improve the attainment of pupils. However, it should be noted that even the best schools do not appear to remove class differences in attainment.

Interactionist Perspectives

These explanations adopt a micro-sociological framework, looking at the inner workings of the education system and attempting to explain differences in attainment by examining the day-to-day interaction of teachers and students. Interactionists maintain that teacher/pupil interaction and school organisation are significant factors that influence working class underachievement. These writers focus on the consequences of the **meanings** which social actors attach to educational situations. By exploring interaction processes such writers claim that the processes of **typing, labelling** and **self-fulfilling prophecy** produce underachievement.

² In this case of cultural difference/capital theories the school is implicated, but the focus remains on the resources that children bring to the educational context.

Labelling and Teacher Expectations

It is argued that teachers often classify (type) and label working class students as non-academic. However, these labels are often based not on objective measures of ability, but on how well the student matched up to their stereotype of an “academic student”. Consequently, labelling is more to do with the teacher’s prejudices than the student’s actual ability

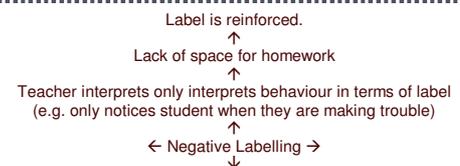
- **Becker** outlines how teachers tend to evaluate and label students in terms of their image of an “**ideal pupil**”. He found that teachers tend to perceive students from middle-class backgrounds as closest to this ideal and working class students as further away – regardless of actual ability.
- **Cicourel and Kituse** interviewed counsellors in an American High School, finding that middle-class students were more likely to be placed on higher-level courses. They found that the counsellors’ classifications of students’ ability and potential were based on a whole range of non-academic factors, such as appearance and demeanour.
- **Rist** found that as early as the 8th day of kindergarten, children had been grouped into “ability” and sat at different tables. However, when the children were tested, it was found that they were actually grouped according to how well they conformed to the teacher’s own middle-class standards.

The Process of Label Formation

Hargreaves et. al. (1975) conducted a study in which they interviewed teachers and observed classrooms, examining the process through which teachers “got to know” new students. The researchers highlight three stages through which labels evolve:

- During the **speculation** stage, “first impressions” are made on the basis of things like the students appearance, ability and enthusiasm and their relationship with other students. Teachers were observed to make a **working hypothesis** about the student
- These hypotheses are either confirmed or contradicted during the **elaboration** stage
- Finally, the label is **stabilised** and the teacher believes that they fully understand the student. At this point, the teacher believes he or she can make sense of the student’s behaviour entirely in reference to the label.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy



Above is the beginning of a spider diagram illustrating some of the consequences of labelling a student.

1. Copy the diagram onto the back of this page.
2. Complete it by suggesting three other consequences.

Labelling of students can have definite effects on achievement. Sociologists have argued that one consequence is the **self-fulfilling prophecy** – students labelled as “underachievers” or “troublemakers” will eventually live up to their label. A number of factors might be involved in this, including...

- **Self-concept.** Interactionists argue that a great deal of how we understand ourselves arises out of our interaction with others. Consequently, if a student is consistently labelled as “thick” they may eventually start to believe this label, resulting in low self-confidence and “giving up” on school.

- **Teacher Expectations.** The label will also have implications for the teachers' expectations of the student. For instance, they may only interpret the students' behaviour in terms of the label. For instance, **Cicourel and Kituse** found that pupils labelled as "conduct problems" were more likely to be disciplined for behaviour that was overlooked in "good students". Furthermore, low teacher-expectations may lead to students being entered for lower-tiers in examination, limiting the grades that they can achieve.

In order to test the validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy theory, **Rosenthal and Jacobson** conducted a now famous field experiment. In *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, the researchers took the following steps:

- A class of students were administered an IQ test.
- 20% of the class were selected and random, and the teachers were told that they should be expected to make faster academic progress
- The researchers returned a year later to administer another IQ test and examine the school reports of the children in the study.

The researchers found that those children who had been labelled as "high-flyers had, in fact, made significant gains in their IQ tests. Their school reports were also better. Based on this evidence, Rosenthal and Jacobson argued that they had "proved" that the self-fulfilling prophecy was an actual phenomenon. However, there are a few notes of caution in the study...

- ✗ It is based on IQ tests which, as we have seen, are not necessarily a valid measure of ability – even supporters of IQ testing have criticised the design of Rosenthal & Jacobson's test.
- ✗ The study was based on a small sample of children (and teachers), and consequently may not be representative. How do we know that the responses were not just because these teachers and students were particularly susceptible to labelling (answer: we don't).
- ✗ The study involved the researcher's attempting to control the students' environment. As we will see within research methods, this leads them open to the criticism that the situation they studied was artificial rather than natural

Setting and Streaming



1. What is the difference between setting and streaming?
2. Draw up a table of advantages and disadvantages of mixed-ability teaching.
3. What might be the effects of placing a student in a low stream?

