Part 3

Society and the Individual

7 How People Learn

This chapter is presented as a challenge to the segmented paradigm that often occurs with a consideration of how people learn. Unlike the majority of textbooks which present a consideration of learning theories with a narrow focus on childhood development, this chapter aims to look at learning across the lifespan. In addition, it is argued that any consideration of how people learn needs a systemic approach to focus on individual differences effectively. To do this, the chapter will provide an overview of a selection of relevant learning theories presented as a broadening conceptual sphere, from the individual learner to the world context for all learners.

Task 7.1 Stop, think and do

- How do you view learning? – An increasing collection of facts? The development of understanding? Do you have a different definition?
- Is learning about the construction of knowledge for the individual, or does learning occur because we interact with others?
- Are some of us genetically predetermined to learn better than others, or does high quality learning depend on the school you attend, your economic status, or your culture?
- Do some people have greater motivation to learn than others? Can your desire to learn be stalled?
- Does learning stop when you leave school?

These are all valid questions you should ask yourself before focusing on the associated field of study. Your view of how people learn is the bedrock for evaluating the theories of others. The aim of the chapter is to consider not only *your* view on how *you l*earn, but the factors impacting on how other people may learn, and the wider context of learning for all people.

Introduction

Learning theories are often limited to a consideration of childhood in isolation, without an effective link to how learning continues throughout the lifespan. This is no longer feasible as there is now a changing emphasis within Education Studies. It is

important to note that the recent context shift of societal needs due to economic changes and pressures, how we live, how we work, and how society deals with these, has had a momentous effect on society's expectation of the role of education. Following key debates and papers in the 1990s, including the European Commission published White Paper in 1994, education is no longer seen as just an early preparation for life. Schools, universities and workplaces now take account of lifelong learning, that is skill development, ongoing qualification attainment and renewal, and are endeavouring to amend their positions to accommodate this. As lifespan consideration is now a guiding principle, our consideration of how we learn should also encompass this.

With lifespan cohesion in mind, we will first consider learning as an individual position.

Learning in the individual

One assumption of learning is that it is a cognitive or brain-based process. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies can be conducted to explore neuropsychological processes relating to the structure and function of the brain to further our understanding of the mechanisms of learning. By mapping and matching which brain areas are being utilized for different cognitive functions, we can develop our understanding of things such as working memory, reading and arithmetic (Dowker 2006). This is a useful modern insight into how we learn, but care should be taken over the credence of brain mapping. What is being measured is brain signals or neurones firing when we perform an action or cognition which only indicate a correlation between the brain area implicated with the action or cognition. Our use of this type of information should be considered cautiously without assuming there is certain causation.

Prior to advanced scanning technology, theorists hypothesized about cognition based on the observations made of individuals. From these observations, the predominant theories associated with learning that emerged were 'cognitivist' (personal and internal) and 'behavioural' (a response to external stimulus). These two approaches contrast mainly at the level of control that the individual is attributed in the learning process. With the cognitive position, the individual is seen as active in their learning, being the engine driver of knowledge construction, whereas with the behaviourist position, the individual has a passive role, being manipulated by the factors external to the self.

The most influential cognitivist theorist was Jean Piaget (1896–1980), whose ideas have been a major influence on educational practice around the world. The premise of his view is that our learning is 'maturational', in that we have innate characteristics that unfurl over time and in 'linear' or ordered sequence in one direction. His hierarchical theory outlined four stages: sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational, for the development of thinking from birth to maturity. These are described by Child as:

> the gradual unfolding of thinking skills, starting with simple sensory and
> motor activities in babyhood and gradually being superseded by internal

> representations of actions carried out by the child; then, through the agency
> of language, reaching the highest form of logical thinking, at first in the
> presence of objective evidence and finally by mental reasoning.

<div align="right">(2007: 90)</div>

Piaget believed that by approximately 11 years of age there is achievement of abstract
and systematic thought. This final stage was characterized by being able to take
learning beyond the acquisition of facts to a new level, where the learner can use the
higher skills of seeing the perspectives of others and intuitive feeling to construct real
understanding. Piaget implied that by the last stage we are provided with 'tools' for
adult understanding. However, alongside this is the assumption that as we reach
adulthood, our learning journey stabilizes; that there are no new skills to be learned
and that our adulthood experiences simply 'puts meat on the bones'. Piaget, perhaps,
did not fully recognize that on reaching maturity we may undertake higher education
study or other activities requiring prolonged or sustained learning whereby we reach
deeper levels of cognition and understanding beyond his formal operational stage. In
practice, as mature adults, we recognize that we are able to look at the world with
changing and potentially improving insight, with ongoing cognitive development
occurring as the post-childhood decades of our life pass. It could be argued that Piaget
is typical of other developmental theorists, in that too narrow a focus is presented.
Childhood is just the preliminary phase of learning development.

Conversely, another of Piaget's basic beliefs has better application to lifelong
learning. This is his view that learning is an active process whereby we develop our
concepts by 'doing'. This process of seeking to find answers has been termed
discovery learning in education. To gain an understanding of discovery learning, you
only need to observe children in free play or generally self-motivated activity.
Everyday examples of this may be the child who is given an activity toy without
instructions or guidance, or the toddler who wants a toy that is out of reach and
explores ways to reach it. Children's play in the early years is characterized by
first-hand exploration, and it is by physically interacting with the world that they
gain knowledge and understanding that is meaningful (Bruce 2001). Discovery
learning continues when the child begins school, in particular within the area of
science teaching and learning in schools (Klahr 2000). It should also be noted that
discovery learning was a main feature of the Plowden Report (DES 1967) regarding
primary education.

Discovery learning does not stop at adulthood. Although the experiences we
have and store over time provide a framework for our daily activities, the process of
discovery needs to be ongoing throughout life as novel situations still do require us to
plan, do and then review our actions. The difference over time is that the process of
discovery can be superseded by a second form of learning as we get older. This second
form of understanding is usually termed consolidation in that the learning role will
change from apprenticeship to mastering what we discover (Gopnik 2005).

Aligned to discovery learning is problem-based learning which is in contrast to
the idea that learning is all about being systematically exposed to facts and
information. This approach to learning suggests that we learn better if we have a
question to answer and we are challenged to solve a mystery. This process is at its

most effective when the question posed is relevant to our personal construct (Kelly 1955) and tagged to our own experience. Thus, meaning connections are made and from this we develop a deeper understanding of concepts rather than collecting facts at a surface level of understanding (Marton and Saljo 1976). However, there is the possibility that experiential learning can also turn into mis-educative experiences (Dewey 1938), for example, consider a young boy's fascination with matches and fire!

Jerome Bruner (1915–) suggested that people learn better if they make their own sense of things and that this occurs when people continally build on previous experiences and concepts over time. Bruner (1960) illustrated this idea by using the term spiral curriculum. The spiral curriculum was a visual image to represent his idea that learners actively construct their own knowledge based upon experiences in the past being joined by new experiences. This constructing of knowledge by adapting and building on past experience in the light of new learning ultimately leads to broader, deeper, richer understanding. Bruner recognized that you can be fully engaged in a current learning experience but you can only take from it your measure, that is, what your existing level of expertise and experience allows you to appreciate. You may return to the *same* ideas later, when you will *understand it more fully*. In other words, Bruner (1960) asserted that effective learning can only occur by revisiting and merging prior understanding with new understanding.

Bruner also believed that thought is language-based and that to learn we need to attach the new information to something which is already part of our personal narrative. Our personal narrative is conscious thought that runs parallel to our learning and is part of a personal construct. Learning occurs when new knowledge is accepted as linking to what we know already. It is this constructive element in learning, the building onto our personal narratives, the linking of new information to conscious thought and personal representations that can focus our attention for longer and, therefore, make learning effective.

An important part of being an individual is that we have the ability to be introspective with our learning, that we have conscious *within-self* thoughts. The ability to reflect allows us to continually pin new knowledge to our personal constructs. It would follow that the older we are, the greater our personal construct is, and thus our learning could be said to be more effective. This is one argument in support of an emergent learning development focus right through the lifespan rather than a model that hits a plateau at maturity and is followed by a later life cognitive decline – in other words, the old dog not only can learn new tricks but also have an intensified understanding of them too!

Other theorists, for example, Skinner, Pavlov, Watson, have taken a behaviourist approach, suggesting that our learning expands from the self and is actually in response to the environment. As discussed earlier, behaviourism is a passive outlook on learning. In general terms, behaviourism is the hypothesis that it is a stimulus occurring outside of the individual, plus a response by an individual that leads to learning. For example, there is a huge puddle following heavy rainfall (stimulus) and the individual steps in it (response by an individual), the consequence would be an unpleasant sensation of soaking wet shoes and socks (negative reinforcer) and the learning would be not to step in puddles in future, but rather to step over or walk

around them. In this approach our learning is reduced to the basic component idea that we avoid negative or unpleasant experiences, but repeat positive, pleasurable experiences. The criticism often presented for viewing learning in this way is that this is too simplistic and mechanistic a view of humanity (Pinker 2002). Behaviourism does not recognize the cognitions we have or the conscious or creative choices that we make based on our feelings, personal priorities, attachments and social influences. It perceives learning as extrinsically or externally motivated rewards and punishments without due consideration of the intrinsic or internal drive to learn. Intrinsic motivation is linked to the idea of self-efficacy, or the value placed on one's own view of one's ability (Bandura 1977). The individual with higher self-efficacy will tend to put in more effort to their learning and persist longer in learning activities, than those with lower self-efficacy (Schunk 1990). As such, self-efficacy must be a factor that is given due attention for learning across the lifespan.

Another individualized aspect of learning is the belief that humans have an innate cognitive ability or intelligence. It was Galton (1874) who first argued that individuals have a cognitive aptitude for learning that can be measured as an intelligence quotient (IQ), a single score assigned to individuals. The dispute over IQ centres around the idea that intelligence could be a fixed entity that is passed down though genetic bloodlines and thus would remain stable across an individual's lifespan. However, in contrast, it has been argued that IQ is dependent on life chances and choices, and that it is possible that IQ can improve or decline over time. The evidence for this is presented by case study investigations of enrichment or deprivation where observable changes to IQ have been reported. Enrichment involves the provision of a deliberately enhanced cognitively simulating environment whereas deprivation involves reduced cognitively stimulating environments.

