## Youth and experience of Education Task sheet 9

## Anti and Pro School Subcultures

* Pupils respond to their schooling in different ways. Some groups accept the rules and the authority of teachers without question, while others may devote all their attention to rule‑breaking and avoiding work. You have probably encountered examples of both during your compulsory education. Sociologists are interested in these subcultures. Why do they form, and what effect do they have on their members, other pupils, teachers and schools?

**Anti-school subcultures**

* In the 1970s a great deal of media concern was directed at inner city comprehensives and the alleged misbehaviour of their pupils. This prompted sociologists such as Paul Willis to examine the possible reasons for the development of these mainly male, working‑class groups of 'undisciplined' school pupils, or anti‑school subcultures. Willis identified a group of 'lads'‑ whose main aim at school was to have a'laff'by rejecting the values of the school ‑ and a more conformist group, referred to by the 'lads' as 'earoles'.
* On a general level, all subcultures have things in common. Their members gain status, mutual support and a sense of belonging from the subculture. According to Hargreaves, anti‑school working‑class subcultures are predominantly found in the bottom streams of secondary schools. In fact, he argued, they are caused by the labelling of some pupils as 'low stream failures'. Unable to achieve status in terms of the **mainstream values** of the school, these pupils substitute their own set of **delinquent values** by which they can achieve success in the eyes of their peers. They do this by, for example, not respecting teachers, messing about, arriving late, having fights, building up a reputation with the opposite sex, and so on.
* The main focus of Willis’ study was a group of 12 working class boys who went to a school on a housing estate in predominantly industrial small town – he followed them for their last 18 months at school and their first few months at work. The ‘lads’ (as Willis refers to them) formed a friendship grouping which was part of a “*counter-school culture*” opposed to the values espoused by the school.
* Willis argues that it is the rejection of school which prepares a certain section of the population for its role in the workforce. Working class pupils are not forced into manual labour but they are able to recognise that their own opportunities are limited. They know that school work will not prepare them for the types of occupations they are likely to get and they don’t believe that putting in lots of extra work at school will be rewarded by significantly better pay in the future. Willis claims that the lads realise they are being exploited but see little opportunity for changing this situation and, ironically, their own choices mean that they become trapped in some of the most exploitative jobs that capitalism has to offer.

Evaluation

* Willis’ study has been criticised for having a sample which is far too small to form the basis for generalising about working class experiences in education. By choosing to study only 12 students, all of them male, his study can’t even be seen as representative of the school he studied, let alone all school pupils.
* Willis is also criticised for simplifying the range of subcultural responses within schools. Most students come somewhere between the extremes of total conformity and total rebellion portrayed by Willis.
* Some have also questioned the continued relevance of Willis’ study. There has been a massive decline in the availability of unskilled male manual work since the 1970s, so it seems likely that male working class attitudes to education will have changed.

In a study of relationship between schooling, class, masculinity and sexuality, Mairtin Mac an Ghaill identified an anti-school subculture. The ‘macho lads’ were hostile to school authority and learning, not unlike the lads in Willis's study. Willis had argued that work especially physical work ‑ was essential to the development of a sense of identity. By the mid‑ 1980s much of this kind of work was gone. Instead, a spell in youth training, followed very often by unemployment, became the norm for many working‑class boys.

School and subcultures

In the 1970s there were two separate, well-reported and influential studies that showed that working class children were highly likely to form anti-school sub-cultures. This original work by **Hargreaves** and by **Lacey** has since been replicated by dozens of other writers, who all come to similar conclusions.

* Working class children are more likely to be found in lower sets in school.
* Working class children are often labelled as trouble-makers by teachers
* The characteristics of anti-school groups are cheeking teachers, messing about, arriving late, having fights, and building up a reputation as sexy and dangerous.

**Paul Willis**, in the 1970s suggested that this behaviour was typical of the traditional working class culture, where ‘having a laff’ is an important cultural value. However, this work has been criticised for romanticising the boys or ‘lads’ and ignoring the many working class boys who were conformist.

**Brown** (1987) suggested that three separate groups were typical of schools:

* 1. Complicit students who simply went through the motions and did as they were expected by their friends and by teachers.
  2. Swots who had aspirations to get on in life and have middle class professional jobs
  3. The ‘getting in’ approach of students who hated school and wanted to get out as soon as possible.

**Mac an Ghaill** studied both middle class and working class students and identified a number of subcultures. His interest was in how males define masculinity and respond to pressure to ‘be masculine’.

