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SCHOOLS IN SOCIETY: THREE CASE STUDIES

It is often easier to move forward by way of a short detour. In this chapter, I will present some of the books and studies that have influenced and inspired me. The selection may seem arbitrary and confusing, but I would ask the reader not to despair. The studies I present below have an inherent value. But more important, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the combined studies illustrate the underlying premise of the main ideas presented in this book.

A FRENCH VILLAGE

If you take the train from Paris to Bordeaux, and a slow, meandering train at that—a train that stops at points of local interest along the way—after a while you will reach a tiny station located near a tiny village. Mazières-en-Gâtine is the name of the village, and Roger Thabault (1971) is the name of the man who has described it.¹ Both names are worth noting. For although the village remains minuscule and Thabault is now an old man, I feel certain that the book he wrote

about the village of his childhood will remain a monument in the history of public education. This point is even more remarkable considering that Thabault writes very little about schools or education in the book.

What he does write a good deal about is the village itself. The name of the village, Mazières-en-Gâtine, indicates that it was probably built in the vicinity or on top of ancient Roman ruins. It was far from an attractive building site. An abundance of natural wells and water holes were the only local resources that could help explain the decision to choose to build a village in precisely this location. In the years around 1750, water was thus the only immediately available resource for the hundreds of households located in and around the village. Most of the inhabitants were tenants and bond servants who fought a desperate battle on infertile soil against weeds, water, fog, and landowners—and not least the French military service that recruited soldiers to take part in the glorious military adventures of the fatherland. The population's garments were simple, hand sewn, and made of hemp. And if people were lucky enough to have shoes, these were carved out of wood. The wealthier residents had one set of clothes made of wool that was intended to last for a lifetime. The food was, of course, homegrown and home cooked. Salt, pepper, and candles were the only commodities imported into the village on a regular basis. Wine was a luxury enjoyed by only the wealthiest members of the population. All tools were handmade, including the wooden plow. The crude plow blade would scratch at the surface of the soil, with the sole advantage being that the plow itself could be drawn by even the most decrepit of livestock. The houses had just one room; animals huddled in one corner, a kitchen

was found in the second, and beds in the third. It was an existence rife with hunger, illness, frostbite, and destitution, and for a long time these conditions remained unchanged. In 1855, the population was around 970. Out of these, 159 were dependent on public welfare to survive the coldest and most difficult years.

Settlement was dispersed, and in 1840, less than 200 of the township residents lived in the actual village. Most were craftspeople who farmed on the side, but two or three landed proprietors, along with a priest, doctor—uneducated, naturally—tax collector, teacher, and four police officers also lived in the village.

We will soon learn more about the teacher. But before that, a few words about the road builder, because he is the first to make an entrance in the lifeworld that Thabault describes. The road builder arrived in 1850. Before that time, and for a long time afterward, travel was a perilous undertaking. In the words of Thabault (1971, 42),

It is possible to gain an idea of what the roads were like at the time simply by looking at the plowing tracks in a field. Just a couple of inches below the surface, there is an impenetrable layer of sediment, leading to flooded roads with every rainfall. Thick hedges protect the roads from the sun. They are almost constantly muddy, even during the summer, and most of the time completely impassible. Passage is possible only by oxcart, as persons traveling on foot will find themselves ankle deep in the mud. The conditions were even worse before 1850 due to the bushes and heather invading the road. And as if that were not enough, Baron de Tousseau had only to relocate a fence and the road would become a part of his outlying fields.

In year IX following the revolution, Prefect Dupin wrote, “The roads of Gâtine are passable only toward the end of summer, and on the ridges the roads are blocked by large stones

that can be removed only by blasting with dynamite. In the road there are many deep craters filled with mud, which are covered by a thin layer of dry soil. The horses traveling there fall through, and several oxen are needed to haul them out again.

On the whole, it was, still in the words of Thabault, a closed world. There were few who traveled. Everyone knew a little about everything and had no need to go anywhere. Every once in a while, a villager would venture to a local market in the neighboring village, but for the majority, the weekly expedition to church every Sunday was enough. No one left, and no one arrived. The first records of birthplaces in the township appeared in 1872, and showed that only five people were born outside the county and eighteen were born in neighboring townships. Only the most important of dignitaries enjoyed a slightly larger network of contacts. A messenger brought them letters on a weekly basis, but due to the small amount of mail in and out of the village, the messenger was not entitled to the use of a horse.

There was a school in the village. Here is its birth certificate:

Today, on June 10, 1832, the undersigned members of the village council in Mazières have gathered for an extraordinary meeting to address the circular letter of May 17 ... regarding funds for a primary school teacher.

Given that the township has never before had a teacher or even a building to teach in, but at the same time wholly acknowledges the pressing need for procuring such a teacher—the village council unanimously agrees to the approval of a surtax of sixty francs to provide the teacher with a salary and will submit a request to the government—as the surtax will surely be insufficient—that it supply whatever outstanding amount might be necessary to employ a teacher. (Thabault 1971, 52)

The initiative for the school came from Paris. Mazières was one of the few townships that welcomed the idea. The surrounding townships either dismissed it out of hand or remained skeptical. As became quickly apparent, it was difficult to find support for this new idea of a school. Teachers came, but soon left again. They were offered extremely primitive conditions. And most important, they were given no children to teach.

