

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOLING ON THE DEVELOPMENT
OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Nancy Bell

and

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont

Universities of Geneva and Neuchâtel

Our aim in this article is to explore the school experience from a socio-psychological perspective by examining the interaction between school selection and the image elaborated by the pupil in the school context. We will present the current state of a theoretical framework which we have elaborated in order to try to account for the sometimes striking results of data gathered through questionnaires, interviews and class observations over the last decade, in primary and secondary schools of various Swiss Cantons. The subject which we have undertaken to study has revealed itself to be particularly complicated due to the complexity of the interaction of the various psychological, sociological and ideological processes involved. Thus, such an intricate topic can not be grasped (at least initially) by traditional experimental designs; one of the reasons being the difficulty of obtaining random samples. Keeping sex, social class and school experience constant has proven to be virtually impossible as it does not correspond to the social reality found within the school (there are, for instance, nearly no upper-class children in the lower streams of secondary school of Switzerland).

We have conducted our studies guided by hypotheses drawn from our present understanding of such social psychological processes as: social categorization, causal attribution, intergroup perceptions and social identity. It should be noted that, in its present state, our research would be best described as being in an inductive phase: we have gathered data from hundreds of pupils for which no straightforward explanation can in itself be univocally asserted and whose understanding is not complete. Therefore, when the occasion calls for us to cite data, it will be in illustration of a theoretical analysis that needs further research to validate it.

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I. The context of the study

In many European countries (France, Belgium, Switzerland, etc.), it is quite common to find that as many as fifty percent of their school population arrives, at the end of their compulsory education (around the age of fifteen) with at least one year of retard. This implies that these pupils have been officially categorized as a "failure" at least at one time in their school careers and have most likely felt the stigma of being held back while their peers were promoted to the next grade.

Another large proportion of children (more difficult to estimate) fail to achieve the scholastic level necessary to gain access to more "prestigious" forms of education (University-bound tracks, etc.). It has been frequently argued that repeating a grade is not necessarily considered as a failure and does not automatically entail traumatic consequences for the child. As to selection processes, they have been presented as means to stimulate better students and not as means of defeating the poorest. While this perspective may seem valid to many adults, its validity remains to be verified from the child's perspective.

Analyses of our data seem to repeatedly converge in suggesting that, more often than not, pupils who fail in school tend to present themselves as if they had, for one reason or another, interiorized this failure as an indication of a personal deficit. For example, they cite predominantly personal factors and not external factors (the teacher, school, etc.) as explanations of school failure.

What could be the implications for society of the placement of more than half of its school population in a potential situation of perceived failure? Again, one could argue, from a so-called "adult" (mature) perspective that so-called "real life" is made of successes as well as failures and that schools have no reason to avoid these phenomena. Nevertheless, we lack descriptions of the mechanisms by which such experiences would be of educational value for the large groups of children concerned.

How does the school system account for the failure of so many of its pupils? The school discourse, impregnated by the prevailing ideology tends to emphasize an individualistic interpretation of school insuccess by referring to the pupil's characteristics, such as lack of ability, achievement motivation, interest, attention, or effort. More recently, this discourse has evoked various handicaps considered as resulting from the pupil's environment (usually his family environment), but these handicaps are still perceived as being primarily personal deficits

(rather than relational problems in an intergroup situation or as external factors impeding certain behaviours, etc.). This interpretative schema of the internalization of failure fails to explain the close interrelation existing between social origin and school success often observed by sociologists (cf. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Alexander, Cook & Mc Dill, 1976; Halsey, Heath & Ridge, 1980; Little & Smith, 1971; Boudon, 1974). Let us note here that both the psychological and sociological interpretations of school failure, by their elaboration and exclusive focusing on an input-output model of school processes, too often regard the school as a sort of "black box" which consequently ignores significant variables within the school context.

The individualistic perspective of school failure leaves the participants (pupils as well as teachers and parents) largely deprived of any means of positive reaction or remediation. In such a perspective, the failing student can, at the very most, "try harder" to realize the potential of his individual capacities (intelligence, aptitudes, etc.) since they are perceived as basically inherent, static traits and hence modifiable only within a limited scope. Because the prevalent social representation of intelligence is that of an individual, inherent trait instead of being seen also as a product of social interaction and of the social situation, other factors external to the student are given little weight in the remediation of school failure.

