

... if advances (in our understanding) are to be made, there will (need to) be greater concentration on the social factors affecting pupil learning and (on) the ways in which teachers can create classroom climates which allow situations of 'high risk' and 'high ambiguity' to be coped with successfully.

(1987, p. 44)

This statement underlines a key point in social constructivist models of learning about control of the learning process. Since understanding can only be constructed in the mind of the learner, it is essential that learners exercise a significant degree of control of the process—a point to which I will return below.

I turn now though, to introduce the empirical study around which my thinking on this topic has developed.

A longitudinal ethnography

In 1987 I began a research programme, a longitudinal ethnography, which was designed to explore the potential for linking social interactionism and social constructivism.

I aimed to monitor the primary school careers of a small cohort of ten children at one primary school by using a variety of qualitative methods and I started from the children's entry to the school at the age of four. I particularly focused on the social factors which were likely to influence the children's stance, perspectives and strategies regarding learning. Data was thus collected from parents about family life, sibling relationships and the children's emergent identities; from peers and playground contexts concerning peer-group relations; and from teachers with regard to classroom behaviour and academic achievements.

At the heart of the study was regular classroom observation so that the progression of organisation, activity structures and routine tasks in each class which the children passed through could be documented—together with the responses of the children to such provision. The main sources of data were: field-notes from participant-observation, interviews, teacher records, parent diaries, school documents, photographs, video recordings, sociometry and examples of children's work.

This work built on the sociological studies of teacher/pupil coping strategies in schools which has developed over a number of years (e.g. Woods, 1977; Hargreaves, 1978; Pollard, 1982; Beynon, 1985; Scarth, 1987), with its strong influence of symbolic interactionism. Since that work has been generally accepted as a means of conceptualising and analysing macro-micro linkages as they affect school processes, I judged that it might also prove to be capable of bearing the weight of analysis of socio-historical factors in learning, as raised by Helen Haste (see Fig. 10), in addition to the interpersonal factors which are the more obvious provenance of symbolic interactionism.

I also hoped that the study would develop existing work on coping strategies substantively because of the focus on children as pupils developing through schools. This focus was designed to complement the considerable amount of work which is now available on teacher strategies and careers (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Sikes *et al.*, 1985; Nias, 1989). Additionally, of course, the study was intended to provide a more explicit focus on learning than is evident in previous sociological work, which, as I argued earlier, has tended to be primarily concerned with differentiation.

The main aims of the study were thus:

- 1 to trace the development of a cohort of young children's stances, perspectives and strategies regarding learning, through consideration of home, playground and classroom settings;

- 2 to investigate pupil career, in terms of emergent identities and the influences on them, as children move through different teachers and classrooms within their school;
- 3 to develop the analytic potential of combining social constructivist models of children's learning and symbolic interactionist models of school processes.

In the course of gathering data, I attempted to code and analyse it with the intention of generating grounded theoretical models and concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1985) which could contribute to both professional and academic debate. In keeping with other, earlier work, I do not aspire to 'prove' relationships, believing this to be inappropriate with regard to such subtle issues (or indeed to many aspects of social science more generally). However, through the detailed analysis of the data, I aimed to highlight the most significant issues and patterns in the social relationships which seem to affect pupil learning and career. Others can then relate this analysis to their own circumstances.

This paper represents my first public attempt to begin to make sense of work. It remains tentative in many respects, but certainly indicates the direction in which my thinking is leading.

By the Spring of 1990, I had studied nine children (one child had moved schools) over their first three school years with regard to three major social settings (classroom, playground, home). I had collected a large amount of data and faced analytical problems which I aimed to address through the comparison of the nine cases which the children represented.

Before I focus directly on the emerging analysis, an indication of the data is provided below by a brief illustrative account of the educational experiences, over their first two school years, of just two of the children whom I studied.

This is a highly condensed 'account', in almost narrative form, and was written initially for an audience of governors and parents (Pollard, 1990). The judgements expressed in it rest on a detailed analysis of data, but the main point which I wish to make requires a holistic understanding, for which narrative documentary is a proven vehicle. I thus hope that the account below serves its purpose in highlighting the importance of contextual factors in learning and in providing a bridge to the theoretical analysis in the final section of this chapter. More complete substantive documentation and analysis will appear in due course.

