An Alternative Culture for Teaching

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: These notes were prepared during my final year as a secondary school teacher in 1975. In many ways time has not treated them well, and clearly patterns of working class and youth culture have continued to change, giving some of the statements a rather "faded" aura.

The optimism of changing the culture of teaching by specifying some new ideas and guidelines reflects a historical moment of cultural optimism in the early 1970s. Plainly one would now need to ally such arguments with a plan for contextual and structural redefinition.

With these provisos in mind I think the arguments still reasonably represent some of my views and values with regard to the culture of teaching.

During the 1970s the sociology of education in Britain was dominated by the work of Basil Bernstein. This paper was written at the time when Bernstein's interests were moving from the sociology of language (and particularly the much publicized debate over the notions of 'restricted' and 'elaborated' codes), back to his prior concerns with questions of schooling and curriculum. It is important to emphasize that, in this shift in topics and perspectives, the central ideas remained fairly constant. Essentially these relate to the connections between language use and culture, culture and identity and derive from the writings of Benjamin Whorf.

Like many others at the time we were caught up in this same set of ideas. But it is also important to show how the same ideas changed our views of teaching, both in schools and teacher education.

CULTURE AND TEACHING

In this short piece I want to take as my starting point Bernstein's statement: 'If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher'. (Bernstein, 1969) I want to describe certain aspects of my own consciousness of the child's culture derived from my experiences both as a child at school and within working class and youth culture and as a teacher in secondary schools where such cultures predominated among the students.

In particular I shall argue that 'alternative cultures' exist among adolescents which span a range of factors in childhood and adolescence that are unrelated to or patently divergent from most contemporary secondary school life.

Perhaps 'alternative culture' is the wrong term to use, for it is an alternative that constitutes a significant, perhaps even an essential, element of

the mainstream. But I have stayed with it, not least because the word 'alternative' conveys part of what it means to be inside it. It is essentially a culture of resistance. The cost of entry to this culture is most often exclusion from success at school, but once this decision is made the alternative culture offers a spectrum of opportunities to the adolescent; involving occasional actions for some through to a complete lifestyle for others. Certainly for many of the Comprehensive school students I have taught the alternative culture has provided important vocabularies of motive. Once the preserve of a deviant minority for whom it provided a lifestyle, the alternative culture now forms a significant part of the 'world' of many secondary school children. (Murdoch and Phelps, 1973)

The central focus of alternative culture exists at the points of intersection between working class and youth culture. It is from here that vocabularies of motives, and rhetoric of interaction are derived and in which they are situated. Two elements of alternative culture would seem particularly central and symptomatic:

1. The pursuit of 'fun', 'kicks' or 'laughs'. This is seen as an essential ingredient of all activity which must be present in the 'here and now'. Whether something is 'fun' is the means of evaluation, the yardstick by which all activity is judged. The centrality of this criteria can be illustrated in the conversation of John Lennon where all things are judged in this light: 'It's no fun being an artist', or 'Heroin? It was just not too much fun'. (Wenner, 1970, p. 11)
2. The 'image' one creates is of critical importance: irreverence or rebelliousness are common elements of image. Image is, of course, clearly delineated from self and it is easy for the child to 'image' as a rebel without ever being rebellious to others who are sensitized to the demands of image. Image is extremely vulnerable to changes of fashion: it can move from being simply a pose of endless boredom ('this all bugs me') to a uniform and highly stylized complex of body movements that communicate a casual and disdainful aloofness ('looking cool'). (Werthmann, 1963)

Certain elements of image however appear timeless. There are certain ways of staring, glaring, walking and talking which I experienced as a teddy boy in the Fifties that form the basis of instant recognition and acceptance among the adolescents I taught twenty years later. Clearly some of the intimate signs and symbols by which past and present participants in alternative culture recognize each other are less susceptible to fashion than others.

EXTRACTS FROM A DIARY, 1973

For several years I have had a recurrent dream:

It was the staff party and each member of staff was asked to entertain for fifteen minutes. The contributions were predictable – shop-windowing and various talents of a professional community. The music teacher played a short piece on the cello, the english teacher read some of his own poems, a group of teachers presented a short play highlighting many staffroom jokes and rumours, the head gave a short morale-boosting speech and so on – shades of my school speech day. In the middle however, the lights had gone down and a rock n' roll band started playing – heavy saxophone, subversive lyrics – some of the most troublesome pupils were playing on drums and guitar – three of the cutest girls were singing "ooh-wafts" to the side and there singing was – oh my God – a teacher.

After two songs – one a Little Richard, one a Larry William – the curtain closes. The school staff talk in embarrassed whispers.It is as if an alien has visited; the tribe close ranks. The authenticity and excitement of an alternative culture has been glimpsed – then rapidly purged from the memory. The staff party continues.

What I encounter in schools when I am wearing my working class culture or youth culture hats is a group of people (teachers) whose lifestyle contradicts or ignores those criteria most central to my existence.

Since beginning to join them as a group and since changing my life-style towards theirs, I have experienced a sense of anti-climax so monumental that it leaves me with an existence which feels hollow and worthless.

ALTERNATIVE CULTURE AND THE SCHOOL

1. FUN

Schools are not places where fun and laughter are readily accepted. In fact, you could define schools as social mechanisms concerned with the replacement of fun by seriousness, and of play by work. In general the teacher is expected to project a rather grim and earnest professional image if he or she is really to teach: the spirit is best captured by that recurrent staff room phrase 'I'm terribly worried about so and so ...' Certainly many trainee teachers have been advised to 'Never smile before Christmas' or else respect (and by implication, control) will be lost.

