Optional Reading

Reading 2

Timetables

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Notes

This optional reading on the sociology of school timetables includes a small research activity. If you set aside some time to do the activity yourself, you will be able to engage more fully with the issues Meighan raises. You will also be prepared for a related research activity in the *Learning Guide*. Meighan looks at school timetables from the perspective of learners' experiences of school. He also discusses some hidden assumptions about knowledge and learning that are implicit in different ways of allocating school time, as well as how the timetable enables and constrains teaching. For a deeper understanding of school time in relation to teachers' work and the implementation of curriculum change, we suggest that you read the abridged chapter by Hargreaves (Reading 1).

Reading

2.1 Introduction: The allocation of time

In situations where it is believed that there is not enough time to do everything, systems of allocating time to chosen activities have to be established. Breaking up time into small segments is common to most situations[…]

Schools face a time allocation problem. There are competing claims about what should be learnt in schools and the number of subjects to be included in the curriculum is seen as being greater than the time available, so time is defined as a scarce item that needs to be rationed in some way.

The way in which time is allocated in schools can contribute some insights into what goes on there and the hidden assumptions involved, as with the spaces and the architecture. The timetable becomes part of

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the consciousness of the pupils, and it is generally taken for granted. It is one of the features of the culture of the school that is taken for granted, seemingly obvious, and unquestioned.[…]

Within a very short time of entering a school, a pupil begins to take for granted that the school day is broken down into blocks of time called periods. Playtime is at a set time and so is lunch time, the start of the afternoon and the end of the school day. This system was created by previous members of the school and has some theoretical base, but this is not explained to the pupil; and it becomes accepted as the 'natural', if not inevitable, way of doing things.

2.2 Sociological questions

A sociological approach tries to resist this 'taken-forgrantedness' and instead asks questions about the particular kinds of timetables in use, the assumptions underpinning these, and the implications and consequences for the learning of all who are involved. A number of general questions may be asked:

1. Who timetables?
2. What is timetabled?
3. How is the timetabling undertaken?
4. Why timetabling and what are its consequences?

2.3 A research activity: The school timetable

Background Propositions

The allocation of time in school is deliberate and codified in a timetable. The principles that underlie this allocation are of interest, since they may:

1. Have implications for what is learnt;
2. Imply psychological, philosophical, sociological and pedagogical ideas that may be taken for granted, but are still open to question.

Aim

The aim of this exercise is to begin the process of questioning and analysing the underlying assumptions of school timetables.

Procedure

Obtain a copy of a school timetable, or consider a timetable you have experienced, or obtain access to a timetable board. (A class timetable

will yield some results if the school timetable is inaccessible.) It should be possible to deduce most answers from the timetable itself: any questions to school staff must obviously be handled with politeness and tact.

1. Who designed the timetable?
2. Who was consulted?
3. Who, in the school community, was not consulted?
4. When was it devised?

What assumptions are being made here?

5. How are groups formed: Allocated? Chosen? Age? Sex? Attainment?
6. Do all groups study the same subjects?
7. If not, when do differences begin?

What assumptions are being made here?

8. Which three subjects/activities are most frequently timetabled?
9. Which three subjects/activities are least frequently timetabled?
10. Which subjects/activities are absent from the timetable?
11. Does the frequency of subject/activity timetabling vary with groups?

What assumptions are being made here?

12. How long are the periods allocated?
13. What subjects/activities are given double periods?
14. Are the timetables of boys and girls the same?
15. f they differ, give details.

What assumptions are being made here?

16. How does the school timetable compare with:
    (a) An evening institute programme; or
    (b) A youth club programme (either one night a week or full time) or
    (c) A technical college timetable?
17. Why was the timetable devised in this particular way?

2.4 Discussion

One general difference in timetables that can be seen is between those of infants, junior and secondary schools. The secondary school timetable tends to be made up of a wide variety of subjects and the task of fitting

all these in with appropriate classes and teachers is complicated – so complicated that some schools use a computer for the purpose. In the infants schools there are usually broadened defined activities like language work, number work and creative activities based on arts and crafts. Junior and middle school occupies an interim position where the inclusion of subjects like history, science and music mean that a finer division of time is required than in an infants school.

Who timetables and when?

The general question 'who timetables?' raises some interesting issues. A hierarchy of some kind usually emerges. The pupils are rarely consulted. Usually only some of the teachers are involved, and these tend to be senior teachers. Caretakers and cleaners are usually expected to arrange their activities to fit in with the timetable. 'Outside' clients like parents are not usually consulted.

The answer to the question 'when was the timetable devised?' is usually that this takes place before the pupils arrive in school and, in the case of a new intake, before the children have been met. There is an assumption here that the needs, achievements and wishes of pupils can be predicted. The variations between schools, however, suggest that different schools may make different predictions about these needs and achievements. For example, one school may predict that pupils have no need of social science studies and so this subject never appears in their timetables. Another school may predict that social science is appropriate only for sixth formers. […]

Some schools have challenged the assumption that a school timetable should be imposed in an authoritarian way upon learners, and have developed timetables based on negotiation[…]

> ***"Some schools have challenged the assumption that a school timetable should be imposed in an authoritarian way upon the learners…"***

What is timetabled?