An argument against the use of IQ tests is that they were constructed by a small number of people of similar backgrounds and cultural identities implying that the generalizability, or the potential for application to all individuals, is highly questionable. In addition, performance on IQ tests has been linked to socio-economic status and other family circumstances such as family size and cultural background/race and thus has courted controversy that there was a judgemental and discriminatory agenda attached to them (Murdoch 2007). Moreover, the tests, in spite of being termed general intelligence tests, actually focus on discrete abilities for memory-based spatial/linguistic abilities only. IQ measurements do not include other important individual characteristics valued by society, such as emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995), that is, being socially aware and responsive to your emotional needs and the needs of others, or multiple intelligences, such as musical, body-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal as suggested by Gardner (1983).

Despite these objections, IQ scores are still being measured and compared, for example, by the MENSA organization which is a 'higher intelligence' community and by educational psychologists. An individual can be ranked and evaluated in society by placing their score in an IQ test alongside the population mean or average score. From the population mean there is a normal range calculated which includes a margin above and below the mean score. Those above or below the cut-off point are identified as having abnormal intelligence. Those people with abnormally low IQ

scores may have their life choices limited, for example, by being offered a limited choice of schools or careers, yet those people with abnormally high IQ scores may have their life choices enhanced through elitism. Thus an IQ measurement can dictate future learning experiences and a self-perpetuating cycle may begin. It could be argued that the issue of intelligence is a clear example of how learning needs to be considered across the lifespan.

Further controversy relating to learning centres around the suggestion that there is a gender effect to learning. Gurian and Ballew (2003) described inherent differences between male and female brains and Glazer (2005) reported intrinsic aptitude differences due to gender for maths and science. The idea of a difference in learning approaches between males and females was explored by Baron-Cohen (2003) from which two cognitive styles were suggested: empathizing and systemizing. Males and females both took part in self-report measures and from the data gathered it was proposed that males were more focused on problem-solving whereas females prioritised social understanding, and that it was this that led to a variation in learning. This indicates that gender differences for learning are not to do with more or less efficient cognitive function and capacity, but are due to different priorities and motivations for learning which are gender-specific. It should be noted that reported gender differences for learning may not be due to innate factors, but are due to socio-cultural attitudes and resultant discrimination and barriers to learning experienced by the different genders.

Another mechanism has been proposed as being vital to effective individual learning. This is referred to as metacognition and is defined by Bartlett and Burton (2007: 128) as 'the process of coming to know more about one's own learning strategies'. Metacognitive awareness is a deeper form of reflection where there is not only an engagement in learning but a secondary perspective of one's own learning process. This self-awareness not only considers the individual's own learning, but places it in the context of the learning of others. For example, the individual considers, 'If I can do this, I could do this … but maybe I should do that.' Metacognition can be thought of as the use of an internalized mentor who analyses and appreciates how the self is approaching learner tasks, asks the self 'Why' questions and directs the self to more effective strategies observed in others. It has been suggested that those people who are able to employ such an internal mentor learn better than those with a more passive approach to learning.

Task 7.2 Stop, think and do

- Do you feel that your learning has reached a plateau as you have reached adulthood? Piaget's stage model for cognitive development ends at the Formal Operational stage and the end of childhood – do you feel that your learning will get better or worse from this point?
- Would you say that your learning development thus far has been linear, or do you revisit concepts, as suggested by Bruner?
- Do you feel that your aptitude for learning is innate, as suggested by 'measured intelligence', or do you see your capacity to learn as influenced by either the environment or your motivation for a specific task?

This section has presented an overview of some of the issues associated with learning for the individual. However, it is the specific aim of this chapter to broaden consideration of learning from the individual viewpoint, to consider learning that occurs as a result of humans existing in a social world. This is because our learning, although individual and often feeling like a private journey, does not take place in a vacuum. We learn in interaction with one another. We may be 'little scientists', as proponents of Piaget suggest, but the *context* of learning does, in most cases, involve others. For this reason, the next conceptual layer discussed is the learning that occurs with another person.

Learning with another

The premise of the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was that learning is socially constructed and that it is the experiences that we have with others that provide an intellectual scaffold. Within this socio-cultural and social constructivist theory of learning, the term teacher is used in the context of a person supporting another in their learning rather than a professional role as an experienced other. The role of the teacher is to recognize where the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD) lies. The ZPD is the gap between the learner's current understanding/ability and where targeted support should be. The teacher poses questions and provides activities within the hypothetical zone, which are neither oversimplified, and, therefore, having no cognitive challenge, nor so taxing that the learner is unable to make appropriate cognitive connections. It should be noted that the teacher can be a peer with a better understanding of the concept, a slightly older child at the ZPD level or even a computer-assisted learning programme. However, there is some debate about whether a computer can be included in the definition of an expert other which centres on comparisons of computer versus a conscious entity (Turing 1950; Penrose 1989).

A further advantage of the scaffolding of learning is that motivation is enhanced by inspiration from someone acting at the learner's potential level. In other words, there could be an assimilation of enthusiasm and focus for learning plus recognition of the possible outcome of the learning observed in another person. However, it could also be argued that there are potential negatives of learning with

another. There is the possibility of poor or inconsistent support that is not targeted to the person's ZPD, or, even with effective pitching within the ZPD, the learner could become reliant on another person and unable to maintain or generalize learning when the intellectual scaffold is removed.

A common misconception associated with the notion of learning occurring with another is that learning is a simple process of transferring knowledge from one person to another. This is a simplistic and limiting view of learning that has one person as advisor and one as a recipient, and it does not take into account the two-way flow of interaction characterized by the dialogue that accompanies the interaction. This transmission view of learning suggests that the learner is engaged in the uptake of knowledge and, although there may be a conversation and an appreciation of the information provided by the learner through feedback, it fails to acknowledge the extra ingredient of effective learning.

The notion of mentoring recognizes this extra ingredient of learning with another. Mentoring is derived from the theoretical underpinnings of Vygotsky's ZPD where there is an element of knowledge transfer, but the value of mentoring is that both people involved take positive features from the interaction for themselves. It could be argued that the effectiveness of this type of learning is due to the fact that the interaction is satisfying some emotional need as well as supporting a cognitive process, which makes the learning both rewarding and meaningful with a positive impact on self-efficacy.

Task 7.3 Stop, think and do

If a computer programme is able to pitch questions, instructions and activities within the ZPD of a learner based on the ongoing responses from that person, would you accept computers as an alternative of Vygotsky's 'expert other'?

Think of a time when you had an interesting conversation where you learned something new.

- Was this a one-way flow of information, or did you respond to the other person?
- Do you think the other person modified what they were saying based on your responses?
- How did you feel during the conversation – a passive recipient of information or as an equal member of a conversation that happened to reveal new information?

Learning in relation to a group

Learning within a group has many dynamics that individual learning does not. Group dynamics take into account not only the individual attributes, personality and level of sociability, but the relationships between each group member in interaction with

each other as well as the group relationship of everyone combined. As discussed earlier, we rarely learn in isolation. More often we are part of a group when we are learning.

Some of the benefits of group learning are sharing ideas and the capacity to solve problems that may elude the individual. However, effective learning may be stalled in a group situation where the relationship within the group is operating negatively or working against a common goal. Group interaction in such circumstances is often characterized by irrelevant discussions or disengagement. In such cases what tends to be missing is a contract of respect that underpins collaborative learning and acknowledges that personal value is equal, regardless of individual variation in current skill, knowledge or even contribution. Personal issues need to be segregated from the real focus or goal of the learning activity and put aside for the mutual benefit of all group members. The contract, whether written or spoken, formal or informal, should allocate roles prior to the group working together. Moreover, it should outline the unified focus for the group in achieving a learning goal so that all group members having a reasonable level of intrinsic motivation is necessary. The value of the learning goal should be recognized by all group members through communication.

The fundamental difference between individual learning and group learning is agreed learning outcomes (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003). Being made aware of and agreeing to the learning outcomes through negotiation within a group can also develop metacognitive skills in the individual. From this, it can be seen that the process of working within a group can be as valuable as the content of the learning activities with regard to effective learning. This is akin to Vygotsky's perspective that learning actually depends on an interaction with people in addition to the tools, such as language, experience, that social contexts provide.

A DfES publication called the *Primary Strategy Learning Networks* published in 2004 (DfES 2004d) recognised the potential for extending learning for groups of learners by encouraging groups to join together to form a learning alliance. For example, similar schools in the local environment or higher education institutions delivering similar courses may form a learning alliance. The practical application in education was clustering or learning networks developed between similar learning contexts to share current understanding and good practice. The aim was then to extend the learning and attainment of the group by working within the ZPD/ mentoring for the group rather than the individual. Although the coming together of the groups may be a one-off collaborative experience, it was envisaged that sustained relationships would develop partnerships and permanent learning networks. However, despite the potential benefits of group clustering in terms of effective learning, the practical difficulty that goes with partnership formation must be noted. Learning networks or clusters can be time-consuming to form and take time, knowledge, interpersonal skills and resources to sustain (Bailis 2004).

Task 7.4   Stop, think and do

You should have some experience of group work from your previous or current studies.

- Do you believe that you were a productive member of that group on the task set?
- Do you learn better as part of a team?
- Did you relate equally well to each member of the team?
- Was there a group contract prior to beginning the group task – written, spoken or an informal 'non-verbal agreement' (an understanding)?

Learning in a society

Being social beings, people tend to cluster together as a collective with shared values, exchange of viewpoints and interpretation of a common situation among a learning community. This is where a larger group will work together as a society, not only sharing knowledge and understanding, but operating with the same set of judgements and values. Thus, within each society, there will be requirements based on the sole purpose of keeping the societal cohesion which can dictate what the people in that society are expected to learn or conform to.

Learning occurs from being part of a community through observation. People learn through observing others' behaviour and attitudes and the outcomes of those behaviours. Social learning theory regarded learning as occurring in a social context through imitation and modelling (Bandura 1963). Being part of a large community will provide more learning opportunities, but on the downside there is a wide variety of models to observe, both positive and negative. To account for this, continual reference should be made to the wider agreed code to refocus individuals on the most appropriate models so that their learning and behaviour are constructive and productive for the needs of the community.

