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Research Proposal

*An Analysis of Pupil Reports*

Investigating Research

Word count: 2523

## **An Analysis of Pupil Reports**

### **Statement of research issue**

The investigation involves the analysis of annual reports on pupils in a secondary school. The reports inform the parent or guardian of the progress made by their child in school, often acting as the one formal contact between the school and the home in relation to academic progress. I approach the subject however from the premise that close analysis will reveal that the reports are engaged in much more. The work of recent sociologists highlights the role of school processes in the construction of, amongst other things, gender, ability and class. I will argue that the pupil report plays a significant part in this process. Evidence will be acquired through an analysis of text in the reports. The approach will be guided by, amongst others, the work of Dowling and Brown. With the material available, this study will necessarily be mainly limited to issues of gender. A more extensive analysis would require access to student records and interviews with students and their parents.

### **Empirical and theoretical background**

While the analysis is to take place largely outside the social setting, some context exploration is necessary. This will involve charting the role of reporting following the introduction of the National Curriculum and its assessment procedures. Although these changes are long established, I will argue that they are significant in the study as they result in a foregrounding of more detailed academic progress in a more performance oriented school system (Ball 2004). While 'common sense' would indicate that this is helpful in underlining the prime purpose of attending school, in practice, for some pupils the highlighting of the performance culture may be detrimental.

In the light of the above, Power and Clark's (Power & Clark 2000) research into school reports and parents' evenings gives a valuable context in which to set this investigation. Their research draws on data from a survey of schools, coupled with parental interviews. The two produce quite contradictory results. While the school generally reports satisfaction with their arrangements, the interview data reveals considerable dissatisfaction. Parents often felt that 'comments were bland and gave them no direction' (Ibid. p.38). Of significance to the intended study is the conclusion that the 'decoding' of the report is easier for middle class parents than working class.

While here the focus is on class, the findings point to a possible issue to address in relation to gender. Thus, although the above will assist in locating the investigation, it is beyond the scope of this enquiry to reveal empirical evidence in relation to parent or pupil perceptions. A further investigation, coupling an analysis of the text with parent and pupil interviews or surveys would be needed to follow this line.

Of considerable relevance to the investigation is the changing emphasis in sociological research into schooling. Faced with the intractable problems of underachievement of working class pupils, the focus has moved from external factors to the internal processes of the school and the relationship between the two. Historic works of Hargreaves (1967) and Willis (1978) expose the social reproductive processes of the school. These processes have persisted through the large scale structural changes such as the introduction of comprehensive schools, the National Curriculum, and national testing. More recent research has been informed by sociologists such as Bourdieu (1986) and Foucault (1977). In the case of Bourdieu, his work involving the key concepts of cultural capital and habitus have enabled exploration of the cultural discontinuity between the school and the home. In Foucault we see an exploration of the dynamics of power. The impact of these two in particular has been considerable in more recent educational research which has focussed on the constellation of influences creating identity as a dynamic process. Each from a different perspective, Walkerdine (2001), Youdell (2006) and Gillborn and Youdell (2000) vividly demonstrate the significance of the school process. The two research articles featured in my critical review, each foregrounds a different area in connection with this. Mac Ruairc's work (Mac Ruairc, 2011) is concerned with language discontinuity and the work of Dunne and Gazeley (2008) concerns teacher perceptions of underachievement. I acknowledge that in singling out gender in this research, I am in danger of losing the dynamic of the interplay with other factors, ethnicity, class and ability. Nevertheless, with the current debate concerning gender and academic achievement (see, for example, The Guardian, 2012), this focus is of particular interest.

### **Methodological background**

While a great deal of research has been carried out on analysis of text, little seems to have been applied to reports written about pupils. In seeking to move towards a

methodology from this theoretical background I turn therefore to work of a slightly different nature, specifically in the analysis of text in the school environment.

Much of the background to the two studies which will be considered comes directly or indirectly from the work of Bernstein (1977). He has been of considerable influence in highlighting language and culture in schooling, but in further providing an analytic structure for pedagogy.

