

Conferences

School and the pupils' work

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences
of the University of Lisbon, 12 February 2009
(17th Afirse Debate — Portuguese Section,
“School and the world of work”)

BERNARD CHARLOT

When my French children got back from school, in the 1980s, I asked them: “Did you work hard at school?” Today, when my Brazilian children get home I ask a different question: “Did you study hard at school?” This change is connected to my research and reflections about school, but is also linked to the differences between the French and Portuguese language. In French one says that pupils *work* at school. In Portuguese, at least in Brazil, one does not say pupils work, but rather they *study* at school. Likewise, in Portuguese one says that the teacher *teaches* and the pupil *learns*. In French one can say that the teacher *teaches* or that he *learns*; in other words, the teacher learns (teaches)¹ things to pupils, who have to learn these things. A third difference I believe is also interesting. In Portuguese the pupil *accompanies* the teacher, or the lesson. In French the pupil *follows* the teacher, or the lesson. These are implicitly two completely different models. The French model calls *work* what the pupil does at school, but, in fact, highlights the teacher's activity: the teacher “teaches” things to the pupil, who should “follow” them. The implicit Portuguese model, or at least the Brazilian model, does not call the pupil's activity *work*, but emphasises its specificity: the teacher teaches, the pupil learns; these are two activities that cannot be confused.

These differences lead me to two questions. The main one concerns the activity of the pupil: what is the nature and the specificity of the pupil's activity at school? The second question is less important, but is also relevant: does this activity merit the label of *work*?

THE QUESTION OF THE PUPIL'S ACTIVITY: A THEORETICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATE

What is at stake in the debate about the pupil's activity is whether it is merely a reflection of the social position

or whether it is a specific activity, which produces effects, changes, and should be considered an essential aspect of what is happening in the school. The debate covers the question of the differences between pupils coming from various social classes, but also includes the question of gender.

THE QUESTION OF ACTIVITY IN SOCIOLOGY OF THE POSITIONS AND DISPOSITIONS

In the 60s, 70s and 80s of the 20th century, the way school was thought out was heavily influenced by the Sociology of Reproduction, especially that of Bourdieu, i.e. a Sociology of positions and dispositions. Even today explanations remain pressing about the difficulties of pupils at school owing to factors such as the family and social background of the children. It is therefore worth reflecting on the place this sociology attributes to the pupils' activity.

In this model, what is important is the social position of the pupils, defined based on their father's occupation, and not their own activity. The position of the pupils starting school (*in*) and their position leaving it (*out*) are analysed. Both are compared and the conclusion is that the school contributes towards social reproduction. From this point of view, what happens inside school does not produce anything new. This approach, of course, serves to undermine or lessen the value of the pupil's activity; it is not necessary to analyse it in detail.

However, a distinction should be made between the sociologies of reproduction developed by Baudelot and Establet and by Bowles and Gintis, in which the activity is almost not mentioned, and Bourdieu's more interesting sociology (Baudelot & Establet, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992). Bourdieu raises the question of what the pupil does in the school. He does not analyse, therefore, the activity itself, but rather the resources, i.e. the *dispositions* that back them up. These dispositions depend on the social

position of the pupil. It is the dispositions that are important and not the way the activity itself is carried out. They appear in theory as cultural capital and *habitus*.

In Bourdieu's conceptual system, society is made up of a set of fields. In these fields there are battles: all parties try to preserve, and if possible improve, their position. To do so, they use the resources that are within their reach. These resources derive from their social position. In each field the battles for power depend, before all else, on the resources available to each person: their *capital*. In the cultural field (school, press, arts, etc) the cultural capital prevails, which comprises a set of knowledge and relations with culture and language. Those who have more cultural capital can develop more effective strategies in this field to improve their position; in the cultural field these are strategies of *distinction* (Bourdieu, 2007). Hence, according to Bourdieu's theory, there is space for the battles, but the development and outcome of these battles depend on the resources backing them up, i.e. at the end of the day they depend on the social position of the person who acts: the principle of intelligibility of the activity is not the activity itself, but the social structure of the capital invested in the activity. Therefore, Bourdieu does not talk about *actors*, but instead he talks about social *agents*.

