

# Streaming: A Sociological Perspective

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## Introduction

An ideal view of streaming would have us justify the process of sorting and selecting students into different classes (stream A, B, C etc.) and schools (junior lyceum, secondary, trade schools, craft centres etc.) in terms of a number of educational goals. In attempting to organise class and school membership on the grounds of similarity of academic abilities and occupational aspirations, streaming is said to facilitate the achievement of the following positive ends:

- \* Teaching is more effectively carried out because students proceed at roughly the same rates through the learning tasks;
- \* Appropriate pedagogies, curricula, texts and teachers can be delivered to different kinds of students according to the latter's particular needs, abilities and inclinations.

In this ideal view, both students and teachers stand to gain from streaming. Students are spared the constant embarrassment of competing with more able classmates, or the injustice of being slowed down by those who are less capable. Teachers, on the other hand, feel reassured because there is less of a risk of addressing their teaching at only one group of students in their class. Few would moreover deny that the teaching of mixed ability classes requires more — and different kinds of — skills, and that teachers training courses in Malta have generally failed to foster such skills<sup>1</sup>.

Underpinning the argument in favour of streaming is an unexpressed belief in what is often referred to as "meritocracy", or the conviction that Intelligence plus Effort equals Success (at school and in terms of future life-chances<sup>2</sup>). In academic circles, meritocracy has been shown to be more an exception than a rule, but it still holds sway on the minds of many parents, teachers, educational policy-makers, as well as students. One and all tend to liken education to a race in which "*all compete on equal terms for a limited number of prizes, and in which premature judgements about the results of the race are avoided*" (Watts, 1985). In this contest, there is mobility for those who are capable and those who try. In other words, those who find themselves in low streams and in low-status schools (and eventually in the "lower" ranks of the

labour market) have only themselves (and their genetic endowment) to blame. Within this logic, streaming is a fair and impartial allocation of places according to intrinsic ability and effort to achieve.

My intention in this article is to first of all place the ideal view of streaming elaborated above within a set of sociological arguments, thus problematising views which have assumed a common-sense quality about them. In so doing, I will be challenging the prevalently held notion of meritocracy to suggest — and offer explanations for the fact — that students coming from "higher" social class groups are more likely to be in top streams and in high status schools, and that the inverse is true for those coming from "lower" social class groups. In other words, I will be arguing that when we stream we are involved in a process of social, not ability selection, and that streaming is therefore inadmissible since it goes against the most basic principles of democracy.

In the mounting of this argument, I will make reference to reproduction theories of education. These have been classified by Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) in terms of economic reproduction theories — as represented by the writing of Bowles and Gintis (1976); cultural reproduction theories — whose main exponent is Bourdieu (1973); and ideological reproduction theories as formulated by Gramsci (1971) among others. Reproduction theories have in common the belief that schooling is not a neutral process, but rather is serving the interests of the economy — and of those who have a privileged position within the economic structure — through a variety of ways. It is actively engaged in the selection and sorting of students along class lines so that the children of the dominating class inherit — through "education" — the privileges of the parents. The obvious corollary of this is, of course, that the children of the dominated classes remain disadvantaged, and thus the social structure, injustices and all, is reproduced from one generation to the next.

Economic reproduction theories suggest that students from different social class are differentially processed in schools and this in turn predisposes them to fit positions in the occupational structure accordingly. Cultural reproduction theories argue that this differentiation and streaming is further strengthened by the fact that the

culture of the school is generally that of the dominant class, and that this gives an advantage to the privileged. Ideological reproduction theories examine the way schools transmit messages in hidden and explicit ways in order to promote the *status quo*, even when this, as is being suggested, is unjust. These are very serious accusations levelled at an institution which for decades has been considered to be a democratic and democratising influence in the West<sup>3</sup>. I will therefore give a brief but thorough account of economic and cultural reproduction theories, making only a cursory reference to ideological reproduction theories since these have a peripheral relationship to streaming when compared to the former two theories.

### Economic Reproduction Theories

While the three master minds of classical sociological thought, namely Durkheim, Marx and Weber, have all considered the role of schooling within a wider social context, it has been Bowles and Gintis' (1976) work which has been most influential in formulating the contemporary debate on education in its macro dimensions. Bowles and Gintis build on the insights provided by Marx to suggest that all institutions in the superstructure of society — including the family, the legal system, the church, the media, and schooling — are to a large extent determined by the economic base of that society. In other words, it is the way the economy is organised which "determines"<sup>4</sup> the form and character of, in our case, schooling.

