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# Differentiation, Inequality and the Educational Process

## Introduction

The relationship between educational and social inequalities and opportunities is one of the most fundamental issues in the sociology of education, uniting its core theoretical concerns and research interests and its broader uses in public debate and policy making. But education is not simple. It is doing different things in different ways for different groups, and is influenced by a diversity of forces. Inevitably, many of these will be contradictory: e.g. the demand that education promote equality of opportunity may conflict (for some) with the need to preserve standards of academic excellence, or the value placed by liberal educators on developing the ‘whole person’ with the demand by others that education meet the needs of the economy. This chapter explores a set of problems associated with educational and social differentiation and the various ways in which they have been accounted for across a range of perspectives. The focus is upon factors associated with the education system itself and with educational processes.

There are obvious reasons why sociologists, educators, policy-makers and others should see these things as being of primary concern – it is within schools that the work of education gets done. How we organize the school system determines not only the quality of children’s educational lives, but also influences those broader objectives sought through education. Another reason why educational structures and processes are given primacy is that they are open to direct intervention by policy-makers and educationalists. It is harder to affect external relations and factors such as those between education and the labour market or family. However, the conclusion reached in this chapter is that the explanatory scope of school-related factors alone is limited, and that they need to be located within a wider social framework if we are to understand more fully how

education works within society. But this carries the possibility that educational change *in itself* might have only limited effect.

Issues of differentiation have become increasingly complex as a result of the multiplication of social differences taken into account with the introduction of gender and ethnicity alongside class. This is associated with a proliferation of explanatory approaches – in the contributions of feminism, for instance (Measor and Sikes 1997). Hence, it is necessary to look at *what* needs explaining and *how* within a variety of approaches applied to different facets of educational and social differentiation. This complexity has been further complicated by post-modern approaches that reject broad categories such as class and gender in favour of more nuanced and multidimensional models of self, identity and difference (Bradley 1996). The purpose of this chapter is to review the complex range of explanatory issues faced by the sociology of education and its various perspectives.

## The Problems to be Explained

Historically, sociology of education and educational policy have addressed the differences between *classes*, the *sexes* and *ethnic groups*. As Halsey says, ‘Class, gender and ethnicity are now the three giants in the path of aspirations towards equity’ (1997: 638). Education is treated as the principle means of creating a more equal society (for some this means equality of opportunity to become unequal, but for others it is achieving greater equity in outcomes). The ideal is that social rewards should be distributed on the basis of merit rather than inherited, and undeserved, social advantages and disadvantages. Class, gender and ethnic inequalities are treated as the obstacles that education has to tackle in order to achieve justice in the distribution of opportunities and rewards. Equality of opportunity in education is seen to be the means of achieving equality in society. However, education itself is also seen by ‘critical’ theorists as being implicated in the reproduction of social inequalities. Consequently, much of the work of sociology of education has been concerned with identifying such obstructive factors and suggesting progressive alternatives.

To illustrate the issues here, Collins et al. present the view that

children from different backgrounds achieve different outcomes from school *because they do not, in fact, receive the same schooling* . . . In general, they receive a form of schooling that steers them towards the backgrounds they come from – be they socio-economically advantaged or disadvantaged. Again, while the paths they take may be construed as a matter of choice, the systematic dimensions of the outcome point to the strong probability that other factors are at work. (C. Collins et al. 2000: 135)

This contains the basic elements and assumptions that tend to underpin approaches to the analysis of schooling and differentiation.

- 1 Differential educational outcomes are defined in terms of socio-economic *advantages and disadvantages* between groups.
- 2 There is a judgement concerning the *existential status* of the choices that pupils make relative to these outcomes: for some they are a matter of choice, but for others the result of factors acting upon them.
- 3 It is suggested that these outcomes are *actively constructed* by different forms of schooling.
- 4 Consequently, there is an assumption concerning the *effectivity* of educational processes associated with these different forms of schooling ('effectivity' refers to the range of effects a thing has the capacity to produce by virtue of its being the kind of thing it is regardless of which ones actually are produced or how effective they are in any particular circumstance).
- 5 Then, finally, there is the implicit possibility that changing the forms of schooling will change their effects and, consequently, the outcomes.

There are a number of complex issues associated with each of these propositions and assumptions.

### Differences and inequalities, problems and explanations

Although the phenomenon of social differentiation is fundamental to the sociology of education, the notion of 'difference' is not straightforward, and it is necessary to distinguish between various senses of the term. In the first, and, perhaps, most obvious sense, difference can be taken as referring to systematic *mean* differences in outcomes for social groups. However, the term 'difference' has another sense within post-modernist discourse. Here it has to do with the constitutive features of identities and the subjectivities of self, membership and heritage. Underpinning this sense of 'difference' are post-structuralist and deconstructionist semiotic theories of meaning (S. Mills 1997) in which the sense of self is given relationally through contrasts with all those *others* who I am not (e.g. 'maleness' is understood as being *not* female: female is Other). In a general manner, the difference between these two notions of difference is that whereas the first is defined by 'objective' criteria determined by sociologists for their own purposes, the second is more 'subjective' and is constructed discursively through how individuals feel about their identities and how groups want to be recognized by others. How schools respond to and respect these subjective differences are for many researchers a core question. Current post-structuralist approaches follow on from earlier ones grounded in symbolic-interactionism in arguing that differential outcomes reflect the

degrees to which different groups feel the school to be relevant to and to value their identity, experience and heritage.

Thirdly, it is important to establish an initial sense of the distinction between a ‘difference’ and an ‘inequality’. It is often the case in the sociology of education that these two are conflated; yet, it cannot be taken for granted that a difference is automatically an inequality – this must be established rather than assumed. This distinction has implications for what is taken to be a ‘problem’ in the sociology of education.

The underlying value and rationality assumptions involved in defining a difference as an inequality have ramifications for what is defined as a ‘problem’ (inequality *is* a problem, difference is *not*) and what counts as an explanation (identifying forces acting on people that create inequalities). Basically, the definition of what constitutes a *problem* relies upon a contrast between the actual pattern of social differentiation in education and an assumed ideal pattern that would emerge if negative influences were eliminated – ‘the random distribution which would result from the “free play of natural faculties”’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 228). Whatever might be the case philosophically, it is impossible to distinguish between choices and inequalities in any meaningful substantive sense. The existence of enduring systematic differences between groups can be taken as *suggesting* forces at work that constrain people to act in particular ways. The issue of choice has to be located within contextual conditions that may constrain the choices that people can effectively make. We can ‘freely’ make choices that disadvantage us (see Ogbu 1997: 770)! In part, sociological explanation has to do with making visible the contextual conditions that render apparently irrational choices intelligible – in the way, for instance, that Paul Willis in his classic study *Learning to Labour* (1977) answered the question, ‘Why do working class kids get working class jobs?’ (see chapter 4).

### *Difference, explanation and social change*

Although, historically, class formed the primary focus of analysis and concern, some argue that we now live in a post-modern world in which class is less significant than other aspects of identity, such as subcultural membership, ethnicity or sexual orientation (Hartley 1997). What kinds of changes in society over the past fifty years might be attenuating the usefulness of the categories traditionally employed in the study of social stratification and educational differentiation (Westergaard 1995: part 3; Brown and Lauder 2001)?