The concept of *habitus* clarifies the difference between the actor and the agent. The *habitus* is a set of psychic dispositions, which are durable and transposable, which have been socially structured and which function as the structural principles of the practices and the representations (Bourdieu, 1989). To understand an activity one has to understand why the individual acts, and how s/he acts. Hence, one has to know her/his ideas, expectations, tastes, etc, in other words, the psychic dispositions of the person. This means that to understand an activity or a practice one has to analyse the *habitus*, the system of psychic dispositions that it is based on. And to know the *habitus*, one has to analyse the social conditions in which it was built. As such, what enables a practice to be explained are the social conditions that construct the *habitus*. Therefore, in the final analysis, the social position is the principle of the intelligibility of the activity. The social positions are *reproduced* from one generation to the next, at least in terms of probabilities: the conditions in which a child is brought up socially mould his/her psyche, and this leads to the representations and practices that reproduce the social structure of origin. A person who acts is the *agent* of the social structures, given that these are reproduced through mediation of her/his *habitus*; s/he is not an *actor* who, in line with her/his situation, will react against the social order of things.

In line with this sociological model, what happens in the school depends essentially on the cultural capital and the pupils' *habitus*. Those who have the psychic dispositions and cultural capital necessary for school will

become successful pupils, whereas those who do not are destined to fail. The concepts of activity or school work do not comply with any important function in the explicative system.

Meanwhile, the question of the activity is not completely absent from Bourdieu's system, as mentioned above. But it is *practical sense*, as Bourdieu says: rarely does the *habitus* function in social situations that are exactly the same as those that structure it, and therefore, a constant adaptation has to be made, carried out through practical sense. Most of the time, this adaptation does not bring problems, as there are a lot of similarities between the conditions in which the *habitus* was built and those in which it later has to function. However, late on Bourdieu became sensitive to the non-coinciding phases, which are increasingly common in a modern society engaged in rapid change, between the essential psychic dispositions of individuals (their *habitus*) and the social situations in which they live today. These non-coinciding phases do not, however, lead Bourdieu to show more interest for the current activity of the individuals, the transformation of the *habitus*, or the construction of new cultural resources. They lead him to highlight the suffering produced by this disorder, contributing to the "misery of the world" (Bourdieu, 2003).

Are we condemned to eternal reproduction? Bourdieu leaves the door open, which allows one to surmise that, despite everything, the individual Bourdieu himself engaged in determined fashion in the social battles of the 1990s. The past and the future are articulated in the *habitus*, the key to reproduction. Therefore, to break the reproduction, disconnect the future from the past and as such change society, one has to change the *habitus*. As such, becoming aware of the sociological conscience is the essential condition of change: the world can be changed by people who understand that their representations and practices have been socially conditioned, and in grasping this, can free themselves from this conditioning. Becoming aware is the necessary condition of social transformation, as in the thinking of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1976, 1983). However, while according to Paulo Freire, becoming aware may be the effect of training, in Bourdieu's opinion this cannot occur in school, as this is where the ruling classes exercise their symbolic violence and their "cultural tyranny". Awareness can only be produced in social struggles. Therefore, activity is the principle of transformation, but we are talking about activity carried out in the social struggles and not the activity of the teacher and pupil in the classroom. Indeed, Bourdieu shows no interest regarding school activity, what happens in the classroom, but instead he is interested in the social functions of the school and the process of social reproduction that takes place through it.

When Bourdieu focuses on school activity he highlights the implicit nature of this activity, in detriment, again, to its actual undertaking. Bernstein had already pointed out the difference between the elaborated code (explicit) and the restricted code (full of implicitness), and the existence, in school, of a hidden curriculum (Bernstein, 1996). Going down the same path, Bourdieu argues that the true criteria of assessment of the pupils' activity are, for the most part, implicit. Implicitly, the school requires a certain kind of relationship with culture and language, and in its assessments of the pupil it is this relationship that the school assesses. In other words, the school does not teach what it assesses. Pupils who have already constructed this relationship in their family can achieve academic success and those who have not will fail. This relationship is socially constructed, but it is implicit, and therefore hidden; it is considered a fact of nature: it is the "good pupil" who is naturally intelligent. The teachers themselves, as Bourdieu points out, value the talented pupil, who seems to achieve success without trying, and looks down on the pupil who works hard to meet the requirements of the school, considering them "too scholarly". In other words, and however paradoxical it seems, it is the school that does not value the school work.