One of the consequences of labelling and teacher prejudice is that working class students tend to be overrepresented in low streams and sets. In *Beachside Comprehensive*, **Stephen Ball** examines the impact of streaming within a comprehensive school. At Beachside, students were divided into three "bands", based on information from their primary schools. Band one was supposed to contain the most able students and band three the least able. However, Ball found that the most influential factor on being assigned to band one was not ability, but whether the students father with a non-manual worker.

Ball argues that the teacher's expectations of the different bands led to the behaviour of students within them to change. When the pupils first arrived at the school, Ball observed that most were conformist and eager – however their behaviour quickly diverged. In particular, **band two** were expected by teachers to be the most difficult to work with. According to Ball, this led to a progressive deterioration in the behaviour of most band two pupils, which was

reflected in higher levels of absence, more non-conformist behaviour and a lack of effort being put into homework – which of course had a negative impact on attainment.



List **three** processes that might be occurring within band two to cause this behaviour.

In addition, Ball points out that different expectations of the bands led to each being taught in a slightly different way and encouraged to take a different educational path.

- Band one pupils were **warmed up** and encouraged to have high aspirations and follow academic O-Level subjects.
- In contrast, band two pupils were **cooled down** and directed towards more practical subjects and towards CSE exams.

Consequently band two pupils were less likely to take O Levels, to stay on in school after the age of 16, or to take A-Levels.



1. In this study, Ball is offering an explanation of why working class students tend not to continue into FE. Offer alternative material and cultural explanations.
2. Ball also suggests that in the different bands, students were encouraged to take different qualifications. Can you think of a contemporary equivalent?

Ball admits that not all band two children failed, some were able to overcome the negative effects of streaming. However there is a strong correlation between educational success and banding, and between banding and social class. Ball claims that "working class pupils tend to percolate downwards in the processes of academic and behavioural differentiation".

Pupil Subcultures

Hargreaves (1967)³ also relates labelling and streaming to the emergence of **subcultures**.

- He observed that those who had been labelled as "troublemakers" were faced with being defined as "failures" on a number of different ways:
 - They had failed to get into grammar schools
 - They had been allocated to a low stream in their school
 - Within this stream, they had been selected as the lowest of the low and labelled as "worthless louts"
- This gave them the impression that they were unable to achieve high status within the school
- In order to preserve their self-esteem and positive self-concept, those students labelled as failures tended to seek each other out and form **counter-school subcultures**.
- Within these groups, high status was awarded to students who broke the school rules as frequently as possible.
- As these subcultures reject the school values, they reject academic success as a goal. Consequently, they lead students to lower attainment within schools.

³ Similar results were found by Willis in "Learning to Labour"

Evaluation

- ✗ Crude labelling theory is **deterministic**. If we are to believe the explanation, all it would take for to get everyone an A-grade in sociology would be for me to label you all as incredibly bright. Consequently, we must be cautious about over simplifying labelling as an explanation of differential achievement, and recognise that the consequences of labelling can range.
- ✗ This criticism is supported by **Fuller**, who studied the reactions of working class black girls to negative labelling. She found that that, rather than simply living out their labels, the girls worked harder to disprove the label.
- ✗ **Roger Dale** argues that labelling theory concentrates too heavily on small-scale interaction. Consequently, they fail to address wider social issues, such as where do ideas such as the “ideal pupil” come from in the first place.
- ✗ Students are likely to have many different teachers, some of whom might be sympathetic to working class behaviour and attitudes. There is no explanation of why the negative labels of some teachers have more influence.

Pupil Adaptations

Pupil Adaptations

In order to address the problem of assuming that pupils automatically “take on” labels, **Peter Woods (1979)** gives a more complex account of student responses to schools. In his study of “Lowfields” – a secondary modern in a rural area of the Midlands – he outlines a range of different responses that students were observed to have made to school. He called these reactions **pupil adaptations**. Some students, for example, attempt to ingratiate themselves with teachers (i.e. become “teachers pets”), others actively rebel whilst others simply go through the motions of the school day in order to stay out of trouble. (Woods identifies a total of 8 different types of pupil adaptation – you can read more in Haralambos, p848).

- ✓ This theory shows that pupil responses to schools are not straightforward, and there is an element of **negotiation** involved in classroom interaction – we must remember that students also have freewill and can chose to reject a label, or work extra hard to disprove it.

A Modern Addition...

Cordingly (1993) argues that recently, focus has shifted to combating gender and racial stereotypes in schools and, consequently, social class has “dropped off the educational agenda”. This means that the discrimination that white, working-class boys experience through teacher stereotyping is ignored. According to Cordingly, this made the problem worse, as it has created a group of frustrated, white, working class males with low self-esteem and low attainment. There is a **backlash** against those policies that address discrimination against other groups, creating a group of young people who are easily attracted to extremist politics and racism.

Activity: Student-Teacher Interaction.

	WORKING CLASS	MIDDLE CLASS
<p>First Impression of Student</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>		
<p>Labels that might be attached</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>		
<p>Teacher's expectations or response to student</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>		
<p>Self fulfilling prophecy</p>		