The thoughts of the politicians in Paris were as follows:

Make no mistake: while the teacher's profession may be without glamor, and his daily duties confined within the borders of a single township, his work is of importance to the entire society. His profession represents an invaluable contribution to public life. It is not just for the sake of the township's welfare or out of consideration for mere local interests that the law requires that all Frenchmen—if possible—acquire the necessary skills deemed indispensable for social life and intelligent behavior. It is also for the sake of both the state and public interests: freedom can only flourish among people who are sufficiently enlightened as to be able to attend the voice of reason. A common and compulsory education for all will henceforth guarantee order and stability in our society. Because our country is governed by the pillars of truth and rationality, it is only through the development of intelligence and enlightenment that we may secure the continuance of the constitutional monarchy. (François Guizot, quoted in Thabault 1971, 56–57)

These notions were conceived in Paris. But the children of Mazières lived on dirt floors, waded through mud, and lived their lives primarily within the closed circle of their community. They needed to be able to perform basic calculations—a skill most of the children either learned by themselves or from each other. Yet all the other stuff from Paris, which was to be taught in the classroom, was alien and above all useless.

Advanced numeracy was unnecessary—the household economy was based on the simple barter and trade of natural goods. Public announcements and official news were communicated by word of mouth. What was most important was the local news, and no schooling was required for the oral manner of its communication. The village church, fireplace, and water pump all retained their double functions.

But then the road builder arrived and began his work in 1848. Most of the roads were completed in seven years' time. The first railroad tracks arrived twenty years later. The bubble had finally burst. Only then did the school find its true meaning.

Studies show for whom the school was important during the first years of its existence. Village residents were the first to recognize the need for schooling. The baker's balance sheets became too complex to calculate accurately through simple mental arithmetic, and the blacksmith acquired a need for new materials from outside the village. So they sent their sons to school. A post office soon followed. More than anyone, the postmaster depended on the written word, and reading soon became a general requirement—even for girls. The village slowly grew in size—from 200 inhabitants in 1850 to 250 in 1870—and more craftspeople arrived: cobblers, clockmakers, and fabric and yarn dyers. The documented arrival of craftsmen and artisans indicates that something must have happened in the village. The villagers were now able to afford new shoes and watches. They also started dying their clothes. The road was opened; products were sent out, and money and new impulses came in. And little by little,

the farm children started appearing in the school statistics, at first only boys, but soon also girls.

Soon the farmers were able to avail themselves of yet another opportunity: in 1849, an agricultural school was founded near the village. Apparently the founding of this school occurred purely by chance. One of the larger landed proprietors owned several fertile farms along with one that was extremely infertile, which he turned over to the government in exchange for the establishment of an agricultural school, where he would hold a paid post of director. The school targeted farmers from a large area, and the teachings were quite abstract. The local farmers had no use for it—on the contrary, they became angry and demanded that a research commission from the government conduct a review of the school. Teach farming—at a school? Never! But with time, the crops in the area began to flourish. One neighbor took a leap of faith and bought himself an iron plow identical to the one used at the college. And although the local farmers had distanced themselves from the school, they flocked around the neighbor: the first time he put the plow to use, more than 200 people came to watch. Curiosity notwithstanding, they remained unconvinced. The plow dug too deeply and was criticized for unearthing the infertile soil lying underneath the good soil. But when the time for harvest came, the man with the iron plow brought in abundant crops. The plow had uprooted the nightmarish weeds, and the following year, many iron plows could be seen in the fields. The development of new fertilization methods soon followed, along with the introduction of different types of grain, and more than ever, the road and railroad were needed to deal with the unprecedented surplus. In fact, no column of

Table 1.1 Transported Goods to and from Mazières between 1885 and 1910

Year	Express trains		Slow trains	
	Export in tons	Import in tons	Export in tons	Import in tons
1885	6	–	1,208	2,482
1890	33	–	1,405	4,312
1900	181	77	2,304	4,807
1910	324	83	2,867	6,195

Source: Thabault 1971, 145.

numbers is more suitable to start this book than that found in table 1.1, showing the village’s statistics for outgoing and incoming goods by rail between 1885 and 1910. The increasing necessity of the village school is reflected in this table.

There were other reasons as well. Compulsory military service was introduced, and young men were to a much greater extent obliged to leave the confines of the village. Asking your friend to write the letter home to your girlfriend—or knowing that it would be read aloud to her by a friend—was an unpleasant prospect. It was not only the effects of one iron plow that could be clearly discerned: the benefits of schooling for the first students also became increasingly evident. Some of the township’s poorest children, who were not needed at home, were therefore among the first to attend the school. These children finished school at the same time as the village opened up to the outside world, and suddenly a large number of jobs—and from a farmer’s perspective, attractive jobs—materialized. The poor lad with an education

sailed straight past the others. Later, other children from more affluent families also found themselves with more free time on their hands and were sent to school as well. As machines began to take over, children were no longer needed at home to the same extent, and schooling soon became a matter of course. We will return to this subject in another chapter.²

On top of this, critical events were also unfolding in France. Kings came and kings went—mostly the latter. New forms of governance emerged. Without roads, none of this would have mattered. Norwegian officials were probably better informed of events in Paris than the average citizen of Mazières. But the roads and railroad brought more than just goods and money; they brought new ideas as well. Landowners slowly lost their monopoly on important decisions about community matters. Local opposition emerged in keeping with national trends. There was a fireworks display on the day of the Republican victory in the local elections. And soon enough, the information shared at the village water pump became insufficient. Newspapers began arriving—sent free of charge to the most influential citizens in the village. Those who could not read were excluded from all this.