Taking into account these analyses, one can distinguish what the school activity seems to be and what it actually is in truth. Apparently, it is an educational activity supplied to all the pupils. It is in fact, through this façade that the real activity functions and remains implicit: academically and socially legitimising the power of the dominating classes. Hence, in this perspective, the sociological work does not aim to analyse the development of the activity itself, but to unveil its implicit facets.

One can therefore understand why, for many years, people talked about school and the social inequality of school without analysing in depth what was happening in the classrooms. The diagnosis was made before opening the classroom door: in it a vast process of illusion and deception took place, and it was not worth concerning oneself with the details. On this subject there are some very significant lines at the end of the book entitled *Reproduction in Education* (1992), in which Bourdieu and Passeron put forward the hypothesis of a rational pedagogy, which would make the implicit facets of the school explicit, and in doing so would allow success to be achieved by the youths coming from the dominated classes. They immediately throw out this hypothesis: why would the ruling classes implement pedagogy in school that would allow everyone to succeed, when the current pedagogy only benefits their children? No doubts are left: in this sociological model the democratisation of the school depends on the social struggles

that must be fought outside school and not on an internal transformation of the school practices.

Today, a large proportion of the researchers who investigate social inequality at school take an interest in the school activity itself. Unveiling the implicit facets of the activity remains the overriding approach in another area: gender studies. To highlight the hidden masculine values that permeate the school environment, the textbooks, the behaviours of male and female teachers and the assessment practices, etc are researched into. These implicit facets have been identified by multiple research projects and are undeniable. Nevertheless, the gender studies neglect, and generally silence, one very important fact: in several countries it is proven that girls are much more academically successful than boys. How can this happen in a school whose values are implicitly masculine?

Very often the gender studies ignore this question with the following argument: girls are more academically successful at school, but they cannot make the most of their qualifications in the job market. This reasoning highlights that women are always victims, including when they seem to have an advantage over men, but it does not answer the question. Schools have no responsibility with regard to what happens in the job market and the paradox remains: at a school permeated by masculine values, it is females who obtain more success. By failing to take this fact into account the research slides into a victimisation discourse.

Adriana Marrero, a Uruguayan sociologist, has worked on this issue (Marrero, 2007). She explains that, as well as the implicit masculine values, at school there is also an explicit discourse, which must be taken into consideration. What does this explicit discourse say? It asserts that school success does not depend on the sex or social category of the pupils and anybody can be successful at school, provided they study. The time has also arrived to hear the explicit discourse of the school. Of course, it does not annul the implicit masculine values, but it produces mobilisation effects. If a girl hears that she can be as good as a boy, the girl will commit herself at school and feel motivated to study. This mobilisation is mobilisation of what? It is mobilisation of the female pupil's activity.

At the end of the day, no matter how masculine the school's values are, there are not many places where a girl can hear this message: that she can surpass men. The school is one of the few places that explicitly champions equality between the sexes and which paves the way for women to outdo men — which, indeed, they do. Of course, this is partially deception, an illusion, given that the masculine values seep through the school. One knows, however, that this illusion has a social reality. Sociology calls it a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, whereby a conviction that is objectively wrong ends up generating what was predicted. One can consider the academic success of

girls, and also of pupils coming from the popular classes, a self-fulfilling prophecy: in stating that anybody can be successful, the school creates the conditions for anybody to be, although this demands a greater personal investment if you are a girl or from the popular classes.

The research on school should take into account, at the same time, its implicit values and its explicit principles. In paying attention to the latter, one is faced with the question of the pupils' mobilisation in their studies, and hence the pupil's activity. It is therefore necessary to build a model of analysis and not the Sociology of reproduction — without, in so doing, forgetting the social and gender inequalities.

WHY DOES THE QUESTION OF THE PUPIL'S ACTIVITY HAVE TO BE RAISED?