Learning and developing an identity

The two children on whom this illustration is based began their school careers together, with twenty-four others, in the same 'reception' class.

The first child, a girl called Sally, was the youngest of the two children of the school caretaker. Her mother also worked in the school as a School Meals Services Assistant and as a cleaner. Her parents had always taken enormous pleasure and pride in Sally's achievements. They celebrated each step as it came but did not seem to overtly press her. Life, for them, seemed very much in perspective. Sally was physically agile and had a good deal of self-confidence. She had known the school and the teaching staff for most of her life. She felt at home. She was very sensitive to 'school rules' and adult concerns and she engaged in each new challenge with zest. Over the years, with her parents' encouragement, she had developed a considerable talent for dancing and had won several competitions. In school she had also taken a leading role in several class assemblies and had made good progress with her reading and other work. The teachers felt she was a delightful and rewarding child

to teach—convivial and able, but compliant too. Her friends were mainly girls though she mixed easily. She was at the centre of a group which was particularly popular in the class and which, over the years since playgroup, had developed strong internal links and friendships through shared interests, for instance, in ‘My Little Pony’, playing at ‘mummies and daddies’ and reciprocal home visits.

The second child, Daniel, was the fifth and youngest in his family. His father was an extremely busy business executive and his mother had devoted the previous sixteen years to caring for their children, which she saw as a worthwhile but all-absorbing commitment. She was concerned for Daniel who had had some difficulties in establishing his identity in the bustle of the family with four older children. She also felt that he had ‘always tended to worry about things’ and was not very confident in himself. For many years he had tended to play on being the youngest, the baby of the family, a role which seemed naturally available. At playgroup he was particularly friendly with a girl, Harriet, who was later to be in his class at school. However, over their first year at school, distinct friendships of boys and girls began to form. It became ‘sissy’ to play with girls. Daniel, who had found the transition from the security of home hard to take and who had to begin to develop a greater self-sufficiency, thus found the ground-rules of appropriate friendships changing, as the power of child culture asserted itself. He could not play with Harriet because she was a girl, but nor was he fully accepted by the dominant groups of boys.

This insecurity was increased when he moved from the structured and ‘motherly’ atmosphere of his reception class into the more volatile environment of his ‘middle infant’ class. There were now thirty one children in his class, most of whom were from a parallel reception class—within which a group of boys had developed a reputation for being ‘difficult’. The new teacher thus judged that the class . . . ‘needed a firm hand to settle them down after last year’ and, as a caring but experienced infant teacher, decided to stand no nonsense. It also so happened that this teacher was somewhat stressed, as a lot of teachers in England and Wales have been in the late 1980s. She sometimes acted a little harshly and in other ways which were against her own better judgement.

The environment which Daniel experienced was therefore one which was sometimes a little unpredictable. Whilst he was never one of the ones who ‘got into trouble’, he was very worried by the possibility that he might ‘upset Miss’. Daniel would thus be very careful. He would watch and listen to the teacher, attempting to ‘be good’ and do exactly what was required. He would check with other children and, on making a first attempt at a task, try to have his efforts approved before proceeding further. Occasionally, at work with a group and with other children also pressing, the teacher might wave Daniel away. He would then drift, unsure, watching to take another opportunity to obtain the reinforcement which he felt he needed. As the year progressed, Daniel became more unhappy and increasingly unwilling to go to school.

Daniel’s mother was torn as this situation developed—was the ‘problem’ caused by Daniel’s ‘immaturity’ or was it because he was frightened of the teacher? She felt it was probably a bit of both but school-gate advice suggested that discussion in school might not go easily. She delayed and the situation worsened, with Daniel making up excuses to avoid school, insisting on returning home for lunch and becoming unwilling to visit the homes of other children. Daniel’s mother eventually and tentatively visited the school where the issues were aired.

Over the following weeks the teacher worked hard to support Daniel and to help him settle. Daniel’s confidence improved a little, particularly when he found a new friend, a boy, from whom he then became inseparable. Even so, as his mother told

me towards the end of the year, ‘we are holding on and praying for the end of term’.

