

Cultural Deprivation and Compensatory Education

Cultural deprivation theory is not now so significant in theory as it once was, but it still justifies some thought. It begins with the understanding that working class people have a different culture from middle class people. It then notes that working class people do less well in education. Some theorists then make a causative link between the two ideas and suggest that working class people do less well because their culture is somehow inferior.

This is a political view as it so critical of working class culture. It points out that the working class does less well and then moves on to blame the victims for their own failure. However, there is an element of attractive common sense appeal to the idea. There are two questions to be considered here:

- Is there a culture or cycle of disadvantage?
- Is the culture of working class people different or deficient?

Melvin Kohn tested families in Washington DC in the 1940s and 50s and discovered that there are class differences in culture. He described middle class parents as desiring independence of mind and working class parents as valuing obedience. **John and Elizabeth Newson** (1963) in Britain made similar findings in their study of families in Nottingham. They further claimed that poverty led to irritability among mothers.

Oscar Lewis in the late 1950s introduced the idea of the **culture of poverty**. He claimed that poor people developed distinct sub-cultural values to enable them to survive poverty, but which disadvantaged children in school. At an individual level, people grow to feel helpless and disempowered to change their circumstances. By the age of six or seven, children have absorbed the values of their culture and cannot take advantage of opportunities that may occur. This idea is linked with the commonly held view of the **cycle of poverty**.

Hints and tips

If you consider whether there is a culture of failure, consider also whether a culture of success may have a distinctive value system, which is in some way 'better'!

The level of the debate was raised by growing awareness of the theorising of the Marxist, **Pierre Bourdieu** describes a situation where cultural knowledge reflects the interests and concerns of the dominant classes. This, he describes as cultural capital. Bourdieu discusses in detail a whole variety of behaviours, which form part of a **habitus** or preferred mode of thinking, acting and perceiving. Those individuals who possess the dominant culture are recognised in schools, and supported by their teachers who possess the same cultural background.

Similar to this is C Wright-Mills concept of **elite self-recruitment**. Members of the highest sectors of society can prevent educational failure and protect their interests and those of their children by sending their children to the best public schools. This allows them the chance to acquire the social skills and background to rise to the best and most powerful positions.

Compensatory Education – Policy and Debates

In the USA in 1964, **President Johnson** opened the '**War on Poverty**' because people were shocked to discover that 50% of men called for military service were educationally or physically unfit as a result of poor homes. The underlying philosophy of his policy was that poverty could be cured through education in the correct attitudes and values for success. The poorest people are '**culturally deprived**' and trapped in a '**cycle of poverty**'.

Compensatory education could offer very young poor children some of the educational advantages of the richer child and change their attitudes and values. It was claimed that through education programmes, children's **IQs** could be raised by 20 points! The most comprehensive programme was **Head Start**. It involved health care, social services, and education. Parental involvement was a key component, so parents and children were taught together.

By 1970, Project Head Start was being deemed a failure because it was not raising IQ levels and subsequent educational standards. This criticism ignored the wider aims of re-socialising children and communities. The projects initiated under Head Start have begun to change and there are funding problems. Liberal educationalists rate it very highly as a scheme.

In Britain, the ideas of Head Start came later in the decade. **A.H. Halsey** asked for positive discrimination for schools in poorer (deprived) areas. Geographical areas were designated **Educational Priority Areas** and teachers were paid more to work in E.P.A. schools. Local Educational Authorities will still consider social need as a reasonable argument when deciding where to allocate funding for nursery schools.

The thinking was that good schools in poor areas could compensate for 'bad' socialisation and 'bad' parenting. **Basil Bernstein** criticised the idea of compensatory education by suggesting that schools reflect inequalities in society. He wanted the emphasis changed from under-fives to the whole education system. **Rutter** in **15000 hours** suggested that schools vary in quality, some schools are successful because they have a better **ethos** than others.

The push for improving conditions in poorer areas came from thinkers with a Marxist or socialist philosophy. This type of thought was unfashionable in educational administration after the change in government in 1979 to **Conservatism** and the **New Right**. The criticism was that there were few obvious changes as a result of the money that was spent in poor areas. The new philosophy was not 'throw money at it' but to obtain better value from that money. Market forces should be used in the provision of education services to make the poorer schools come up to the standards of the best schools.

Compensatory education as an issue is probably dead. The debate has nevertheless fuelled much current thinking in education and has had an impact on current educational organisation in the UK.

Questions

1. Which underlying philosophies did the notion of compensatory education draw on? (knowledge)
2. Sociologically evaluate the notion that schooling can compensate children for deprivation experienced in their early lives. (evaluation)
3. Sociologically assess the claims that were made that compensatory education could 'cure poverty'. (evaluation)