The changes in Mazières spelled trouble for the village priest. Others, too, were now able to read, and suddenly the roads began leading to places other than heaven. Three central movements emerged that would replace religion: nationalism, republicanism, and—as the ultimate driving force—the belief in progress. Or rather, the certitude of progress—progress leading the village residents out of hardship, destitution, and disenfranchisement into an existence of waving fields of grain, prosperity, and dignity. The road

had become an integrated part of the village, and for generation after generation, the school was seen as the key to all this. The school became the bedrock on which everything else rested.

THE EMPTY ROOMS

A dreary landscape. Dusty roads, randomly situated wood shacks, a number of tents. Forty thousand people. And there, towering behind it all like a temple, the school.

We are in Dakota, United States.³ The home of many of Norway's destitute—farm boys without an allodial entitlement, children of smallholders, and the impoverished, along with the occasional black sheep who made the journey in hopes of changing the color of his fleece “over there.” The landscape was vast, open, and uninhabited.

Well, almost uninhabited. The unlucky groups of people that were already settled on the land were quickly driven out and subsequently resettled on tracts of uncultivable land, such as the Pine Ridge district. Here the Sioux people were given new land—or old sand.⁴

They were doing fine, if by doing fine we mean to say they were not starving. Their former hunting grounds were being cultivated by the Scandinavian farmers. There was surplus produce, the conditions for trade were difficult, and Sitting Bull and One Feather received weekly deliveries free of charge. There were plenty of old clothes. No starvation, no nudity.

But becoming American—in the sense of European—was not in the cards for them. The common wisdom of the time was that if you give them money, they will drink it up, and

waste their time on tomfoolery or shooting the breeze or just staring up at the clouds.

The nights were still spent doing the old ritual dances. Living conditions remained far removed from the American dream: water was taken from the brook, heat was provided by a fireplace, and the water closet was at best an outhouse. Even their language was kept alive: in Pine Ridge, most people spoke the “L” dialect of the Dakota language—that is, Lakotan. Only those living near the main roads spoke English, along with a few of those living a bit further away, but mostly there were many who merely pretended to do so. On the outskirts of the district, an interpreter was required. The word “interpreter,” by the way, also means “half-breed” in the Lakota language. If anything, this illustrates how during those early years, so few Europeans lived in the region that they coexisted—mostly in peace—with the native population.

And now to the schools. A group of federal schools was built in the region, funded by Washington, DC. Amends were to be made for past injustices; the schools were built and equipped to offer the Native American children the same satisfactory educational standards as those offered to the rest of the country. Solid, modern buildings, fully equipped classrooms, cafeterias, running water, and working toilets. Three to four buses collected the children every day from even the remotest of locations, the youngest were given breakfast at school, and all the children received lunch. A staff of qualified teachers was ready and waiting, eager to fill up the day as well as the children.

In spite of these measures, or perhaps exactly because of them, things went terribly wrong. The results from the

primary schools were among the lowest 10 percent in the country, and did not even include the large number of children who dropped out of school completely and made up about half of an average class. Of the few who made it to high school, only one out of three students completed their studies—once again with dreadful results. This third of the students also included quite a large group of children whose parents were teachers or state employees on the reservation. *Why did things go so wrong?* The answer to this question is explained in a study dear to my heart. It was cowritten by a number of authors, all of whom deserve mention: Murray L. Wax, Rosalie H. Wax, and Robert V. Dumont Jr., assisted by Rosely Holyrock and Gerald OneFeather. Henceforth, reference to the study will be Wax, Wax, and Dumont 1964).

In the study of why things went so dreadfully wrong for the Pine Ridge people, three elements in particular stand out. First, it was a school *based on a vacuum theory*. It hereby became a *degrading school*. And it became an *irrelevant school*. Other readers will perhaps highlight other important aspects of the study. The authors offer examples of extreme incompetence on the part of school personnel as a critical contributing factor. But such factors are not of interest, unless there is a frequency indicating that they represent a trend. As is the case for most other social schemes, we must assume schools to be staffed with average personnel. Some are extremely competent, and others are extremely incompetent, but the majority are average. The system must be designed in terms of the average. If “the average” cannot be used, another kind of system must be created.

As we were saying, the teachers were there, prepared to fill up both the day and the children. Hidden in this

formulation lies the key to understanding *the vacuum theory*. We could have given it another name: the blotting paper ideology. Or the theory of the empty rooms. Or tabula rasa. The point is that the student is regarded as someone who is completely empty when meeting the teacher—or at best, unfortunate enough to be burdened with irrelevant or unwanted prior knowledge. In the words of two distinguished administrators,

This kid from a conservative home began attending the school. He only speaks his Native American tongue; everything he knows comes from his grandmother's teachings. His home has no books, no magazines, no radio, no television. And then he goes to school, and we have to teach him everything. OK, so we bring him to the point where he actually knows a little about something, and then he drops out of school. Our numbers are high for kids like that—who drop out before completing their final exams. The reason is simply that at some point, he is forced to choose between his grandmother and becoming an educated person. ... If only we had reached the child earlier, maybe at kindergarten or nursery school age—we should have a nursery here—then we could have achieved more with the kid.