The early work of Dowling referred to in Dowling and Brown (2010) analyses the content of a published mathematics curriculum. Through this he explores connections between language, class and ability as portrayed by the text. He produces evidence to show how the presentation of maths differs for pupils of differing ability and how this is further related to class through assumptions about the nature of employment. Whilst Dowling's work is focused on class and it relates to a specific curriculum area, a number of important principles relate to the work which foregrounds gender. Of perhaps greatest significance is the fact that Dowling, in his Social Activity Method espoused in Dowling (2009), has developed an analytic tool which may enable categorisation and exploration of teachers' statements applicable to a range of situations.

Brown (1999) examines a primary school maths project, the intention of which is to engage the parent and home in the development of the child's ability in maths. Much of Brown's work involves analysis of the communications between the home and the school. Two aspects of the study are of interest to this research. The first is the analysis of school produced booklets for the parent. For this he uses a structure based on the work of Dowling referred to above. He examines the texts, drawing on a number of facets of which I will highlight two. One is the regulatory relationship between the transmitter and acquirer, in particular the positioning of the acquirer, in this case the parent. The other is at the structural level, involving the distinction between the esoteric domain where content and expression are both strongly classified and the public domain where both are non-specialised. His application of this structure to the analysis of the booklets enables him to describe the position created for the parent. His conclusion, illustrated in his analysis of one of the booklets is that 'The school is opening up the home as a potential site for official

pedagogic practice, but in doing so is placing the parent in a subordinate position' (ibid p.138)

The second area is his analysis of parents' comments about the work carried out by the pupil. In this task, Brown constructs a network, creating categories which, for example distinguish between the 'acquirer' and the 'task' and within the 'acquirer' category distinguishing between 'competence' and 'disposition'.

A number of aspects of both Brown and Dowling's work are applicable to the research topic in hand. In addition to the methodology, they raise questions about the positioning of the parent in relation to the pedagogy, although this may be confused by the lack clarity about audience. By secondary school both parent and pupil are perceived as the audience along with the school's hierarchy.

### **The data and some preliminary work**

The data under consideration for this study consists of a set of annual reports written about pupils in one secondary school. There are some 200 pupils, each studying approximately 10 subjects, giving a total of at least 2000 reports. While this may sound a large number, care will need to be taken to counteract the effect of an individual teacher writing a large number of reports and as a result this teacher's approach being overrepresented. The reports vary in length, but tend to consist of six or so sentences in length. They are contained in an Access database constructed by myself. This means that initial interrogation will be relatively simple.

Although the analysis of text in relation to gender will be the main focus, the fact that the pupils are in ability sets for many subjects raises the prospect of the analysis extending to perceived ability. Furthermore, different year groups present different issues. Year 10 reports present the opportunity to consider the relationship to the combination of other subjects followed by the pupil. Year 9 reports have traditionally been seen to contain messages recruiting or cooling out pupils in relation to option subjects.

Reading a cross section of reports throws up a number of possible approaches. A simple interrogation could be used seeking individual words to reveal easily accessible patterns. The frequency of use of words in male and female reports

instantly reveals interesting data. For example, the word 'lovely' appears in ten reports for girls and only one for boys. In the same set of reports, the word 'conscientious' appears in reports for five boys, but nineteen girls. This alone is an interesting result in the light of the work of Walkerdine (1989) and others, who raise questions about gender and *how* pupils work.

Despite the earlier exploration of theoretical stances, the intention is to approach the data by using grounded theory. The aim here is to seek through interrogation of the text, to reveal the theory; essentially an inductive process. The seminal work in this area is that by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Since then a great deal of divergence has taken place in the methodology, not least between the authors mentioned above, particularly in the degree of prescription. There has also been the introduction of alternative approaches, such as the constructivist approach advocated by Charmaz (2005). A number of the different interpretations are outlined in Cresswell (2007).