- **Changes in the nature of work:** the effectiveness of class as a concept depended on stable, hierarchical occupational structures with clear divisions between manual and non-manual and administrative and executive strata. This type of ‘Fordist’ occupational system, based in manufacturing, has largely given way to a ‘post-Fordist’ system based

in service industries and exhibiting a far more fragmented system of 'flexible' working arrangements with widely differing conditions of service, job security and possibilities of career development. Individuals are expected to be multi-skilled rather than specialized and be prepared to regularly change jobs, retrain and update their skills. Different kinds of divisions become significant, such as that between core and peripheral workers, and class loses its salience as an organizing principle in working and social life and in the construction of identity.

- **Changes in family structures:** Fordist production sustained a patriarchal family structure based upon a male bread-winner and a wife and mother who devoted her time to home making and child rearing. This traditional family has now been superseded by a range of family types as a result of increasing divorce rates, changing sexual mores and new attitudes towards states such as single parenthood, cohabitation and homosexuality.
- **Changes in the role of women:** an important aspect of change in the family has been that of the concomitant changes in the roles of women and the impact of feminism. The general trend has been towards the increased independence of women economically and in other areas of their lives. Women experience and expect a much wider range of options than was previously the case (including that of remaining childless – an option being adopted by some 25 per cent).
- **Multiculturalism:** the pluralistic trends described above occurring within indigenous populations are supplemented by other forms of diversity introduced through migration. In the UK, for example, this is represented by the presence of peoples from countries of the old British Empire – mainly from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent – and in the USA by the relative decline in the proportion of those of British and Irish origin and the rising numbers of African-Americans and others, especially those of Hispanic descent.

Taken together, these complex patterns of change are interpreted by post-modernists as a decisive shift towards a new social order, radically discontinuous with what went before, one in which the old categories and social models (or 'meta-narratives') in which they are embedded no longer serve. Others see them as less fundamental (Giddens 1990; Alexander 1995), with essential continuities being preserved. However conceived, such patterns of change present problems for educators in terms of what and how to teach, as well as sociologically, problems to do with what needs explaining and how (Hartley 1997).

### *Class and other differences*

Recognizing the multidimensional character of identity and positioning raises the question: Are some dimensions more fundamental than others? (Lopez and Scott 2000: ch. 5) Is class, as Marxists might argue, more

fundamental than gender or ethnicity? If so, explanation would adopt a *reductionist* form in which ethnic and gender and status differences would ultimately dissolve into class differences. Feminists adopting a *standpoint* perspective, however, hold that gender requires a distinct body of theory and concepts qualitatively different from those of the 'male' theory of class, and that 'feminist method' is different in kind from 'male' method (Bilton et al. 2002: 461–3). For them, theories and methods are *constitutively* gendered and, hence, radically discontinuous and incommensurable.

In defence of the priority of class, John Westergaard (1995) suggests

a difference that sets class inequality apart from both gender and ethnic inequality. This is that, in the public sphere and in general principle alike, the latter two operate in large measure through the former. Inequalities between men and women, between blacks/browns and whites – for that matter between Catholics and Protestants in a Protestant dominated society – come to major expression as inequalities of class; but not vice versa. (Westergaard 1995: 145)

As he points out, 'women experience their social subordination especially – though not only – by way of poor placement in the structure of class' (ibid.). And similarly for blacks. To make this point is not to return to class reductionism (class inequalities and modes of discrimination do not *exhaust* those of gender and race), but to note an important asymmetry in the relation between these inequalities so as to view their relationships as interactive and relational rather than as 'conceptually parallel dimensions of inequality' (ibid. 147) associated with paradigmatic differences in theory and method.

Within the American context, Ogbu (1997) has made a similar observation about the class/race relation, but makes a different point in order to explain the persistence of racial inequalities in education. Ogbu constructs a set of careful distinctions to define the specificity of 'racial stratification' as separate from class. He argues that although social inequality is universal, social stratification is not. Stratification occurs when *groups* are defined by certain criteria (e.g. colour, sex), then ranked relative to each other, and individuals are treated according to group membership. He defines stratification in this way:

A stratified society is a society in which there is a differential relationship between members of its constituent groups and the society's fundamental resources, so that *some people (e.g. white Americans), by virtue of their membership in particular social groups, have almost unimpaired access to the strategic resources, while some other people (e.g. black Americans), by virtue of their own membership in other social groups, have various impediments in their access to the same strategic or fundamental resources.* In addition, the different social groups in the hierarchy are separated by cultural and invidious distinctions that serve to maintain social distance between them. In a stratified society there is usually an overarching ideology, a folk

or/and scientific 'theory' embodying the dominant group's rationalisations or explanations of the hierarchical ordering of the groups. Subordinated groups do not necessarily accept the rationalisation of the system; however, they are not entirely free from its influence. (Ogbu 1997: 766–7)

Stratification can occur without class (e.g. in pre-industrial societies), and class does not necessarily entail stratification (as distinct from social inequality). Individuals can change class, but in a racially stratified society cannot change their colour and what that entails. Strata membership is assigned on the basis of *ascribed* (assumed intrinsic) characteristics, whereas class membership is *achieved* and is marked by external characteristics (such as socio-economic status). Strata contain classes (e.g. middle-class black Americans), but those of the inferior strata are not continuous with the same class in the dominant group. A black American, Ogbu argues, can achieve a high class status, but still suffer the consequences of racial stratification and be segregated from whites of the same class and disadvantaged relative to them.

Following Ogbu's analysis, a full understanding of the position of black pupils in white-dominated racially stratified society requires engagement with the *specific* dynamics of stratification conceptualized as distinct from class, but interacting with and working through it. That dynamic might also involve calling upon concepts developed within feminism concerning gender and sexuality. Sociological accounts would draw upon a range of theories and concepts that complement and 'talk' to each other, as distinct from either a reductionism that treats everything as simply an effect of one fundamental category or a standpoint approach that posits an array of paradigmatically incommensurable perspectives reflecting different interests. The key question is: Can sociology of education produce synthesizing explanations of increasing complexity at increasingly higher levels of abstraction? Hence, the ways in which we go about understanding education and society also relate to how we understand sociology itself as an explanatory discipline.

These complexities in defining educational inequalities in terms of relative advantages and disadvantages are discussed by C. Collins et al. (2000) in a report on gender differences in education in Australia.

There are several paradoxes and problems with this approach to educational equity. These are best represented through a series of questions. Firstly, if one gender were to be out-performing and out-participating the other at the top of the range, does this constitute under-performance and participation by the other gender at the top? Does this constitute disadvantage? If this is understood as disadvantage, then how does that compare with those males and females at other levels of performance? Who is disadvantaged, the gender being out-performed at the top or the gender out-performing others at lower levels of the performance hierarchy? Or the gender being out-performed at each level? Are they all disadvantaged equally? Or, are both genders at the bottom particularly disadvantaged in comparison with

those further up? If this is the case, then how should the ‘what about the boys?’ issue be redefined? . . . Educational disadvantage is often understood as poor performance in all school learning areas, and particularly in certain ‘key’ school learning areas. But perhaps it is also best understood as being unable to convert one’s schooling into further training, education or secure work or indeed into other aspects of a meaningful life. It is difficult to discuss educational disadvantage without reference to what students can do now and later with the capital they accrue through education – be it human, cultural or social capital. Indeed, one might argue that a student’s cultural and social capital needs to be as well developed through schooling as their human capital and that anyone who is only developed in one area is disadvantaged. (C. Collins et al. 2000: 60–1)

Collins et al. point to the *cumulative* effects of educational advantages over time, when children have left school. Education is an investment in ‘human, social and cultural capital’ that can be ‘converted’ into further education, training and work. It is important that these cumulative effects are given proper explanatory weight, because they may influence pupil expectations concerning their futures *after* school in ways that affect their behaviour while *at* school: boys may not do so well as girls because they *don’t have to*, given the advantages that males enjoy in the labour market! An implication of this is that if boys did achieve educational parity with girls, then females would be *even more* disadvantaged in the world of work. Increasing equality between the sexes within education would increase inequalities outside it. Educational advantages do not translate straightforwardly into social and economic advantages, and pupils are aware of this.