The Sociology of education managed to surpass the reproduction and victimisation discourse when it paid attention to the resistance of the pupils. The book by Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (1991), played an important role, showing that the young English working class do not value school, and therefore contribute to the social reproduction through it. In effect, this resistance of the pupils to school regulations confirms that the dominated classes do not accept the processes of domination passively. The author who best developed this idea was Michel de Certeau, in particular in his book *The Art of Practice*, the first volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1996). He highlighted that the dominated try to subvert the ruling order to gain some advantage. For example, they know that to receive social benefits they have to have the appearance of being a “good poor person”. Those who are dominated cannot implement *strategies*, as they do not have control over their time and the domination of the means that allow them to achieve their ends. Meanwhile, this does not make them remain passive. They use *tactics* to take advantage of the situations that crop up, and as such “invent their everyday life”, through a permanent social “bricolage”. To sum up, no matter how dominated one is, a human being remains a subject, he acts and his activity has effects.

This is a fundamental departure from the Sociology of reproduction and victimisation, and it brings to the forefront the question of activity. It is worth pointing out that this approach fits perfectly into the Marxist tradition: Marxism is a theory of the class struggle, i.e. activity in conflict; it is not a theory of reproduction of the social positions, or at least not only this. Marxism is a theory of the *praxis*: in transforming the world, man transforms himself. The human being occupies a position in the world, but based on that position he acts on the world. The pupils' activity in the classroom and outside it is as important as their social or sexual category to understand what is happening in the school.

Therefore, one has to outline an activity. Alexis Leontiev, a collaborator of Vygotsky's, explains that an activity is a series of actions and operations, with a motive and an objective (Leontiev, 1984). Why is this done? It is the motive. What do I do it for? To achieve an objective. How can this objective be achieved? Carrying out actions, which require operations. An activity has an effectiveness and a meaning. It is effective when the operations lead to the objective aimed for. The meaning of the activity, according to Leontiev, depends on the relationship between the motive and the objective. When they coincide, it is a real activity; if not, it is merely an action. We use an example proposed by Leontiev himself. If I am reading a book to prepare for an exam, it is an action, not an activity: the motive (the exam) does not coincide with the objective of the action (getting to know the content of the book). If I am reading the book because I am interested in its content (motive), then it is an activity. This distinction between action and activity is interesting as it highlights the gap between the results of an action and its real motive.

To analyse an activity, including that of the pupil, one has to be interested in the meaning of the activity and its efficacy.

Why and towards what aim does a pupil study? In my opinion this is the basic question, including when you research into the question of social inequalities or gender at school. At the end of the day, when a pupils fail, it is not directly caused by their social condition, although this may also influence the teacher's assessment; it is, before all else, because they did not study enough. Why did they not study enough? This question takes us to the meaning that the pupils attribute to their studies. To understand this meaning, one has to take into account the social position and sex of the pupils, which has a large bearing on their relationship with knowledge and with school. My research into this relationship focuses on three connected questions. For a pupil, especially one from a popular class background, what does going to school mean? For her/him what is the meaning of studying, or refusing to study? What is the point of learning and understanding, either at school or outside school? (Charlot, 1999, 2000, 2005a; Charlot *et al.*, 1992).

It is a question, essentially, of researching the pupils' mobilisation in their study. I avoid talking about *motivation*, preferring to use the word *mobilisation*. In effect, “motivating the pupils” often consists of inventing a trick so that they study subjects they are not in the least interested in. Paying attention to the mobilisation of the pupils leads one to question the internal engine of study, in other words, what is it that makes pupils invest in their studies. Someone can be motivated from the outside, but one mobilises oneself from the inside. In raising the question of mobilisation, one comes across the issue of desire, and straight away the sub-conscious, and in a

more general way, the psychoanalytical theory — which Vygotsky and Leontiev dismiss (Charlot, 2005b).