Working class boys:

* Macho lads are threatened by the lack of the kinds of work that they expect – hard manual labour. They disliked school as feminine.
* Academic achievers were bullied by macho lads, but concentrated on success through working well.
* New Enterprisers disliked traditional academic schoolwork, but aimed high through vocational courses in computing and business studies.

Middle class boys:

* Real Englishmen were usually from professional academic backgrounds. They were superior and racist. They rejected being seen to work but still aimed for university.
* Gay students did not have a subculture as such but either tended to play down their status or play it up.

**Pro-school subcultures**

However, it is important to realise that not all school subcultures are anti-school. For example, Mac an Ghaill found a range of subcultures which subscribed to the values of success and accepted the ethos of the school.

* The ‘academic achievers’, who were from mostly skilled manual working‑class backgrounds, adopted a more traditional upwardly mobile route via academic success. However, they had to develop ways of coping with the stereotyping and accusations of effeminacy from the'macho lads' They would do this either by confusing those who bullied them, by deliberately behaving in an effeminate way, or simply by having the confidence to cope with the jibes.
* The ‘new enterprisers’ were identified as a new successful pro‑school subculture, who embraced the 'new vocationalism' of the 1980s and 1990s. They rejected the traditional academic curriculum, which they saw as a waste of time, but accepted the new vocational ethos, with the help and support of the new breed of teachers and their industrial contacts. In studying subjects such as business studies and computing, they were able to achieve upward mobility and employment by exploiting school‑industry links to their advantage.
* The ‘real Englishmen’ were a small group of middle‑class pupils, usually from a liberal professional background (their parents were typical­ly university lecturers, or writers, or they had jobs in the media). They rejected what teachers had to offer, seeing their own culture and knowledge as superior. They also saw the motivations of the 'achievers' and 'enterprisers' as shallow. Whilst their own values did not fit with doing well at school, they did, however, aspire to university and a professional career. They resolved this dilemma by achieving academic suc­cess in a way that appeared effortless (whether it was or not).
* Finally, Mac an Ghaill looked at the experience of a group neglected entirely by most writers ‑ gay students. These stu­dents commented on the heterosexist and homophobic nature of schools, which took for granted the naturalness of heterosexual relationships and the two‑parent nuclear family.

Evaluation

* All of Mac an Ghaill’s studies are small-scale ethnographic accounts. Therefore, they may provide a detailed picture of those being studied but they are not necessarily representative of all school students and it is difficult to generalise the findings to the rest of the population. However, it could be argued that the combination of a number of studies produces a more representative picture.
* Mac an Ghaill presents a detailed picture of student responses to their experiences in the education system in terms of different forms of masculinity, responses to racism and ‘survival strategies’ to achieve educational success. However, he admits himself, at times, that these are not simply responses to educational experiences but are part of a wider social structure affected by class, gender and ethnicity. Therefore, studies of educational experiences cannot present a full explanation of why students behave in these ways.

# Gender differences in subject choice

##### Statistics on subject choice

###### A Level

* Males outnumber females in all science and technical subjects apart from biology and related subjects however this picture is rapidly changing.
* Females outnumber males in all other subjects. English, modern languages and social studies have a particularly high proportion of female entries.

###### Degrees

* Males are more likely to gain degrees in physical and mathematical sciences, engineering and technology, and architecture, building and planning.
* In all other areas women predominated.
* In some traditionally male areas, such as medicine, women have now made significant inroads.

##### Explanations for gender differences in subject choice

* Anne Colley reviewed the reasons why gender differences in subject choice persisted into the 1990s:

1. **Perceptions of gender roles.** Despite all the changes in recent decades, traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity are widespread. These perceptions filter into likely or desirable workplaces for males and females which are different e.g builder or receptionist.
2. **Subject preferences and choice.** Different subjects have different images. Computer studies involves working with machines rather than people and this gives it a rather masculine image. The lack of opportunities for group activities and the rather formal way of teaching add to this.
3. **The learning environment.** There is some evidence that girls are more comfortable with scientific and technical subjects when taught in single-sex schools of single-sex lessons.

**Questions:**

1. Paul Willis’ research was titled ‘learning to labour’ why do you think this is?
2. In what ways did the ‘lads’ in his study demonstrate their anti-school sub-culture?
3. How might the work of Paul Willis be no longer relevant to working class ‘lads’ today?
4. How do working class lads respond to ‘pressure to be masculine’?
5. Suggest some characteristics of an anti-school sub-culture.
6. Why do you think ‘effortless achievement’ is important to middle class lads?
7. Suggest reasons why gender differences in subject choice are still present.