Timetables indicate the dual nature of what is being processed in schools, knowledge and people.

People

Pupils are formed into groups and these groups tend to be allocated rather than chosen. Allocation takes place on the multiple criteria of age, sex and achievement. The first groupings experienced by pupils tend to be on the basis of age. Some infants schools developed a family grouping system where children of various ages worked with one teacher, but the most common system is to allocate children into 1st years, 2nd years, 3rd years, etc. Age grouping is less rigid in other educational institutions, e.g. technical colleges, the Open University and evening institutes.

The next experience of grouping may be by sex. Certain activities tend to be designated as boys' activities and others as girls' activities. Games provide an example: football for boys and netball for girls. Later, domes-

tic science for girls and metalwork for boys are much more formally sex-typed aspects of the timetable. A few schools have adopted the alternative of non-sex-typed timetables, where all subjects are studied by both boys and girls. […]

Grouping by achievement is encountered by most pupils sooner or later. An early experience may be grouping within classes into 'top' tables and 'bottom' tables. Later experiences may be streaming, when a whole class is grouped on the basis of similar achievement, and setting, where achievement in one subject or activity is the basis for grouping pupils together.

Teachers are allocated to the timetable on the basis of subject identification in most secondary schools, and on the basis of class teaching of a wide range of activities in primary schools. Middle schools and some secondary and primary schools have a mixed classification of subject and general teaching, and teachers do some of both.

> ***"Some subjects and activities are allocated more time than others"***

Knowledge

The knowledge to be processed is allocated to periods of time by being divided up into subjects. These subjects are more loosely organized in some schools than in others: in infants schools it is often broadly based in terms of number work, language activities, creative activities, etc., while in secondary schools the division of knowledge into a range of subjects is usually more rigid.

Some subjects and activities are allocated more time than others. Frequently English and maths, or their equivalent, head the list and physical education, including games, is often third. Subjects that tend to be allocated least time are religious education and music.

Some subjects, such as ethics, philosophy, logic, sociology, anthropology, politics and psychology, are missing from the timetables of most schools. These omissions raise some interesting questions. For example, since logic, rather than mathematics, underpins most of the subjects on the timetable, there is a case for its being the basic tool subject. […]

The assumptions made about knowledge make an interesting list of *propositions:*

propositions: Statements or assertions. A proposition may be either true or false.

1. Knowledge is best compartmentalized into subjects.
2. Some knowledge deserves more timetable space than other knowledge, and knowledge is thus stratified.
3. Some knowledge is legally compulsory, e.g. religious education.
4. Some knowledge is examinable and some is not; e.g. physical education is not usually examined.
5. Different children should have different packages of knowledge, rather than there being a common curriculum.
6. Some knowledge is suitable for boys and some for girls.
7. Some knowledge, e.g. economics, sociology, is seen as worthy of timetable space by some schools and not by others.
8. The most suitable knowledge for schools is past-orientated and based on an ancient system of subject classification, rather than

present-orientated and based on integrated themes like censorship, terrorism and environmental pollution, which cross the ancient subject boundaries.

10. Future-orientated knowledge systems stressing the skills of learning to create new knowledge and cope with constant changes in information are given little space in most timetables.
11. Some knowledge within the subject traditions is best excluded from the timetable, e.g. logic, philosophy and psychology.

How is timetabling undertaken?

The division of time into periods, days and weeks has consequences for the type of learning that can take place. All subjects or activities have to be taught and learnt in a similar way, in regularized blocks of time. Some concession to variations in learning may appear in the form of double periods, but this illustrates the point that, if double periods are needed, why not a half day, a whole day, several days or a week?

This division of time has implications for teaching methods. It tends to place a premium on third- and fourth-hand experiences. In history this may mean reading what a teacher has to say about manor houses rather than visiting the one a few kilometres away. It may mean seeing a short film about canals instead of travelling along one in a barge. It may mean copying pictures of locks and lock gates rather than sketching from the original. It may mean reading a play over a series of lessons instead of attending a performance at a local theatre. When outings of the above type are organized, they are special events rather than the basic mode of learning.

> ***“The timetable tends to be imposed: it is a set menu rather than a choice-based menu.”***

The timetable tends to be imposed: it is a set menu rather than a choice-based menu. The contrast here is with an evening-institute timetable, which indicates a range of classes from which students can choose. A technical-college timetable is based on the same principle: students enrol for courses rather than have an imposed allocation of subjects. A youth-club timetable is negotiated even further, and is fashioned from the wishes and needs of the members.[…]

Why timetabling and with what consequences?