In capitalist societies, argue Bowles and Gintis, we have a segmented labour market which needs different kinds of workers (entrepreneurs, professionals, technicians, manual workers, etc) arranged in an hierarchical relationship with regards to each other, with regards to financial and status rewards, and with regards to those who own capital and the means of production. It is vital for the survival and reproduction of capitalist societies to somehow ensure that the population does not all end up in the most rewarding occupational stratas. Society needs a variety of socialisation mechanisms to direct different groups towards particular locations in the labour market. While families and the media are powerful socialisation forces, Bowles and Gintis identify schools as having the foremost influence in the selection and sorting of generation upon generation of children. By providing different kinds of educational experiences in different streams and schools, society ensures that students end up with different — or no — qualifications, and that they are then channelled to corresponding jobs.

Bowles and Gintis make two points here: first that the structures, organisation and relationships prevalent in schools generally mirror the needs of the economy. Capitalist work places have a number of characteristics, among these being an emphasis on hierarchical rather than participative relationships, the fragmentation of tasks which alienates the worker from his/her product and from colleagues, the carrying out of tasks for the sake of an extrinsic reward (a wage). It is easy to see the correspondence between these characteristics and what takes place in schools. The Department of Education assumes the role of the expert, with students (and in a Maltese context, some would say the Head and the teachers<sup>5</sup>) having little or no say about the choice of curricula, as well as the pace and direction of learning. Students are alienated from a holistic understanding of the world they live in through a fragmented rather than integrated subject approach. They are alienated from each other physically (note the seating arrangements in most of our schools) and morally (competition rather than co-operation is the norm). Like workers, students are encouraged to give more importance to extrinsic rewards: it is grades ("wages") rather than the intrinsic satisfaction of learning which most often counts. More close to the focus of this article is the fact that as in workplaces, students are streamed in different locations which have a differential access to rewards in terms of both life-chances and status.

Bowles and Gintis make a second point. Within this general framework of correspondence, different schools prepare specific groups of students for specific types of work. Elite schools catering for the children of executives and professionals are a very different kind of animal to working class schools. Both encourage pedagogies; patterns of school work and styles of control which promote traits and skills required by on the one hand executive and professional-type work, and manual-type work on the other. Anyon's (1980) research is of particular importance in this regard because her observations in schools catering for different socio-economic groups (the elite executive, the affluent professional, the middle class, and the working class) provide qualitative and substantive evidence for Bowles and Gintis' arguments which were in the main based on statistics and formal theorising.

Anyon's research suggests that the children of the American elite receive a schooling which involves them in a process of creative discovery of concepts and principles underlying knowledge. Teachers in these elite schools were observed explaining the procedures and purpose of every activity they organised, giving their students the opportunity to discuss the direction the lesson/unit

would take. In these schools, students are encouraged to experiment, investigate, observe, draw conclusions, organise results and report them. They are given frequent and immediate feedback, have ample opportunity for group and self-expression, and are exposed to a wide variety of teaching styles and contexts which include discussion, field trips and research projects. Control is generally exercised through negotiation with students, with reasons being given for every decision taken, encouraging students to develop their own class rules and to monitor their own behaviour.

It is quite easy to note the correspondence between such a socialisation and the traits of self-determination, authority, total conception of task, planning abilities and so on which are required by the executive, managerial and professional jobs in society.

In direct contrast are the patterns of school work, pedagogies and forms of control in schools catering for working class students. Anyon notes that here the emphasis is on mechanical and rote learning, the blind following of pre-set tasks over which students have little control or choice. There is little done by teachers in these schools to encourage a holistic understanding of the nature of the tasks at hand, and the relationship of this to wider systems of knowledge and meaning. There is an overall emphasis placed on copying as opposed to the creative production of knowledge: students copy from the blackboard or stencilled notes during a variety of lessons. Assessment depends not on whether the ideas expressed by the students are correct, but on whether they approximate to the teachers' notes. Control is characterised not by negotiation, but by imposition on the part of the teacher, and resistance on the part of the students. This resistance to the curricula and pedagogy can be so aggressive that at times teachers capitulate, promising not to give any work as long as students remain quiet.