These two children attended the same school and were part of the same classes—yet as learners they had quite different characteristics. Whilst Sally was confident, keen to ‘have a go’ and would take risks, Daniel was insecure, fearful lest he ‘got things wrong’ in a world in which he felt evaluated and vulnerable. The accident of birth into a small or large family may have been an influence too, with Sally having had the psychological space to flourish and the day to day support of both her parents all around her, whilst Daniel had to establish his place in a large family in which both parents faced considerable pressure in their work—be it in an office or domestically. Perhaps too, Daniel’s initial solutions to his position, which had carried him in good stead in his infancy, whilst at home, would simply not transfer into the less bounded environment of school.

Towards an analytical framework

The data which underpins an account such as that reviewed above is highly complex and, in attempting to make sense of it, one can easily lose direction or become distracted. For the purposes of this study, it was crucial to retain the focus on identity and learning whilst also structuring the comparison of cases across settings—with 27 interrelated data sets formed by the nine children and three major settings. Building on what I take to be key interactionist and constructivist principles, I evolved a simple analytical formula which I found to be powerful and which could be applied to data and cases derived from any setting.

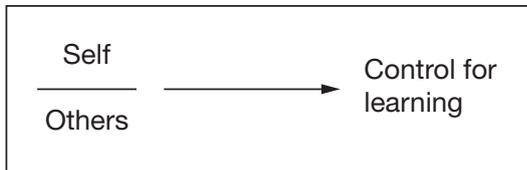


Figure 12 Individual, context and learning: an analytic formula.

The relationship between self and others expresses the key symbolic interactionist focus, with its recognition of the importance of social context in the formation of meaning and self. A sense of control in social situations is seen as a product of this. It is an indication of the success, or otherwise, of a child’s coping strategies in the politico-cultural context of any particular social setting—home, classroom, playground—and thus reflects the interplay of interests, power, strategies and negotiation. However, it is also a necessary element of the learning process as conceived by social constructivist psychologists. Only children themselves can ‘make sense’, understand and learn. They may be supported and instructed by others, but, once their understanding has been scaffolded in such ways, it must stand on its own foundations—foundations which can only be secure when the child has been able to control the construction itself.

Teaching and other forms of support by adults are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Learning also requires conditions which enable each child to control the assembly and construction of their understanding.¹

I have elaborated below, a model by Rowland (1987) in order to express this point.

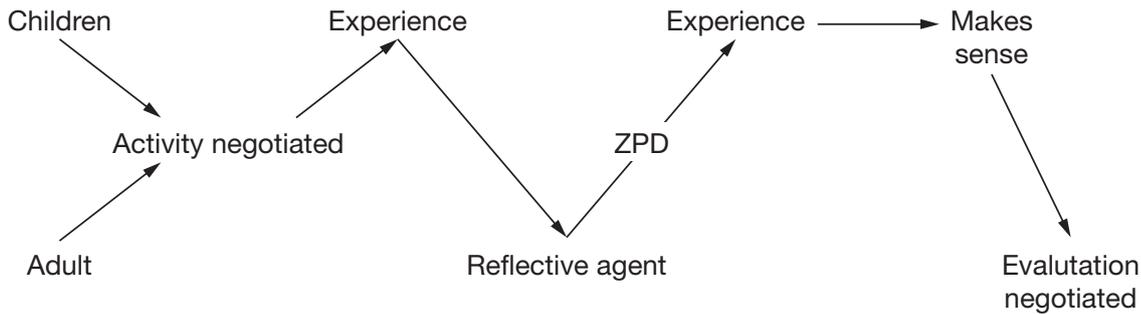


Figure 13 A social constructivist model of the teaching/learning process.

It is worth dwelling a little on the importance of the role of an adult as a ‘reflective agent’ in this model, providing meaningful and appropriate guidance and extension to the cognitive structuring and skill development arising from the child’s initial experiences. This, it is suggested, supports the child’s attempts to ‘make sense’ and enables them to cross the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Their thinking is thus *restructured* in the course of further experiences. Of course, the concept of ‘reflective agent’ is not unrelated to that of ‘reflective teaching’ (Pollard & Tann, 1987), which is becoming a new orthodoxy in terms of course rationales for teacher education in the UK. However, as with sociology of education, present work on reflective teaching is relatively weak on the issue of learning itself.² Of great interest too, is the fact that carrying out the role of a reflective agent effectively is dependent on sensitivity *and* accurate knowledge of each child’s needs. It thus places a premium on formative, teacher assessment (TGAT, 1988) and could be greatly facilitated in England and Wales by the requirements of new legislation—if it is appropriately implemented, a condition which, unfortunately, we cannot take for granted.

