# SOCIAL CLASS, LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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# AND EDUCATION

# *T h e   I n t e r n a t i o n a l   L i b r a r y   o f   S o c i o l o g y*

## RACE, CLASS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE
### In 21 Volumes

# SOCIAL CLASS, LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

by
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# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first became interested in the question of language and social class at my first teaching post in a secondary school. I was teaching English, and it soon became very noticeable that many of the pupils labelled as 'difficult', or even 'ineducable' (although they were in the top 12 per cent of the population as regards intelligence) and who were grouped together in the bottom stream of the third or fourth year had in common not a lack of intelligence but certain social attitudes and linguistic difficulties. I found that my work as a teacher was illuminated by the study of sociology, and in particular by the research of Basil Bernstein. This book is an attempt to analyse the educational implications of language and social class from a theoretical point of view, and also to make some practical suggestions for the attention of educationists. I feel very strongly that this is an area where any attempts to 'reform' teaching methods and curriculum should be based on sound theoretical principles.

I should like to express my thanks to a number of colleagues at the London Institute of Education who have discussed certain aspects of this book with me, and made helpful suggestions: I am particularly grateful to Miss Nancy Martin and Professor Basil Bernstein for letting me take up much more of their time than I could reasonably expect.

I must also thank the Headmasters of the two schools mentioned in Chapter VI, and also the pupils at those schools who uncomplainingly took part in the experiment.

Finally, I am very grateful to Miss Sophie Bowlby who for several months generously acted as unpaid research assistant, and to my wife who has typed and re-typed, read and re-read the many drafts of this book with only an occasional murmur of complaint.

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# I

## SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: THE DEMOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

In the 1930's Gray and Moshinsky, accepting the principle that educational success ought to be closely related to ability or natural endowment, illustrated inequality of opportunity existing in the educational system simply by referring to the fact that highly intelligent children of working-class parents were severely under-represented in secondary schools and higher education. The problem seen by Gray and Moshinsky (as well as the pre-war Labour Party and the T.U.C.) was simply a question of *access* to particular kinds of educational institutions, grammar schools in particular. It was not until after 1945 that a number of studies took a wider view of the problem. In the post-war years it became clear that *access* to grammar schools was not the only problem: the more subtle questions of *retention* (including the problem of working-class 'early leavers') and differential *performance* have increasingly been regarded as of considerable importance.

*Access.* There are a number of factors which affect access to selective secondary schools: the size of the eleven-year-old cohort, the supply of places, the social composition of the area and the criteria of selection. All of these factors will interact with social class as an influence. In contrast to the pre-war position, however, by 1956 Mrs. Floud and her associates were able to say that if measured I.Q. were taken as the criterion, the problem of access to grammar schools had been settled by the 1944 Act: according to measured intelligence the working-class pupils were getting their 'fair share' of places in the two areas studied.

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TABLE 1

*Social Origins of Boys Entering Secondary GrammarSchools
Before and After 1944. England and Wales*

| Occupations of Fathers | 1930–41 | 1946–51 |
|---|---|---|
| | % | % |
| Professional and managerial | 40 | 26 |
| Clerical and other non-manual | 20 | 18 |
| Manual | 40 | 56 |

Source: *Ability and Educational Opportunity*, A. H. Halsey.

In a more recent study Douglas (1964) has shown that over the country *as a whole* there is still a problem of differential access to grammar schools even holding measured ability constant and allowing for regional fluctuations. The working-class pupil at eleven has to be a few I.Q. points higher than a middle-class pupil to gain a grammar school place, for the simple reason that predominantly working-class areas tend to have a lower percentage of grammar school places—lower even than the I.Q. distribution would justify. Douglas also reinforces the argument put forward by Vernon and quoted by Floud that measured I.Q. is not the same as innate ability; Douglas showed that whereas the middle-class I.Q. tended to rise a few points between the ages of eight and eleven the average working-class score dropped slightly between eight and selection for grammar school places.

Nevertheless, so far as access to grammar schools is concerned it is safe to say that the position has much improved since the 1944 Education Act, but there may still be a great deal of wastage of ability at this stage, because differences may exist between innate ability and scores on performance tests. (See Vernon (1955) who stated that measured intelligence was to some extent an acquired characteristic; also the discussion of differences between verbal and non-verbal I.Q. later in this chapter and in Chapter V.)

A system of education which would ensure equality of access to educational institutions would, however, have solved only a part of the problem—probably the easiest part. As was pointed out in the *Early Leaving Report* (1954) still greater difficulties remain: 'From the children of parents at one (social) extreme to the children of unskilled manual

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workers at the other there is a steady and marked decline in performance at the grammar school, at the length of school life and in academic promise at the time of leaving'.