Here too, the correspondence between working class schooling and the character of most working class jobs is obvious. These students' present school work is preparing them for occupations characterised by routine and mechanical labour, where there is little control over the tasks to be done, and where obedience rather than questioning, understanding, and participation is desirable. The conflictual rather than co-operative style of relationship with authority developed at school will last throughout their working career, where various types of resistance including *soldiering*, *slowdowns* and *sabotage* (cf. Carlson, 1982) learned at school will be used again and again in reaction to exploitative and dehumanising working conditions.

Bowles and Gintis' work as well as that of

Anyon afford a much more sophisticated and detailed exposition than the brief and selective overview I have given of their argument above. There have also been important developments on their work. Bowles and Gintis have, for instance, been criticised for being too functionalist (i.e. for over-emphasising the determination of schools by the economy leaving little agency to teachers, parents and other pressure groups to promote different versions of schooling), for focusing only on social class (i.e. ignoring the way schooling promotes inequality on the grounds of gender, race and ethnicity), and for presenting a conspiratorial view of social engineering (i.e. as if educational directors got together with capitalists and planned schools in such a way that students from different social classes received different and occupationally "appropriate" learning experiences). Despite such critiques, the basic insights developed by Bowles and Gintis have been applied to educational analyses in a variety of countries (cf. Da Silva's work in Brazil, and Connel *et al.*'s research in Australia, for instance), and form the basis for all major developments in contemporary sociological theory (cf. Cole, 1988).

There is, to my knowledge, no analysis of Maltese schooling as a source of economic reproduction within the theoretical framework elaborated above. However, initial data being collected in the ethnographic data bank of the Trade School Research Project — which the author is carrying out with the help of a number of research students — is already indicating that schools in Malta treat students from different social classes differentially. The work tasks assigned, the relationships encouraged, the control techniques used — one and all exhibit a correspondence to the future occupational paths deemed "realistic" for the students in question. Gatt and Vassallo-Agius' (1988) research in "Fra Mudest Primary School" also reports similar types of processes with lower streamed students, even though their analysis remains at the micro level of interacting. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that there are a variety of studies which show that there is a high correlation between social class and streaming, indicating that the chances of being in a low stream for a working class child are very high (Jackson, 1964; Coclough and Beck, 1986; Oakes, 1985 among others). A number of recent dissertations carried out in Malta suggest that the same correlations apply locally (Baldacchino, 1988; Gatt and Vassallo-Agius, 1988; Hili, 1988).

## Cultural Reproduction Theories

**T**he economic reproduction perspective attempts to describe how schools promote social inequality through their practices, and to explain the rather unexpected findings through

out the seventies and into the eighties in a number of countries that despite the widespread increase of schooling for all, there was little evidence of social mobility. In other words, as Health and Ridge (1980) discovered in the United Kingdom, children of the working classes were highly unlikely to get jobs outside of their class, and thus social positions were inherited from generation to the next.

Such findings placed the notion of meritocracy in jeopardy. If, however, one moves away from the logic of meritocracy to mount a different set of arguments, then it becomes increasingly clear why there are social patterns in who ends up in the low streams and low-status schools. Cultural reproduction theories complement economic reproduction approaches in their analysis of education and power, focusing, however, on the way the dominant culture is imposed in schools. This new framework has been presented by — among others — Bernstein and Willis in the U.K., and Bourdieu in France. Bernstein can be credited with being the first sociologist to suggest that working class students experience failure at school not because they are intellectually less capable, but because their language code, embedded in a set of cultural experiences and meanings conditioned by the material circumstances of their class membership, does not give them access to the meanings and knowledge transmitted within middle-class institutions in middle class language codes. While at first the notion of a “restricted code” led to the viewing of working class children as being culturally deprived, Labov’s (1969) critiques helped Bernstein — and others who have followed his lead in critical and interpretative sociology of education — to clarify the initial position. It is Bourdieu (1973), who has developed Bernstein’s initial insights with most sophistication. Bourdieu’s explanation for working class failure at school suggests the following sequence:

(1) Each class of people — and Bourdieu has a Weberian rather than Marxist notion of class — has developed a particular set of meaning systems, values, perceptions, attitudes, inclinations which are related to its particular position in the overall social structure. This set of inter-related factors Bourdieu calls a *habitus*, a word which incorporates but goes beyond the notion of class culture.