Or as another administrator puts it,

The Native American child has such a limited horizon. Ask him to read words like “elevator” or “escalator,” and he will have no idea what the words mean. But the issue lies not only with foreign words or concepts. Take a word such as “water.” When you or I think of it, well, we think of stainless steel, running water, a shiny sink—pure, clean water—and the pipes that supply it, sewers, purification plants, and the half-million-dollar water supply project for the Pine Ridge area. But the Native American child doesn't exactly think of water as something flowing into a bathtub. (Quoted in Wax, Wax, and Dumont 1964, 67–68)

Wax, Wax, and Dumont (1964, 68) comment that “while he [the administrator] was talking, we thought about our camping trip last summer by the small river just a couple of hundred meters away from the Sioux settlement. We recalled the cool water, the vegetation around it, and the people coming to bathe along with their animals.”

In their ignorance, the administrators’ utterances sound like such a caricature that I was hesitant to cite them here. That is, until I found myself in lecture hall five, eagerly teaching a group of zealous Norwegian students about different forms of social control. First I spoke at great length about complex theories. Then I tried starting a conversation. Vacant gazes stared back at me. These students had just commenced their studies. They couldn’t be expected to participate in something like this. One of them even got angry with me. They were here to *learn*. Not to be put on display in all their ignorance. How were they supposed to know how people control one another? He was right. I had alienated the content and begun at the (wrong) end of a complex theory, where none of my students had been before. Suddenly, not a single one of the students knew a single thing about something they did every day: the ways in which they encourage, curb, control, and direct one another. The vacuum theory had implicitly prevailed. It was not the first time and it will certainly not be the last.

But some cases are, of course, more extreme than others. These cases occur especially in situations where the greatest distance exists between the current or prospective lives of the pupils and teachers. The gap between the Sioux people and their teachers was insurmountable. The teachers resided in quaint detached houses, located near the area of the school.

Their working day was long, but in their leisure time, they could do as they pleased. Traveling within the district, however, was difficult. There were no road signs, and no numbers on the houses—local familiarity with the district alone was helpful. Add to this the language barriers, and uncertainty as to whether or not they were even welcome in the Sioux territory, and the gap widens. Only a single teacher went on regular visits to their hometown.

The school thereby became the disseminator of all the things that the Native Americans were lacking: how to use the toilet, how to eat a hamburger properly, how to be polite to adults, and all the other *things* and *symbols* that were supposedly important outside their community.

Naturally, a gap between the teacher and student is not unique to this case. This distance is the norm. Two peers have little to learn from each other. One of them must know something that the other doesn't.

In some cases, the vacuum theory might even be fully acceptable—it might even be the best foundation for learning. These are cases in which the theory provides an accurate description of the situation, whereby it is acceptable for the students, and their acceptance provides the students with subsequent benefits. The example of Asian university students seeking to learn how to speak Norwegian in Norway is useful here. It seems fair to assume that the students will know nothing, and that the “rooms” must be filled. This premise alone makes initial failure acceptable for both students and teachers, while at the same time making any later achievements seem all the more glorious.

But then there are many cases in which such premises are flawed. In these cases, it is first and foremost the refusal to

base the teaching on what the students already know that is pedagogically unsound. This point is basic. Yet on top of this, although it might be a bit more difficult to understand, comes the implication of the theory of the empty rooms—which are in no sense empty—and entails that whatever was in the room to begin with must be pushed aside. The teacher stomps blindly into the classroom, doing their best to fill up the rooms on top of all the things that are already in there, but that they cannot see. Perhaps some of the existing contents are shoved out during the process, some are broken, while other contents may be sturdy enough to circumvent the teacher’s attempts to shove them away or even replace them. *In every case, the teacher’s conduct inevitably leads to an understanding among the students that whatever was in the room wasn’t worth having there in the first place.*

This describes the situation in Pine Ridge. The vacuum theory resulted in *a degrading school*. The ideals of the white man found expression in the white man’s books, even more so in his behavior, and most of all in his things. And of all the white man’s things, nothing was more important and more removed from reality than the school itself. Previously, the Sioux people’s schools had been small and scattered throughout the district until they were combined into a single, central school. “The Native Americans’ own school,” they called it on its opening day. This claim did not last long after the school was asked to host a “native gathering.” Dirt, rowdiness, and disorder followed—once was more than enough. Such things have no place in what was, clearly, the white headmaster’s school. Parents brought their children to school on their first day. They rarely stepped onto the school grounds again. Everything was set up in a way that facilitated

the experience of inferiority. And like my Norwegian students, the Sioux parents reacted by avoiding situations of degradation as much as they could.

The children followed the parents' lead. This is the crucial point in the analysis provided by Wax and his colleagues. While their point is especially significant in the case of the Sioux people, its features are to be found in other cultures as well. The Sioux have a deep-rooted belief in human beings as fundamentally stable. The joyful person will almost always be joyful, the kind person always kind, and the foolish person always foolish. This makes it all the more important *not* to be made a fool of. All reasonable members of the tribe know this, and arrange their lives accordingly. When mistakes are made, great efforts are made to cover them up. And when there is a need to correct someone's behavior, much care is taken to ensure that this takes place in private and the dignity of both parties is preserved.

But the theory of the empty rooms leaves little room for dignity. The teacher's persona and ideals imply that the student is inherently inferior—a fact that is highlighted in the classroom situation. Here, the young Sioux is put in situations where they will inevitably do everything wrong. They will make a fool of themselves in public, be corrected in public, and on top of it all, be told to respect and cooperate with the person whom, little by little, is experienced as an intruder in the room that is already filled to the brim.