Collins et al. point out that while girls out-perform boys in education, they also adopt a more expressive approach, selecting subjects they find interesting, but which might not attract the greatest returns in the labour market. Boys study more instrumentally useful ‘packages’ of subjects, but may miss out on the development of personality attributes that girls gain, and may increase their alienation by studying what they feel they ‘have to’ rather than what they want to. Some boys might do better in ‘feminine’ subjects. The authors observe that:

it is clear that current performance and knowledge hierarchies seriously disadvantage some groups of boys, encouraging them to avoid ‘feminine’ subjects and to over-enrol in mathematics and ‘hard’ science and hence to under-perform. The real curriculum challenge is to teach both males and females to see more clearly how gender and power relations impinge upon and constrain their life options. As a consequence, they would then be in the position to make *informed, rather than socially constructed, decisions* about what they want to learn and achieve. (C. Collins et al. 2000: 89, my emphasis)

But is boys’ instrumentalism *intrinsically* a ‘better’ choice? From a liberal educational perspective, the *girls* might be seen as making the better

choice – they may gain less in economic terms but gain more as people. Distinguishing between an ‘informed’ versus a ‘socially constructed’ decision inevitably involves value judgements.

### The dimensions of difference

The significant dimensions of the social differences associated with education can be summarized as follows:

**Class:** the case of class differentials in education presents a peculiar problem for sociology. The evidence shows that, in the UK and elsewhere (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993), the pattern of *relative* difference remained virtually unchanged throughout the twentieth century, *despite* all the reforms aimed at reducing it. The *absolute* level of education in society has risen consistently, but in a proportionate way between classes. Hence class differences were reduced successively at *lower* levels, but the overall pattern of difference has remained the same. Why have class differentials persisted despite all the changes that have taken place in education, including that in *absolute* levels of attainment? Why have working-class pupils raised their average level but not changed their *relative* position?

**Gender:** here, the situation is the opposite. The outstanding phenomenon over the past twenty years has been that of girls and young women steadily overtaking male achievement at every level: in higher education as well as in school, a ‘gender revolution’ (Arnot et al. 1999). This has two aspects: first, that of achievement levels *per se*, and secondly the spread of that success into areas traditionally considered ‘male’ such as mathematics and the sciences. Females have succeeded in doing precisely that which lower classes did not – they have changed not only their absolute but also their *relative* position. Significantly, whereas class was the major focus of educational policy and reform in the second half of the twentieth century, gender reform was, in most cases, at best fragmentary and at worst treated with official hostility!

**Ethnicity:** here, *no* overall generalization can safely be made. The point about the performance of ethnic minorities relative to the majority population in the UK, for instance, is that some have higher than average levels of attainment and others have lower levels, and these positions change over time and even vary from one part of the country to another (Heath and McMahon 1997; Gillborn and Mirza 2000). The majority groups of indigenous white English, Welsh, Scots and Irish, in aggregate, score slightly below the national mean. In the case of ethnic group data it is important to be sensitive to the categories employed: ‘Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi’, for example, are sometimes combined, yet there are considerable educational and

cultural differences between (and within) these groups. The situations in different countries need to be considered individually, taking into account patterns of settlement and migration, the presence of colonized indigenous people, etc.

This complex pattern of differences, change and stasis presents a major explanatory challenge. How, at one and the same time, can we adequately account for both the gender revolution *and* the stability of class differentials *together* with the complexities of ethnicity? The problem is to maintain consistency. If it is claimed that the gender revolution is the result of education itself being made more 'girl-friendly', then why should reforms of a similar kind (applied in a more systematic and extensive manner) not have worked for working-class pupils? If racist stereotyping accounts for the disadvantaged position of black African-Caribbean boys, how do we account for the relative success of their female peers or of black African boys or of some Asian groups, but not others? The basic explanatory issues are to do with the types of effectivity being attributed to different aspects of the education system and its structures and processes and the underlying models of social causality and the person.

### *The order of difference*

The educational differences associated with class, gender and ethnicity are of different *orders*. Gillborn and Mirza (2000) show that in England and Wales in 1997 45 per cent of *all* pupils attained five or more higher grades in the GCSE examination (mostly taken at age 16). This comprised 51 per cent of girls (6 per cent above the mean) and 42 per cent of boys (3 per cent below the mean). However, the difference between white pupils and Afro-Caribbean pupils was *twice* that (it must be remembered that some ethnic minorities have superior levels of attainment to whites – the differences between top- and bottom-scoring ethnic minority groups is *greater* than the difference between blacks and whites alone), and the class difference much greater still with children of managerial/professionals just over 20 per cent above the mean and those of unskilled manuals around 25 per cent below (Gillborn and Mirza 2000: 22–3). It should also be noted that if the professionals were treated separately from managerials, the class gap would be even greater, because there is a significant educational difference between these two class fractions (Savage et al. 1992, Power et al. 2003). In explanatory terms, differences *within* groups (e.g. between sections of the middle class) are every bit as important as differences *between* groups.

### *Differences within groups*

We cannot successfully account for why *some* members of certain categories underachieve in relative terms without at the same time (i.e. in the

same theoretical language) explaining why others of the same category do not. Differences between groups are based on averages, but there is always a significant amount of variance around the mean, and this variance is of considerable importance. Differences *between* the categories are associated with changes *within* them. Hence, the combination of class stability and gender change means that the preservation of differences between the classes is associated with changes between the sexes within each class. This can affect the choice of partners, for instance – people tend to choose partners of a similar educational level. The interactions between different dimensions of difference (and between stability and change) can have significant implications for different groups, depending upon where they are starting from and the kinds of thresholds they might reach and pass (Savage and Edgerton 1997). Gillborn and Mirza report that:

By 1995 a pattern was established with a gender gap of similar proportions within each ethnic group (with girls in each group about ten percentage points ahead of boys) ... however, throughout this period there have also been consistent and significant inequalities of attainment between ethnic groups *regardless* of pupils' gender. Since 1991 white girls and Indian girls have attained five higher passes in roughly similar proportions with a considerable gap between them and Pakistani/Bangladeshi and African-Caribbean girls ... Here the girls attain rather higher than their male peers but the gender gap within their groups is insufficient to close the pronounced inequality of attainment associated with their ethnic group as a whole. (Gillborn and Mirza 2000: 24)

Consequently, the gender gap (though of a similar proportion) has different consequences for different groups. This relates to class differences between ethnic groups and the ways in which their positions interact with educational and social opportunity structures – how they relate to various educational and occupational thresholds and ceilings. The *dynamic* aspect of these relationships also has to be taken into account. Mean attainment levels and differentials change *over time*, and this is in itself significant in that the circumstances of each generation have been changed by the performance of its predecessors.