To recap—in Fig. 13 above, we see the need for appropriate adult support and instruction and its relationship to children’s control over their learning. The two are not contradictory. Indeed, I would argue that both are necessary but neither is sufficient for high quality learning. In the cases of Sally and Daniel, Sally was able to negotiate, control and cope with the variety of domestic, classroom and playground settings which she encountered with relative ease. She was confident in tackling new learning situations and achieved a great deal. Daniel found things much more difficult in each setting, but particularly in the classroom. He developed two key strategies regarding this learning. First, to watch, check and recheck to make sure that he ‘was doing it right’ so that he could avoid ‘trouble with Miss’. Second, to stay away from school. His learning achievements over the two years were relatively modest.

Of course, the simple formula (Fig. 12) and the social constructivist model of interaction in learning (Fig. 13) express only a small part of the story, and I have developed them further to begin to reflect on the outcomes and consequences of the learning process.

This model expresses the recursive nature of experience. Self-confidence, together with other attributes and other contextual factors (e.g. Bennett’s work on the quality of tasks set), produces particular learning outcomes—successful or otherwise—and with them associated perspectives. These, it is suggested, contribute cumulatively to each child’s sense of identity and to their learning stance, and it is with these which, for better or worse, they enter the next setting. Over time, as this cycle moves forward, it tends to develop in patterned ways into what can be identified more clearly as ‘pupil career’.

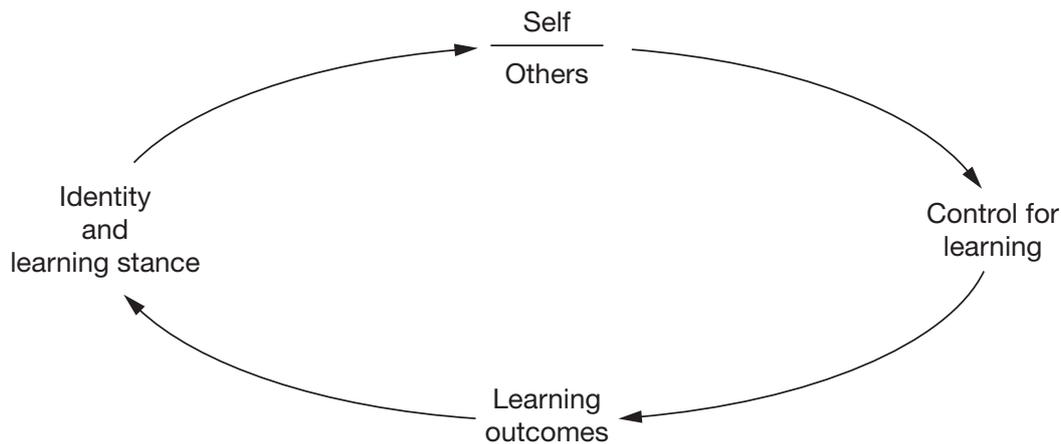


Figure 14 A model of teaming and identity.

Thus, in the case of Sally and Daniel, we might speculate that Sally's pupil career will go from strength to strength, founded on the confidence of her learning stance, whilst Daniel's progress may be more halting. In fact, of course, such speculation is premature. Time will bring new social contexts and experiences and the factor of social class may influence the children's development. This is where the longitudinal design of the study should be significant.

Whatever the empirical outcomes, the nature of the patterns in pupil learning and career is of consequence for both psychologists and sociologists. For psychologists, it highlights processes of learning in context. For sociologists, it begins to relate factors such as social class, gender and race, through the processes of learning and identity formation, and on to long term social differentiation, career and life chances.

I am attempting to apply the basic formula, Fig. 12, above, in relation to the settings of classrooms, playground and the home, through the application of some key elements of the model of coping strategies which I developed some years ago (Pollard, 1985). Four important aspects of this are:

- 1 An individual's structural position: their power, influence and capacity to take active decisions.
- 2 An individual's interests-at-hand: the immediate concerns of a person in processes of interaction, given their goals and structural position within a particular social setting.
- 3 The working consensus: the social rules and understandings which tend to become established in any particular setting as a result of interaction. Such understandings often involve a negotiated 'trade-off' between the participants.
- 4 Strategic action: strategies used by individuals as a means of coping with different settings. These include conformity, negotiating and rejecting and may or may not be transferred across different settings.