Recent developments in child psychology have attempted to go beyond this rather simplistic interpretation of failure. From a developmental perspective, the individual's abilities are now perceived as acquired characteristics. This approach admits the possibility of overcoming specific difficulties by adequate training. Thus, it gives educators an active role in the pupil's acquisition of knowledge and introduces a certain dynamic into the educational process. In this perspective, the responsibility of failure can either fall on the teacher's shoulders, to whom is attributed the lack of sufficient training of the child, or, once again, to the pupil himself who failed to benefit from such training. In the later case, this interpretation can have double consequences: the deeper interiorization of failure, given the fact that the child has failed despite the pedagogical support offered to him (compensatory education, special tutoring, therapeutic interventions, etc.) and, by the same and paradoxically, the minimization of the responsibility of the school for the failure of its pupils (having taken measures to prevent or remediate it).

Similar interpretations can be applied to the pheno-

menon of school selection: in Swiss schools, the placement of pupils in lower-ability classes is done on the basis of test scores and school performance, thereby reinforcing the idea that the pupil's lack of ability prevented him from achieving what, in principle, every pupil had the "equal chance" to attain. This notion of inferiority and difference is then reinforced again by the segregation of students into a hierarchical organization of distinct class-groups with different curricula, educational goals and professional orientations (an organization which pupils, even before attending secondary school, seem to be well aware of). Thus, what the school would classify as differentiated placement of pupils into classes adapted to their individual capacities is often interpreted as failure in the eyes of its pupils.

In their day-to-day functioning, schools rarely make explicit the political, institutional, sociological and economical choices underlying their selection processes. This silence concerning such macroprocesses could also be one of the mechanisms leading to the interiorization of failure by the pupil due to his ignorance of such factors. There appears to be a complex interplay between the failing pupil's explanation of his insuccess, his strategies of "psychological survival" within the school context and the causal schemas available to him in this milieu. How will the child use the various psychological explanations which are salient in the school context? Will he be able to elaborate a strategy of maintenance of positive self-regard in such a situation? By what processes?

The social psychological processes associated with school selection and failure necessarily vary according to context and situation. Our study here is an attempt to identify some of these socio-psychological mechanisms. As we have not yet elaborated a method that would permit us to measure their weight nor their normality, we will simply describe their existence here. We will rely on observations drawn from a series of studies (Doise, Meyer & Perret-Clermont, 1976; Vouilloz, 1981; Bell, Perret-Clermont & Baker in press) but we are well aware of the need for further research. It is evident that the socio-psychological impact of school selection and failure on pupil's representation of self is complex. It seems to vary according to the social insertion of the pupil. Failure does not mean the same thing for a working class child or a middle-class child, nor for pupils in different ability classes. It does not have the same consequences for all pupils nor does the school treat all failing children equally. Our thesis is that the understanding of the consequences of the institutional and socialization processes within educational settings could be greatly enhanced by studying the social psy-

chological processes; that is, not by studying children in general or pupil-teacher or child-parent interactions, but by taking into consideration the social position of the pupil within the school context.

II. Observations

a. Self-presentation in Primary School

Let us first look at the impact of the pupil's school experience on his self-concept in primary school. It would seem evident that the child's early years of socialization in the educational institution have a non-negligible effect on the perception of himself within his social environment which he will develop and modulate during his scholastic career.

Using a modified version of the classical Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954), we asked 418 second, fourth and sixth graders in four schools in two Swiss Cantons to describe themselves in seven statements and to evaluate each statement by marking it with a '+' if it was "something they liked" (e.g., "I am blond (+)"), or with a '-' if it was something they did not like (e.g., "I am shy (-)"). If they were not sure how to evaluate their statement, they were asked to mark it with a '?' (e.g., "I am rather tall (?)").

We have found interesting differences between the self-presentations of second and fourth graders, the most striking being a general diminution of positive self-evaluation (i.e., the percentage of responses coded with a '+' by subjects) and a corresponding augmentation of negativity (i.e., the percentage of responses coded with a '-'). We have also observed an increase with age of the use of '?' to qualify the value of the self-characteristic cited by the pupil.

How could these changes be explained? Could they simply be indications of natural developmental trends? It seems evident to us that these changes do not take place in a social vacuum, being rather the product of a complex and intricate interaction between psychological, social, and experiential factors. Thus, one part of the observed increase in negativity could be seen as a result of the school experience of the child. Indeed, we have observed an augmentation of negativity in school-related content of pupils' statements as they progress through school (e.g., "I am in the second grade (+)" compared to "I am in the fourth grade (-)"). It would seem that, as pupils become increasingly socialized into the school system, their ini-

tial "optimism" is modified by a certain scepticism or uncertainty concerning themselves in the school context. It is with this uncertainty that pupils at the end of primary school face the transition to secondary school where they will encounter the selective process of "streaming".

b. In-group and out-group perception in Secondary School

We will now consider the secondary school by looking at some effects of the socialization of its student body into the organizational system of stratified class-groups. The school's channeling of pupils into distinct groups (known by such labels as "ability groups", "streams", "tracks", "levels", "sections", etc.) not only creates very different academic experiences (Rosenbaum, 1975) but also presents to its member-pupils different social environments (Woods, 1976; Taylor, 1978).

