

The socio-psychological impact of school selection and failure

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I. The problem

It is our aim in this article 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. By this undertaking, our intention is to call attention to some of the important social and psychological consequences of school selection and school failure in our present-day educational systems.

In many European countries (e.g. France, Belgium, Switzerland), it is quite common to find that as many as 50 percent of the school population arrives at the end of their compulsory education (around the age of 15) with at least one year of retard. This implies that these pupils have been officially categorized as a 'failure' 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) fails 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.

Our present hypothesis is that, more often than not, pupils who

fail in school tend to internalize this failure due to a number of psychological, social and ideological reasons, and interpret it as an indicator of a personal deficit. The socialization of such a large proportion of pupils to the status of 'failure' can lead to individual and social-value crisis and conflict during late adolescence and adulthood. What are the implications for society of the placement of more than half its school population in such a situation? Again one could argue, from an 'adult' perspective, that 'real life' is made of successes as well as failures and that schools have no reason to avoid these phenomena. However, this type of reasoning does not enlighten us as to the educational value of the experience of failing at school.

How does the school system account for the failure of so many of its pupils? The school discourse, impregnated by a certain ideology, tends to emphasize an individualistic interpretation of school lack of success by referring to the pupil's characteristics, such as lack of ability, achievement motivation, interest, attention, effort, or to various personal handicaps resulting from his family environment. However, this interpretative schema fails to explain the close interrelation existing between social origin and school success often observed by sociologists (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Alexander et al., 1978; Halsey et al., 1980; Little and Smith 1971; Boudon 1974).¹

The individualistic perspective leaves the participants (pupils as well as teachers and parents) completely deprived of any means of positive reaction or remedy. 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.

Recent developments in child psychology have attempted to go beyond this rather simplistic interpretation of school 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. By this approach, the responsibility for 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 this training. In the latter case, this

perspective can have double consequences: the deeper internalization 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 token, the minimization of the responsibility of the school for the failure of its pupils (having taken measures to prevent or to rectify it).

Similar interpretations can be applied to the phenomenon of school selection: the pupil is placed in lower ability classes on the basis of test scores and school performance, thereby creating the idea that his lack of ability prevented him from achieving what, in principle, every pupil had an equal chance to attain. This notion of inferiority and difference is then reinforced by the segregation of students into an hierarchical organization of distinct class-groups with different curricula, educational goals and professional orientations. 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 tend to forget the political, institutional, sociological and economic choices underlying their selection processes, which could also lead to an internalization of failure by the pupil due to his ignorance of these mechanisms. However, there appears to be a complex interplay between the failing pupil's explanation of his lack of success, his strategies of 'psychological survival' within the school context and the causal schemas available to him in this milieu. It remains to be seen how the child will use the various psychological explanations that are salient in the school context and if he can elaborate a strategy of maintenance of positive self-regard in such a situation.

The social psychological processes associated with school selection and failure necessarily vary according to context and situation. Our study here is not a sociological survey but rather an investigation designed to identify some of these socio-psychological mechanisms. This qualitative method will not permit us to measure their weight or their normality but simply to describe their existence. We will present some observations drawn from a series of studies (Doise et al., 1976; Vouilloz, 1981; Deschamps et al., 1982; Doise, 1983; Bell et al., in press) undertaken during the past ten years which, we hope, will point to the need to further examine the socio-psychological impact of school selection and failure and stimulate research for a better understanding of the consequences

of these institutional processes.

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 an educational institution have a considerable effect on his perception of himself within his social environment which he will develop and moderate during his academic career.

Using a modified version of the classical Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954), we² asked 418 second, fourth and sixth graders in four schools in two Swiss cantons (counties) 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 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 the 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 can these changes be explained? Are they simply 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. It would seem then that the school experience of the child contributes to the elaboration of his identity during childhood. But just how does the child perceive this experience and incorporate it into his self-presentation? If we look at the responses that explicitly mention school-related content, we can begin to formulate an idea of the pupils' evaluation of their schooling. Our data show a decrease in subjects' positive evaluation of school-related statements as they

progress through school, accompanied by an increase in questions posed in regard to 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 initial 'optimism' is modified by a certain scepticism or uncertainty concerning themselves in the school context which is, in turn, reflected in their self-concept. 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 would now like to 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 channelling of its 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, 1980).

It is in this context that the concept of 'social identity' can contribute to the understanding of the impact of schooling on the pupil's self-concept. Social identity can be considered as part of the subjective reality in which the individual defines himself in his relations with society (Taboada-Leonetti, 1981) and which is elaborated in the articulation and interaction between the individual and social structures (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Tajfel and Turner, 1978). Social identity is related to the knowledge that the individual has of his membership of social groups and the evaluative and affective significance of this membership (Tajfel, 1973). A membership group can serve as a point of reference in making comparisons and contrasts, especially in forming judgements about oneself (Shibutani, 1955). Thus 'reference groups' play an important role in the formation of the self-concept by providing a framework for self-evaluation. Reference groups also fulfil the important function of providing group perspectives to which group members will refer in their perceptions and judgements.

Applying this concept to the school context, we could expect that the institutional differentiation of groups of students will influence the perceptions of its members. If pupils are placed in distinct

groups, it is probable that they will use their membership group as a point of reference in their interpretations of the school experience.

It should be noted here that social groups are always defined in relation to other groups: 'The characteristics of one's own group . . . only acquired 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 would follow 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. The introduction of institutional inequalities (above and beyond the pre-existing socio-economic inequalities) is accompanied by a certain moral and social significance which acts as a justification of the creation of a social hierarchy. Hence a certain number of pupils, by the very fact of their group membership in a particular stream or track, 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-concept, how will a devalued status affect the social identity and self-perception of its members?

In a study conducted by Vouilloz (1981), 313 seventh and eighth graders divided into a university-bound track (known as 'section A') and a track leading to apprenticeships and pre-professional training ('section B') were asked to present themselves as a group as well as to 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 '0' (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 inverse procedure.

It was found that pupils belonging to section A evaluated items relating to school more positively than pupils in section B (e.g. 'We get better grades (+)'), adopting the criteria defined and valued by the educational institution. Conversely section B evaluated themselves more negatively on school-related content. This observed tendency increased when subjects had to present themselves after having described the more prestigious section A. This section was also observed to evaluate items concerning extra-curricular activities more positively than those in section A (e.g. 'We like sport (+)'). This finding can be interpreted as indicating

that, when faced with a devaluation 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 redefinition 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 section B's inferior status as the pupils of this section used an overall higher percentage of '-' when describing themselves. This tendency toward negative in-group evaluation augmented over time (and school experience) as students seemed to accept their devalued 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 research studies aimed at exploring the perceptions (or 'social representations') elaborated by pupils of their academic and social world.

In the first study (Doise et al., 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?' (subjects having to choose between such items as 'the teacher', 'parents', 'the pupil himself', etc.). Their 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

positive 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.

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 of 110 ninth graders divided into six sections ('classique', 'scientifique', 'moderne' and three pre-professional sections) (Bell et al., in press), subjects were asked the yes/no question 'Did you choose the section in which you find yourself in ninth grade?' We found that the self-attribution of section choice (i.e. a 'yes' response) also varied significantly according to 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 pre-professional 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,³ 124 ninth graders (divided into 'classique', 'scientifique', 'moderne' and pre-professional sections) 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 sections cited their own interests or preferences (e.g. 'because I like maths') as a principal causal factor in their school placement, very few pupils in the pre-professional sections do so. The university-bound students were also the only ones to mention their future professional plans as a criterion 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 valuation or devaluation 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 is made almost exclusively by pupils in the 'modern' 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 by the fact of this section's close proximity to the other higher status sections, its members are led to compare themselves to these sections and have come to perceive themselves as essentially lacking those qualities that 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 evidently has repercussions on other social perceptions apart from the self-image. In the first questionnaire study cited above (Doise et al., 1976), subjects were asked to resolve several syllogisms having similar logical premises but different content. It was found that the 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 (e.g. 'my life', 'my ideas'). Concerning collective property ('Give examples of things that belong to everyone'), we found that students of more prestigious sections referred more often to abstract concepts (such as 'nature') whereas the students 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 of their social

universe while the higher status students introduce an ideological reinterpretation of this same reality.

III. Conclusion

We have tried to show by the studies reported above that the child's school experience is closely linked to his perceptions of himself 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 valued or devalued group) will become an influential element in the development of his self-presentation, having potential long-term consequences given the idea that, 'as the individual is social, identities are interiorized, becoming inevitable structures of the individual's consciousness' (Berger, 1971). Thus, as we have seen, the pupil who holds a subordinate status in the school hierarchy will encounter difficulties in maintaining a presentation of a positive self-evaluation in this context, being led to internalize 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 accept the definition of their role as offered by the school as a form of negotiation instead of taking the risk of contradicting and directly confronting the official school ideology. This strategy of 'conformism' could also have consequences for self-presentation and social perception beyond the world of the school.

Throughout this article we have indicated the existence of the relation between school status and the pupil's self-image which is made up of a complexity of factors in a complicated interplay. It is apparent to us that more research is needed to explore the mechanisms by which the pupil 'makes sense' of his school experiences in terms of his own self-identity.

Notes

1. 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.
2. With the help of Max Viale, student in the University of Neuchâtel.

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