Social differences in education associated with class, ethnicity and gender interact, but each has an effect specific to itself. Gillborn and Mirza summarize their findings for England and Wales as follows:

Comparing pupils of the same gender and social class background there are five groups for whom we have a value for each ethnic group in the research: in four of these cases Indian pupils did best, followed by white, Pakistani/Bangladeshi and Black pupils respectively ... the available evidence points to the following:

- no group has been completely excluded from the improvement in GCSE attainments during the late 1980s and 1990s;
- by 1995 the gender gap was present within each ethnic group regardless of social class background;

- ethnic inequalities persist even when simultaneously controlling for gender and class;
- when comparing like with like, in terms of gender, class and ethnic origin, consistent and significant ethnic inequalities of attainment remain clear.

(Ibid. 26)

These complex interactions between class, ethnicity and gender underline the importance of the point stressed by Arnot et al. (1999: 28): we must always ask the question, ‘which girls and which boys?’ rather than deal in broad generalizations. Dichotomies such as male/female, black/white, middle class/working class can obscure the ways in which *some* members of each opposed category can be more like each other than they are like the majority of their own group.

The three major dimensions of social difference – class, gender and ethnicity – present very different educational profiles and diverse problems for the sociology of education. Although each dimension above can be considered separately, they are interactive. Each of us has a class membership, a sex and an ethnic identity. For purposes of analysis, we can take them apart. The problem is to put them back together!

## Explaining the Problems

Reviewing the range of explanatory approaches entails identifying *what*, for each, is picked out as educationally significant. An initial distinction can be made between ‘external’ accounts that focus upon the child’s social background or presumed genetic constitution (e.g. cultural deprivation, identity and self-image or IQ) and ‘internal’ accounts that look at features of educational *organization* (e.g. the tripartite system, streaming and setting) or educational *processes* (e.g. teacher expectations and stereotypes). Essentially, the former are concerned with how different groups relate to the school, the latter with the way in which the school relates to different social groups. Internalist approaches concerned with educational differentiation form the main focus of this chapter. These two perspectives have identified the following kinds of factors generating social differences in and through education.

### Externalist approaches

The principal concern of externalist approaches has been with ‘educability’. Educability is understood as referring to those aspects of an individual’s ‘socially determined capacity to respond to the demands of the

particular educational arrangements to which he is exposed' (Floud and Halsey: 183, quoted in P. Brown 1987: 13). The education system is treated as unproblematic. What *is* held to be the problem is the failure or incapacity of *certain kinds of families* to adequately equip their children to fully benefit from school. Hence, the following kinds of things are identified as causing social differences in education:

- presumed innate differences between groups in terms of IQ or cognitive capacities,
- material deprivation,
- cultural deprivation such as a general lack of literacy in families and of the social and/or linguistic skills and knowledge required to effectively deal with schools,
- social differences in degrees of educational motivation and social aspiration,
- differences in 'cultural capital'.

Externalist accounts, then, are associated with *deprivation* theories and *compensatory education*, where schools attempt to make up for assumed deficiencies in the home and community, classic examples being Project Headstart in the USA and the Educational Priority Areas established following the Plowden Report in the UK in the 1960s. A similar response can be seen more recently in the UK in the New Labour government's Educational Action Zones policy linked to the concept of 'social exclusion' (Jordan 1996). Although at one level approaches of this kind have a strong element of common-sense reasonableness – surely some communities *are* suffering multiple deprivations that affect children's education – they have been criticized on the grounds of imposing unexamined normative assumptions upon groups that do not conform to standard white middle-class values in the home and school (they *pathologize* groups by treating their values as deficient rather than as simply *different*).

### Internalist approaches

Internalist accounts focus upon 'educational differentiation', and more specifically upon those processes *associated with the school* that categorize, select and order pupils in terms of academic and other criteria. The focus is upon the school itself in terms of features such as:

- the organization of the educational system in such a way that it may reflect and reproduce class and other divisions,
- social biases in the formal curriculum such as the stereotypical representation of traditional gender roles or of white superiority or the assumption of middle-class cultural values,

- the covert transmission of such assumptions through the 'hidden curriculum' and teacher expectations resulting in a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' of success for some groups and failure by others,
- the failure of schools to acknowledge and include certain kinds of cultural identities, especially in respect to ethnicity and sexuality.

Internalist accounts look to education as the main cause of differentiation. In the 1960s and 1970s they developed as a critique of externalist accounts that were seen as 'blaming the victim' by pathologizing certain groups and simply taking for granted the socially neutral and benevolent character of the school. At that time this approach drew upon qualitative, interpretative sociology: the 'New Sociology of Education', the central focus of which was the critical analysis of 'the social construction of reality' in school knowledge and educational processes. To say that something is a 'construct' is to say that a term or concept does not refer to something outside itself in the world that is independently *real*. The construct *constructs* a reality that appears to confirm that what it *says* is real *really is!* Hence, intelligence tests do not refer to and objectively measure a real attribute of people, but act selectively to legitimate differences constructed on social grounds and reflecting power relations and interests.

This type of analysis advocates transforming educational processes in ways that (a) take critical (or 'reflexive') account of previously unexamined assumptions and their links to power, and (b) positively develop new kinds of inclusive 'radical pedagogies' that challenge those assumptions and contest existing power relations (see Giroux 1997). Although applauded for their sensitivity to what happens in the classroom itself, constructionist approaches are criticized for being overly idealist and subjectivist and for neglecting (or even rejecting the very idea of) structural factors and constraints.

A deeper sense of the complexities of the interactions between the factors associated with externalist and internalist approaches and the manner in which they are contextualized within broader processes of social change can be developed by considering the gender revolution in education and the extent to which it is explicable in terms of changes *within* the education system itself. This must be set against the background of the peculiar *stability* in class differentials in the twentieth century.

### **Closing the Gender Gap: Women and the 'Educational Revolution'**

The outstanding feature of educational change in the second half of the twentieth century was the gender revolution (Arnot 2002). This is one aspect of the more general complex of changes in gender relations in modern

societies, involving family structures, economic participation and the impact of feminism. Madeleine Arnot describes the situation as follows:

As part of a counter-hegemonic movement, feminist teachers challenged the ways in which gender categories were constructed, reproduced and transmitted through schooling. They challenged the principles of social order – the gendered principles for the distribution of power and social control – and the framing of a unitary social identity ‘woman’. Feminism had essentially destabilised the category of femininity for a generation of young women by making the process of problematisation critical to identity formation. Being female became associated not with a static class-based categorisation but with a dynamic process of ‘becoming’. Women, therefore, were encouraged to become actors within a set of social relations that were described as arbitrary not given. (Arnot 2002: 191)

Feminist initiatives in education opened spaces within which wider social changes could be interpolated in the form of a critical questioning of the role of the school in reproducing gender relations. As Arnot says, for pupils (and teachers also) this activity was directly related to identity formation through the ways in which girls could come to question things such as subject and career choice.

It is important to stress that there is not just one ‘feminism’ or just one kind of educational feminism (Arnot and Dillabough 1999). In both cases, feminism presents a plurality of positions and perspectives, drawing upon a range of other traditions (Marxist, psychoanalytic, existentialist, etc.) as well as developments internal to feminism itself. Writers in the area typically prefer to use the plural *feminisms* (Bilton et al. 2002: 487–93, 527–9; Measor and Sikes 1997; Weiner 1994). The variety of feminisms represents both the range of issues that can be addressed and the range of approaches through which they might be addressed.