Reading a set of reports with the fundamental question 'what is this report about?' will be the start of the process. From this reading it should be possible to identify a number of issues of importance to the report writer. These are assigned codes in the form of a short phrase. This coding is a form of content analysis designed to conceptualise the issues to reach beyond the 'noise' of the raw data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocate what they call 'micro-analysis coding', where every word is analysed. For extensive data such as presented here, it would be impractical and suffers the problem of potential loss of focus.

From this initial analysis, more detailed analysis will be carried out, coding more and more data, and developing the coding system. The on-going development is a crucial aspect of grounded theory, where, as referred to above, the intention is to allow the theory to emerge from the data. The coding at this stage is known as 'open coding'. Code notes and memos about the codes are both important to keep track of the developments.

Axial coding, which will follow, is about relating codes to each other in new ways. There is a question here about whether to follow the standard procedure for a coding paradigm. This, as described in Cresswell (2007), involves a frame which identifies a central concept, the phenomenon, and a series of other elements; the causal conditions, the context, the intervening conditions, the action strategies, and the

consequences. I raise this as a question as in comparison with other uses of grounded theory the data being analysed was produced for a purpose other than for an enquiry. This means that it was created within the confines of specific guidelines, even though these may be tacit. There is a clear expectation about what a report should contain. In data produced from a more open interview, the authors intentions are more likely to come to the fore. I believe this issue will become apparent and the investigation proceeds and may require some adaptation of technique.

The final step will be selective coding in which hypotheses are developed from the relationship between the categories.

It is clear from the array of interpretations, and directions of development of grounded theory that a number of stances could be taken on this data. As previously mentioned, the data itself is somewhat unusual. I have already referred to one unusual aspect, but a strength rests with the consistency and therefore ease of access. I therefore intend to pick out elements of techniques appropriate to the needs of the research, rather than to slavishly follow a model.

That the Access database containing the reports was coded by myself enables additional procedures to readily be incorporated to query the data. On the other hand, an initial exploration of the software QSR NVivo specifically designed for the coding process has some attractions. This will be further investigated.

### **Ethical issues**

The data was originally collected for an alternative purpose, the audience being parents and pupils. This raises a potential conflict with BSA Statement of Ethical Practice (2002). The conflict is considerably reduced for a number of reasons. No names will be used, either of teachers or pupils. Furthermore, they will not be identifiable through the text as interrogation of the data will involve words, phrases and at most whole sentences rather than entire reports. Furthermore, the data was produced some time ago, in 2004. On the other hand, the identity of the school will be available through the name of the researcher who was employed in the school over a long period of time. Permission has been sought and agreed by the head teacher of the school and the IOE procedure for the ethical approval of research will be followed.

### **Anticipated outcomes**

In a secondary school, reports are one of the few contacts with parents, but as Power and Clark (2000) have found, their value is questionable. As a former member of a schools' leadership team, I am aware that an extraordinary amount of energy is expended in their production. Senior staff generally read the reports, but their concern is one of public relations; ensuring quality control in terms of use of language. The hope is the study will raise awareness of what is actually being transmitted. Once this is understood, there is potential to refocus on more significant pedagogic aspects.

The scope for further extension of this work is considerable. In one direction, the outcomes could be triangulated with interviews with parents. The relationships with class and perceived ability could be explored. It may also be possible to apply a number of perspectives to the coding of the text. The influence of Foucault would result in an analysis of power relations. Reference to Bourdieu would raise questions of the cultural capital in the field of the school. It would even be possible to focus on purely pedagogic characteristics, examining patterns based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1984).

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Critical Review

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**Where words collide: Social class, school and linguistic discontinuity: Mac Ruairc, G.**

**British Journal of Sociology of Education Vol. 32 No, 4 July 2011, 541-561**

**Teachers, social class and underachievement: Dunne, M. & Gazeley, L**

**British Journal of Sociology of Education Vol. 29 No, 5 Sept 2008, 451-463**

### **Introduction:**

Both papers reviewed are concerned with the seemingly intractable problem of underachievement of working class pupils in school. They are both essentially qualitative studies, and both make the assumption that success or otherwise in schooling is associated with social class. The mechanism by which social class acts is where the main difference comes in. Mac Ruairc's work focuses on the linguistic demands made by the school in relation to the pupil's home background. The work by Dunne and Gazeley explores the principles by which teachers recognise apparent ability, and the consequences of this. These approaches are reflected in the methodology adopted.