(2) All social classes have their own *habitus*, but the educational system in France (and Bourdieu’s analyses have been accepted in countries as far flung as the U.S.A., Brazil, Britain, New Caledonia, Australia and New Zealand) recognises and promotes only one *habitus*, that of the ruling class. While the children of the ruling classes find continuity between their socialisation in the family and the meanings and symbols within the school, the children of the dominated classes find schooling an alien and alienating experience. The

school does not give their *habitus* (e.g. linguistic and behavioural styles) legitimacy, and imposes one cultural arbitrary — the *habitus* of the ruling classes — on all as if it were the only and best one in society.

(3) This imposition results in a process of what Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence*, whereby dominated class students unconsciously accept that the “referent” (in Bissseret’s terms, 1979) is the culture of the school, and they thereby judge themselves — and are labelled by significant others — as incapable and unintelligent. This process of “learned ignorance” damages — probably for ever — the self-image of the student who blames him/herself rather than the system for failing. These students do not succeed in fully “penetrating” (Willis, 1976) the way the system works in patterning their disadvantage, and thus they feel they only have themselves to blame for their position in lower streams in the primary schools, lower-status secondary schools, and eventually lower-status, lower-paid manual jobs. Such a blame-the-victim approach is important, because the blaming of the system would lead to social unrest. Through this form of ideological reproduction, hegemonic control is maintained (Gramsci, 1971). Willis (1977) also shows how some students do resist the cultural and ideological imposition of dominant class schooling, but in rejecting schooling they also reject intellectual labour and damn themselves to the class position the school wills on them.

(4) The children of the ruling classes, on the other hand, enter the educational race with a distinct advantage. They have already inherited from the home the “cultural capital” which the schooling system requires (a conceptual style which operates in the abstract, for instance). Therefore they do well at school — not necessarily because they are innately and generally more capable or “intelligent” — but simply because in comparison to other groups with other *habitus*es, they are at an advantage. Bourdieu suggests that cultural and linguistic capital is in this way transformed into educational capital (in the form of credentials), and this in turn leads to the better jobs in society and thus to economic capital. The children of the ruling class therefore rule once again, and power is inherited as surely as in pre-modern times. In other words Bourdieu — taking a very different line of argument from and drawing on different evidence than that used by Bowles and Gintis — comes to the same conclusion: schooling promotes rather than reduces the reproduction of inequalities.

### The Notion of Ability

**T**hese sociological arguments challenge the very foundation of our streaming procedures. They suggest that when we stream, we are involved in a process of social, not academic



selection<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, the very notion of ability and innate intelligence which underlies attempts to justify streaming need to be re-evaluated in relation to reproduction theories. Those who accept a meritocratic view of education have an implicit belief in a specific notion of intelligence, one which has been influenced by Arthur Jensen's work and which believes that it is heredity which largely determines a child's intellectual potential, and that this potential is fixed, unchanging and subject to accurate measurement.

While this view was scarcely questioned in the 1920s and 1930s, *Jensenism* has today lost most of its credibility, and with it the belief that "*the blame of educational failure is located in the insular individual and his or her genetic endowment or personal environment, instead of in the very social process which organised education represents*" (Richardson, 1982, p. 182).

It is not possible to present a detailed critique of common-sense conceptions of psychology and heredity in this context, although this exercise would certainly be beneficial. Suffice it to point out the unfounded but strong beliefs in ability as natural talent, in intelligence as a unitary concept, and in the distribution of natural talent along a curve of normal distribution, just like height and weight are. Christensen *et al.* (1986) report, for instance, that those who had traditionally been labelled as "learning disabled" often came from low status groups in society, such as working class students or members of ethnic "minorities". The authors conclude that here the schools purport to select on grounds of ability, when in fact they are differentiating on social criteria.

This is where the work of psychologists like Luria, Vygotsky and Bruner<sup>7</sup> ties in with the cultural reproduction theories discussed earlier, and with the modern conception of ability to learn as residing not so much in the students' supposed limitations and failures (whether in their conceptual apparatus or in their environment), but rather in terms of the actual teaching quality itself (Nisbet and Entwistle, 1982).