The question of meaning can be looked at from another angle, directly linked to the teaching experience. Nobody learns without implementing intellectual activity; in other words: whoever does not study does not learn. Straight away the question of “motive” arises concerning this investment in the activity, to use the words of Leontiev. What is the meaning of this activity for the pupil? When there is no meaning, there is no activity: nobody does anything without a motive. But the most common situation in school is for the pupil to act for a motive not related to the knowledge itself. In the most extreme case, one can cite a French adolescent who one day said: “at school I like everything, apart from the lessons and the teachers.” The more common case is for pupils to study to get a good grade or a mobile phone promised by their father. In the ideal case, pupils study because they are interested in the content being studied. Of course, the efficacy of the study is not the same in all these cases. Leontiev would say that only the latter is an activity, while the other examples are actions whereby there is a gap between the motive and the objective.

Learning requires an intellectual activity. An individual only engages in an activity that has a meaning for her/him. When this meaning is some distance from the desired result of the action of studying, this engagement is fragile. In contrast, when the motive and the objective of the activity coincide, the latter is carried out with a lot of meaning, and pleasure is gleaned in undertaking it, even more so in achieving the objective. Activity, meaning, pleasure: these are the terms of the pedagogical equation that has to be solved.

The issue of social and gender inequality at school has not been neglected. It is integrated into a broader perspective than merely reproduction, victimisation, unilateral action of the ruling classes: what is the meaning of school, school activity, knowledge, learning when one belongs to a social class or gender that is dominated? This meaning is constructed outside school, but is also heavily influenced by what happens inside the school. The pupils are not the same at school: on this point, the Sociology of reproduction is right and its findings remain important. But taking into consideration the issue of school activity, which it ignores, it is possible to dismiss the sociological determinism, and therefore understand how it is possible that pupils from the popular classes are successful at school, despite all the likelihood of the opposite being the case, and how it is possible that girls are more successful than boys in a school that is permeated with masculine values.

However, in analysing the pupil’s activity it is not sufficient to raise the question of its meaning; one also has to pay attention on its efficacy. This is what we shall now do.

SCHOOL ACTIVITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SCHOOL AND THE PUPILS

The pupil that does not study will fail, but also the pupil who carries out an activity at school other than that which characterises the school will fail.

WHAT IS THE SPECIFICITY OF SCHOOL ACTIVITY?

Answering this question in depth requires a precise and long analysis, which cannot be done in this article of a limited size. Therefore, I will directly present some conclusions, considered as affirmations to be discussed (Charlot, 1999, 2000; Charlot *et al.*, 1992).

School is a place where the world is treated as an object and not as an environment, place of experience.

At times, this object of thought has a referent outside school, in the environment of the pupil’s life. But in this case the relationship with the object of thought should be different to the relationship with the referent. The Lisbon that the Geography teacher talks about should not be confused with the Lisbon in which the pupils live. To a certain extent, it is the same city, but their relationship with it is not the same in the two cases: the latter is a place of experience, the former an object of thought. When the pupils do not manage to make the difference between the two and relate to the former as if it was the latter, they will have problems at school. For example, the teacher asks what the functions of the city of Lisbon are, which requires that the city is thought of in its role as the capital, and the pupils respond narrating how they, their parents and their friends live in the city.

Very often, the object of thought of the school does not have a referent in the environment of the pupil’s life. It belongs to a specific world, constructed by Science and by the school. The basic Arithmetic operations have some referents in social practices outside school, where the pupils count, add, multiply, but these referents are rare when the pupil moves on to Algebra: who, in their lifetime, has to solve second-degree equations? The notion of weight has a referent in the everyday world, but the atom does not. Controlling the relationship between the object of thought and its referents in life’s environment, and introducing the pupil to intellectual worlds made up of objects whose meaning does not derive from a relationship with the real world as it is experienced is, under two correlated forms, the overriding problem of the school pedagogy.