### The varieties of feminism

Arnot et al. (1999: ch. 5) make a broad distinction between ‘liberal’ and ‘critical’ educational feminisms. The former are primarily concerned with issues of equality of access, experience and opportunity. The latter are more concerned with fundamental issues concerning the androcentric and ethnocentric nature of school knowledge and its relationship to white male domination in society. The critical feminisms include Marxist, black, lesbian, radical and post-structuralist approaches, amongst others. With the exception of post-structuralists, the critical approaches view sexism in education as the product of underlying patriarchal structures in society, and hence see it as deeply entrenched and endemic.

For Marxist feminists, patriarchy and capitalism are intertwined – the solution to the problems of the one entails (but does not necessarily guarantee) solutions to the problems of the other. On this basis, feminism

is in alliance with other movements seeking fundamental social change. Radical feminism sees patriarchy as an autonomous system of oppression of women by men that operates independently of capitalism and other economic formations. Hence, transcending capitalism would not automatically solve the problem of patriarchy, because the labour movement and socialism are *not* necessarily non-patriarchal. Consequently, women must recognize their own separate struggle and seek their own solutions independent of other issues. Aligned with the radical feminists are lesbian theorists who are concerned with the way in which patriarchy controls female sexuality and imposes 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Lesbian feminists argue that mainstream feminism has also assumed a heterosexual perspective that marginalizes the situation and experiences of homosexual women and prescriptively positions heterosexuality as normal.

By contrast, liberal approaches view sexism as a residual cultural hang-over from the past, which can be eliminated by progressive reforms and changes in consciousness. The basic problem is that of 'ignorance', which can be 'cured' through appropriate education. Post-structuralists see sexism as the 'normalizing' activity of dominant 'regulative discourses' and, hence, less amenable to change, but, in so far as they are self-consistent, they share with liberals the rejection of the macro-structural theories of the other critical approaches and the 'grand narratives' in which they are embedded.

Weiner (1994: ch. 4) has summarized this range of perspectives in feminism and in feminist educational research. Drawing upon her account (Weiner 1994: 71–3), the grid shown in table 1.1 can be constructed to illustrate the range of main educational feminisms and their particular concerns and research interests (though, as she herself admits, even this is not exhaustive – see also Measor and Sikes 1997). Weiner points out that these approaches differ in how they see education itself as being able to contribute to change of a fundamental kind. Whereas liberal feminism assumes a reformist approach within existing social arrangements, Marxist and radical feminists believe that far more fundamental changes must occur in the very nature of society, and that education's capacity to produce change is limited.

## Summary

The first part of this chapter has raised a set of issues of different kinds in order to illustrate the complexity of the field of the sociology of education. This set of issues can be summarized as follows:

**The problems of educational differentiation and social inequalities:** these have to do with the body of facts that need addressing and

**Table 1.1** The major educational feminist perspectives

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Major concern</i>	<i>Research questions</i>	<i>Key terms</i>
Liberal	focus on girls' underachievement in the schooling system and education more generally in order to campaign for change	the causes of differential attainment patterns between the sexes in certain subject areas (particularly in maths, science and technology); sex stereotyping in optional subject areas and in careers advice; bias in the way examinations and tests are constructed and marked; sex differences in school staffing patterns	access, choice, disadvantage, underrepresentation, underachievement
Radical	criticisms of the male domination of society and the nature of school knowledge	role played by sexuality in the oppression of girls and women in the classroom and staffroom, and in the schooling process more generally; the role for the single-sex school in the creation of an autonomous female learning culture	patriarchal relations, domination and subordination, oppression and empowerment, woman- and girl-centredness
Marxist	the degree to which education and schooling have been effective in producing sexual inequality compared to the reproduction of class inequality	how gender and power relations are continually reproduced in schooling; the formation of gendered class groupings in the schooling context; the relationship between the family, schooling and the labour market in maintaining dominant class and gender relationships	capitalism, production, reproduction, class, gender, patriarchal relations, correspondence theory
Black	criticizing the endemic nature of both racism and sexism	the actual experience of black girls and young women in British schooling and in higher education; the sexism and racism of teachers; the construction of women and black students as a problem for, and within, education	anti-sexism, anti-racism, black disadvantage, institutional racism, stereotyping, lack of expectation
Post-structuralist	the ways in which sex and gender are constituted through discursive practices	the 'regime of truth' of the progressive primary classroom; 'praxis' and 'self-reflexivity' of the feminist researcher	gendered identities, regulative discourses, subjectivity, power-knowledge, reflexivity

the patterns and trends that need to be accounted for. Attention was drawn to (a) the stability in class differentials, (b) the gender revolution, and (c) the wide variety of differences between ethnic communities. It was stressed that it is important to take account of the ways in which these relationships change over time and the significance of variance *within* groups as well as differences between them.

**The problems of distinguishing between differences and inequalities:** at one level this problem is beyond solution – how could we ever demonstrate definitively that one person's choice is freely made and another's determined? However, it can be reasonably argued that a major concern for sociology is to account for enduring structures of aggregate social differences in light of the view that some conditions of life are humanely preferable to others and that attempts should be made to ameliorate the circumstances of those less fortunate and to improve the lot of people in general. It is important to be sensitive, though, to the fact that the definition of what constitutes a problem in sociology cannot be disentangled from value judgements that in part reflect assumptions about the existential status of people's choices – why *shouldn't* working-class kids get working-class jobs? What is wrong with being working-class? What is wrong with being a good wife and mother? These more philosophical concerns are of direct significance for teachers, in that within the Western liberal tradition the aim of education is precisely to develop in individuals the capacity to be autonomous or authentic decision-makers (Bonnett and Cuypers 2001), and this, in turn, links with the view that the education system should be promoting social opportunity, mobility and change. These secular humanist values can be fiercely contested by religious believers in traditional faith communities and by politically conservative traditionalists.

**The problems of explanation:** the issue here is not just that there is a wide variety of explanatory perspectives in sociology, but that they operate in different modes (e.g. some attempt to reduce all explanation to one primary dimension, some assume a multiplicity of standpoint-specific perspectives, some aspire to integrative general theory). In addition, with reference to the range of things that require explaining, it is important that consistency is maintained across areas. If certain kinds of factors are invoked in order to account for the gender revolution, then it should be assumed that such factors would be equally effective in the class and ethnicity areas. Is the method of explanation adopted in one area consistent with what is observed in others? How does an explanation of the mean condition for any group accommodate the fact of variance? Essentially, this has to do with the types of *effectivity* being attributed to particular aspects of education by different explanatory perspectives. Related to this is the key issue: How much can the educational

process itself explain about educational differences, and how much difference does education make? These concerns will be the focus of the next section.

### The Ethos of Masculinity and the Limitations of Internalist Explanation

As Weiner et al. point out, the major public response to the gender educational revolution (at least in the media) has been a moral panic over the 'underachievement' of boys: 'It appears as if female success is viewed as a corollary to male failure. Rather than celebrating girls' achievements and aspirations, we have now a discourse of male disadvantage' (1997: 620). It is as if the success of girls is in some way at the expense of boys. However, as Collins et al. argue, defining educational advantages and disadvantages is by no means straightforward; furthermore, as both sets of writers emphasize, female 'advantage' in education does not automatically translate into economic and social advantages. Weiner et al. explore how the 'boy problem' is described in different ways according to class and colour. Although educational processes might be described in certain ways as 'masculine', there is not just *one* masculinity, and masculinities are not all treated equally in schools.