### Streaming and Maltese Teachers

**D**armanin (1985) has suggested that while officials of the *Malta Union of Teachers* have consistently denounced streaming, many of the practitioners are themselves in favour of it. Gatt and Vassallo-Agius (1988) report that as many as 90% of the teachers in their school believed that streaming was beneficial to all pupils. While the result of a national survey launched in June 1988 by the Department of Education to find out the opinions of parents and children on streaming are not yet available, I would not be at all surprised that even these groups would be averse

to destreaming. I would suggest a number of reasons for the prevailing opposition to destreaming. I have already suggested that the teaching of mixed "ability" classes require skills — and resources — which Maltese teachers might consider themselves to lack. For control reasons too, teachers might prefer to have a class progressing at the same pace so that the orchestration of tasks commences and terminates roughly at the same time for all.

An important reason for resistance to the idea of destreaming is probably the fact that it — together with the ideologically parallel initiative of comprehensivisation — had already been tried in the early seventies, and was considered to have failed. However, while the education reforms of the Labour government of the time were democratic in intent and ideologically consistent, the suddenness of the exercise, the lack of consultation with teachers, the lack of training and offering of concrete alternatives (Darmanin, 1985, p. 176), one and all have led to an aversion of the possibility of the repetition of a similar experiment. Teachers and parents (who are often both at the same time) associated destreaming with the fall of academic standards, but in fact, the former — if correctly implemented — will not lead to the latter. Indeed, the intention is to remove the limitations inevitably imposed by streaming, and to develop a system whereby each child is encouraged and enabled to develop its full potential.

This poses a *pedagogic* challenge and the raising of educational achievement for all. The latter is not wishful thinking: there is now a long tradition of educational research which strongly suggests that most children gain academically (Daniels, 1961), socially (Willing, 1963), and in the motivation to learn and interact (Chetcuti, 1961) from non-streamed situations. Simon (1970) reports that on the basis of similar research results, the Swedish parliament passed a law making it illegal to stream pupils below the age of fifteen.

Finally, streaming will remain unless the whole educational system is given an overhaul and is brought into the twentieth century. The competitive striving for exams and grades blinkers parents and their children from the meaning of true education as personal growth in a community of caring people, identifying "success" with pure academia and the collection of inert knowledge and certificates. Within this system, destreaming cannot make sense because the concept begs a notion of education which is completely different to the way it is currently being defined. I would therefore argue a case for the professionalisation of teachers based on their commitment to a true democratisation of education where each individual is empowered to grow in all his/her human aspects. The removal of streaming is only one, but highly significant starting point.

## Notes

1. This problem is compounded by the shortage of trained teachers, and the large numbers of casual teachers and instructors in Maltese schools. Sources from the Department of Education have claimed that as many as 20% of primary school teachers are untrained (i.e. have "casual instructor" status).
2. The concept "life chances", as developed by Weber, refers to the probability of a person of a specified status achieving a specified goal or suffering a specific disadvantage. The concept therefore suggests that there are regular patterns to the biographies of individuals and groups, and "educational life chances" refers to the regular features found in educational biographies and group experiences (Meighan, 1986).
3. Although in Malta, of course, the Labour Movements' reforms in education — including destreaming at the primary level, comprehensivisation at the secondary level, and freer access at the tertiary level — did have an understanding of the part played by formal education institutions in the reproduction of an elite.
4. The nature and extent of this "determination" has been an issue of important debate for a number of social theorists. Althusser (1971) for instance argued that superstructural elements like the school had a "relative autonomy" from the economic base, although he also argued that the latter enjoyed determination "in the last instance".
5. Refer to Sultana (1989) for a discussion of the way teachers in Malta are "deskilled".
6. We even have Maltese research, reported by Borg and Falzon (1988) and discussed in their article in this issue of *Education*, which indicates that our selection procedures go wrong on other grounds as well: streaming in primary schools depends, to a great extent, on a person's gender and age.
7. The movement toward the so-called "new" or "critical" psychology is gaining ground, and useful discussions can be found in Youngman (1986), Leonard (1984), Wexler (1983) and in the works of social theorists of the Frankfurt School.

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