It is the nature of culture that people who live within a society are judged by how they perform and achieve on the standards set for that particular society. Over time, there is a subtle evolution of expectations as the culture evolves. As a result, each subsequent generation born have the content of their learning modified in light of the shift in demand. This is termed modified cognition. Therefore, the knowledge, skills and attributes become prioritized and valued as a circumstantial factor, and will depend on the cultural context. In other words, learning is not just an individualized set of cognitive factors but highly embedded within the culture that the person lives in (Edwards and Harrison 2002).

Part of being an individual who is included within a society is an acknowledgement that there are roles for everyone. This requires a consideration of individual characteristics and a self-evaluation of how we might meet the needs of society at our

individual level. Consequently, our learning is mediated not only by our intrinsic interest but by the expectations placed upon us by our parents, peers, teachers, and community. Our learning experiences are subsequently tailored to meet societal expectations. An illustration of this is the concept of work-based learning being recommended and incorporated into educational settings within the UK (Dearing 1997) as part of a national agenda. As well as learning being individualized, we must also incorporate society's needs in order for our place as a valued member of society to be assured.

Task 7.5 Stop, think and do

Think about the content of your current studies. Is it based on what is pertinent to your individual learner needs, or can you identify some elements that are included for your future role as an effective member of society?

World learning

World learning can be interpreted as the hands-on experience in real settings that is associated with the term work-based learning. However, this does not give support to a more valuable learning context, that is, the recognition of and the concentration on the wider world issues such as the global needs and economy. It is suggested that our consideration of learning should not be about the learning needs of the individual within their world (Mezirow 1997), where there is an egocentric viewpoint of self in the world. This idea needs to be set aside and, instead, world learning beyond the self to the higher tiers should be considered (Boyd and Myers 1988) as a transformative process for a collective consciousness (Bernstein 1992). This means that all people should be invited to unite their learning for the common need at a global level in order to provide the basics such as food, water, shelter, access to education, health and social services, as well as to work against the threats to these basics, such as extreme weather and climate, maladaptive large group behaviour and aggression.

In order for world learning to be possible, a medium is needed. The internet (World Wide Web) is our connectivity but, again, there are positive and negative factors associated with this. The wealth of information can aid world learning significantly but we also need to recognize that the internet, at times, lacks authenticity and accuracy of information for learning. Misinformation and deception in particular will hinder world learning and cause great damage to learning constructs. Trust is a key human attribute, and it is unfortunate when we are not able to place it in others; however, there is a need to exercise caution as effective world learning will always be accompanied by a shadow of ossification which can block or distort information and trust.

Task 7.6 Stop, think and do

Consider a recent issue where the world has come together, for example, a news bulletin for a missing child, a summit for climate change, a documentary about an individual country struggling with war or environmental disaster.

- What is the effect on you, the individual?
- How much input is possible from those individuals or cultures not directly linked to the context of the issue?
- Is there an impact across the globe when one issue emerges?
- Do you agree that there may be a 'collective consciousness' and that it can lead to transformative learning across the world?

Some of the most pertinent learning comes from studying the past. World lessons may reverberate down through the tiers to the individual to teach us how to avoid or address similar issues that have previously occurred in history.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a consideration of how people learn that integrates the tiers of the learning in the broader context of the learner's life, with other people and for the wider global issues. It has provided an overview of some of the more pertinent ideas concerning how we learn, presented in a tiered progression from individual through to world learning factors. Each section of the chapter has looked at how people sometimes do not learn effectively, and unpicked some of the factors and influences that contribute to this.

The chapter has looked beyond the reduction of learning to a consideration of individual developmental factors. As indicated at the start of the chapter, this is not just a text about child development. People do learn, not just in childhood, but throughout the lifespan and are being actively encouraged to do so due to the current social and global context, predominantly the need for people to change the content of their work more often than in the past. Within the current global working and learning climate, it is the transferable knowledge and skills that people need to learn are required, and more educational settings are looking at developing this. However, perhaps, the biggest gains for the advancement of human knowledge and learning could be achieved by encouraging the individual to start looking beyond the self to the combined learning need across the globe.

Summary

1   The European Commission published a White Paper in 1994 that asked those involved in education to now consider how learning continues throughout the lifespan. Any consideration of how we learn should try to encompass this.

2   Jean Piaget has been a major influence on our understanding of how people learn, but his theory assumed we reach a level of maturity by the end of childhood.

3   Jerome Bruner suggested we revisit learning experiences, building our understanding over time which is linked to our own personal construct.

4   Although discovery learning is a key feature of childhood, we continue to engage in it in adulthood. We simply tag new knowledge to our ongoing personal construct to achieve deeper levels of understanding as we get older.

5   Lev Vygotsky's idea of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) has provided us with a framework for learning with another person. The other person can be a 'teacher' who encourages effective learning with targeted support, or a mentor where there is a mutual beneficial effect for both the learner and mentor when learning experiences occur within the ZPD.

6   *Primary Strategy Learning Networks* (DfES 2004d) called for groups to collaborate within education to further their understanding.

7   Group working can help solve problems that elude the individual, and learning networks share the learning benefits within a wider context.

8   The dynamics within a group is fundamental to the process of group learning, requiring respect, focus and values to be shared for learning to be effective.

9   Being part of a community provides learning opportunities via observation, but there is also mediation due to societal needs such as prioritized social knowledge, skills and attributes.

10 Learning can also be transcendental or beyond the self, where there is a union of learning focus for our collective global needs.

8 Social Factors in Education

All of us, regardless of our job, level of qualifications, attitudes, ideologies, ethnicity, gender or age, form part of the complex structure known as society. Due to the complex nature of society, it requires rules, some supported by legislation and protected by law, such as it being illegal to murder and steal. Other rules or norms are governed by manners and good grace, such as saying thank you and please, queuing and holding open doors for strangers. In order for such a range of individuals to co-exist peacefully, each of us has to observe the majority of those rules to avoid societal breakdown and anarchy. However, while these general rules or norms can be debated and their relevance at times questioned, the basic idea of civility to each other is one which is necessary for the smooth running of society. The main area of contention within society is not the day-to-day interactions and individuals' observance of norms and values, rather, it is the system of society that they maintain and whether that system is fair and equitable.

In a modern, post-industrial society, a range of different individual roles is called for, so we need doctors, engineers, teachers, solicitors, refuse collectors, electricians, entertainers, and so forth. However, whilst each of these jobs is important in maintaining society, the value we attach to them, both in terms of monetary value and perhaps more importantly social status, differs immensely. So, for example, a doctor will generally earn more and be considered to belong to a higher social class than a refuse collector. You may consider this to be logical; whilst it is clear that both jobs are crucial, the job of the doctor requires more training, more education and more knowledge than that of the refuse collector. In addition, more people are able to take on the latter role than the former so in classical economic terms of supply and demand, the doctor deserves their higher status and income. This book, however, is concerned with education and the main issue we need to consider is whether the opportunity to gain a higher status occupation, following a successful educational experience, is equally available to all groups within society.

In the UK, our class system is primarily based on occupation and academic qualifications rather than actual income. Additionally, the social class of a child will largely depend on the occupation and qualification levels of primarily their father. Individuals are placed in certain social class groups using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). Generally, there are eight categories into which individuals are placed although there are variations on issues such as those who are self-employed and the size of the company you work for. However, broadly speaking, the breakdown of social economic groups is as shown in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1   The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification Analytic Classes

Group	Definition
1	Higher managerial and professional occupations
1.1	Large employers and higher managerial occupations
1.2	Higher professional occupations
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations
3	Intermediate occupations
4	Small employers and own account workers
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6	Semi-routine occupations
7	Routine occupations
8	Never worked and long-term unemployed

In addition, in the UK, individuals are further categorized, for the purpose of social classification, into ethnic groups of origin and gender. Chapter 9 details the differences between these groups and similarities within them when it comes to their educational experience. This chapter will outline some of the theoretical perspectives behind those issues but it is important at this stage to understand how society is stratified and the impact this stratification may have.

What is sociology?

> Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects. In 'action' is included all human behaviour when and insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it. Action in this sense may be either overt or purely inward or subjective; it may consist of positive intervention in a situation, or of deliberately refraining from such intervention or passively acquiescing in the situation. Action is social insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course.
>
> (Weber 1994)

What Max Weber is stating here is that modern society is not a purely natural state and that the 'actions' or 'inactions' of various groups have an impact on the fabric of society and the lives of individuals and groups made up of those individuals.

The sociology of education

Within the sociology of education there are two main schools of thought, function-alists or consensus theorists and Marxism or conflict theorists. Both theories see

school as much more than a place where you receive an academic education. Instead, school is seen primarily as a socializing force, that is, it ensures that individuals develop into productive members of our society. The main differences between the theories concern the benefits of this socialization. Consensus theorists see it as a positive force within society, that we as individuals consent to a general overall view (ideology) which ensures that each of us can take our rightful place based upon our ability and dedication. There must be divisions in society in order for it to function properly. Conflict theorists also believe that there are divisions in society. However, instead of these being based upon ability and dedication, conflict theorists feel that they are based upon inequality. It is suggested that the ruling classes oversee the system of education in such a way that ensures those who share their ideological view (class-based) will succeed whilst those who do not will fail, and that, in order to achieve any success within the school system, we have to adhere to the dominant ideology. Conflict theorists believe that this ideology is not a shared one but one that has been developed from the top down and that the rest of society has been coerced into accepting it.

Functionalists or consensus theorists

Functionalism as a school of thought is so called because functionalist theorists feel that society has basic needs and that they need to be met in order for it to function correctly. They liken society to a biological organism such as the human body. We need every part of our body to be functioning correctly in order for us to survive. If, for example, our liver fails, then the rest of our body cannot bypass the organ but instead will fail. In a similar fashion, if the school system does not provide the socialization of our young people, in conjunction with other socializing forces such as the family, then society will collapse.