*Retention.* The 'Early Leaving' committee, in attempting to explain the difficulties of retaining working-class pupils in grammar schools, concentrated their attention on the pupils' background—mentioning the physical over-crowding of homes, parents' attitudes, and the desire of the pupil to be independent while ignoring almost completely the role of the school in the retaining process: on the question of teachers' attitudes to the pupils for example, the 'Early Leaving' committee stated that they were convinced that no discrimination was being shown, and quoted as evidence the fact that once in the sixth form the working-class pupil was just as likely to become a prefect as a middle-class pupil. A contrary point of view has, however, been put by Himmelweit (1954) who showed that grammar school teachers tended to give working-class pupils lower personality ratings on a whole range of criteria from general behaviour to industriousness. Similarly Halsey and Gardner's work (1953) in four London grammar schools showed that the working-class pupils not only had on the average less favourable academic records than middle-class boys but that they also received lower teacher ratings on personality characteristics associated with school success and were regarded as being less likely to profit from a grammar school education. To what extent the working-class early leaving problem is a question of social background in itself and to what extent it is a question of the power of the school to assimilate such pupils will be considered later. However, evidence has accumulated to show that a considerable amount of human talent has been wasted by the early leaving phenomenon. The Crowther Report (1959) in its examination of National Service recruits showed that there was a very disturbing amount of wasted talent or 'uneducated capacity' especially among the sons of skilled manual workers. Some of this wastage was in the highest ability group but it was especially prevalent in the second ability group. Of these recruits, two-thirds had left school at age fifteen, and only one in four had taken 'O' level examinations. The majority of this 25 per cent had done very well at their 'O' level examinations, and one of

the questions asked by the Committee was why the other 75 per cent of this able group were not educated up to the same standard. Working-class early leavers accounted for a great deal of this wastage of ability. In the same ability group (group two) the recruits whose fathers were social class I were three times as likely to become graduates as the lower class boys *of the same ability.* In 1963 the Robbins Report, examining the 'more means worse' argument, produced similar evidence to show that since there were so many high ability pupils (mostly working-class in origin) leaving education at far too early a stage, there was no real danger of a reduction in standards if university places were expanded. The Robbins Committee accordingly recommended a doubling of the university intake by the mid-1970s.

*Performance.* Although the 'early leaving' problem has diminished to some extent since 1954, there is no evidence that there has been an equivalent reduction in differential performance. The Robbins Committee, taking G.C.E. 'O' level successes as a criterion of performance, compared the figures contained in the *Early Leaving Report* with those for 1960–61 (Robbins Appendix I, Table 14) and showed that it was still the case that a professional worker's child classified at eleven into the lowest third of the ability range was likely to become a better 'O' level candidate than the lower working-class child classified at eleven into the top third of the ability range.

Thus the Reports demonstrated that it would have been 'safer' for a grammar school to select a middle-class marginal pupil than one of the working-class pupils in the high ability range.

The fact that regarding both the question of early leaving and the question of poor performance the school may bear a responsibility as well as the pupils' home background has already been referred to. The studies quoted above would seem to be agreed that the following factors are of importance:

  (i) the physical conditions of the home.
  (ii) income of the parents.
  (iii) age of parents' leaving school.

TABLE 2

*Percentage of Children at maintained grammar schools
achieving 5 or more 'O' levels. England and Wales*

| | | Percentage | |
| | | Entrants in 1946 (leaving in 1949/ 50–53/54) | Leavers in 1960/1 |
| *11 + grading* | *Father's Occupation* | (1) | (2) |
| Upper Third | Professional and managerial | 80 | 91 |
| | Clerical | 65 | 79 |
| | Skilled manual | 60 | 77 |
| | Semi- and unskilled | 42 | 49 |
| | ALL children | 61 | 78 |
| Middle third | Professional and managerial | 62 | 68 |
| | Clerical | 53 | 60 |
| | Skilled manual | 43 | 55 |
| | Semi- and unskilled | 27 | 46 |
| | ALL children | 43 | 56 |
| Lower third | Professional and managerial | 48 | 53 |
| | Clerical | 36 | 47 |
| | Skilled manual | 33 | 32 |
| | Semi- and unskilled | 20 | 22 |
| | ALL children | 31 | 36 |
| Transfer from secondary modern school | | 46 | 45 |
| ALL groups | Professional and managerial | 69 | 72 |
| | Clerical | 54 | 60 |
| | Skilled manual | 46 | 55 |
| | Semi- and unskilled | 29 | 37 |
| | ALL children | 48 | 55 |

Source: Robbins Report, Appendix I, Table 14.

   (iv) parents' attitudes to education.
   (v) the power of the school to assimilate working-class pupils.
   (vi) size of family.

   The first factor could be treated only by wider schemes of social policy, but meanwhile measures such as the Newsom recommendation for a longer school day, or providing facilities for doing homework in school would perhaps be helpful. The second has been considered to be a fairly simple administrative problem of providing grants etc. The other four

factors, however, present much deeper problems of a social psychological nature which will be considered in Chapter II under the general consideration of motivation, culture and educability. A final factor which may well be closely related to the last four is the question of linguistic ability. Floud, Halsey and Martin (1956) mentioned this factor in connection with Nisbet's researches on size of family and I.Q. The Newsom Report focused much greater attention upon this factor, and Crowther (1959) and Ravenette (1963) also reported differences in verbal and non-verbal ability. None of the above studies, however, was able to undertake an investigation of the relationships between social class, linguistic ability and educational attainment. Nevertheless, it is possible that the consequences of the linguistic background may be a key factor in working-class under-achievement. It has an effect not only on performance in I.Q. tests and attainment at 11 +, that is in *access* to grammar schools, but also on *retention* and *performance* by its inter-relation with what has been described as 'motivation'. It is clear that for a number of reasons working-class children tend to be under-achievers. In this respect they are less 'educable' than middle-class children. The studies quoted above have been demographic in character: they have indicated the existence of a problem without proceeding very far in the direction of a solution. The following chapters will examine the inter-related factors which comprise this under-achievement complex, and in particular the relationship between social class and linguistic development.

# II

## MOTIVATION, SUB-CULTURE AND EDUCABILITY

It was demonstrated in Chapter I that the educational performance of large numbers of working-class pupils is far below their potential ability. Various attempts have been made to account for their low educational achievement: Lewis (1953) reviewed the evidence of a number of observers who referred to the general educational attitude of the lower working class as ranging 'from apathy to truculent resistance'; Burt (1945) has mentioned the importance of the fact that the lower working class consists of groups traditionally outside the educational system—hence their lack of motivation.

To explain differential achievement simply in terms of motivation, however, is completely unsatisfactory, even tautologous. McClelland (1958) has rightly stressed the need for an analysis of the various factors comprising motivation, and has been responsible for a series of interesting studies of motivation which will be examined below.

It is not the intention to make a comprehensive critical survey of the literature on the concept of sub-culture (which has been carried out by Gottlieb and Reeves (1963) and by Downes (1966)), nor of motivation, but simply to examine educational motivation as a sub-cultural variable. For the purpose of this chapter Malinowski's definition of culture will be accepted, namely 'inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values'. Within a general cultural framework, however, there may be significant differences in behaviour between groups within the culture. These differences will be due either to differences in *situation* or to differences in *frame of reference*: i.e. various groups may have to

contend with different *problems* because of their relationship with the 'goods' and 'technical processes', or they may *perceive* the problems differently. Either of these two factors or a combination of the two may give rise to conditions which might best be regarded as a sub-culture.

It would, perhaps, be useful at this point to note the classification of sub-cultures by Downes (1966) into:

(a) those which precede or which are formed *outside* the context of the 'dominant culture' (e.g. immigrant or regional.)

(b) those which originate within the dominant sub-culture: either

(b) (i) those which emerge in *positive* response to the demands of the social and cultural structures (e.g. occupation or age-group), or

(b) (ii) those emerging in negative response (e.g., delinquent, messianic, political-extremist).

Unless otherwise stated the term sub-culture in this chapter will be used to refer to Downes's category (b) (i).

Sub-cultural differences can thus be examined at a number of different levels. At the most general level an examination can be made of the values and norms of various social groups. Evidence at this level will be briefly examined below. Then the chapter will focus on the particular question of differences in family structure and organization, and upon those child-rearing practices within families which are most likely to influence 'educability', especially questions of social control. Finally the possible existence of social class differences in cognitive style will be closely examined together with the suggestion that this is related to social class differences in language.

*1. General: sub-cultural differences in values and norms*

Alison Davis (1948) made a strong case for linking education and sub-cultural differences: 'In order to help the child learn the teacher must discover the reference points from which the child starts . . . his cultural environment and his cultural motivation'. Davis defined cultural environment as: 'All behaviour which the human being exhibits in conformity with his family, his play-group, . . . and all his other human groups.'

More recently Josephine Klein (1965) has reviewed, summarized and interpreted much of the evidence relating to different sub-cultures in

England. As a result of her extensive survey of the literature she concluded that there were important sub-cultural differences between groups according to their place in the economic and occupational structure. At one extreme in society she described groups labelled 'the deprived'. These sub-cultures had their own values and norms relating not only to family organization and child rearing but also to adolescence, courtship, sexual behaviour and marriage. Insecurity seemed to be the dominant feature of life.

The next group she described was the group termed 'the traditional working-class people', sub-classified into rough and respectable (rather vague concepts but useful at this level of analysis). The important aspect of the norms and values of this group was that they were reinforced by the very traditionalism of the group. The protraction of traditional behaviour was made possible by the comparatively low rate of mobility in and out of the community. In the studies reviewed the general finding seemed to be that the community was inward looking with close-knit networks, clear cut and largely ascribed role expectations, having short-term goals rather than long-term plans, saving 'for a fine rather than a rainy day', seeking advice from kin rather than from 'them' who were regarded with suspicion. The high degree of rigid conformity to traditional patterns of characteristic behaviour of traditional working-class areas was connected with the mental disposition defined as 'cognitive poverty'. In the children this manifested itself in a very low level of imagination and aesthetic appreciation. There was also a mistrust of the unfamiliar and the abstract with a correspondingly low rate of exploratory behaviour and curiosity.

A third broad category of working-class groups was described: those whose style of life was changing—often because of re-housing programmes resulting in significant residential and occupational changes. These changes in style of life were set out by Klein as follows:

1. From a close-knit family network to a more loose-knit one.
2. From a community centred existence to greater individuation.
3. From a community centred existence to a more home centred one.
4. From a community centred existence to greater participation in associational life.