In the case of both the children illustrated, we see the influence of each of the three major social settings and significant others in their lives—family, peers and teachers.

For Sally, the particular, overlapping configuration of the self/other relationship between home and school gave her self-confidence on which she was able to build in her relationships with her peers and which enabled her to exercise considerable control over her classroom learning. Other data clearly shows how this control was obtained, in large part, through her social awareness and negotiating skills. She

contributed directly to the working consensus in both classes. Her structural position was strong, her interests-at-hand could be accommodated within teacher goals and she acted with skill and strategic awareness to achieve expected learning outcomes and a positive identity—despite the risks associated with life in her second class.

For Daniel, the situation was more difficult. His structural position was weak both in his family and then, almost as a knock-on effect of his strategies in the home setting, amongst his peers. He felt insecure, in one way or another, in each of the three main settings in his life and he thus developed relatively defensive strategies in order to protect his interests. At its most obvious, this involved trying to avoid coming to school but, once there, it was manifested by extreme caution in his dealings with teachers and a reluctance to take any sort of risk or exercise control over his learning. Preferring to keep a low profile, he participated little in the establishment of classroom understandings and the working consensus. Learning outcomes were affected and with them, Daniel's identity began to develop and to be registered with both his teachers, parents and peers.

Of course, these patterns are related to the particular classroom settings in which Daniel worked and to the teachers concerned and, unfortunately, the teacher of Daniel's middle infant class seemed to compound some of his difficulties. It remains perfectly possible that Daniel will develop more poise and belief in himself as he gets older and he has many abilities and social advantages. The question is an empirical one about which, for the moment, we must be open-minded.

The story of these two children is not just about learning in a narrow academic sense. Additionally, it is about the ways in which Sally and Daniel began to develop their identities as people. As was suggested by Fig. 14, identity and self-confidence in stances towards future learning develop alongside skills, knowledge and other learning outcomes. They thus feed back, recursively, into future actions and experiences and as the biography and career of each child is gradually constructed.

This brief illustration of the cases of Sally and Daniel demonstrates the importance of the social context in which learning takes place and suggests that it will impact on children irrespective of their individual capabilities. Interestingly, it also reinforces the suggestion that there is no necessary connection between social class factors or income levels and the quality of the learning environment which parents can provide.

There are many further aspects of this attempt to generate theoretical models of the social factors affecting learning which could be discussed. However, in a chapter such as this there is little space to do them justice and they must therefore await elaboration elsewhere.

Summary and conclusion

In this chapter I firstly suggested that many social phenomena require interdisciplinary analysis if they are to be studied in ways which are valid—and thus practically useful. Learning in primary schools provided a case in point and I reflected on the strange absence of a sociological account and on the partial nature of other analyses because of this omission. I then began to explore the potential for drawing on symbolic interactionism and social constructivism to construct an integrated analysis and showed how I have attempted to begin this through the analysis of data gathered from a longitudinal ethnography of a small group of children in one school.

This analysis has significant policy implications for parents, teachers and school governors since they bear very heavy responsibilities for children's learning and careers. This is so because children develop their perspectives, strategies and, thus, identities

in response to their need to cope with circumstances which such adults control. If adults fail to co-operate, to liaise, to negotiate or to think their actions through, then it is the children who will suffer. Their lives are, literally, an ongoing test of the continuity and support which adults provide. Certainly such vulnerability deserves our attention and can, I would argue, best be addressed by focusing on the nature of the learning provision in different settings and by recognising the integrated nature of experience.

It is interesting that, at the present time in England and Wales, such issues are far down the educational agenda—an agenda which is dominated by curriculum, assessment, accountability and management issues. One day, when policies are sought with a more secure foundation on learning processes, it is to be hoped that sociologists will be able to contribute to the available understanding about this extremely important issue.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Neville Bennett, in helpfully commenting on a draft of this chapter (personal communication, May, 1990), has advised that he ‘knows of no data which would argue that pupil choice of work is more positively related to elaborated schema than, say, teacher given work’. I am still thinking about this statement because at first sight it appears to beg the issue of motivation and its relationship to learning. Clearly more discussion is necessary to clarify this important issue.
- 2 In the case of my own book with Sarah Tann (*Reflective Teaching in the Primary School*, Cassell, 1987), a new edition [. . . 1993 should] correct this.

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