I would argue that exactly the converse is true. In purely educational terms, the best way to earn the respect of adolescents is to be able to handle fun and laughter in just the way one has to in life. The criterion for acceptance of the teacher at the level of alternative culture is his ability to 'take a laugh'. Students have a number of strategies for testing this ability, strategies that have received some attention from American sociologists who use the term 'sounding' to broadly describe the strategy employed by Negro students in New York's secondary schools. Once the ability to 'take a laugh' is proven the testing of the teacher abates — one of the prime tests of alternative culture has been passed.

But, while fun is a powerful educational force, attempts to mobilize it (especially in secondary schooling) run straight into those more brutal socializing functions of schooling in which control dominates learning.

The way that school acts to exclude fun and laughter is a source of alienation consistently alluded to in the internal language of alternative culture. This judgement is confirmed and perpetuated by many working class/ youth cult figures. In his pop song 'School Day' Chuck Berry caught the spirit in which alternative culture perceives school — it is the spirit in which the worker goes to the factory:

Back in the classroom open your books
Even the teacher don't know how mean she look!

or again:

Soon as 3 o'clock rolls around
You finally lay your burden down ***(School Day)***

The continuity is clear through to today. From Pink Floyd:

We don't need no education,
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasms in the classroom
Teacher leave those kids alone
(Brick in the Wall)

to Paul Simon, ***Kodachrome***:

When I look back on all the crap
I learned in high school
It's a wonder I can think at all

to Bruce Springsteen:

Learn more from a 3 minute record baby,
than I ever learnt in school ***(No Surrender)***

Keith Richard of the Rolling Stones went to school in Deptford:

I really wanted to learn when I was a kid. I really did. I mean I wanted to watch how things were done and try to figure it out and leave it at that. I was going to school to do something I wanted to do, and then the assholes manage to turn the whole thing around and make you hate 'em because they have to run their little Hitler numbers, and then you just hate the learning thing. You don't wanna learn anymore. School is just like the nick. (Scudato, 1974, pp. 37-38)

In his last phrase Richards anticipated the National Union of School Students' banner which pronounced 'School is Prison'

2. IMAGE

Image is what allows adolescents to love David Bowie and Boy George and yet proclaim that they detest homosexuals: 'No problem, it's just his image'. Each child negotiates her or his image within the immediate peer group and the wider class unit: some will be 'hard', some 'way out', some 'straight' some just plain 'bored' (or 'bugged').

In the same way as kids test the teacher over

'laughs,' so the teacher is tested for sensitivity to image. The image determines the rules which the students want observed in their dealings with the teacher. So, if a kid is 'bugged', one of the rules is that he or she will not make any obvious show of being interested or enthusiastic when the teacher talks. Once sensitized to this there should be no problem in talking to and teaching them: without such recognition there would rapidly be a breakdown of communication. Similarly, once recognized, it is perfectly possible to allow the 'hard' student to act out an image without there ever being a confrontation.

Recognition of the student's image normally ensures a reciprocal acceptance of the requirements of the teacher's role — I think that is one of the rules of the game. The crucial point is that image, once recognized, is divorced from actual behaviour. Recognition pre-empts the need for proof so that it becomes the opposite of the tacit acceptance that many teachers might quite validly fear.

In this game the teacher also has to attend to her or his own image. Since the school is viewed as a prison without much credibility, teachers tend to be viewed in a similar light if they echo some of the fallacies and hypocracies that the students sense (often rightly) in the situation. Too often the teacher is simply seen as the representative of an alien life-style. In this situation I would argue that it is perfectly defensible for the teacher to 'image' in ways that make teaching and the student's learning more successful:

> *As I watch him teaching it does seem to me there is something about him that's different to other teachers, even the other jokesters like Liz. Ron doesn't seem to represent school like other teachers do. He gives the impression of simply being there because it's a job. In some subtle and indefinable way he conveys a kind of insolence that pupils frequently convey but never teachers. There is something confident, arrogant and deeply irreverent about the way he acts.* (Goodson and Walker, 1990, p.64)



In this situation the teacher is imaging as a 'rebel' in pursuit of a viable teacher-pupil relationship.

CONCLUSION

A major variable in classroom interaction, often misunderstood or ignored by teachers of education, is the teachers' consciousness of what I have called alternative culture. I am suggesting that this consciousness could be a once-and-for-all acquisition — rather like understanding the rules of a game.

Once grasped, the rules of alternative culture transform the reality which the teacher perceives, encounters and constructs in this classroom. As Werthmann said of his pupils, who were specifically delinquent:

> *When gang members are convinced that the educational enterprise and its ground rules are being legitimately pursued, that a teacher is really interested in teaching them something, and that efforts to learn will be rewarded, they consistently show up on time, leave when the class is dismissed, raise their hands before speaking, and stay silent and awake.* (Werthmann, 1963, p.8)

Given an understanding of the alternative culture, this is exactly what a teacher could expect. As Howard Becker has written:

> *School teachers experience problems in working with their students to the degree that those students fail to exhibit in reality the qualities of the image of the ideal pupil that teachers hold. In a stratified urban society there are many groups whose life-style and culture produce children who do not meet the standards of this image, and who are thus impossible for teachers like these to work with effectively. Programs of action intended to increase the educational opportunities of the under-privileged in our society should take account of the manner in which teachers interpret and react to the culture traits of this group, and the institutional consequences of their behaviour.* (Becker, 1952, pp. 75-80)

Becker was writing in 1952 and the emergence of youth culture since that date has clearly complicated the process of 'mapping' the child's culture, yet his statement retains its validity. Instead of a growing consciousness of the child's culture, the prerequisite of educational success, we have a system in which the professionalism of the teacher is associated with attitudes to fun, image and other central cultural manifestations which ensure broad-based educational failure. Hence the definition of alternative culture as deviant derives from the way schools operate and prescribe teachers' actions. It is to this process that the sociologist should look rather than continue the reification of deliquescence.

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