

The usefulness of an interactionists perspective on education



Education provides us with academic knowledge and social skills. The formal academic education we receive gives us the qualifications necessary to prepare us for our working lives and integration into society. Industrialisation changed societies view on education, it realised for Britain to succeed in economy it had to have an educated work force.

Sociologists use a variety of methods to evaluate education for example, IQ tests (which increases the longer pupils spend in education and tends to have a more complex language, therefore aimed at upper and middle classes). Sat's, (where children are tested to see if the teachers have been teaching the curriculum). Ofsted, the school inspectors appointed by the council to inspect and regulate the education system within individual learning facilities. League tables and long term studies such as ' Child of our time', which followed children born in 2000 in different parts of the country with differing backgrounds. (Class hand outs) (sixthsence. osfc) (www.

the student room). This essay will be discussing interactionism and the 4 main sub theories within it - labelling, selffulfilling prophesy, language, subcultures and the effects they have on education. George Mead (1934) had a theory that we develop who we are by the influence of the ' significant' others around us, such as our parents, teachers, religious leaders and friends. It is believed this theory plays a significant role when looking at issues of class, gender and ethnicity in education.

(Heinemann, Sociology) (Browne, Sociology). Interactionist theorists do not focus heavily on relationships between the formal education system and the economy, but their theories do suggest that the formal education systems

are not organised meritocratically and this theory does help to undermine the other theories such as functionalists and Marxist of the relationship between formal education and the economy. The micro scale research of the interactionist can sometimes ignore government policy, for example, the introduction of curriculum 2000 and funding. Greater funding would mean more teachers to fewer students and therefore a better learning environment for all, which is important to the Marxist and functionalists. Marxist and Functionalist theories look at society on a MACRO scale, also known as structural theories. Their theories look at how education affects a whole society and not just certain people in it.

(Gardner, 2004; Pilkington et al, 2004, sixthsence. osfc). Interactionism is concerned with the interaction between individuals. Interactionists believe action is meaningful to those involved and action requires interpretation and definition of situation and self. Interactionists look at society on a MICRO scale, the interaction and independence between people. Theirs is a more subjective theory, an action theory.

Interactionists do not look at what education does for society as a whole, but at one class in a school, how the teachers and pupils treat each other and how this affects exam results. To gain their knowledge they use qualitative research methods like unstructured interviews or participant observation. The first sub theory within interactionism is the Labelling Theory, pioneered by George Herbert Mead and developed further by Howard Becker. The labelling theory is interested in how pupils come to be labelled in particular ways, for example good or bad pupils and the consequences which arise

from these definitions. Some studies show that teachers often attach labels regardless of ability or attitude.

Instead they label pupils on the basis of stereotyped assumptions about their class background, labelling working class negatively and middle class positively. Interactionists are interested in how and why teachers label pupils, and the effects it has. They believe working class and African-Caribbean children are labelled as unintelligent and disruptive. So when a child is labelled they may begin to believe the label. Middle class, white and Asian children are labelled as intelligent, so they tend to do well. Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) studied a decision made by school councillors to place students on a course to prepare them for college.

The study showed how students were evaluated by teachers and school councillors in terms of their appearance, manners and observed behaviour, although they claimed to be using IQ and grade results. It was found that their social class influenced the councillors decision and they believed that the higher the social class the greater the educational potential. Cicourel and Kitsuse argued that the decision made by the councillors was unfair. Once these labels are firmly attached and for those with a negative label it may be hard to change. Rist (1977) believes the problem with labelling does not lay with known recognised bad behaviour but whether someone is going to do something about it.

Lacey's study shows how the power of labelling can actually create failure. Boys who were among 15% of pupils who had passed the 11+ to gain entry to grammar school, failed once there, due to the competitive atmosphere

and use of streaming. By the second year they had become clearly anti-school as they adapted to their role as failures. A form of labelling, (this can have a positive or negative effect), is known as the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. Where self fulfilling prophecies are used to define working class students as failures helps to ensure that they do fail.

Stephen Ball's (1981) study showed how teachers varied their expectations and teaching method depending on the band pupils were in. Studies have shown other reasons why working class pupils receive poorer results in education than children from middle class backgrounds. Interactionists Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) showed how teachers responded to being told that some of their pupils were brighter than others. Certain pupils were selected as intellectually exceptional, although this was not necessarily true, the teachers proved to respond differently to these pupil's and it brought out a higher self fulfilling prophecy in the pupils. Mary Fuller's (1984) study criticised Rosenthal and Jacobson's self fulfilling prophecy by studying a group of female black girls in a comprehensive school in London who were labelled negatively. Through interviews with 8 girls aged between 15 and 16, Fuller identified a very distinctive subculture.

These girls were extremely committed and focused on the educational requirements necessary for a successful career. They received high academic success due to their private application both in class and at home. To maintain friendships with less academic students and shun any association of being a 'good pupil', they distanced themselves from the teacher and acted like everyone else. (Heinemann, Sociology) (Browne, Sociology). The Pygmalion effect is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy where <https://assignbuster.com/the-usefulness-of-an-interactionists-perspective-on-education/>

people will believe their negative label and those with positive labels succeed accordingly. Rosenthal and Jacobson carried out an experimental study to back up the belief that the end result can be influenced by the expectations of others.

Rosenthal predicted that if teachers were given information about certain students having higher IQ's than others then the teacher might act in a way, which may positively affect and encourage the student's success. Two other researchers Feldman and Prohaska decided to reverse this study in 1979. In the first experiment students were told either positive or negative information about their teacher. Students with negative expectations scored 52. 2% students with positive expectations scored 65.

8%, non-verbal students leaned forward more and made better eye contact. Pupils portraying positive, non-verbal behaviour were happier and more competent. Teacher receiving positive behaviour taught more effectively. Therefore performance is influenced by expectation and behaviour.

(Wikipedia.

Pygmalion effect 24/10/11) Subcultures, are groups of people who have different 'VALUES', ideas about right and wrong, and different ways of behaving to the rest of society 'NORMS'. Working class children might join an 'anti school', subculture, where the group believes that education is a waste of time. The subculture spends time doing things school disapproves of, being rude, fighting, not doing homework and truanting. Language is part of the subculture of class, upper and middle class people talk with an extensive, elaborated vocabulary which working class pupils may find hard

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to understand. Working class pupils will talk with restricted speech, text talk or slang.

Upper and middle class pupils are able to understand both elaborate and restricted speech. All these things can lead to working class pupils to fail. The Pygmalion effect refers to the belief that the greater the expectation placed on children, students and employees, the better they perform. Using the evidence in the body of this essay, it is clear to see that the interactionist perspective on education is a very useful and important part of the education system. When the positive and negative areas of studies, which have been and are being completed, are acted upon, the interactionist perspective would be the first point of reference in developing the education system with macro theories adding their experience and effective input. The interactionist perspective takes account of the importance of what happens inside schools and classrooms, rather than putting the blame for educational failure on the pupil, their family, their cultural values and attitudes or circumstances arising from their social class background.

Hopefully encouraging those labelled to act positively, through hard work and academic success. An education policy which has recently been activated saw " free schools" being opened in September 2011. These schools are all ability, state funded schools, which have been set up in response to local people's requests to improve education for children in their area. Giving children the opportunity to learn and develop in a way that's best for them. Free schools aim to tackle educational inequality, or marginalised groups, as over the years the gap in educational attainment between rich and poor has widened.

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Free schools provide teachers with more power than politicians and are more accountable to parents, this gives the school more freedom over what is taught and how students are assessed. This new system has been set up in the hope that parents and children will have more choice in the school they attend and meets their educational needs.