For the child or young person, this is unavoidable. School attendance is compulsory, and most parents genuinely believe that schooling must somehow be good for the child. Besides, the school provides free lunch, among others things. As for the school, it is granted a certain amount of money

per child, and consequently the bar for expulsion is pretty high. But dignity is more important than food. The result is physical attendance, but mental absence.

This is not, however, the case in the earliest years of schooling. Eager children attend willingly, doing their best to understand some of the strange words coming out of the strange person's mouth. They're too young to have any dignity to lose and too excited about the unknown. But before long, two things start to happen. First, protests. Chaos erupts in the classroom, especially among children who tease or bully one another. This is a recurring theme in teachers' complaints about the Native American schools: the children harass one another constantly and do so with an unbridled vengeance. The explanation for this phenomenon is multifaceted. Most of the children are used to living in small neighborhood communities where hierarchies are established quickly, and peace and order prevail. But in the centralized school, all these power relations must be tested anew. The children are accustomed to equality between people and inequality in age, which enables the elders to protect the young members of the community. In school, the opposite occurs: there is inequality between the children and equality in age. At home, the adults serve as courts of appeal in the event somebody should cross over the line too frequently. But at school, the only adult person present is the representative of the empty rooms—the person who must be avoided at all costs. And so the children are left to manage things on their own. The first couple of years become nightmarish.

And yet they pull through. In the end, they manage to establish some form of stable, hierarchical order. By seventh and eighth grade, order and silence prevail. The only sounds

being made are coming from the teacher. The students are as unresponsive as mollusks:

Hours pass without a single word being uttered by any student. The incredible discipline ruling the upper classes is created and enforced by the Sioux children themselves in relation to both teachers and peers. Their self-imposed discipline serves as a shield. Behind it, unprepared or unwilling students can hide, turning most teachers into useless or ridiculous figures, and for the first time in many years, the students find themselves in a calm and orderly environment. Here, they are allowed to day-dream, pass each other notes, read books from the library, and even study if they wish to do so. The only disturbance is the teacher's voice, but they have nonetheless long since learned how to tune in and out, according to their own needs and inclinations. The teachers usually react to this in one of three different ways. Some resign themselves to the silence as if it were inevitable, allowing it to prevail and instead working individually with those of the children who seem willing to cooperate. Some go to great lengths to keep talking, indifferent to any response or lack thereof from the pupils. And finally, at its most extreme and in clear contrast to Sioux customs, some teachers shake and terrorize their students to force a mechanical reply out of them, or simply frighten the children so they stop coming to school altogether. (Wax, Wax, and Dumont 1964, 98)

The observers of these classes provide accounts of how the teachers, in one way or another, make pathetic attempts to penetrate the shield. They force answers out of the students, pretend to hear the answers they hope for, or try to read the answers from facial expressions or body postures. Of equal cause for concern are the responses of the students. In the event of direct confrontations, the offending student will duck under the lid of their desk, pretend not to have heard, and look in totally a different direction or feign stupidity. For them, any one of these responses is better than answering,

better than making a fool of themselves, or better than showing signs of a willingness to cooperate with the person who does not accept the students in the first place.

Under such circumstances, it is clear that little learning takes place in the school. The issue of an extreme *lack of relevance*, constituted by both external and internal conditions, is another part of this equation. The external conditions are tied closely to the state of Dakota in the 1960s. Most of the fertile lands for farming are controlled by white men. Few are able to coax any form of crops out of the sandy fields left for the Sioux people. Table 1.2 illustrates the working situation of fathers of the Sioux families in Pine Ridge.

Table 1.2 Occupational Distribution of Family Fathers of the Pine Ridge Sioux People

	Quantity	Percentage
Agriculture	557	21.4
Unskilled	136	5.2
State employed	129	5.0
Military	120	4.6
Skilled or semiskilled	101	3.9
Service sector	44	1.7
Supervisors	28	1.1
“Tribal” workers	26	1.0
Unemployed	1,379	52.9
No information	86	3.3
	2,606	100.0

Source: Wax, Wax, and Dumont 1964, 23.

More than half are unemployed, and only one-fifth have managed to find employment in agriculture. Of those who have, the majority are half-breeds—in other words, “almost” white. More than half of all the families’ annual incomes are less than a thousand dollars per year, at a time when a mere 15 percent of the total population of Dakota had such a low income. And again, a large portion of this 15 percent in Dakota as a whole were without doubt Native American. Such are the circumstances for the Sioux students, of the life to which they will return. It is far from self-evident how a national curriculum with a standardized view of achievement might have any kind of impact in such a context.⁵

Only under one condition would the Sioux people’s school become relevant: if life were to be lived off the reservation. But here, the internal conditions of the school come into play. The students know very well that they are not learning anything at school. They experience it themselves and see it in their fellow tribesmen, none of whom have been equipped with the intellectual or practical prerequisites that would enable them to leave the reservation. Knowing this, schooling becomes even more irrelevant and the students even less inclined to learn. The vicious circle tightens its grip. That is, of course, *if* it is considered vicious in the first place by the reservation. After all, the latter retains its people—also the best ones.

THE CENTRIFUGE

“Lumley” Secondary School is located somewhere in the heart of northern England. The name and location of the school are fictitious. In reading the following, the necessity of such camouflaging will eventually become evident.