The masculinity issue has been thrown into sharp focus by the case of the over-representation of black boys amongst those pupils excluded from school for disciplinary reasons in the UK. A study of this problem by Wright et al. (1998) explores the dynamic whereby the behaviour of certain black boys in a school is mediated by teachers' stereotypes of black masculinity (Mac an Gaill 1988; Sewell 1997; Youdell 2003). They say:

This does not deny that Black males may act in ways which require school sanctions, but it does suggest that their experiences within education should not differ from White peers and other Black females who also behave in similar ways. It is important to note that Black male perception of differential teacher responses to them and their schooling identities informs their subsequent relations with school staff. (Wright et al. 1998: 84)

Debates around these issues amongst researchers have been fierce and sometimes bitter. At one level the question is: Does the over-representation of black boys amongst excluded pupils imply that more black boys *actually* behave in ways that would lead to the exclusion of *any* pupil, or is it that teachers are more likely to construe the behaviour of black boys as problematic in ways that result in disproportionate exclusion? In sociological terms, this relates to a long-running methodological debate about the relationship between objectivity and the interpretative problems raised by constructionist approaches (Foster et al. 1996). In earlier times

symbolic-interactionist perspectives such as labelling theory described 'deviant' behaviour in the classroom (and elsewhere) as socially produced through the arbitrary imposition of 'labels' upon certain categories of pupils who depart from the teacher's unconsciously held model of 'the ideal pupil'. For labelling theorists a further stage of this process is when it begins to shape (through internalization) the self-image of those being labelled in such a way that they *become* the type of person the label stereotypically represented – a self-fulfilling prophecy in which pupils come to confirm teacher expectations about pupils of their 'kind' (Becker 1971; Keddie 1971). This process radically reverses the common-sense view that disruptive pupils simply are 'in fact' disruptive. It argues that disruptive pupils are constructed as such by these complex processes of formal and informal educational differentiation acting upon pupil self-image.

Analyses of this type are significant because of the way in which they attribute a certain kind of *effectivity* to internal processes of educational differentiation. What is at issue is indicated by Weiner et al.'s observation concerning discourse theory and the ideas of Michel Foucault: 'Discourses are structuring mechanisms for social institutions (such as schools), modes of thought, and individual subjectivities: they are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak"' (Weiner et al. 1997: 621–2). The quote from Foucault indicates the force of the effectivity being attributed to educational discursive processes: they *form* the objects (in this case 'pupils') of which they speak. The attribution, in this way, of *strong* effects to internal processes of educational differentiation is the core issue of this chapter.

Wright et al. stress that there is a range of 'schooling masculinities' ranked hierarchically. The dominant (or 'hegemonic') model is white and middle-class, and is associated with academic success. Others, such as that associated with sporting prowess, are acceptable but of lower status. Still others are unacceptable and illegitimate. These masculinities and access to them are regulated by class and colour. Certain types of black masculinity are especially problematic, and 'lead Black males to be positioned by teachers, White male peers and themselves, as highly aggressive and sexualised' (Wright et al. 1998: 78). Hence, although the dominant ethos of the school is 'masculine', some male pupils can be 'too' masculine, and others, presumably, not masculine enough or masculine in less valued ways. This gendered and sexualized system of educational differentiation generates a position system within which categories of pupils are distributed by colour, class and sex.

The writers say that 'Working-class and Black male pupils fall foul of these dominant definitions of schooling masculinity through their representation as academic failures. They then take up different expressions of masculinity in order to find other forms of power' (Wright et al. 1998: 78). The notion of a hierarchy of legitimate and illegitimate 'masculinities' functions here in the same way as features of school organization such as streaming in earlier accounts of class differentiation within schools

(e.g. Hargreaves 1967; Keddie 1971). Despite the Foucauldian resonances of this more recent study, the logic of explanation is continuous with classic differentiation/polarization studies of anti-school subculture formation (see chapter 4).

The problem of black male exclusion is located by Wright et al. within a broader feminist problematic. Under the heading 'An Ethos of Masculinity' (ibid. 77), the writers provide a thorough example of the educational differentiation model as grounded in radical feminism (see below). However, it is important to underline that the concern here is *not* feminism *per se*, but *internalist* theories of educational differentiation in general, of which this is a topical instance – there is no intrinsic reason why feminist approaches to education should adopt this particular form, and there would be no difficulty in selecting a similar piece from an earlier time on the 'middle-class ethos of the school' written within a symbolic-interactionist, phenomenological or labelling theory perspective.

Feminist researchers on the reproduction of gender divisions within education have focused on the implicit and explicit forms of masculinity which exist within schools. The ways in which specific 'disciplined knowledge' has, in the past, been constructed as gendered is not the only way that gender is reproduced within this sphere, as this aspect of researching gender often focused more on the need to integrate girls into technical and science subjects, than on the way boys take up masculine identities. However, feminist research did reveal an ethos within education which promoted qualities of individualism, competitiveness and differentiation, and this ethos has been theorised as masculine. If young females are conceptualised as oriented towards personal relationships and males towards structures and role differentiation, then the basic principles of education (and practices) within schools are at odds with the social orientation of girls, favouring instead the ways that boys in general are socialised. Additionally, the processes by which achievement is measured through the comparison of one child with another foster forms of competitiveness, often aggressive, which coincide not only with young male orientation, but also the 'technical-limited rationality' seen to dominate the market place. The important work of feminist researchers in education has highlighted (and in many ways helped to address) the educational performances of young women in schools, such that increasing educational achievements of girls in comparison to boys can be seen as evidence of this. (Wright et al. 1998: 77–8, original references omitted)

The general principles of internalist approaches towards the effectivity of differentiation, represented here, can be summarized as follows:

- 1 Research reveals that both formally and informally gender relations are *reproduced* in education around a dominant 'masculine' model.
- 2 Specifically, this 'masculine' model is expressed in an inescapable *ethos* of individualism, competitiveness and differentiation.
- 3 Schooling contributes to the *formation* of a range of male identities.

- 4 Not all such identities are *equally* valued.
- 5 The basic *principles* of education are in line with the ways in which boys are socialised but at odds with the social orientation of girls.
- 6 Feminist research has had an *impact* upon these arrangements in such a way that the educational performance of girls relative to boys has improved.

There are three basic difficulties common to constructionist-type educational differentiation theories: problems of *description*, problems of *effectivity*, and problems of *validity* (see also Foster et al. 1996).

### Problems of description

In the first instance, the education system, its schools, their structures and processes, have to be described via an all-embracing categorization: as 'middle-class', 'masculine', 'white' or whatever. The problem is: *what* exactly is it that defines 'middle-classness', etc., and how are these qualities to be identified within the school? Ideally, these features should be theorized independently; it would then need to be *demonstrated* that the relevant features of the school are indeed instances of these things. Unfortunately, this is rarely done in a rigorous fashion (upon inspection, such attempts frequently turn out to be simply tautological). The feminist problematic typically defines 'masculinity' in terms of 'individualism, competitiveness and differentiation'. But *why* should these particular qualities be 'masculine'? In what sense are they this, and how do we know it?

The root problem is that it is difficult to isolate specific characteristics that are *so* specific that they can be unproblematically identified as definitive (or constitutive) of any one particular group or category. In social populations it is almost invariably the case that *mean* differences between categories are relatively insignificant compared to the variation around any characteristic *within* categories. There is no measurable feature of difference *between* the sexes that exceeds the variation *within* each sex on that count. Hence, if we contend that mathematics is 'masculine', what this means is that, of that small minority of the population who are mathematicians, more are men than are women; but the great majority of men and women are more like each other in *not* being mathematical. The same applies to the group of 'aggressively competitive individualists'. More may be men, but a significant number will be women (as anyone who watches professional tennis tournaments will know!), and the majority of both sexes will be more alike in *not* being aggressively competitive individualists.