One of the pioneers of the functionalist movement was Emile Durkheim whose main works were developed in the late nineteenth century. He suggested that, at the time, society was in danger of breaking down and that the rules of social engagement were becoming confused and unclear. This, he felt, could cause the destruction of society. He called this condition anomie which means a breakdown of social norms and values leading to anarchy. This condition ensured no shared norms of behaviour existed and so it would be impossible for a society to form and function.

In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) Durkheim outlined his theory that societies developed from a mechanical system into an organic system In the mechanical system, individuals tend to have similar work tasks and similar goals. An example of this would be an agricultural society where the majority of workers are farm-based and each is reliant on the other to provide sufficient amounts and variety of foods for the whole. Therefore, in this society the ideology will be a shared one as we can clearly see the links between us and the rest of society. When society moves to a more complex arrangement, such as we have today, then the links between individuals become less clear. Different elements of society will be seen to be independent of each other and the idea of shared goals and ideology becomes more complex. It is at this stage that Durkheim believes there is a danger of anomie.

Different roles in society will carry greater or lesser rewards which can result in conflict between individuals. However, Durkheim believed that these rewards were necessary in order to ensure that society functioned correctly. He and other functionalists, such as Talcott Parsons, believed that school was a powerful force in ensuring that children were socialized into accepting their roles within society. Schools, according to Durkheim, acted as a secondary socializing force which enabled individuals to understand their role in a broader more complex society than that of their immediate environment and family.

This leads us to understand the two main relationships we encounter in our dealings with other individuals within society. First, affective relationships. These are relationships which are primarily based on love and affection, for many of us the ones we receive from family and close friends. Second, and more common in our day-to-day encounters, are instrumental relationships. These relationships are ones that contain a purpose such as in a shop or office. For these relationships there are certain shared rules which ensure that they run smoothly. Without education, functionalists argue, we would not understand those rules and either all of society would collapse or, as an individual, we would be excluded from the system. So, therefore, even though we adopt disparate roles in society, we all share a common value system which ensures that society functions.

Therefore, the role of schools, from a functionalist perspective, is not solely to provide a free education which examines knowledge unsullied by ideological bias. Instead the true purpose is to perform a number of key tasks. First, it should ensure that we have the necessary basic skills in order to perform our role, such as reading, increasingly, information communication technology skills and basic mathematics. The second task, and perhaps most crucial for our discussion here, is based on socializing us and ensuring that social order is maintained. This would entail manners, accepting hierarchical structures, working within the law, respect for elders and other shared norms and values which maintain the order of society. The third element is in preparing us for the world of work. This is partly linked to the maintaining of the social order element, for in work, as in society, we conform to certain rules but also we require the development of specialist skills and knowledge for certain jobs. So education would, through the teaching of, say, history, and in particular certain types of history, primarily British and with a bias towards British perspectives, ensure a spirit of patriotism in children. Furthermore, through subjects such as citizenship a sense of working within society could be fostered. Later on in the chapter we will discuss ways in which the socialization process within education is not primarily achieved through taught subjects but instead in the way in which the school is structured and managed.

Durkheim was not the only theorist who espoused these views and his work was developed further by, in particular, Talcott Parsons and Davis and Moore. In his work *The Social System* (1964), Parsons developed the theories of Durkheim and discussed how individual 'social actors' operated within the larger 'social order'. Parsons believed that our integration into society was not a natural process but instead was something which needed to be taught and learnt. He described many institutions in society as agencies of socialization which would together ensure that society and the

individuals within it continued to function. School, of course, was considered to be a key agency in maintaining social order. Parsons, like Durkheim, believed that the system was meritocratic in that it favoured no individual but achievement was linked solely to ability and dedication.

Davis and Moore (1945) raised a similar point in terms of education being the proving ground for ability and that it acted as an agent of selection. Those who did well gained the roles which brought higher rewards in terms of social status and often, although not always, higher financial status. Their belief, therefore, was not only that education provided a function in maintaining control but that the system also fairly separated us into the roles to which we were most suited.

What each of the above theoretical perspectives suggests is that education is necessary to maintain social order and that, furthermore, each of us has an equal chance to succeed. They also put forward a crucial point which is that they believe society is generally positive for all sections of it. We all agree to the norms and values of society because it benefits all of us in some way. We may not all be given equal rewards and status but that is due to the importance of our roles and in any case we were all given a chance to succeed. To summarize the consensus viewpoint, we have a place in society, we know that place and act accordingly but that place is not pre-ordained but instead is based upon our own ability and dedication.

What the consensus perspective fails to fully account for are the inequalities we encounter within society. We have, in the UK, huge discrepancies in terms of wealth and educational achievement. Whilst consensus theorists would suggest that these are necessary and useful in creating ambition and a fully functioning society, the theory is less clear as to why those who tend to achieve generally are from the higher socio-economic groups and that those who do less well tend to be from the lower socio-economic groups. This, of course, is a generalization and more specific examples can be seen in Chapter 9. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, consensus theorists do not fully address power relations in society, who controls systems such as education and whether they could be used to maintain power and privilege in the hands of the few.

Conflict theorists

Conflict theorists also believe that the primary purpose of education is to socialize us into accepting norms and values in order to ensure the smooth running of society. However, while consensus theorists state that this is for the benefit of us all, conflict theorists state that we are being conditioned to accept as normal an unjust system. They see the primary role of education as maintaining the power base of the ruling classes and reinforcing the unjust class system. For conflict theorists, the system of education will not allow significant numbers of individuals from outside of the elite classes to succeed, as this would erode the power base of those in positions of power.

In order for this to be achieved, the whole of society needs to believe that maintaining social order is beneficial for us all. This cannot be solely achieved in the long term by force or by withholding services or goods but instead, in order to provide a stable and fully functioning society where those in lesser positions accept their roles, a form of social control must be developed. Gramsci (1971) suggested that

through institutions like the media, family and schools, those in positions of power, namely governments and those who owned large industries, developed a concept of hegemony. Through this, the elite can govern in ways which suit their purpose whilst other groups believe that they too have a full say in the structure and belief system of that society. It is not enough, therefore, to impose rules, as that would be obvious coercion, instead, those rules must appear to be developed by all groups and be challengeable by all groups. For conflict theorists, the main problem lies in the fact that the structure and belief system of capitalism are not able to be challenged in any meaningful way as to do so would directly challenge the power of the elite groups. So, through an apparently free media, a supposedly democratic political system and an education system which, particularly within higher education, can be critical, it appears that we all have some say in the structure of society. However, conflict theorists would argue that all this is part of the deception and that the supposedly challengeable structure is anything but. Whilst we may be able to see small changes being made in the social structure, those changes will not challenge the overall structure which is designed to ensure the smooth handover of power from generation to generation of the ruling classes. You may have encountered the old political slogan, 'Whomever you vote for, the Government gets in.' This is what is meant by hegemony: a concept which gives the illusion of freedom and meritocracy in a system which is class-based and inherently biased in favour of those from the higher social classes. It is important to note though, as Apple does (2003), that hegemony is a process, not a thing and should not be seen as holding direct and total control over meanings. Instead hegemonic power is something which needs to be built and rebuilt; it is contested and negotiated (2003: 6). Whether this can be viewed as a suggestion that change can come via challenge, both intellectual and practical, or that the dominant ideology will merely shift to incorporate such challenges whilst maintaining overall control is a matter of debate.

Education, of course, is seen by conflict theorists as a primary tool in this deception. In much the same way as consensus theorists saw education as a socializing tool, conflict theorists see it as a tool which will socialize us or condition us into accepting an unfair system. Perhaps the most seminal and certainly the most famous of the conflict theorists is Karl Marx (1813–1883). Together with his compatriot Engels, Marx did not write specifically about education but his theories on the way in which the state maintained social order through deception pioneered the works of later sociologists who viewed education as a key tool in this form of control. In addition, his views can be indirectly applied to our modern system of education as later discussions in this chapter demonstrate. Marx stated that at the heart of society was production and that, under a capitalist society, production must make surplus profit which, rather than being shared among the workers, would instead be taken as profit by the owners of the companies, be they individuals or groups. This unfair system would, by definition, ensure that those who created the wealth, the workers, could not reap the full reward of their endeavours as to do so would result in a lack of profit. Marx and Engels stated that this system needed to be legitimized and naturalized by a system above it, thus suggesting that it was a natural order and beyond challenge rather than an engineered intrinsically unjust system. Marx saw

these two elements as the economic infrastructure which ensured the power of the owners and the superstructure which supported, via ideological control, the status quo. Therefore, the profit-making production creates a superstructure of schools, religion, the family and mass media to ideologically condition us into accepting capitalist ideologies. This is done not through direct violence but through messages, both overt and covert, which suggest the current system is one that favours us all. One key message in this perspective is that schools are controlled by those in positions of power and, as such, the education system, rather than being a force for change, is engineered to favour those who will form part of the elite in later life. These individuals will be, almost without exception, from what we now class as the higher socio-economic groups. This control will manifest itself not in the subjects within education, but the content of those subjects, the status of different types of knowledge, the way in which those subjects are taught and the way in which individuals are assessed. In addition, control is exercised over the length of the school day, increasingly the structure of that day, at what age children start school and finish school and the amount of days they spend in school. Control also manifests itself in the training future teachers receive, what is included within that training and crucially what is deemed unnecessary. See Chapter 1 for more discussion on this subject. In essence, then, education is a highly controlled practice within formal institutions most notably schools and it is the purpose of that control which conflict theorists seek to question. As Marx put it: 'the ruling class will give its ideas the form of universality and represent them as the only rational universally valid ones' (cited in Apple 2004: 145).

Building on the works of Marx and Engels, Althusser (1984) stated that there were two main forms of maintaining social control in an unjust society. First, what he coined the repressive state apparatuses (RSAs). These elements, such as the army, the police force and system of law and order, are rough tools and whilst they can, for short periods, maintain order, that order is likely to be challenged as it is clear that they are repressing individuals and groups within society. Think of dictatorships in numerous countries worldwide which are supported by the threat or reality of force of such RSAs.