Two young lads, two worlds, and one school. Or should they in fact be considered *two* schools? On the contrary, as it is precisely because they have been forced to attend the same school that two separate worlds have been created. David Hargreaves (1967) illustrates this clearly. Adrian and Clint would probably not be as fully Adrian and Clint were it not for the fact that for four years, they were forced into a confrontation with each other, their fellow students, and their teachers—and above all with their own self-image as reflected in all these encounters.

It all takes place somewhere in northern England. A dirty, industrial town of dreary houses, but often inhabited by warmhearted individuals. The school is only ten years old, but it too is already shrouded in an aura of grayness. Four hundred and fifty students, most of them from working-class families, absorb the knowledge dispensed by the twenty-four teachers employed at the school. Only a single teacher lives in the school neighborhood. The majority of the others live in a residential district outside the town's limits. At the lower secondary school, the students are given four years of schooling from the age of twelve to fifteen. At that point they also have the option of continuing for an additional, noncompulsory fifth year.

Adrian and Clint began in the same class. Both had done well on their primary school leaving exams and therefore were naturally placed in the A-level class—the best class out of the school's four levels.⁶ The school's level division is without any pretension of equality among the students. The level divisions are categorized alphabetically. Smart students are put in the A level, and the incorrigible are placed in the B level. And what's more, the school even has an E

level for those so far removed from the school society that Hargreaves himself chose not to include this class in his investigation. This choice is one of the few weaknesses of his study.

So Adrian and Clint began in the same class with somewhat similar prerequisites for learning. But then something happened to Clint. The triggering incident remains unknown. Yet the result of his transformation is conveyed through several sources. During an audiotaped interview, one of Clint's former classmates explains it as follows:

In 1B I used to hang out with Clint. He was all right. He is sensible when you're alone with him. He's smart. He could have been good at sports and all that, but he just refused to take the class. It's the teachers' fault really. Cause he was in 1A. But because he misbehaved, they sent him down to 1E. If they'd kept him in the A-level class, he could have been cock of the roost by now. (Quoted in Hargreaves 1967, 120)

Described in more detail, Clint's development was as follows: Clint comes afoul of his homeroom teacher during his first year of school. As a form of shock treatment in punishment for his behavior, he is transferred temporarily to the E-level class. He is then allowed to return, albeit not to the A-level class. Instead he is delegated to the B level, where he must prove himself once more. But from here on in, his performance in school rapidly deteriorates. From being second best in his B-level class he descends first down to number six, then twenty-first, and then finally ending at thirty. And that is the total number of students in the class. He is then transferred to the C-level class, where he ends up as number twenty-one out of twenty-three. And then lower secondary school comes to an end.

It is difficult to find an explanation for this development. Hargreaves holds that it was because Clint made friends in the C- and D-level classes, and thereby was motivated to work his way down to their level. But why didn't he make friends with his A-level classmates instead? Perhaps he was on bad terms with some of the students in the A-level class. Perhaps there was not enough room for both him and Adrian. This remains unanswered. All we know for certain is that as Clint descended on the ladder of achievement, he became the natural leader of the C- and D-level classes due to his intellectual abilities (and physique).

Viewing this development from the outside, Clint and Adrian became kings of their own kingdoms. First Adrian—neatly groomed and well dressed, the school's most trusted representative, the undisputed leader of his class, one of the best students at the school, with almost perfect attendance, positive in his attitude, but also clear about his requirements for effective instruction on the part of the teachers. And then Clint—long, unkempt hair and working hard every day to keep it that way, dressed in blue jeans, a violation of the school dress code, known as the school brawler, liked by some, obeyed by many, a high level of absenteeism, considered a scourge by the teachers, and wishing for nothing else but the duress of school to soon come to an end.

We can imagine the kind of answer that Clint would give to describe his dream of adult life:

What do you most look forward to doing when you finish school?

Strolling around at home with a cigarette butt in my mouth.

Table 1.3 Percentage of School Absence out of Maximum Possible Attendance at “Lumley” Lower Secondary School, 1964–1965

	Fall	Spring
Class 4 (A level)	2.79	6.28
Class 4 (B level)	5.18	7.67
Class 4 (C level)	7.36	12.82
Class 4 (D level)	16.50	16.91

Source: Hargreaves 1967, 50.

The distinctive characteristics of the two kingdoms can be seen numerically in table 1.3, which shows the absenteeism of the fourth graders rising gradually from A to D. Similar data exist for tardiness, but here the differences are not as significant. More important are Hargreaves’s comments. Tardy arrivals are recorded by the student representatives—such as Adrian—who sit by the door and let them in. No one would dare report those from the C and D classes. They would beat you up if you did. But the statements from the students themselves—on whether they would like to stay on for a voluntary fifth year—tell us a lot about their different attitudes to school. Seventy-two percent of the A-level students wish to continue. At all other levels, the number decreases to below 30 percent. Similar differences can be found in school gatherings and social life, which constitute the inner life of the school. A-level students dominate on all occasions, from phys ed to fund-raisers; C- and D-level students are mostly found hanging around on the sidelines.

The students in the fourth-year A-level class, like Adrian himself, were acutely aware of their academic superiority.

Newcomers had a low status in that they held back the rest of the class. Through their shortcomings, these newcomers exposed the class norms. Alf was the most disliked student of the class. He was also the strongest—which the rest of the class accepted—but his strength was in no sense sufficient to compensate for his weaknesses: he was not as capable as the others, did not dress well, and was also more of a troublemaker. These were all violations of important class norms. Another fundamental rule in the class was, “Do not copy the work of your classmates.”