As such, we have to rethink the question of the connection between the pupils’ family background and what is taught in school. Very often an attempt is made to solve school failure by linking everything to the pupil’s daily life. This connection, however, can constitute both a support and an obstacle at the same time. It is a support because it gives meaning to what the school teaches. It

is an obstacle when it hides the specific meaning of the school activity. Therefore, Vergnaud showed how the family representation of subtraction prevents its mathematical understanding (Vergnaud, 2005). José leaves home with thirty euros and loses ten euros: how many euros will he get back home with? The pupil solves this problem without difficulty because the meanings “lose” and “subtract” converge. Now, José leaves home with thirty euros, earns money and comes back home with fifty euros: how much did he earn? To solve the problem the pupils have to do a subtraction, which they do not find logical, given that José earned money. One can give lots of examples in which the reference to the everyday world creates a difficulty for the pupil (Silva, 2004, 2009). One can also evoke the notion of Bachelard’s epistemological obstacle and the ideas of Vygotsky, stating that there is a difference in nature between common knowledge and scientific or school knowledge (Bachelard, 1996; Vygotsky, 1987). What is important is that the teaching has meaning, not whether or not it is linked to the pupil’s family world; this option represents only one possible solution, in certain cases, and can be dangerous or impossible in others.

To relate to the world as an object of thought, the distancing-objectivation and systematisation processes are fundamental. The distancing enables the pupils to leave the subjective world of their emotions, feelings, experience and view the world as an object to be thought out. Distancing and objectivation cannot be separated and occur in a single process: the Self constitutes an epistemic Self, different from the empirical Self, in the process through which the world is placed as an object of thought. This process of distancing-objectivation is only possible thanks to language; only through language can objects of thought exist and can a rational subject think them (Vygotsky, 1987). If in school language rules, it is because this enables objects of thought to be constructed which are different from the objects of experience, which is the specificity of the school.

Systematisation is a complementary process of distancing-objectivation. It is possible to constitute objects of thought without linking them in a system, but this is always the horizon of thought, given that a concept is defined as the set of relations that it maintains with other concepts and not by a direct connection with a referent. Systematisation enables the construction of the subjects (Mathematics, Physics, History, etc) and it is not by chance that the interdisciplinary project is always on a collision course with the problem of systematisation. Both in Vygotsky and in Piaget, the question of systematisation is fundamental. According to Vygotsky, there are three differences between everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge: the latter is conscious, voluntary and systematised, differently to the former (Vygotsky, 1987). In Piaget’s opinion one gets to the end of the construction of

intellectual operations when one can think in systems, in other words, when the real is the undertaking of a possibility of the system (Linhelder & Piaget, 1976; Piaget, 2008).

Distancing, objectivation, systematisation, in other words, inseparable constitution of the Self as the epistemic Self and the world as the object of thought, define the specificity of the school activity. This definition is valid for the essential subjects (Mathematics, History, Portuguese, etc), but also for the subjects that occupy the body or the Arts. There is a difference between street conflict, with kicks and cuffs, and the sporting battle at school. The battle has rules, regulations, which may be spoken or explicitly outlined, while the conflict is an experience of life without words (apart from swearwords). Likewise, there is a difference between a pretty picture drawn by an infant school pupil and a Picasso picture: difference in technique, construction, incorporation or ostensive refusal of rules.

There is a specificity of the school activity. It requires certain relationships with the world, with others and with oneself, with language and with time, which define a certain relationship with knowledge and with the school (Charlot, 2000, 2005a). These relations are socially neutral, given that they start to be constructed in the middle classes, who value language, while the relationship with the world of the popular classes is a different one. Therefore, it is not surprising that the children of the popular classes have more difficulties at school than middle-class children.

Meanwhile, this specific school activity is not a “cultural tyranny”, a simple reflection of the rules of the ruling classes, as argued by Bourdieu and Passeron (1992). It has an educational value, an anthropological value, as a specific and extremely elaborate form of relating to the world. One has to avoid making mistakes. The first mistake: considering this activity as a simple imposition of the ruling class, forgetting its educational value. The second, symmetrical, mistake: considering that only this activity has value. There are other ways to learn, other valuable ways to relate to the world, to others, to oneself, other activities that are worth being carried out and perfected in a human lifetime. On this matter we should reflect on the fact that today school has invaded the life of the young and tends to make other forms of relating to the world impossible.

CAN SCHOOL ACTIVITY BE CONSIDERED A JOB?

The answer to this question depends, obviously, on how one defines what a “job” is.