At the beginning of the chapter we saw that breaking up time into small segments is a common activity. The timetable represents a school's attempt to cope with competing claims about what should be learnt in schools and by whom. A particular view of knowledge and a particular view of teaching and learning are implied in these arrangements. Therefore pupils involved in a timetable learn considerably more than where to go for a lesson at a certain time. They are being exposed to a series of hidden messages about what counts as knowledge, which knowledge is thought to be appropriate for them, and which knowledge is not made available to them.[…]

One view is that these time tracks are related to social class. In this

view the time perspective associated with white-collar workers tends to be future-orientated, impersonal, planned, and built on the notion of deferred gratification, whereas the time perspective of blue-collar workers tends to be present-orientated, personal, spontaneous, and implying immediate gratification. Schools and teachers tend to adopt the first view of time. Pupils used to the second view of time may quickly be seen as 'lazy careless, impulsive, uninvolved'. A school's promise to pupils is that it will all be worth it in the long run. […]

From the teachers' point of view, a secondary-school timetable tends to mean facing a large number of groups for rather short periods of time. The relationships with pupils become fragmented and rather impersonal because of lack of continuity of contact. These short periods of contact tend to stress group rather than individual relationships.

From the pupils' point of view, the timetable may be seen as a limitation on their learning. […]

Timetables tend to imply a dogmatic theory of the sequencing of knowledge.[…] There are usually several ways of sequencing educational material that are effective, even in a seemingly constrained field like mathematics. […]

2.5 The sociology of time, and time in schools

So far the analysis has concentrated on school timetables, but there are other timetables in operation. The school timetable yields a class timetable, and a pupil's individual timetable may be derived from that. There are also year timetables and career timetables. The external, imposed and seemingly inevitable aspects of time in the school timetable are open to subjective interpretations by the participants.

A class timetable may carry the indicators of maths, religious knowledge and history: the subjective interpretation may be a boring period of hard work with the autocratic Mr Smith, an insulting attempt at indoctrination by Holy Joe Jones, worthy only of maximum playing-up, and a regular lecture by the history lady that allows you to write up your science homework.

An 'individual' timetable may repeat these subjective interpretations with other indicators like 'this is the lesson to skip' or 'truancy this afternoon will not be noted'. The ambiguity of experience is illustrated here: experiences on the timetable have to be interpreted as pleasurable, useful or tedious, and some autonomy for teachers and taught is suggested here.

The year timetable introduces other features. It is shorter than a calendar year and has within it paradoxes such as the compulsion to attend the school building for part of the calendar year, and the exclusion, on the threat of trespass, at other times in the year.

A career timetable is built out of the year timetables. Although the years are of similar length, some are marked off as special. Years of transfer from one school to another, examination years and school leaving years are examples. Some school career timetables are longer than others, for various reasons. Early starts are the experience of some because of accidents of birth dates or because of the 'optional' nursery-school experience. The sixth form experience is for some but not for others. 'Schooldays' can mean anything from 11 to 16 years in school. Life chances are involved here, since length of school career is strongly correlated with job prospects and standards of living.

Time in school links with time outside school, and the social class links have already been mentioned. The school career timetable provides another example of this link in the concept of 'planners' and 'drifters': usually pupils who are 'pushed' by parents tend to adopt the 'rational, future oriented' time perspective of the school, whereas drifters do not. Planners know what goals exist in the school and how to reach them, when important turning points have arrived, and what the consequences of their choices will be. Drifters are less certain of the goals and their order of importance, and where each of the possible choices will lead. […]

2.6 Conclusion

Many of the messages learnt from the spatial layout of schools and classrooms …are reinforced by the messages learnt from the timetables. … [A] timetable is not an arbitrary arrangement of time: it represents in outline form the timetable designers' beliefs and assumptions about knowledge, about learning, about teaching and about the outcomes of schooling. This selection of beliefs, often made by ancestors long gone, is only one of several alternative sets of belief about these matters.

2.7 Summary

1. The activity of breaking time into small segments is common to many situations.
2. In school there are competing claims about what should be learnt and so time has to be rationed as a scarce item.
3. Timetables are some of the most taken-for-granted aspects of school culture and the hidden assumptions are rarely investigated.
4. A given timetable is only one of several possible ways of organizing, and the one chosen will reflect features of an ideology of education.
5. Some of the features of the implicit ideology of education are

revealed by asking questions about who timetables, when timetabling takes place and what is timetabled.

6. From a timetable, pupils learn a great deal more than where to go at a certain time. They may also learn some messages of the hidden curriculum, e.g. which knowledge is seen as male knowledge and which is seen as female.
7. The hidden assumption of deferred gratification may be a more familiar message to one social class grouping than to another and consequent adjustment to it less of a problem.
8. The subjective interpretations of timetables by pupils and staff illustrate the ambiguity of many human experiences: the interpretations of like, dislike, useful, and useless have to be learned.
9. Many of the hidden messages of the spatial arrangements of schools are reinforced by the timetable arrangements.