In 4C, this was all turned upside down. The class had three cliques, two of which were respected by the other classmates, and one of which was looked down on. But here, rank and achievement were inversely related: those with the lowest rank in terms of popularity did the best in school. The punishment for getting good grades was exacting. And in his capacity as their leader, Clint complied with the classroom norms more diligently than anyone else:

During one math lesson, all the 4C boys were working on various sections of the textbook. Clint was sitting next to Chris as usual, surrounded by the other clique members. Throughout the lesson, Clint never opened his book or used his pen. He spent the time talking, daydreaming, combing his hair and bullying the younger boys in the class. During study hall periods in the library, he wasted the majority of his time pretending to look for a book and playing hide-and-seek with the teacher behind the shelves. All academic activity was avoided scrupulously and flagrantly. Yet judging by the results on the transcripts that he brought with him when he first came to the school, Clint was one of the most intelligent boys at school. And his ingenuity when it came to not getting caught by the teachers when causing trouble was remarkable. Usually he would goad other boys into trouble instead. When a

situation seemed unlikely to provoke any retaliation on the part of the teacher, Clint did not miss out on a single opportunity to break the rules. This approach produced a norm that forbade any kind of academic achievement among his followers.

“... we throw things at each other, cause everyone takes it as a joke and throws things back.” ... “I like number 79 because he’s always messing about. We get a lot of laughs out of him.” (Quoted in Hargreaves 1967, 36–37)

Two kings, two kingdoms—but a single territory. And on top of it a system based on emphasizing differences. The A levels were put with the B levels for most activities, and the C levels were put with the D levels. Their schedules were planned accordingly. But the outcome was that of course the students got to know and befriended one another in accordance with this pattern. The gap widened between A and B on the one side, and C and D on the other. The students on “the other side” of the gap seemed more like fairy-tale characters than ordinary children. Other circumstances served to further consolidate this tendency. Most of the appointed class representatives were from the A-level class. The C and D classes compensated for this with physical strength. Excursions and special tasks were reserved for A- and B-level classes. The C and D levels brought little honor to the school, and mainly just caused trouble. They were most useful as subject matter for cautionary tales, serving as examples of the potential abyss that threatened should the students’ interest and diligence falter.

WE MUST ALWAYS BEHAVE LIKE AN A-LEVEL CLASS. These words were written on a blackboard one day. “Who are you?” a teacher asked a noisy group in the hallway. “We’re

from 4B, Mr. Teacher.” “Well, you sound more like someone from 4E.”

These accounts from everyday life at the school are interesting, but of greater importance are the systemically designed dimensions of school differentiation, such as the distribution of experienced teachers. The head teacher and the person who a short time later was appointed head teacher at the neighboring school were, respectively, assigned to the A and B levels—competent educators, impeccable in their discipline, and who consequently always achieved the best results. The teachers assigned to the C and D levels, on the other hand, were second rate and neither could they produce results proving this to be an error in judgment. These teachers employed two different strategies to handle the disciplinary issues of the lower-level classrooms. The first was based on withdrawal. The teacher would sit at their desk, correcting assignments or write reports, while the class was left to live a life of its own. A variation of this strategy entailed simply lecturing at such a volume that any other noise was drowned out, so any deviants in this class might have a chance of learning something. The second was based on domination, or discipline taken to an extreme: any rule violation was countered with harsh punishments. And while it may have seemed as if the students were now doing their work, in reality in this case the students solved the problem with what in Hargreaves’s opinion was their own form of withdrawal.

Let me provide an example of how one of the lower-level students is described by a teacher reporting to the head teacher. And let me also cite some of Hargreaves’s comments on it. The student is a boy in the D-level class—branded a

loser—placed even further down in the hierarchy than the students in C to whom I have paid the most attention so far. Here he is, “Mediocre, improper in every way, lazy, doesn’t give two hoots about anyone but himself, vicious, slick, a smoker, uncooperative, paranoid, constantly moaning, a bully, hates anyone who is intelligent, a trouble-maker.” And here is Hargreaves’s (1967, 100–101) commentary:

It is hard to imagine a less flattering report. Yet a lot of it was true. Whenever possible, he would shout, scream, and distract other boys. Most of his time at school was spent searching for potential distractions. He would laugh out loud if a teacher told him that his schoolwork would help him get a good job. Most of his actions were directed toward producing a good laugh for himself and his buddies, and he would revel in the guffaws of the rest of the class when he pulled a successful prank and a teacher fell into his trap. When punished, he would sulk if he could not lie his way out of the situation.

Yet this behavior represents an adaptation to the situation. He belongs to an underprivileged class. He has come to learn that he is perceived as a loser. His relationships to the teachers deteriorated steadily over the course of his four years at school, until he was totally rejected by many of them. He made virtually no progress in his schoolwork. ... While the A-level class boys advance in ways the teachers find important—and thereby create a learning situation that is rewarding for both teacher and student—the C- and D-level class lads become increasingly slower and more difficult to handle, creating learning situations with little, if any, rewards for either party.