From three points of view school activity can be considered a job. It demands effort and expends energy. It functions under conditions of time, space, material and is assessed. Finally, it takes place in a social background. Therefore, it presents certain characteristics of work. Indeed, at least in France, young children, especially in

infant education, make a point of saying that at school *they work*. Having a social and serious activity outside home, like their parents, is proof that you are now a “grown-up”.

However, there are fundamental differences between the pupil's activity and work outside school. Alain's philosophy makes the distinction between the pupil and the apprentice. The latter does not waste the material, or waste time, because material and time are money. Hence, he cannot take a “trial and error” attitude, and as such is not in a good position to think. In contrast, the pupil can test, try, fail, start again, and do so without losing money: in doing so he gains learning (Alain, 1969).

From the Marxist point of view, work is also distinguished from school activity. In effect, school work does not lead to a profit, at least an immediate and direct one; it produces learning. The pupils do not receive a salary; they gain knowledge, skills, grades, qualifications.

So at the end of the day, is school activity a job or not? One can say that the pupils “work” (between quotation marks), doing a specific task which is to study. Meanwhile, the pupils themselves are less and less aware of the specificity of the school activity. As we shall see, they tend to consider it as work imposed on the young by adults.

WHEN SCHOOL ACTIVITY DETERIORATES INTO TRANSFERRED WORK

Nowadays, school is increasingly seldom viewed as a place of learning and thinking and it is thought of more as a route to a job. This relationship with knowledge and with school is reflected in the words of parents, in the discourse of politicians, in newspaper articles, in the marketing of private schools, and it is therefore unsurprising that it has become the dominant thinking also among pupils.

My research into the relationship with knowledge has highlighted that many pupils go to school to pass the year, and obtain their diploma in order to subsequently get a good job later on. This is a realistic position, of course, but the problem is that more and more pupils attend school solely for this reason (and, of course, to see their friends). School as a place of knowledge and education is being superseded by school as a promise of insertion into the job market. I have heard the young ask: “teachers receive a salary, so why don't we?” In their logic this is a legitimate question: school is the start of the professional career, and hence the pupils should receive a small salary.

Furthermore, for a lot of pupils, in Brazil as well as in France, the active person in the teaching-learning act is not the pupil — it is the teacher. What does studying mean, for Brazilian children in the fourth series (fifth year)? It is doing what the teacher says to do. It is listening to her, without messing about, playing, arguing (Ireland *et al.*, 2007). Pupils who go to school and pay

attention to what the teacher says are complying with their duty as a pupil. What happens next depends on the teacher. If she explains well, the pupil will learn and get a good grade. The logical conclusion is as follows: a bad grade is unfair when the pupils listened to the teacher. If they did not understand anything, it is because the teacher did not explain properly and it is the teacher who should get a bad grade.

Following this logic, the idea of the pupil's intellectual activity disappears. The school becomes a place where tasks have to be completed. Why? Because the teacher said so and whoever disobeys her will not pass the year and will not get a good job later. According to Leontiev, as we have seen, one can only talk about activity when the motive and the objective coincide: one studies to appropriate knowledge. In the thinking that is becoming dominant, pupils study (when they study...) to get good grades, pass the year, get into university, get a good job: the motive and the objective do not coincide. Therefore, there is no activity. As such, what is the meaning of what the pupils do in school? Leontiev would answer that it is a question of actions. We can also say that it is a job: a transferred job. The pupils have to expend energy to comply with the rules and earn good grades, but they are misappropriated and misappropriate themselves to do so. When school activity loses its specificity, all that is left is transferred work, both that of the pupil and that of the teacher. And it is this work, we have to admit, that is annoying and very boring.

We should reflect on this. To what extent can our schools induce the pupils to carry out intellectual activity, to immerse themselves in new worlds, to build other ways of relating to the world? To what extent, in contrast, do they put the emphasis on standardised tasks and compliance with regulations? Here is part of the answer: when pupils arrive late at school, they are immediately sent to a staff member's office to justify their lateness, and as such they miss a little more of the lesson. Satisfying the needs of the institution is more important than learning...