Far more subtle ways of control are those supported by the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). These tools are far more important as the most effective way to ensure that there is no challenge to an unjust system is to convince the public that the system is just. Many of the chapters in the book have discussed ideology in detail so this is not the place for a lengthy discussion of its meaning, suffice to say that ideology is a system of values and beliefs which can be imposed, shared or given the illusion of being shared. Or as Althusser himself stated: 'the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group' ([1970] 1984: 32). Althusser suggested that the following were ISAs (Table 8.2).

Table 8.2 Ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)

- the religious ISA
- the educational ISA
- the family ISA
- the legal ISA
- the political ISA
- the trade-union ISA
- the communications ISA
- the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.)

Althusser stressed that one telling aspect of the ISAs were that many of them were privately owned or at least not under the direct control of the government, unlike the RSAs. This is a major indicator of how deeply hegemony has infiltrated the thinking of the population when even those institutions whose very role is to challenge, such as the trade unions, work within the system and as such become largely ineffective in achieving true change. As Althusser stated: 'No class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses' (1984: 20). So if, as Althusser stated, ISAs such as schools maintain an unjust system, in what ways does this transmit itself?

Task 8.1   Stop, think & do

Consider in what ways the list of ISAs in Table 8.2 could develop hegemony and support an unjust system. Consider whether celebrity culture is a way of ensuring that individuals focus on less important aspects of life, thus preventing a challenge to the status quo.

Earlier in this chapter we examined how Davis and Moore believed schools acted as agents for selection in that school separated us into the roles we were most suited for. Whilst it is true that school and education generally is a competitive environment and that there will be winners and losers within the system, the question we must ask is whether the competition is a fair one in which all individuals have an equal chance of success.

Bourdieu (1977) outlined the theory of cultural capital and habitus to explain why certain students were more comfortable in and, therefore, more likely to succeed in the educational system. The theory that he outlined was one of cultural capital and the ways in which schools were a more natural environment for certain children, most notably those where education was valued and encouraged. Bourdieu stated that the systems within schools endowed those who entered with what they termed as the appropriate cultural capital. Schools are places which naturally value a willingness to learn and appropriate behaviour from the children in their care. Those children who see the value in education are more likely, therefore, to more smoothly integrate into

the institution. As can be seen in Chapter 9, not all groups in society perform equally within the education system. You are far less likely to succeed if, for example, your parents' levels of qualifications are low and it is this type of discrepancy within the system that Bourdieu sought to explain. He felt that there are three main types of cultural capital that an individual can bring to an educational environment: the embodied state which includes the investment of time and influence by primary carers, often parents; the institutionalized form of educational qualifications and achievements; and the objective form of cultural goods such as books, resources and places to study, similar to concepts of material deprivation or affluence (Reay et al. 2005: 20). The theory suggests that those individuals who come to education from families which have previously succeeded within the education system will do well, and that, furthermore, the education system is primarily created, maintained and staffed by those who have done the same. Due to this, the cultural capital that the children of those groups bring to education results in a distinct advantage for them. Ultimately, the value systems, behavioural expectations and types of knowledge that are deemed important within the schools are similar to those they will encounter at home. Of course, this also results in the opposite being true for children from groups which have not succeeded as well within education and who, therefore, do not necessarily view success within it quite as crucially. In essence, the illusion of meritocracy is maintained as each individual receives a similar education and similar opportunities to succeed in exams but there is a fundamental advantage for those children whose cultural capital is more in tune with the ethos and culture of the school. As Bourdieu suggested, when the capital of a student links well with the field of an educational environment, then a student can feel like 'a fish in water'. However, when there is disjuncture between them, it can lead to feelings of isolation, discomfort and insecurity.

Examining similar instances of the culture that children bring to school, Bernstein (1971) introduced the concept of language codes that children from varying socio-economic backgrounds brought into schools, and how closely they matched the codes used within the school. Bernstein stated that there were two types of language codes 'restricted' and 'elaborated', the former being more commonly used by those from lower socio-economic groups and the latter by those from the higher socio-economic groups. In more recent years the terms have changed to 'dominated' codes and 'dominating' codes. The 'dominating' code is more commonly used within schools and those who enter school with a familiarity with the code are again at a distinct advantage within the system. The change in terminology was due to the fact that Bernstein never intended to suggest that one code was superior to another and that they could both be descriptive and discuss abstract concepts. As Labov (1969) stated, 'We could as easily expect the school to adapt its language to the child as expect the child to adapt his or her language to the school' (cited in Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford 2001: 335). This idea of the school adapting is core to our under-standing of the conflict theory of education in that, at all times, we expect the pupil to adapt rather than the school, which ensures that those whose adaptation is smaller will continue to flourish in a system which suits their background. The 'dominating' language will be more descriptive and paint a picture for the reader, allowing them to

visualize what is being described. The 'dominated' code, on the other hand, is more context dependent, it will also describe what is occurring but it will be more difficult for the reader to gain a sense of the overall situation. Within speech, however, it should again be stressed that Bernstein never suggested that one code was superior to another. In a similar fashion, non-standard English spoken by pupils from various minority ethnic groups or those from regions across the UK are often considered inferior as they do not match the language used within the educational system.

The hidden curriculum and conflict theorists

Many of the ways in which schools, from a conflict perspective, fail certain children are through the content of the official curriculum and the teaching methods employed (see Chapter 12 for a more detailed discussion around the official curriculum). This is not to be dismissed lightly as it demonstrates the value systems employed within and through education which form much of the basis for conflict theorists. However, whilst the official curriculum is of obvious importance, the ways in which we are socialized and learn which behaviour patterns are expected of us, often class- and gender-related, are often more effectively delivered through what Jackson (1968) coined the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum can be seen as all the messages that we gain from an educational experience which do not, at least implicitly, form part of the official curriculum. Therefore, whilst there are no actual lessons in appropriate gender behaviour, understanding and respecting hierarchy within schools and that knowledge is something to learn rather than create, we nevertheless take these and many more messages away from our educational experiences. Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford provide a more detailed list of messages that students gain through the hidden curriculum and include issues such as adults being more important than children, the Western world being more advanced and superior to the rest of the world and that passive acceptance of ideas is more desirable than criticism (2001: 65–6). As previously pointed out in Chapter 3, the hidden curriculum is not necessarily a simple and unintended by-product of the schooling process and instead can be viewed as a deliberate attempt to maintain social order through a series of covert and overt messages. The way in which the hidden curriculum can manifest itself are myriad. It can be in the teacher's attitude, the way in which they praise and admonish and the reasons for both of them. It can be in the way classrooms are laid out and the displays on the walls and in corridors. It can be in the uniform requirements, which prizes are given at the end of the year and which elements make up reports. In short, the ethos and direction of the institution are clearly defined through a series of messages which will be constantly reinforced in actions, words and decor.

Task 8.2 Stop, think and do

- Consider what knowledge you have retained from school.
- How much of the content of the subjects you studied at GCSE and A-level do you still recall? Would you feel confident in taking those exams again right now?
- In contrast, consider what other messages you received from school which may have been delivered in a less direct manner. Are the messages such as the ones listed above things that remain with you from your schooling?
- What other 'lessons' of this nature did you take from school?
- How would you describe the hidden curriculum of your current environment? Think of the ways in which this transmits itself.

The much admired and equally criticized work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) developed the concept of the hidden curriculum further and linked it to what they termed the 'correspondence principle'. Bowles and Gintis stated that the messages we gained from the hidden curriculum in schools corresponded closely with the world of work we would later encounter. This is part of what Hatcher (2001) would call the 'capitalist agenda for schools' in that the purpose of education is to create subservient workers within a capitalist economy. These workers will have the necessary knowledge to be productive but, far more importantly, they will also consider the working environment as a natural and unchangeable product which they should work within rather than seek to alter. For Bowles and Gintis, education corresponded to the world of work in a number of key ways. First, they stated that, in their study, grades related more to subservient personality traits rather than ability. In addition, the hierarchical nature of the educational environment in the way that the teacher is in charge and above her lie the deputy and the head teacher. Bowles and Gintis claim that an uncritical acceptance of these power relations will smooth the educational progress much as it would within a work environment. The idea of external rewards through the exam system and their role in gaining higher status employment also link education to school. In much the same way that much employment is unsatisfying and unrewarding with only the prospect of a wage making it worthwhile, the learning process is equally unrewarding with many children failing to enjoy school. However, the carrot remains in terms of external rewards, in one case, wages, in the other, exam results.

Whilst the importance of the work of Bowles and Gintis should not be underestimated, there are a number of criticisms of their work. Some of this focuses upon their reasoning and research methodologies but perhaps more tellingly criticism is levelled at the way in which they present children as uncritical and unquestioning adopters of the messages within the hidden curriculum. Bearing in mind that theorists such as Bowles and Gintis form part of what we class as the conflict theory of education, there is little evidence of conflict within their work. This has led to the

likes of Apple (1999, 2002) and Giroux (2001) criticizing their work as being somewhat misleading. It is worth noting, though, that Bowles and Gintis (2001) reject such claims.

Such criticism as that above could not be levelled at Paul Willis who, in his seminal text *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977) discovered strong evidence of a rejection of school and the formulation of a counter-culture among working-class pupils. Willis followed a group of 12 boys for their last 18 months of school and into their first jobs. The 'lads', as Willis coined them, had clearly rejected the messages sent to them via the hidden and official curriculum. They had little respect for teachers and more subservient pupils and realized instinctively that the 'rewards' of good performance in school were not applicable to them as they had no prospect of succeeding within the system. This was not, as Willis states, a politically aware decision, and in fact the racism and sexism of the 'lads' were contrary to such an awareness, but instead the awareness was developed from observing those around them from similar backgrounds in their homes and the community. Their peers in this case obtained jobs primarily in semi-skilled and unskilled labour for which schools had little to offer. In fact, though, once Willis followed the 'lads' into their first jobs, he discovered that what was classed as a counter-culture within schools was the dominant culture within those workplaces. Therefore, the rejection of the school culture was borne out of the school culture having little relevance to their own. They also realised that academic qualifications were unlikely to be achieved within such a system which Willis argued was developed to exclude too many of their class from achieving. As he succinctly put it:

> Insofar as knowledge is always biased and shot through with class meaning, the working class student must overcome his inbuilt disadvantage of possessing the wrong class culture and the wrong educational decoders to start with. A few can make it. The class can never follow. It is through a good number trying, however, that the class structure is legitimated.

(1977: 128)

What Willis means here is that to maintain an illusion of meritocracy, such as that suggested by the consensus theorists, some children from working-class backgrounds have to achieve, but the system will ensure that the numbers will be heavily restricted in order to maintain society's inequalities.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that there are clear indicators of how likely we are to achieve success within education. Broadly speaking, these indicators centre on our class status, ethnic origin and gender, all of which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 9. The main debate in the sociology of education is how engineered those differences are. The chapter has outlined a range of theoretical perspectives broadly separated into two main philosophies: the consensus theory, and the conflict theory.

The first, the consensus theory, suggests that we all have an equal chance within education, that education is a meritocracy. Any differences in achievement are not the fault of the system but instead education is a natural selection process which separates us into our most suitable future roles.

In contrast, the conflict theorists suggest that education is socially and politically constructed to exclude large numbers of, particularly, children from lower socio-economic groups. This is done through an official curriculum and a hidden curriculum which favours those children whose background, ethos and capital are more suited to the environment.

Both schools of thought believe that education primarily exists to socialize us into becoming productive members of society but that process can be seen by consensus theorists as positive and beneficial to all. Conflict theorists see this very differently, the socialization process is there to maintain and strengthen divisions ensuring that the economic base of society remains unchallenged.

Summary

1   Sociologists understand the system of education to play a key role in the socialization of individuals within society.
2   There are two main schools of thought on this process, conflict theorists, such as Marx, see it as a negative force which maintains divisions within society based on issues such as social class. In comparison, consensus theorists, such as Durkheim, see this as a positive force which socializes us into roles most suitable for the individual and therefore, society.
3   Education is one of the socializing agents within society, others include the family, religion and the media.
4   How the education system socializes us is via issues such as the hidden curriculum and a correspondence between school and the workplace.
5   This socialization process often leads to a negative educational experience for individuals from certain ethnic groups and lower socio-economic groups as discussed in Chapter 9, in this volume.

9 Education: Who Gets What?

In the previous chapter, issues concerning the role of education were discussed and differences in achievement in terms of class status, gender and ethnic origin were alluded to. In this chapter, an examination of the specific issues relating to these groups will demonstrate why the education system is so keenly debated and why accusations of a biased system cannot and should not be dismissed. The chapter will first outline some of the key issues specific to each area before concluding by drawing together relevant theoretical perspectives.

Introduction

Each of us belongs to a range of social classifications. We are separated by our sex, our class and our race. These social classifications can be seen as problematic. Whilst they clearly allow comparison of life chances between the classifications, which can highlight issues of inequality and thus seek to address them, their role in creating these inequalities needs to be considered. Being clearly identified as belonging to a social group, for example, females or working class, brings with it connotations. These connotations are based on the prejudices and stereotypical views each of us, in some way, hold. It is worth noting that all social classifications are engineered, that is, they are created artificially and do not necessarily reflect the individuals found within those groups. An example of this can be seen in the concept of gender. The term gender refers to the social differences between males and females. The term sex is used to describe the biological differences. The fact that separate terms are needed suggests that much of the perceived difference in behaviour and attitude is socially constructed in that males and females behave in certain defined ways not due to any biological reason but because they have been socialized in that manner. The work of anthropologists such as Mead (1935) have shown that gender differences inherent in Western society are challenged radically by other societies which, at the time, were free from global influences. In much the same way we should consider how natural differences in attitudes between varying racial groups and class groups might be and how much they are products of the socialization process discussed in Chapter 8.

By virtue of placing an individual within a social classification, you are labelling them not only with the title of that classification but also with all the history of that group and the prejudices held against that group by others. This level of prejudice should not be underestimated; there are many media and academic accounts of the difficulties in gaining employment by those whose names suggest they are not

English. Equally, the struggle for equal pay and status for women in today's society can in no way be said to have been achieved as yet.

Not only do others have prejudices against groups they do not belong to but individuals within those groups can begin to believe in and act out those social differences. Therefore, the battle for equality needs to be seen on two fronts, first, the attitudes of those who may, consciously or unconsciously, discriminate based on social classifications, and, second, the influence of the socialization process on the behaviour of those belonging to those groups. Examples of this latter issue can be seen in phrases such as 'boys will be boys' and in terms of narrow career choices concerning, for example, the gender groups.

In education, of course, this can impact on the achievement rates of individuals according to their social classifications and again reasons behind this need to be viewed from the dual perspective of internal and external expectations.

Task 9.1 Stop, think and do

This chapter will consider the different educational experiences of:

- boys and girls
- middle-class and working-class children
- Afro-Caribbean children and White children.

It will also consider ways in which our race, gender and class are interlinked issues.

- For each of these groups, write five words which you believe describes them and their attitudes towards education. What do your words suggest about the views we all hold?
- Can you create a list of jobs which are 'Male' and ones which are 'Female'?
- Why are jobs separated by gender? Would you consider working in a profession which is considered by most to be for the opposite sex to you? What do you believe would be the main issues in and out of the job if you did so?

External expectations – theoretical perspectives

Within any given group of people who attempt Task 9.1, there are likely to be some commonalities between the words chosen to describe the various groups. Each individual undertaking the task is likely to have their own view of acceptable or 'positive' behaviour which is likely to achieve educational success. Those views will have been developed from their own socialization process through the family, media, education and the other ideological state apparatuses that define us. The decisions

taken as to how to describe each of the social groups listed above will largely depend on how different they are perceived to be from our own views, effectively the norms and values we hold. Therefore, each of the groups above will broadly have been assigned a label which stresses their difference from the perceived norm of society. This perspective is known as labelling theory. Labelling theory forms, in an educational setting, the basis of teacher expectations and the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Gender and education

Currently in many government publications and the educational press, much concern is expressed about the underachievement of boys within education. A range of theories on the lack of male role models, both in the classroom and at home, together with ideas of a male anti-school counter-culture continue to make headlines. However, the idea that boys are underachieving as a problem is seen only in relation to the achievements of their female counterparts, a telling point which raises important issues around how society views males and females.

Currently there is no doubt that girls are outperforming boys in the majority of subjects and at the majority of levels. However, whilst girls' performance in the more traditional male subjects of the physical sciences and mathematics has increased dramatically, the idea that females have always been significantly behind males overall in attainment is inaccurate as Figure 9.1 demonstrates.
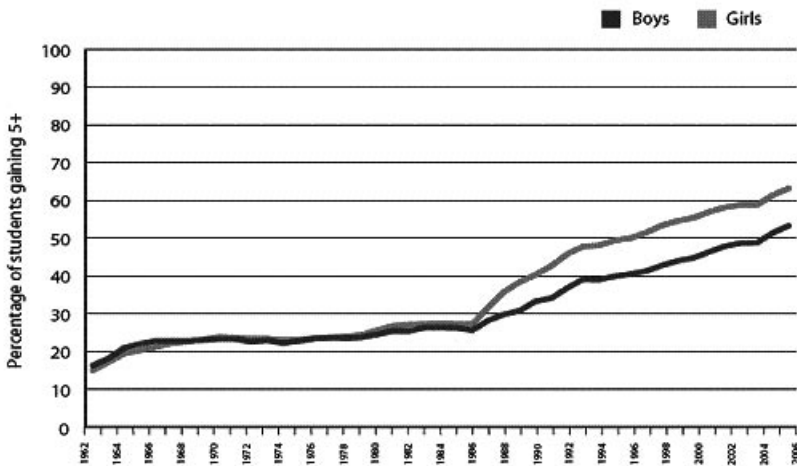

Figure 9.1   Percentage of school leavers achieving 5+ A–C (or Pass) O-level or A*–C GCSE by gender (1962–2006)

Source: (DfES 2007: 18).

As can be ascertained, historically, or at least since girls had similar educational opportunities to boys, there has been little difference in terms of O-level/GCSE pass rates. Although it should be noted that for reasons which are discussed later in the

chapter, many of the girls' passes would be in lower status subjects such as home economics. Even taking that into account, there are two clear patterns emerging from the data above, first, that girls began to outperform boys more significantly after 1988, a year which saw both the introduction of the National Curriculum and the replacement of O-levels with GCSE examinations. The second issue to note is that both boys and girls show a steady upwards improvement in terms of achievement at this level. Therefore, the idea that boys are failing within the educational system is not fully supported by the statistical evidence which shows that boys, whilst not doing as well as their female counterparts, are, overall as a group, improving year on year.

Figure 9.1 only tells part of the story of achievement by gender as more telling differences are found in individual subjects. The following selection of subject results at GCSE level demonstrates this difference (Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 GCSE attainment by subject and gender (2006) (pupils gaining A–C passes at GCSE)

Subject	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	Gap (%)
D & T: Textiles Technology	38	70	32
Art and Design	59	78	19
English	55	69	14
Social Studies	48	62	14
Humanities	40	52	12
English Literature	61	73	12
French	58	69	11
German	63	74	11
Geography	63	69	6
History	63	69	6
Mathematics	55	57	2
Chemistry	91	91	0
Physics	92	91	−1
Biological Sciences	90	89	−1
Other Sciences	57	52	−5

Percentage figures relate only to pupils entered for each subject not overall group.
Source: adapted from DfES (2007: 21)'

As can be seen when examining results on a subject by subject basis, the gender achievement differential can vary significantly. Whilst it is clear, therefore, that gender impacts upon educational achievement, the reasons behind such results are not so well defined. Again it is worth commenting on the rhetoric of the debate which has a tendency to bemoan the underachievement of boys rather than celebrate the success of girls.

The education of girls

The rhetoric of boys underachieving is perhaps unsurprising given the history of unequal treatment of girls within education and society generally. This is an issue that globally is still a matter of major concern. The second of the Millennium Development Goals is to achieve universal primary education for all by 2015. Latest figures suggest that there are 72 million children out of school worldwide and that 57 per cent of them are girls. These figures should be regarded as an underestimate as it does not account for places where data are difficult to obtain. In addition, it only concerns enrolment in schools and not whether attendance is frequent and regular (UNDESA 2007).

In Chapter 2, there is a fuller discussion of the policy decisions which have shaped the education of girls and of more importance to this chapter are modern practices, which, it is suggested by many, favour girls, and the attitudes towards girls in education from society as a whole. These attitudes which have, and arguably still do, support this battle can be seen in the work of Newsom (1948) who stated that as the vast majority of girls will go on to be the makers of homes it was inappropriate for them to share the curriculum of boys' schools (cited in Martin 2004: 117).

The education of girls has historically prepared them for wifehood and motherhood at the expense of academic achievement, a situation further developed by a marriage bar which excluded married women from many professions including teaching (Paechter 1998: 13). Furthermore, the curriculum in schools was differentiated according to sex with female pupils engaged in domestic subjects in their latter years to the detriment of the academic subjects within the boys' curriculum. Table 9.1 demonstrates how these attitudes are still influencing subject choice by gender, with the widest differences between boys' and girls' achievement being in the more creative and caring subjects whilst differences are less apparent in the Physical Sciences and Mathematics. It is still the case that subjects such as Education and Childcare are still primarily studied by females. Therefore, we can see that the history of females being treated as second class in education is still influencing both subject choice and the rhetoric of the debate which primarily focuses upon the underachievement of boys.

Education was not the only public institution which differentiated between the sexes. For example, it was not until 1928 that women were allowed to vote at the same age as men. Furthermore, it was not illegal for women to be paid less than men when employed in the same job or even to be denied access to that job. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, together with the Equal Pay Act of 1970, ensured that discriminatory practices such as those above are now illegal. However, the relative lateness of these Acts shows how deeply ingrained in society discrimination based on sex was. Those attitudes are still prevalent today in terms of employment where women are on average paid 17 per cent less than men and part-time female workers are paid 38 per cent less than their male counterparts (Equal Opportunities Commission 2007). It is against this background that the moral panic around boys' failure in education needs to be considered. The Acts alone, like most legislation, were insufficient to change attitudes and a range of texts from the mid-1970s onwards drew attention to the way education shaped and maintained differences based on

gender. These differences were seen to be to the detriment of girls not only within the classroom but in terms of the messages they received on future roles within the workplace. Two of the most seminal texts of the period were Sue Sharpe's *Just Like a Girl* (1976) and Anne Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1975), both of which highlighted the marginalization of girls within education. This was done via both the official and the hidden curriculum. Subjects were gender-specific, girls were discouraged from taking subjects which were seen as traditionally male such as Mathematics and the Physical Sciences, and feminine behaviour was encouraged. It was argued that the underachievement of girls in education was engineered and supported by a system which favoured boys, an argument which current figures suggest had some validity.

Leaving aside the rhetoric and the fact that, year-on-year, boys' achievement is also rising, there is no doubt that girls do better in the majority of subjects at the majority of levels. This issue has led to debates on the content, delivery and assessment methods of the curriculum and whether those elements favour girls in their current formats. The Educational Reform Act of 1988 which introduced the National Curriculum had a major, if unintended impact upon girls' academic performance. First, it made a range of core subjects statutory and ensured that girls could not opt out of, or more likely be persuaded out of, subjects such as science. It also introduced league tables which have ensured the issue of achievement by gender remains high on the public agenda. Therefore, as girls were given greater opportunity within the educational system, we began to see their performance increase at a faster rate than the improvement of boys, resulting in the gender gap within the statistics. There is an ongoing debate on how boys' level of academic performance can be improved and, whilst it is crucial to constantly consider whether practices within education favour or disadvantage any particular group, it is again worth noting that the performance of boys, like girls, is steadily improving year on year. Later in the chapter we will examine some potential reasons for the discrepancies in achievement based on individuals' gender, race and class.

The impact of race

Obviously each of us as individuals belongs to more than one social group. As the discussion on gender demonstrated, fewer boys than girls are achieving the minimum levels of qualifications which society would deem as successful. Furthermore, behind the statistics is the unpalatable truth that over 30 per cent of children do not achieve that level after 11 years of compulsory schooling, an issue which should also feature highly in any discussion on achievement. It is insufficient to suggest that the learning styles of boys or the assessment process, for example, favours girls as this would fail to take into account the fact that not all boys 'fail' and we need to examine the statistics in more detail in order to understand that gender is only one aspect which impacts upon results and in reality may be a less crucial issue than other defining social classifications.

In 2006, 21 per cent of children in the state primary sector and 17 per cent of children within the secondary state sector were classified as belonging to a minority

ethnic group (DfES 2006b). Overall as Table 9.2 demonstrates, there is a correlation between ethnicity and achievement at GCSE level but that correlation is related to specific ethnicities with various groups achieving at widely discrepant rates.

Table 9.2 Percentage of pupils achieving 5 A-C GCSE grades by ethnicity and gender (2006)

Ethnic origin	Boys	Girls
White British	53.0	62.3
Indian	67.1	76.6
Pakistani	45.4	57.9
Bangladeshi	46.7	58.5
Black Caribbean	36.5	52.9
Black African	45.2	56.7
Chinese	75.5	84.8

Source: DfES (2007).

Table 9.2 demonstrates that there is a complexity to the issue of ethnic minority achievement with Chinese and Indian pupils doing particularly well and Black Caribbean boys clearly achieving at levels well below the national average. Later in the chapter we will investigate how ethnicity and class status are often linked, which can go some way to explaining the differences within the figures. However, it is clear that there is major concern about the achievement rates of Black Caribbean boys in particular. This is by no means a new issue: in 1971, Bernard Coard published his short but seminal text, 'How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system. In the work, he highlighted how this group of children showed how the system failed to meet the needs of, in particular, recent immigrants to this country. Through a combination of cultural bias, such as that discussed in Chapter 8, an IQ test in which both the questions and the exam situation were alien to the child and low teacher expectations, West Indian children were deemed to be educationally sub-normal (ESN) and placed in special educational measures. Coard further suggests that historically British history has deemed Black people as educa-tionally inferior, a view which justified slavery but is still given some credence today in limited circles. This perhaps at times subconscious view was supported by low scores in a biased IQ test which merely confirmed expectations. Coupled with this was the attitude towards the system which the Black children showed, an attitude which in many cases was largely negative. This is of course understandable when faced with a system which appears ill-equipped to deal with you at best and demonstrates blatant discrimination at worst. At the time when Coard was writing, the dominant ideology on race relations was one of assimilation slowly turning towards integration. The former suggested that immigrants would simply and naturally become British in their actions, thoughts and deeds. However, this approach was proving to be unworkable, for obvious reasons, and a move towards integration was beginning to gain momentum. It can be seen therefore, that in 1971 the idea of

multicultural education or anti-racist education, both of which understand that one size does not fit all, was some way off, and it is fair to say that it has not fully been achieved in the current time.

Despite the importance of Coard's work and the excellent legacy it has left, the statistics in Table 9.2 demonstrate quite clearly that there is still much to be achieved in terms of equality of opportunity. Many of the issues which Coard highlighted are still an issue within the school system and in 2005 his work was included in a new volume *Tell It Like It Is: How Our Schools Fail Black Children*, in which the message as Mirza puts it, 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' (Mirza 2005: 111) is clear throughout. Still, Black children are far more likely to be excluded from school and are more frequently educated in Pupil Referral Units which Mirza likens to the special units Coard discussed nearly 40 years ago (Mirza 2005:113). The high levels of exclusion of Black children demonstrate that, despite a range of legislation, the experience of those children within the school system is not a particularly successful one. As Abbot (2005: 108) points out, when Black children enter primary school, their ability levels are similar to all other children; however, even at the Foundation Stage (end of reception class), they have fallen behind and as they progress through the system that gap in achievement widens at every stage.

The consensus of opinion as to why this is generally falls into two camps; first, a biased and unsuitable system staffed by teachers who hold stereotypical views for reasons similar to those that Coard outlined; second, an anti-school culture among Black children, in particular, boys. It is clear of course that the two elements are linked and each supports the other and the main debate is which issue causes the other. Regardless of this, the problems that Black boys face within education should not be underestimated and it is a major challenge facing the modern system of education. As Abbot (2005) further suggests, despite the seriousness of the situation, it is one that is not discussed often enough. 'You can discuss the underachievement of boys, but not how the system fails boys' (Abbot 2005: 109). The DfES point out that teacher assessments at Key Stages 2 and 3 underestimate the eventual performance of pupils from ethnic minority groups:

> Whilst all ethnic groups are less likely to achieve the expected level in the teacher assessment than in the test in English at Key Stages 2 and 3, there are larger than average differences between English teacher assessment and test results for Asian and Black pupils and for pupils for whom English is an additional language.

(DfES 2006b: 6)

Sewell (1997) demonstrates how the views of teachers and the structure of the system can negatively impact upon the educational experiences of Black boys. It is important to note that Sewell was not suggesting that teachers or indeed the schools are openly racist but more that they themselves are both projects of an over-arching society which sees Black boys as threatening and anti-school. Furthermore, the teachers in Sewell's study saw the home environment of those Black boys as unconducive to a successful educational experience. Sewell also commented on the relationship that Black boys had with the school and authority. In many ways, parallels can be drawn

with the work of Willis (1977) which was discussed in Chapter 8. Sewell also found evidence of a counter-culture amongst Black boys. He stated that those children who did 'make it' paid the price of ignoring their peer group, ethnicity and anti-school sub-culture in order to do so. (Sewell 1997: 17).

Social class and education

Through examining the impact of gender and ethnicity upon educational success it is clear that they, by themselves, are not a clear indicator of likely achievement. In each of those varying groups there are students who clearly succeed at high levels and those who fail according to the way in which statistics are recorded. There is, of course, another major social classification to consider whenever we discuss educational attainment and that is the area of social class.

Educational discourses and statistics rarely use the term class, preferring instead to refer to socio-economic status (Hatcher 2004: 131). The most common criterion used to indicate that status in terms of schooling is eligibility for free school meals. While it may seem a mere matter of semantics to refer to socio-economic status rather than class, it does have the effect of changing the emphasis onto the individual and subsequently away from the group. This can at times be problematic for a more detailed discussion as individual success or failure is much easier to explain while still maintaining the illusion of meritocracy than large-scale failure of particular sections of society.

There is clear evidence, however, of a correlation between the socio-economic status of an individual and their likelihood of educational success. Whilst for each of those individuals the reasons for this and the experiences they face will never be exactly the same, it would be disingenuous to suggest that there is not commonality between those reasons and experiences. As such, a deeper understanding of the role that society and the education system play in this inequality must be considered. Many of those elements have been discussed in Chapter 8.

In 2002, 77 per cent of children whose families came from the Higher Professional section of the NS-SEC classifications (see Table 8.1) gained 5 or more A–C grades at GCSE level. In contrast, 64 per cent from the Lower Professional classification did so and the figures fell to 32 per cent for those whose families came from Routine or Other backgrounds (Babb et al. 2004: 12). The same authors also stated that lower socio-economic status was more likely to impact upon educational achievement in the UK than it was in other OECD countries.

The impact of class can also be found in other social indicators such as gender and ethnicity. While one in three children are in families that fall below the poverty line, that figure rises to nearly 70 per cent for Pakistani and Bangladeshi children and 41 per cent for Black Caribbean children (Sarda 2003, cited in Hatcher 2004). As can be ascertained, the relatively low levels of educational success achieved by pupils from those ethnic groups must be considered in terms of their socio-economic status as much as their ethnicity.

The impact of socio-economic status is not a new issue and it has been a matter of concern for a number of years. One of the main problems faced is an apparent

inability to create and maintain solutions to this ongoing and deeply concerning state of affairs. This inability has been demonstrated by successive governments and a range of policies which ultimately have made little impact on the correlation between socio-economic status and academic success. Chapter 2 outlines some of the key policy changes in education over the last century. A number of these changes have been major ones in terms of attempting to narrow the achievement gap by socio-economic status. For example, we have moved away from the tripartite system of education and the selection at age 11 that the Butler Act of 1944 introduced. Through this Act, children were tested at age 11 in the eleven-plus exam and then placed in the school deemed most suitable for them. Those who performed academically well were placed in grammar schools; those who showed a technical or practical ability were meant to be placed in technical schools whilst all others were placed in secondary modern schools which aimed to provide a more general education. In reality, though, those schools were primarily segregated according to class status, thus fostering a tiered system which ensured that class differences were maintained and strengthened within the system. However, the move away from selection at age 11 and towards a more comprehensive system of education has not dramatically alerted the overall situation. Other initiatives such as the Widening Participation agenda within higher education (HE) have also sought to reduce the equality gap. Evidence of uptake of study within HE has demonstrated that those from the lowest socio-economic groups have not taken up the opportunity in HE in sufficient numbers to reduce the gap. In fact, that gap is currently widening. Even though more students from all groups are attending HE, the percentage difference between higher and lower socio-economic groups has widened from 24 per cent in 1991/92 to 31 per cent (DfES 2003). Additionally, the experience of those students entering HE with less suitable cultural capital is causing concern in terms of retention and success rates (Mufti 2006).

The general failure of policy in reducing the gap leads us to consider what are the main reasons for such figures. Hatcher (2004) suggests that current responses which either show that schools need to be pushed and encouraged to close the gap (school improvement agenda) or alternatively that schools themselves can do little to alter a system and society which predetermines success and failure are both incorrect. Hatcher states that it is instead the shaping of working-class culture by a class society which ensures a lack of successful school-based cultural capital amongst those students.

Throughout the chapter we have seen evidence that who you are in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status correlates with the likelihood of academic success in the current education system. We have looked in previous chapters at the history and policy of education together with the curriculum studied and the purpose of education; all of these elements have influenced the current system and it is worth remembering that the system is not organic and instead has developed to meet the needs of society via the political ideologies of the policy-makers.

In considering why a student's background can influence their achievement levels, we need to consider not only what influences that student within the system but also outside of that system within the home, the community and the wider society they engage in.

Parental involvement and the home environment

The impact parents can have on the educational progress of a child has been known for some time. In 1967, the Plowden Report built on a range of research which demonstrated the correlation between parental interest and the educational progress of the child. Nor is the role that parents play in their child's education lost on national government. Through initiatives such as Sure Start, for families with children under 4, and information sources including *The Parents' Magazine* and the DfES website, the government seeks to ensure that as many parents as possible have access to resources that can facilitate them in supporting their children's education. Recent proposals to increase the power of parents have also been included in various educational policies. The qualification levels of a child's parents and their career have proved to be a good indicator of academic success for the child. This has led to suggestions that as those parents have succeeded in the education system and that, furthermore, it has provided them with their current lifestyles, they are more likely to see the value of education and aid their child's development, that in some way they care more about the education of their child. This of course would suggest that the parents of those children who do not perform well have a less developed interest in their child's education. This is not necessarily the case. While it is true that increased involvement correlates with higher levels of success, the issue is more complex than that. The idea that parents from lower socio-economic groups do not have an interest in their child's education is an over-simplified suggestion and evidence from Topping and Wolfendale (1985) is just one of many examples which show that parents of all class groups have an interest in the education of their child. The main difference lies in the ideologies they have around education as a positive or negative force, ideologies which have been shaped by their own experiences. Furthermore, issues of cultural capital and an awareness and knowledge of the system ensure that parents who have previously succeeded in the system are able to navigate their way through its intricacies much more effectively.

Role models and counter-culture

In discussions on the achievement of boys and students from minority ethnic groups, the lack of appropriate role models is often presented as a major cause for concern. Male educational role models in the school, home and community can be conspicuously absent for boys from lower socio-economic groups and in particular Black Caribbean boys. This has a dual effect in that there are few who understand the particular needs of these children who then adopt a counter-culture unsuitable to successful academic performance as evidenced by the work of Sewell (1997) and Willis

(1977). It should be noted that this counter-culture is a response to a system which is not designed to meet their needs as they see little or no evidence of past achievement amongst those they would respect. Much of this is due to increased levels of single, predominately female parents coupled with a lack of male teachers within the primary school. There is also a wider issue of a narrow curriculum which does not promote such role models in a positive manner. As Abbot (2005: 109) states: 'Black boys need men in the classroom. They simply do not see reading or educational attainment as masculine or cool.' Abbot further links this issue to that of White working-class boys. While there are male role models, they rarely come from similar backgrounds to those most at risk in the system.

A narrow curriculum?

Although there are a range of schools and new types of schools are often developed and promoted such as Academies, generally through initiatives such as the National Curriculum and the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies, it is fair to say that there is a one-size-fits-all philosophy in the state education system. As Murphy et al. (2006) state: 'Moreover, the one-size-fits-all aspect of the strategy as a pedagogy to be applied in all classrooms nationally, … does little to take into account the prior experience, background, interests and individuality of both teacher and pupil' (2006: 35).

In Chapter 1, we discussed the narrowing of the standards for teacher training which have led to new teachers not always being aware of or equipped to deal with the differing needs within their classrooms. A continual narrowing of curricula together with enforced pedagogy is unlikely to meet the disparate needs of a multi-cultural, class-driven society.

Labelling theory and the self-fulfilling prophecy

Each of us is influenced by a range of experiences, media images, our upbringing and the capital that has been invested in us over the years. Teachers are no exception. These influences can impact upon the expectations held about varying groups of learners and the individuals that make up those groups. Think back to the Stop, Think and Do activity you were asked to undertake earlier in the chapter (Task 9.1). What do the words you chose suggest about the ways in which we view certain individuals? The concept of labelling is not a new one. Becker (1952) discussed how teachers held a view of the 'ideal pupil', a pupil who would be interested and hard working. In addition, they would be compliant and unproblematic. The problem arises when a child does not fit that narrow and culturally biased viewpoint. The label of problematic, uncooperative, unacademic etc. can be attached to a child and this label is further reinforced by the messages given by those around him. The child then comes to accept and work within this label, making it extremely difficult for them to change that expectation of them. Labels can be attached not only by a child's

behaviour but through the background of the parents, their appearance and their acceptance of the hierarchies within the system.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) demonstrated that lower or higher expectations held about a child will ultimately prove to be correct, not, however, because of any insight into a child but because through reinforcement of a label the child will come to accept that they are naughty, stupid, bright or good. This concept is known as the self-fulfilling prophecy and goes some way to explaining the inequalities in achievement found within the system. Effectively, we imagine that certain children will perform at a higher level and that belief is apparent through our actions and the messages sent to that child. Those messages and actions will ensure that the prophecy becomes reality. Of course this prophecy can be negative as well as positive.

Task 9.2   Stop, think and do

- How were you viewed within education? Were you seen as an 'ideal pupil' or not?
- How did this manifest itself?
- What impact do you believe it had upon you?

Conclusion

As individuals, we belong to certain social classifications based upon our gender, ethnicity and social status. We may strongly believe that we are not defined by them but most evidence would suggest that this is not the case and that all of these aspects make us who we are through a complex socialization process. There is no doubt though that there is a strong correlation between our social characteristics and how likely we are to do well within the education system. The statistical evidence presented in this chapter paints a disturbing picture of a system which fails to adequately meet the needs of large sections of society. For a system to claim to be based upon meritocratic principles, this is deeply concerning.

This chapter and Chapter 8 have sought to explain some of the potential reasons behind such issues. It would be naïve to suggest that there is one reason or that there is a simple solution, because both would be incorrect. However, each of the potential reasons has some validity and a combination of them all goes some way towards an explanation. Awareness is a start but it is solutions that will ultimately make a difference. We must realize that the education system is not fully addressing the needs of all of society and it is this challenge that has to be at the forefront of current and future debates.

Summary

1   Gender, class and ethnicity largely determine the nature of the education that individuals receive. However, we cannot view these social factors in isolation from each other as in combination they can create further issues.

2   These social factors should not be underestimated in terms of their impact upon educational experiences and achievement, and social class, in particular, is a major determinant of an individual's chances of success within the educational environment at all levels.

3   There are a wide range of theories which can help us to understand the situation some of which are internal to the individual but many which are external.

4   An understanding of how these theories combine allows us to analyse the barriers that certain individuals face in education.

5   Ultimately, it is essential that we understand the challenges that individuals face if we are truly to develop an education system that allows each individual to reach their full potential.