The implication of this is that such descriptions are only ever partial (are, indeed, 'constructs!'). The relative distribution of any set of characteristics between categories may be disproportionate; but it is always

so far from absolute that in any binary set of classifications (male/female, black/white, middle-class/working-class) there will always be a significant minority of one category that has *more* of the defining characteristic of its opposite than the majority of members of the opposite group (if maths is held to be 'masculine', it will still be the case that *some* women are more mathematical than the *majority* of men). It is precisely this propensity of populations that historically enabled significant numbers of working-class people to be *more* educationally successful than the average middle-class person. In modern, pluralistic liberal democracies it is extremely difficult for any group to appropriate a characteristic with *such* a degree of exclusiveness that it is significantly unavailable to other groups.

### Problems of effectivity

The issue of effectivity is central to differentiation theory because this is where the 'work' gets done – where processes of educational differentiation are held to have determinate effects upon pupils in ways that they generate socially differentiated educational outcomes. From symbolic-interactionism, through labelling theory and the phenomenology of the New Sociology of Education, to discourse theory today, the differentiation paradigm has attributed *strong* effects to educational processes acting on pupil subjectivities. Constructs such as stereotypes and labels *construct* pupil identities, influencing both how teachers come to see and treat pupils and how, consequently, pupils may come to see themselves. The problem of description works itself out in practice through analyses of education that purport to reveal how the defining social characteristics are expressed there. The masculine character of education is identified in the content of curriculum knowledge and teaching methods, etc. These things both position and supposedly affect different categories of pupils in different ways. Girls are not only disadvantaged by the masculine ethos of the school, but are also socialized into the gendered divisions associated with it.

What conditions would have to be met in order for processes of educational differentiation to generate the effects attributed to them (Jones and Moore 1996)? Ideally, the situation in schools would be one where, (a) educational processes and bodies of knowledge have given, unitary forms that, (b) pupils receive in a predictable manner that, (c) produces determinate effects. (Teachers might be inclined to say, 'If only...!') In reality, the educational process and the transmission of knowledge are fragmented, unpredictable, provisional and contested. Pupils not only *fail* to learn things or get things wrong, they discount things, reject things or reinterpret them in their own particular ways. Significantly, pupils invariably have access to other sources of knowledge and authority. Reality is so far removed from this ideal, and educational processes so unpredictable and indeterminate, that the effectivity of differentiation must be

severely limited, making such internal mechanisms implausible as *primary* reproducers of structures of social inequality.

The black sociologist Maureen Stone, in a classic critique of this type of approach (1981), pointed out that the negative self-image model of the black pupil depended upon the assumption that black people depended upon white people for their view of themselves – white racism, rather than making black people feel inferior, might make them think how stupid white people are. It can make them very angry! This approach also disadvantaged them by encouraging teachers to adopt a progressive ‘therapeutic’ approach rather than providing the rigorous academic education that they and their families wanted and that would bring them the real advantages of good qualifications. This leads to a further point about how pupils *themselves* relate to the educational process. Symbolic-interactionist accounts depend upon the idea of ‘significant others’ through whom individuals build up a self-image. However, teachers need not *be* significant (either positively or negatively) for pupils. As will be discussed later (chapter 4), the *majority* of pupils adopt an attitude of indifferent instrumentalism towards school – it doesn’t bother them that much one way or the other. Certainly for *some* pupils, the school and its teachers may matter a great deal and have a significant positive impact upon their identity and development. Others, such as the black boys discussed by Wright, may get boxed into a particularly unpleasant corner that also profoundly affects them. Some may actively set out to ‘resist’.

There are two points here. The first is that rather than working with a general presumption about the effectivity of educational differentiation, effects need to be established in *particular* cases. The second is that pupils are not only positioned by the system of educational differentiation – they also position *themselves* in relation to it. We have to take account of how pupils position themselves within education, as well as of how discursive processes define positions for them. What is striking about the pattern of positions that pupils themselves generate through their educational outcomes is not how closely it corresponds to the internal differentiation system, but how much it *does not*. This leads on to the ‘validity’ problem and also raises the issue of pupil ‘strategies’, to be discussed in chapter 4.

### Problems of validity

The effects of the system of educational differentiation are attenuated for the reasons given above. If this is so, then how valid is the view that the levels of educational attainment, the relative positions of different groups, and their changes over time are driven by conditions and changes *within* the educational system and its processes of differentiation? Is it the case, for example, as Wright et al. suggest, that the gender revolution in education is *evidence* that changes in educational processes inspired by

feminist research brought about the improvement in the relative position of girls?

The following observations can be made about this particular case that are relevant to a more general evaluation of the explanatory capacity of internalist approaches (see Arnot 2002: 190–1 for a contrary view, responding to Moore 1996).

- The improving relative position of females in education was a well-established, long-term trend throughout the second half (and accelerating in the final quarter) of the twentieth century. Its consistent features do not obviously correlate with identifiable episodes or periods of change *within* education.
- The impact of Equal Opportunity (EO) programmes in education promoting anti-sexist or multicultural and anti-racist education was (according to feminist researchers, see Weiner 1994) unevenly distributed, fragmentary and often met with official hostility. Such initiatives were not implemented extensively enough, and for long enough, to generate the systematic features of the long-term trend of relative improvement in girls' levels of attainment.
- It is difficult to see any straightforward correlation between those areas of the education system where such policies were implemented and particular advantages to the girls educated there. The *most* successful girls in the UK have been those in traditional, single-sex selective schools (least likely to have been committed to EO positive image initiatives and most influenced by 'masculinist' forms of organization, knowledge and teaching style), and the least successful girls were typically represented in mixed-sex, metropolitan comprehensives where such policies *were* most often implemented.
- At the same time, changes tended to occur most often at the lower levels of the system (e.g. in upper secondary schools, associated with the GCSEs), but this did not prevent girls extending their success to the 'A' (Advanced) level and degree level, where changes have been less pronounced. Female improvement has been as successful at the higher, more traditional ('masculinist') levels as at the more progressive ('feminized') lower ones.

In short, the requisite changes in educational processes were not extensive enough or sustained enough to validly be seen as generating the long-term, systematic features of the gender revolution in education. On the other hand, the second half of the twentieth century did witness sustained, systematic attempts of the *same kind* to reduce class differentials in education (the move away from selection and streaming towards comprehensive schools, mixed ability teaching, reforms of curriculum and teaching methods, etc.). These, however, had no significant impact on class differentials. But does this imply that what goes on in schools makes *no* difference?

## Does School Make a Difference?

In 1972 an American researcher, Christopher Jencks (building upon the Coleman Report into education in the USA, with which he had been associated) published a book entitled *Inequality*. It had an explosive effect upon public discussions of education. Jencks's conclusion appeared to pull out the rug from under the reformist optimism that had supported educational expansion in the previous two post-war decades. The essence of his critique was that, as far as any *individual* is concerned, luck is more significant in shaping life chances than education. What Halsey et al. (1997: 34) term 'Jencks' pessimism' encouraged a research programme on the effects of the school in order to address the issues: *Does* it make a difference? How *much*, and *how* (though not all researchers in this field would classify themselves as sociologists or cede its achievements to the sociology of education)?

Essentially, the issue for educational research was: Are some schools more effective than others, and, if so, *why*? The significant difference between this approach and that of Jencks is that it investigates differences between *schools*. Today, this research programme is known as 'school effectiveness', but it started life by focusing upon what Neville Bennett (1976), in a seminal investigation, called 'teaching styles': basically, the 'traditional' versus 'progressive' distinction. A leading UK contributor to this field of research, Peter Mortimore (1997), says:

Had Coleman and Jencks had access to more micro-level variables, such as school climate, staff behaviour, pupil attitudes, and institutional relationships they could have tested their conclusions against these more detailed factors. It is this shift in focus from macro- to micro-variables – from the system to the individual school – that has inspired a number of researchers to consider the effects of individual schools on the learning outcomes of their own students. (Mortimore 1997: 476–7)

In this respect, school effectiveness research shares a common focus with educational differentiation analysis. It differs, however, in that its methodology has been more quantitative than qualitative (the development of statistical techniques such as multi-level analysis has been central), and it is more concerned with organizational features of schooling than with discursive processes.

The basic idea of this approach (see, for instance, a pioneering study by Rutter et al. 1979) is to attempt to match schools, as far as possible, in social terms (socio-economic background, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), so that those factors are held constant, and then to see whether there are significant differences in outputs such as attainment levels, forms of behaviour, etc. If there are, then it is fair to assume that these are the result of differences between the *schools* themselves – some are more 'effective' than others. The second stage, obviously, is to then identify those differences in how schools are organized and run. Research established that

there are indeed significant differences between schools in these terms. Mortimore's review of research findings suggests that around 10 per cent of the 'variance between students is accounted for by the school once background factors have been taken into account' (1997: 478–9). To put this into perspective, he says:

In terms of the English examination system used by secondary schools, 10 per cent is the equivalent of over 14 points (GCSE points scale). This can be roughly translated into the difference between being awarded seven E grades and seven C grades. Obtaining C grades in seven subjects will permit the student to move on to A level work and open up the possibility of working in the more prestigious occupations. In contrast, obtaining even seven subjects at E grade is seen in England as evidence of fairly low achievement. (Mortimore 1997: 479)

Hence, although 10 per cent may not seem a massive amount, it nevertheless translates into significant differences in opportunities for pupils in relation to the thresholds it enables them to cross (see also Mirza 1992: ch. 3). The key question is: What is it that makes the difference between schools? Mortimore provides the following summary derived from a set of case studies by the National Commission on Education (in Britain):

A leadership stance that builds on and develops a team approach; a vision of success which includes a view of how the school can improve and which, once it has improved, is replaced by a pride in its achievement; school policies and practices which encourage the planning and setting up of targets; the improvement of the physical environment; common expectations about pupil behaviour and success; and an investment in good relations with parents and the community. (Ibid. 481)

This list should not be considered definitive. Researchers in this area invariably urge caution – not least because policy-makers are inclined to pounce with joy upon such findings as presenting 'kwik-fix' solutions for 'school improvement'.

School effectiveness research indicates that schools *do* make a difference. Pupils who attend more effective schools gain benefits over those who attend less effective ones. However, the literature in this area offers a number of provisos:

- As far as *educational inequalities* are concerned, it is important to stress that more effective schools are more effective for *all* pupils (e.g. Smith and Tomlinson 1989). Making all schools more effective would improve the attainments of all pupils *pro rata*. Hence, group differentials would remain the same.
- Increasing the effectiveness of schools is an intrinsic good, but doing so would not necessarily improve the position of the most socially disadvantaged. Consequently, school effectiveness does not automatically translate into a policy for improving equality of *social opportunities*.

Mortimore and other key researchers have stressed the limitations of school improvement in this respect.

- Best estimates seem to suggest that the school attended explains around 10 per cent of the differences between pupil attainments. As Mortimore shows, this is not insignificant. However, it does mean that the more significant factors explaining that variance are to be found elsewhere. However, in an educational market-place where differing capacities to make effective choices are important, there might be a relationship between these other factors and the likelihood of a pupil attending a more effective school (see chapters 3 and 4).

Contrary to ‘Jencks’ pessimism’, schools *do* make a difference. Stepping back a pace from the finer detail, it appears that the general principle to be abstracted from this research is that of *coherence*. Effective schools are those that at a number of levels cohere around commonly held understandings, objectives, expectations and aims that are *collectively* generated and enforced. Rutter et al. (1979) glossed this quality by the term ‘ethos’. An important implication of this is that the specific *ideological* form that this takes is not relevant to effectiveness. What counts is that the school is a *community* of shared values, aims and expectations consistently applied. From an educational point of view, this is important. In key respects this research *defuses* false ideological divisions in educational debates. It shows that all schools (a) should have high *academic* expectations of *all* pupils, and that (b) they should have the flexibility to adapt teaching styles to the particular needs of particular groups of pupils. The approach to teaching method is pragmatic rather than ideological. Having asked the question, ‘Which boys, which girls?’, we then ask which method within our repertoire of teaching methods works best, and provide teachers with sufficient autonomy to apply their professional judgement *in situ* (Pollard 1994). Taken together, both differentiation analysis in the sociology of education and school effectiveness studies by educational researchers point to a number of ways in which different aspects of school organization and educational processes *might*, under various circumstances and in different ways, have varying effects, both positive and negative, upon different categories of pupils. But the extent to which this is so must be settled pragmatically for particular cases, rather than assumed wholesale on the basis of broad dichotomies such as middle-class/working-class, male/female, black/white.

The relationship between social differences and educational differentiation is complex, and it would be unrealistic to imagine that there is a simple answer to any of the problems encountered in this area. From a common-sense point of view, it would be reasonable to believe that *all* of the kinds of things covered contribute *something* to the situation at some time for some groups, but none by itself or even such things in combination can reasonably be seen as endogenously generating the complexities

and contradictions within the systematic qualities of trend data as they evolve over time.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the complexities in the pattern of relationships between educational and social differences and the variety of ways in which the sociology of education has attempted to account for them. It has distinguished between approaches that stress factors external to the school, the concern with 'educability', and those that stress factors internal to education, the concern with 'differentiation'. These latter perspectives attribute *strong* effects to internal factors and see them as the primary drivers of educational reproduction and change (e.g. by arguing that traditional education reproduced gender differences and that anti-sexist initiatives in schools *caused* the gender revolution). Two kinds of sceptical objections were raised to this view. The first concerned the assumptions being made about how educational processes and pupils interact and the conditions that would have to be met in order for such processes to have such strong determinate effects. The second objections were to do with the complexities presented by the changing patterns of differences between the dimensions of class, gender and ethnicity and the problems of accounting for how it is that the types of things that apparently (for strong internalists) worked for gender failed in the case of class and are inconsistent in the case of ethnicity.

In terms of the changes that occurred in the period after the 1944 Education Act, the educational system in England and Wales constitutes a virtual historical laboratory of educational reform, but class differentials nevertheless remained stubbornly intractable. As far as gender is concerned, too much change has occurred relative to educational change, and as far as class is concerned, far too little! The position of women in education suggests that educational relations need to be located within more general structures of social and economic change – the education system and its processes represent a mezzanine level between the micro-dynamics of the classroom and macro-structures and movements. The next two chapters will examine the broader themes of economy and class and state and status. Chapter 4 will consider ways in which these levels can be pulled together through *structural-dynamic* models of educational change.