### **Theoretical background:**

Current approaches to research into schooling emphasise the relationship between the culture of the home and the school. Research in the sociology of education during the 1960s and 1970s raised awareness of the considerable mismatch between the home and school culture. The seminal work of Hargreaves, *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (Hargreaves, 1967) is one such example. More recent researchers have focussed on the in-school processes which serve to characterise the learner and his/her successes or failures in the system. Examples are to be found in the work of Gillborn and Youdell described in *Rationing Education* (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) or Walkerdine (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). It is within this research culture that both the papers can be located.

Mac Ruairc argues that the view of class as a product of economic structure is being replaced by the view that working class culture is positioned as a result of cultural and symbolic resources. In describing the background to his research, he focuses

on one such cultural symbol, language register. He uses the term 'language climate' (p.543) to describe the linguistic aspects of the school culture and argues that it creates different linguistic contexts for working class and middle class pupils. It should be noted that this is hardly a modern view, elements of which can be traced back to Bernard Shaw in 1912 with *Pygmalion* (Shaw, 1946) and a resurrection in educational research in the work of Rosenthal and Jacobson in the 1960s (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968).

Mac Ruairc defines two areas in which his research takes place. One area he refers to as 'the school space' (p.543). By this he means all aspects of school both within and outside classroom. The research is concerned with the contrast with non-school space where children, in Bernstein's terms 'acquire common place knowledge' (Bernstein 1966). In addition to the analytic structures developed by Bernstein he explores the impact of this discontinuity with reference to Bourdieu (1986), in particular the concept of symbolic violence and its involvement in social reproduction. The second area in which he carries out his research is with respect to language and the individual. Here he explores the constructed nature of the individual in relation to language.

Although both papers are in essence concerned with lack of social mobility, Mac Ruairc contextualises his work in relation to theory, whereas Dunne and Gazeley situate theirs in an evidence base of official statistics. In the case of the latter, situating the work involves a number of references to DfES (Department for Education and Science, now the Department for Education) papers based on national statistics. Research papers quoted tend to be of a quantitative nature, citing correlations between social class and such measures as qualifications, basic numeracy, access to higher education and exclusion rates. Nevertheless in their review of potential causes they too look largely towards school processes, and the contradictions between home and school culture. In finally locating their research, they argue that 'recent work on power and process within institutions has provided a conceptual space [...] to explore social class as a process' (p.454), referring to work by Reay (1998) and Skeggs (2004).

The projects appear to arise from different backgrounds, and this seems to be a factor influencing both the approach, as described above and the methodology. Mac

Ruairc's work is carried out by one individual based in university, whereas the work by Dunne and Gazeley is part of larger project commissioned by the now defunct 'Multiverse', with an interest in initial teacher training.

Mac Ruairc's work is based on three schools. (It should be noted that these are in Ireland and therefore a there is a possibility of some cultural differences.) Using Ireland's Small Area Population Sample, together with school records, he selects two schools which are predominantly working class and one which is predominantly middle class. He confirms validity of his sample with data from the schools on percentages in different occupational groups. The correlation between class and percentile scores in standardised test attainment levels in vocabulary and comprehension are shown graphically. (Fig. 1 p. 546). While the correlation clearly shows higher scores amongst the middle class pupils, there are some outstanding exceptions at either end of the table. (These would make a fascinating study, in particular the high scoring working class pupils.) Although the sample selection process may seem unproblematic, it is interesting to reflect on the earlier discussion regarding the nature of class in relation to schooling. The work by Lipton (2004) in context of UK Inspections raises importance of examining detail of school intake.