The school structure imposes a certain "social identity" on its pupils by the allocation of a precise position in a clearly defined group hierarchy. The student's group status is non-negotiable. Group entry and exit are externally determined. Thus, these class-groups can be considered as a form of reference group.

Reference groups fulfill the important function of providing group perspectives to its members (Shibutani, 1955). We can then expect that the institutional differentiation of groups of students will influence the perceptions of its members. If pupils are placed in such distinct groups, it is quite probable that they will use (at least in some circumstances) their membership group as a point of reference in their interpretations of their school experience.

Social groups are always defined in relation to other groups: "The characteristics of one's own group... only acquire meaning in relation to perceived differences from other groups... the definition of a group only has meaning by rapport to other groups" (Tajfel, 1973). It follows that the school's separation of students into different groups is not devoid of social meaning as each group possesses a specific status in the social structure of the school organization. Pre-existing social and economic inequalities seem to justify the introduction of institutional inequalities which, in turn, seems to somehow act as a justification of the creation (or reproduction) of a social hierarchy. Hence a certain number of pupils, by the very fact of their group membership in a particular group-class, find themselves in a disadvantaged position in the school's social structure. If it is true that the student's group status acts as an important mediator in his elaboration of his

self-perception, how will a devalorized status affect the social identity and self-image of its members?

In a study conducted by M.F. Vouilloz (1981), 313 seventh and eighth graders divided into an University-bound track (known as "section A") and a track leading to apprenticeships and pre-professional training ("section B") were asked to describe themselves as a group as well as describe the other section using a modified Twenty Statement Test. Half the subjects were first asked to describe themselves in seven statements, evaluating them with a '+', '-' or 'o' (indicating a neutral evaluation) and then were asked (without forewarning) to describe the other section in seven statements. The remaining half of the experimental population followed the same procedure but in the reverse order.

It was found that pupils belonging to section A evaluated their own statements relating to their school experience more positively than pupils of section B (e.g., "We get better grades (+)"), adopting the criteria defined and valorized by the educational institution. Conversely, section B evaluated themselves more negatively on school-related content. This observed tendency increased when section B pupils had to present themselves after having described the more "prestigious" section A. This section was also observed to evaluate statements concerning extra-curricular activities more positively than the section A (e.g., "We are sportive (+)"). This result can be interpreted as indicating that, when faced with a devalorization on an academic level, the pupils of the lower stream were forced to search for a positive evaluation of their social identity by referring to criteria outside the school context. This evocation of an exterior social dimension could be seen as an attempt at social re-definition by the construction of a "marginal" identity in relation to the institutional frame of reference. However, this attempt was not enough to compensate for the impact of the section B's inferior status as the pupils of this sections used an over-all higher percentage of '-' when describing themselves. This tendency toward negative in-group evaluation augmented over time (and school experience) as students seem to accept their devalorized status within the school structure.

c. Pupils' explanations of their school status at the end of compulsory education

Focusing on the end of the student's trajectory in the school system, we will now present several observations drawn from three researches aimed at exploring the social representations elaborated by pupils of their scholastic

and social world.

In the first study (Doise, Meyer & Perret-Clermont, 1976), a questionnaire was administered to 190 ninth grade students who were divided into six sections: the "classique" and "scientifique" sections (both leading to higher education), the "moderne" section (which, while grouped together with the "classique and "scientifique" sections, has limited access to higher education), and the pre-professional section (leading directly to apprenticeships and professional training). One of the questions aimed at ascertaining the pupils' perceptions of the causality of school placement asked "Who decides which section the pupil must follow?" (with subjects having to choose between such items as "the teacher", "parents", "the pupil himself", etc.). Pupils' responses varied significantly according to section with the "classique" and "scientifique" sections citing more often "the pupil" or "parents" as causal agents of school placement which could be said to be indicative of a more individualistic perspective. The pupils in the pre-professional section were almost the only ones to choose the item "the administration", reflecting a more institutional approach to the process of school placement. A similar observation is made regarding pupils' definitions of intelligence (in response to the open-ended question: "What is an intelligent person?") where reference to the school was made most often by the pre-professional pupils who, by their inferior position in the school hierarchy, were not able to ignore the powerful sanction of the school. They tended, more often than other pupils, to give answers such as "An intelligent person is someone who succeeds in school".