The fundamental traits of a school such as “Lumley” can perhaps be best understood if we view it as a system for twice-over victors—and twice-over losers. Adrian and his minions in the A-level class are victorious first and foremost in relation to the larger scheme of societal demands. The situation in England is as it was among the Sioux people: if one hopes

to overcome barriers, schooling is an imperative. Completing school at the highest level possible is the mantra. Passing only primary school is equivalent to no schooling whatsoever. We may attempt to obscure this reality, but will not succeed—neither completely nor for long. Adrian was aware of these circumstances, but so too was Clint. Either the one, long-term prize or nothing at all.

But Adrian emerged victorious, and Clint failed, even in the short term. Parents, teachers, and other adults may be despised or hated, yet countless studies show that somehow their values sneak into the minds and self-perceptions of young people. Be zealous in your studies, read and learn, and obey your masters. Adrian knows this. So does Clint.

On top of all this, the system is there to remind them, have them witness each other's victories and failures, and paint them in light of one another, so the white can become even whiter and the black even blacker. It is a centrifuge in which powerful or powerless individuals, respectively, are condemned to external and extremist positions in an established social order.⁷

In a situation like this, it seems almost self-evident that there is only one remaining option for Clint if he hopes to emerge from all this with his dignity intact. He must believe—and demonstrate that he truly believes—that ordinary adult life is good enough for him and schooling is therefore irrelevant. The best means by which he can uphold this conviction is to begin “living like an adult” as soon as possible, by using the symbols of adulthood. For Clint these symbols are clear enough: smoke and drink, play pool, and chase after girls. And then it's a matter of having control over his own

life in all situations other than those involving paid employment, in which the worker slaves away so as to acquire the surplus that will make possible all the adult pastimes mentioned here. So this becomes his response. And the response of his peers. And the response of subsequent C- and D-level classes—as long as we remain within a system that demands such a response in defense of human dignity.

A PROBABLE FUTURE

Every once in a while someone will ask me what the sociology of schools is. The three studies presented above make this question easy to answer. They all represent, in their own way, sociological studies of schools. Formally speaking they would be categorized as something else. Thabault, who described the village school of Mazières-en-Gâtine, is a former teacher and historian by profession. Wax and his colleagues, who described the Sioux people's school, were anthropologists working with the help of two Sioux natives. Hargreaves, the portrayer of the English school, has an educational background in theology and psychology. Their approaches and methods of study differ as well, ranging from document analysis, interviews, and observations to sociometric tests. Nonetheless, they represent the essence of the sociology. Historical details are welcome to the extent that they can shed light on some of the general conditions of the past. Ethnographic characteristics are only included to shed light on the general belief systems. Teachers as well as students are seen as parts of a whole—and at all times, it is the main attributes and features of this whole that are of key interest. The school is

depicted as a system of phenomena, which are connected internally yet always already part of a larger system. If anything, this in particular is the sociology of schools—never mind the definitions.

But this is not, of course, first and foremost the reason why the above-mentioned studies have been chosen and included. They are presented here because each of them, in its own way, tells us something about ourselves. At any rate, it is my hope that the reader has nodded in recognition of at least some of the issues—and felt a bit at home in France, Dakota, and northern England. These nods would indicate above all an appreciation of the general problems at stake in the development of formal schooling. Any society that reaches a certain level of industrial and technological advancement is faced with the need to create formal routines that will attend to the needs of the coming generation. The result is standardized solutions with certain benefits, but also certain costs. National peculiarities surely have a say, but perhaps they have less of a say than we are used to—or comfortable with—ascribing to them.

The flourishing of the village school is first and foremost an example of *the relevant school*. The school had existed in the village long before it was perceived as important. Yet it first became relevant when changes in external factors clearly demonstrated a need for change in the inner structure as well. It became a school in step with the requirements of a given era.

The Sioux people's school came from the outside. It was built on the premise of *the empty rooms*. Learning was forcibly fed. But because the rooms were actually not empty, and because the new knowledge would not help in the life

that would later be lived, the strangers' content would never really fall into place and take root.

The third school we called *the centrifuge*—because of the way its inner structure served only to reproduce and reinforce the class divisions of the surrounding society. It is the polarized and polarizing school that produces only more of what the surrounding society already has in abundance.

What the Sioux people's school and centrifuge share—in stark contrast to the village school in Mazières—is that they both became *somebody else's school*. Both studies show the exceeding narrowness of a perspective that solely views the school as a mechanism for bringing up and socializing children, potentially for a society that can—eventually and indirectly—make use of the children's acquired skills. The intention is indoctrination. But once this system, which is called school, has been created, it attains a life of its own—driven by inner and outer forces. It quickly becomes an organism that evolves in accordance with its own internal needs. The school becomes first and foremost—and this is the key to understanding schools such as those in Pine Ridge and Lumley—*the educationists' school*.

And what about us? What about our own schools in relation to the above? If I am right in my supposition that the three studies presented here have some relevance for us, then it probably means that our schools also share—or have shared—some of their characteristics. But here we must proceed with caution and subtlety. It is utterly meaningless to assign grades to our schools, saying, for example, that three parts of Norwegian schools are relevant—one part characterized by the theory of the empty rooms, and two parts by the centrifuge, combined with portions of the educationists'

school. Instead we must look at the key elements of this organism, the hows and whats of the school, and perhaps even ask why certain elements are similar while others are completely different. We must endeavor to perceive the school system as a whole. We must also challenge received notions and consider the schools in the context of the greater system—the society to which they belong.

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A Study in the Sociology of Schools

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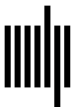
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