The sample size in case of Dunne and Gazeley is considerably greater, using nine secondary schools. Rather than one researcher, the data collection is more opportunistic, making use of trainee teachers and teachers in their regular roles. The sample is therefore restricted to those schools chosen by the University for training their students and those schools which are prepared to accept students. While there are no claims for the universal nature of the findings, in examining the significance of any findings, these possible factors should be borne in mind. (It is noted that the highest proportion of FSM students in any class is 33 %.) The study was carried out on underachieving pupils, selected from school records followed by discussion with the class teacher.

Much of the data collection for both studies involved focus group discussions. Mac Ruairc's work seeks to gain an insight into 'understandings'. This presents considerable difficulty when working with children in a school setting where any adult is identified with the authority of the school. It is made particularly difficult because it is precisely the nature of this authority and its impact that is being explored. Aspects

of the methodology served to reduce this potential difficulty. The use of friendship focus groups meant that pupils were discussing amongst their peers, while the timescale of a whole year would be expected to enable the development of a comfortable relationship with the researcher. In addition, limiting the work to one experienced researcher further helped in enabling a free dialogue and the production of valid data. There are potential ethical problems in obtaining data in this way, as following The British Sociological Association guidelines, it could be argued that in the process of creating a relaxed discussion, the underlying aim for the research becomes lost to those involved. BSA, (2002). This problem seems to have been averted by sketching at the outset, the scope of the research.

The Dunne and Gazeley research being considered reports on only one part of a larger research project. The data central to the argument concerns that derived from teacher interviews, although it is supplemented by other sources. The issues being explored are complex, involving ‘... [teacher] constructions of underachievement, classroom strategies to address it and how social class was implicated in these.’ (p.454). The task is particularly complex, and as it seeks explanation rather than correlation, requires in-depth techniques. The route taken was to focus on specific teaching groups. For each, a number of stages were followed. In summary:

- data collected from school records;
- general discussion with the class teacher;
- more detailed discussion with the teacher about specific pupils;
- pupils identified as underachieving taking part in a focus group;
- year heads interviewed about those pupils.

In adopting this approach, the researchers are clearly reaching into the perceptions of a range of players in the construction of the pupil. The process puts to work the earlier described view of ‘social class as a process’ (Reay, 1998). The school records, the classroom teacher, the pupil, and the head of year, each has a particular perspective, and each is explored. Yet, to meet the primary purpose of the study, focus remains with the teacher perception.

Use is made of trainee teachers in conducting the research. As already mentioned, this has the advantage of enabling a larger sample to be investigated, but it does

have a potential cost as a result of variation in approach of the researchers. This potential is reduced by training and presenting a structured approach to the interviews. Details of this are presented in a separate paper by Gazeley and Dunne (2005). The involvement of trainee teachers has a particular advantage in minimizing the potential for tensions in the process; they are not outsiders, but at the same time they are not part of the school's managerial structure.

A number of ethical issues could arise in a study such as this. It encompasses two potentially highly charged terms, namely, underachievement and class. While neither of these terms needs necessarily to be viewed in a pejorative fashion, this may not be how they are perceived by parents. We must assume that some discussion took place within the school and with parents about the nature of the research and its relationship to the day to day work of the school in relation to those pupils identified. It is reported (in the full report) that to avoid stigma, asked not to use the term 'underachievement'.

### **Presentation of findings and analysis of data:**

As both are qualitative research projects, much of the presentation of evidence is in the form of significant quotes from participants. In neither case is the procedure involved in the coding of the texts included in the papers, although Mac Ruairc makes reference to using Win MaxQDA to assist in the processing. With the purpose being to offer a deeper understanding of the particular situation described, no claims are made for more universal truths, although there is in each case an implicit assumption that the understandings have an application in other situations.

In his analysis of the data, Mac Ruairc positions his findings by reference to other research relating to the influence of language. He cites a number which show the influence on teacher expectation of attainment (p.547), and the work of Trudgill, (1983) which demonstrates a strong rejection of school-type language by working class children with a negative impact on their sense of identity. He refers also to his earlier work (Mac Ruairc, 2009) to make the link between linguistic repertoires and success or otherwise on national standardised tests (Irish). He points out that a number of patterns of language use such as shouting out and swearing are forbidden in all schools in Ireland, and that this is generally taken for granted.



But this research by Mac Ruairc's is concerned more specifically with how 'the expectations in schools for a narrowly codified and linguistic register' (p.547) impacts differently on different children and how this affects the way they engage with the school. In relation to this, a significant outcome of his work is evidence to suggest that irrespective of socio-economic status or gender, children are not always comfortable with school-type language. He highlights the importance of the capacity to adapt, referring to the term 'switch/style shift' coined by Llamas, Mullany and Stockwell (2007) It is the adaptation, or lack of it, and the consequences of this, which appear to mark out the differences in terms of class and gender. Lack of this ability may have a negative impact on sense of identity. He cites evidence mainly in the form of quotations from middle-class children. The quotes demonstrate the desire for positive evaluation by teachers, together with the language code of the child being more continuous with that of the school, enabling these middle class children to be able to more easily conform.

In examining the position of the working-class children he provides evidence for the notion that the formality and politeness expected in the school 'contributes to the discontinuity between [the] two cultural spaces (p.551). He does however argue that as with middle class children, they do understand what is expected of the linguistic register and behaviour. The discontinuity of the two registers is well illustrated by Mac Ruairc when he describes and quotes pupils talking about the use of nicknames. The barrier created is here very clearly expressed.

Using Bernstein's (1996) categorisation of the expressive order, Mac Ruairc argues that the pupils may perceive the school as trying to make them 'posh' and this results in considerable opposition. For some pupils this produces an overall negative attitude to the school. He cites examples of some boys linking this 'poshness' with the term 'gay', used in a powerfully negative sense, or mimicking the 'posh' accents of teachers. The impact of this on the instrumental order is touched upon, although this is not the main focus of the research.

The fundamental questions for Dunne and Gazeley focus on the teachers and their recognition of underachievement, social class, and their addressing underachievement.

The data reveals a considerable variation in the ways in which teachers recognise underachievement. Although not a major issue in the paper, it is most clearly demonstrated in the by cases of dispute between the head of year and the teacher over which children are underachieving. A specific example demonstrating the variation is used, comparing the profiles of two pupils of similar attainment. Here it is clear that the key differences 'were in gender, social class and attendance' (p.456). Further examination of the teacher's comment about the pupils revealed stereotypic views of the support offered by the home. The observations raise a number of interesting questions about teachers locating problems with the pupils, seeing them in a pathological sense and rarely locating problems in the pedagogy.

In relation to social class, the researchers reveal an interesting ambiguity in the teachers. While they attempt to specifically exclude social class in their discussion, it is clear that assumptions and stereotypes inform their day-to-day practice. Evidence is given in the paper in terms of specific statements from interviews. The authors highlight the reluctance to explicitly acknowledge the issue as acting as a barrier the problem.

The issue of social class features highly in the barriers to addressing underachievement. Examples cited show how the relationships with teachers and class assumptions act as a barrier to pupils' learning. The centrality of the teacher to pupil achievement is considerably more pronounced in the reports of teacher trainees and pupils than in reports of the teachers. The latter often referred to discipline and additional support as strategies.

### **Discussions:**

In the discussions on both papers, it is clear that the research reveals just one layer of a complex issue. The nature of the research, in both cases an emphasis on the qualitative, goes beyond correlations to explore the dynamics of the intricate relationships which operate in the school each in a different way seeking understandings. Mac Ruairc illuminates the linguistic barriers which cause working class pupils to frequently underachieve. His analysis raises some interesting questions regarding the different responses of pupils, and begs further research into the pedagogic implications. Dunne and Gazeley's focus on teacher perceptions

reveals much about the virtually arbitrary nature of recognising underachievement. They raise questions about the current discomfort with reference to class.

Above all, both papers underline the need to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of the social nature of the school; an understanding which a vital precursor to tackling the woeful underachievement of whole sectors of society.

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