Do these observed differences in the perception of school placement also hold true for pupils' explanations of their own scholastic position? In a second questionnaire study in another Canton, 110 ninth graders divided into six sections ("classique", "scientifique", "moderne" and three pre-professional sections) (Bell, Perret-Clermont & Baker, in press), subjects were asked the yes-no question: "Did you chose the section in which you find yourself in ninth grade?". We found that the self-attribution of section choice (i.e., a "yes" response) varied significantly in function of the status of the pupils section with the higher status sections attributing to themselves the choice of their section in a higher percentage than the lower status sections. This result suggests that those students who occupy a more prestigious position in the school structure perceive themselves as more autonomous (seeing themselves as causal agents) whereas the lower status pupils are more inclined to admit the existence of external contingencies imposed upon them.

In the third questionnaire study, 124 ninth graders were asked to respond to the open-ended question "Why are you in this section?". Their explanations corroborated the tendencies observed in the two above-mentioned researches as to the differences found between sections in their causal attributions of their section membership. While over half of the pupils in the University-bound section cited their own interests or preferences (e.g., "because I like math") as a principle factor in their school placement, very few pupils in the pre-professional sections did so. The University-bound students were also the only ones to mention their professional future plans as a criterium for section choice (e.g., "because I would have more possibilities in choosing a future profession").

We could hypothesize that the placement of the pupil in a particular section could be interpreted by him as an indication of his intellectual capacities and thus the status of his section could act as a valorization or devalorization of these capacities depending upon its position in the school hierarchy. We find evidence for this supposition in the observation that the students in the higher status sections were the only ones to make a positive reference to their cognitive aptitudes in their explanations of the causality of their school position (e.g., "because I have a facility for languages"). It is interesting to note that negative reference to intellectual capacities was made almost exclusively by pupils in the "moderne" section (e.g., "because I'm not capable of going higher due to my mediocrity in French and my poor memory"). It is almost as if these pupils, by the fact of their section's close proximity to other higher status sections, are led to compare themselves to these sections and have come to perceive themselves as essentially lacking those qualities that serve to justify their peers' higher status.

Concerning the perceived importance of failure in the pupil's scholastic career, we find that almost half of the students in the "moderne" section refer to their scholastic failure or difficulties as being one of the primary causes of their present position (e.g., "because I didn't have enough points (in the entrance examinations given in fifth grade) to go into "classique" or "scientifique"").

Before concluding this article, it seems important to us to point out that the pupil's school status has repercussions on other social perceptions apart from the self-image. In the first questionnaire study cited above, subjects were asked to resolve several syllogisms having similar logical premises but containing different content. It was found that pupils in the lower status sections had less difficulty in solving syllogisms involving content with an

immediate relevance (for example, school related content) than abstract syllogisms.

When the same subjects were asked to respond to an open-ended question concerning their social environment ("Give examples of things that belong to you"), it was observed that the pre-professional sections cited more concrete examples (such as "my bicycle", "my stereo") while the University-bound sections had the tendency to refer to objects on a more philosophical level (such as "my life", "my ideas"). Concerning collective property ("Give examples of things that belong to everyone"), we found that students of higher status sections referred more often to abstract concepts (such as "nature") whereas the pupils of the lower status sections could be said to have a more tangible conception of collective property, citing such items as "buses", "streets", etc. These results could be interpreted as indications of differences in students' perceptions of their social reality: those pupils who belong to lower status sections tend to refer to a more immediate perception or description of their social universe while the higher status students introduce an ideological re-interpretation of this same reality.

III. Conclusion

We have tried to show by the studies reported above that there exists a connection between the child's school experience and his perceptions of his self and his social world. As the child progresses through the educational institution, the position that he occupies within that system (as a "good" or "poor" pupil or as a member of a valorized or devalorized group) seems to be reflected in the development of his self-presentation. We have observed that a pupil who holds a subordinate status in the school hierarchy will most likely encounter difficulties in maintaining a presentation of positive self-evaluation in this context and behave as if he had interiorized his scholastic inferiority.

However, an alternative interpretation of this observed phenomenon would be to look upon the lower status pupils' acceptance of the school's definition of their position as a protective conservative strategy rather than a simple product of school socialization (cf. Woods, 1980). It could be that inferior status pupils opt to present the definition of their role as offered by the school as a form of negotiation instead of taking the risk of counter-dicting and directly confronting the official school ideology. Paradoxically, this strategy could be seen as an attempt (in certain circumstances) to preserve self-identity and limit self-responsability.

It is apparent to us that more research is needed exploring the mechanisms by which the pupil "makes sense" of his school experience in terms of his own self-identity. The long term consequences of this interpreting activity of self and school life would also be worth examining in detail as well as the consequences to self-presentation and social perception outside the school.

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