ENDNOTES

1. In French the same word is used for the verbs learn and teach: *apprendre*.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- ALAIN (1969). *Propos sur l'éducation*. Paris: PUF.
- BACHELARD, Gaston (1996). *A formação do espírito científico*. Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto.
- BAUDELLOT, Christian & ESTABLET, Roger (1971). *L'école capitaliste en France*. Paris: Maspero.

- BERNSTEIN, Basil (1996). *A estruturação do discurso pedagógico: classe, código, controle*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1989). *O poder simbólico*. Lisboa: Difel.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (1998). *Escritos de Educação*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (2003). *A Miséria do Mundo*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre (2007). *A Distinção: crítica social do julgamento*. Porto Alegre: Editora Zouk.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre & PASSERON, Jean-Claude (1992). *A reprodução*. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves.
- BOWLES, Samuel & GINTIS, Herbert (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.
- CERTEAU, Michel de (1996). *Invenção do Cotidiano: 1 Artes de Fazer*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- CHARLOT, Bernard (1999). *Le rapport au savoir en milieu populaire. Une recherche dans les lycées professionnels de banlieue*. Paris: Anthropos.
- CHARLOT, Bernard (2000). *Da Relação com o saber. Elementos para uma teoria*. Porto Alegre: ARTMED.
- CHARLOT, Bernard (2005a). *Relação com o saber, Formação dos professores e globalização: questões para a educação hoje*. Porto Alegre: ARTMED.
- CHARLOT, Bernard (2005b). O sociólogo, o psicanalista e o professor. In Leny Magalhães MRECH (org.), *O impacto da Psicanálise na Educação*. São Paulo: Avercamp Editora, pp. 33-55.
- CHARLOT, Bernard; BAUTIER, Élisabeth & ROCHEX, Jean-Yves (1992). *École et savoir dans les banlieues... et ailleurs*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- FREIRE, Paulo (1976). *Educação como Prática da Liberdade*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- FREIRE, Paulo (1983). *Pedagogia do oprimido*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra.
- INHELDER, Bärbel & PIAGET, Jean (1976). *Da Lógica da Criança à Lógica do Adolescente*. São Paulo: Pioneira.
- IRELAND, Vera Ester et al. (2007). *Re-Pensando a Escola: um estudo sobre os desafios de aprender, ler e escrever*. Brasília: UNESCO e INEP.
- LEONTIEV, Alexis N. (1984). *Activité, Conscience, Personnalité*. Moscou: Ed. Du progres.
- MARRERO, Adriana (2007). Hermione en Hogwarts, o sobre el éxito escolar de las niñas. In Adriana MARRERO (org.), *Educación y Modernidad, Hoy*. Valencia: Germania / Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, pp. 203-245.
- PIAGET, Jean (2008). *Psicologia e Pedagogia*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Forense Universitária.
- SILVA, Veleida Anahi da (2004). *Savoirs quotidiens et savoirs scientifiques: l'élève entre deux mondes*. Paris: Anthropos.
- SILVA, Veleida Anahi da (2009). *Por que e para que aprender a matemática?* São Paulo: Cortez.
- VERGNAUD, Gérard (2005). Prefácio. In Maria Lucia Faria MORO & Maria Tereza Carneiro SOARES (orgs.), *Deseños, palavras e números: as marcas da matemática na escola*. Curitiba: Editora da UFPR.
- VYGOTSKY, Lev (1987). *Sémionovitch. Pensamento e linguagem*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- WILLIS, Paul (1991). *Aprendendo a ser Trabalhador: escola, resistência e reprodução social*. Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas.

Speech given in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon, on 12 February 2009, as part of the 17th Afirse Debate — Portuguese Section, "School and the world of work"

BERNARD CHARLOT

bernard.charlot@terra.com.br

Visiting professor from the Federal University of Sergipe, Brazil (NPGED and NPGECIMA/UFS), member of the Education and Contemporariness Studies Group (EDUCON). Professor emeritus at the University of Paris 8. Professor Affiliate of the University of Porto.

Translated by Thomas Kundert

Charlot, Bernard (2009). School and the pupils' work. Conference given at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon, 12 February 2009. *Sísifo. Educational Sciences Journal*, 10, pp. 87-94.

Retrieved [month, year] from <http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt>