

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

SECOND EDITION

A CRITICAL READER

Edited by Alan R. Sadovnik

MICHAEL W. APPLE
MADELEINE ARNOT
PAUL ATTEWELL
DAVID P. BAKER
DAVID C. BERLINER
BASIL BERNSTEIN
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WALTER G. SECADA
AMY STUART WELLS
TERRENDA WHITE

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SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

This comprehensive and bestselling reader examines the most pressing topics in sociology and education while exposing students to examples of sociological research on schools. Drawing from classic and contemporary scholarship, noted sociologist Alan R. Sadovnik has chosen readings that examine current issues and reflect diverse theoretical approaches to studying the effects of schooling and society. The second edition provides students with seven new readings from some of the best theorists and researchers in education including James S. Coleman, Madeleine Arnot, and Claudia Buchman. Through full, rather than excerpted primary source readings, students have the opportunity to read sociological research as it is written and engage in critical analyses of readings in their entirety. Including comprehensive section introductions, questions for reflection and discussion, and suggested readings, *Sociology of Education* will stimulate student thinking about the important roles that schools play in contemporary society and their ability to solve fundamental social, economic, and political problems.

Alan R. Sadovnik is Professor of Education, Sociology, and Public Affairs at Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey.

For Mags

We're working on it!

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This book is dedicated to Mags Semel, my developmentally disabled stepdaughter, who has taught me what living up to one's potential really means.

Introduction

The sociology of education has provided important insights into the ways in which schools affect individuals and groups. Through an examination of the relationships among societal factors such as political, economic and cultural systems and schools, sociologists have uncovered how educational processes affect the way people think, live and work, their place in society, and their chances for success or failure. From the famous Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* in 1966, research in the sociology of education has attempted to understand whether educational systems and their practices provide opportunities for all children to achieve based on their merits or whether they reproduce existing social inequalities. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, with educational policy in the United States emphasizing the concurrent themes of standards and equity and the reduction of the achievement gap among groups, based on social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability, sociologists of education continue to provide important empirical findings on the effects of education.

Theory and research in the sociology of education seek to understand, in Christopher Hurn's (1993) words, "the limits and possibilities of schooling." In a country that has placed enormous faith in the power of schools to ameliorate all types of social problems, including poverty, and has viewed schools as the central institutions for social mobility, the sociology of education provides evidence about the extent to which schools can solve social problems.

The discipline of sociology developed at the end of the nineteenth century amid the promise and problems of industrialization, urbanization, and a developing belief in education in Europe and the United States. During this period, more and more children were required to go to school and sociologists began to examine the relationship between school and society. As schooling became more available to increased numbers of children, many believed that schools would be critical to a modern era where merit, talent, and effort would replace privilege and inheritance as the most significant factor for social and occupational mobility (Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 20).

Until the 1960s, sociologists for the most part shared this optimism about the role of education in a modern society. They examined important themes, including how children are socialized for adult roles, the school as a social organization, and the effects of schooling on students' life chances. Beginning in the 1960s, sociologists of education began to doubt that schools, by themselves, could solve social problems, especially problems of economic and social inequality. These sociologists questioned whether schools were or could be, in the words of the U.S. nineteenth-century educational reformer Horace Mann, "the great equalizer" (Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 20).

Sociologists of education continued to believe that they could improve education through the application of scientific theory and research. Because of their scientific orientation, they are more likely to ask *what is* rather than *what ought to be*, although sociological research has been the basis for trying to improve and change schools. They want to discover what occurs inside schools and

what the effects of schooling are on individuals and groups. The distinctive feature of the sociology of education is empiricism, or the collection and analysis of empirical data within a theoretical context in order to construct a logical set of conclusions (Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 20).

Thus, the sociology of education relies on empirical methods to understand how schools are related to society, how individuals and groups interact within schools, and what the effects of schooling are for individuals and groups of children. Its findings are based on an attempt to be objective and scientific. It examines individuals and groups in their social context and examines the social forces that affect them. The sociological approach to education is crucial because it provides conclusions based on focused and tested observations. Without such an analysis, one cannot know *what is*; and without knowing *what is*, one cannot make *what ought to be* a reality (Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 20).

In his important book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills argued that the sociological imagination was vital for understanding society. The sociological imagination, according to Mills, allows individuals to transcend the often narrow boundaries of their lives and to see the world from the larger context of history and society. Using the sociological imagination allows individuals to relate their own lives to the social, cultural, and historical factors that have affected them, and ultimately enables individuals to understand how and why these forces are crucial in shaping our lives (Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 5). Based on this, the relationship between school and society is at the heart of the sociology of education. Without an understanding of how the components of society fit together, it is impossible to understand how schools work and their effects within a particular society. In an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, the need for such a sociological perspective remains as important as ever.

In her book *Education and Inequality* (1977), Caroline Persell provided a model for understanding the relationship between school and society through four interrelated levels of sociological analysis. These include the societal, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels (for the complete model, see Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 111). The *societal* level encompasses the most general structures of society, including its political and economic systems, its level of development, and its system of social stratification (or institutionalized levels of inequality). The *institutional* level includes a society's main institutions, including the family, the schools, churches, synagogues, and mosques, business and government agencies, and the media, all of which play an essential part in the socialization of children into adult roles and responsibilities. The *interpersonal* level includes the processes, symbols, and interactions that occur within institutional settings. These include language, dress, face-to-face interactions, gestures, and rituals, which make up everyday life. The *intrapsychic* level includes individual thoughts, beliefs, values, and feelings, which are to a large extent shaped by a society's institutions and interactions. For sociologists of education, the degree to which external forces determine individual actions or whether individuals are capable of freely shaping the world is a crucial dialectic. A sociological perspective, although recognizing the human capacity for free will, stresses the power of external forces in shaping individual choices and how these are often related to group differences within the stratification system. As you will see in Part I, functionalism is concerned with the societal, institutional, and interpersonal processes that create what Emile Durkheim termed the collective conscience (society internalized in the individual). Conflict theory is concerned with the ways in which social, political, cultural, and economic differences among groups at the societal level produce conflict that often results in change (Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel, 2006, p. 111).

In order to understand these issues, *The Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader* provides some of the most important readings in the field. The reader is designed for advanced undergraduate and graduate students in the sociology of education and related courses. It is organized into six parts. Part I examines theory and method in the sociology of education. Through both classic and contemporary readings, you will explore the major theoretical and methodological issues in the field. Part II

examines school organization and processes through an exploration of teaching, learning, and curriculum. Although the majority of the book focuses on education in the United States, Part III examines international education in order to analyze the similarities and differences in educational systems throughout the world, how schools reflect national character and culture, and the degree to which schooling as an institution has become a worldwide phenomenon, with far more similarities than differences among national systems. Part IV examines higher education in the United States and focuses on issues related to access and opportunity. This section explores whether American higher education has become more democratic and meritocratic or if it remains highly stratified according to race, social class, and gender. Within this context, it analyzes access and opportunity in different sectors of the higher educational system, two- and four-year colleges and universities, both public and private. Part V examines arguably the most important area in the field: the relationship between education and inequality. It examines the role of schools in reproducing existing inequalities or in providing opportunities for mobility for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Further, it examines the effects of educational processes such as tracking and ability grouping. Finally, it analyzes the effects of education on different groups, including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, women and men, different social classes, and students with disabilities. Part VI examines educational policy and reform by examining the limits and possibilities of various policies, including district- and school-based reforms, standards-based reforms, school choice, and the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). This section provides an important insight into the extent to which school reform alone can ameliorate the effects of factors outside the schools, including poverty and families.

Selecting twenty-six articles for inclusion was no easy task, given the hundreds that are suitable for inclusion in this reader. They are in no way meant to be exhaustive or to cover all the important topics in the field. In addition, unlike many readers that include edited selections of articles and can include many more, this reader includes articles in their entirety. The reason for this is to ensure that advanced undergraduate and graduate students have the opportunity to read sociological research as it is written and to engage in critical analyses of full texts. Obviously what is gained in depth is lost in breadth. My criteria for selection included the following:

- 1 With a small number of exceptions, sociologists or researchers closely associated with the sociology of education have written all of the articles. Although there have been many important articles written by economists, political scientists, anthropologists, and historians of education, a reader in the sociology of education ought to include work done mostly by sociologists.
- 2 The article applies a sociological perspective to the study of education. Such a sociological perspective views schools and schooling as part of the larger social order, examines the effects of schooling on individuals and groups, and analyzes the factors external to the individual that affect individual and group behavior.
- 3 The article makes an important theoretical and/or research contribution to our understanding of the main issues and problems in the sociology of education. Within this context, the selections include various theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.
- 4 The articles represent either classical or contemporary approaches to the sociology of education.
- 5 The article is written in a language that is understandable to advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Although this is the case for most of the articles, some are theoretically and/or methodologically difficult and are included because they represent an essential contribution to the field.
- 6 For the articles following Part I, the article provides empirical evidence on a problem in the sociology of education and illustrates the power of the sociology of education for understanding educational problems.

- 7 The articles as a whole are representative of the diversity of researchers and problems in the field, with respect to race, ethnicity, and gender. Although there was no quota used to ensure that a diversity of authors and topics were included (the reader does not include equal representation), I attempted to choose articles that represented such diversity.

The readings in *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader* are meant to stimulate your thinking about the important roles that schools play in contemporary society and their ability to solve fundamental social, economic, and political problems.

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- Persell, C. H. (1977). *Education and inequality*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Sadovnik, A. R., Cookson, P. W., and Semel, S. F. (2006). *Exploring education: An introduction to the foundations of education* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Suggested Readings

The following texts are excellent sources for all of the sections of the reader:

- Ballantine, J. H. and Hammack, F. M. (2009). *The sociology of education: A systematic analysis* (6th ed.). Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
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PART I

Theory and Method in the Sociology of Education

Part I provides some of the most important theoretical readings in the sociology of education. They examine the development of theory and research in the sociology of education.

Chapter 1, “Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education” by the Rutgers University sociologist Alan R. Sadovnik, provides an overview of classical and contemporary theories and quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches in sociological and educational research.

Chapter 2, “On Education and Society” by the classical nineteenth-century sociologist Emile Durkheim, provides the foundation for the development of functionalist theories in the sociology of education, popularized in the mid-twentieth century by Talcott Parsons.

Chapter 3, “Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification” by the University of Pennsylvania sociologist Randall Collins, provides a comparison of functionalist and conflict theories in the sociology of education and the foundation of his status-competition theory of educational expansion.

Chapter 4, “Broken Promises: School Reform in Retrospect” from their classic book *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) by the University of Massachusetts political economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, applies their neo-Marxist correspondence theory to the history of school reform in the United States.

Chapter 5, “On Understanding the Processes of Schooling: The Contributions of Labeling Theory” by the sociologist Ray C. Rist, provides an overview of the contributions of interactionist theory in general and labeling theory in particular to understanding the processes of schooling.

Chapter 6, “The Forms of Capital” by the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, provides a conflict analysis of the role of different types of capital (human, economic, cultural, and social) in reproducing social class advantages.

Chapter 7, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital” by the late sociologist James S. Coleman, provides a functionalist analysis of the role of social capital in providing individuals and society with the human capital required for a cohesive and productive social order.

Chapter 8, “Class and Pedagogies: Visible and Invisible” by the late British sociologist Basil Bernstein, uses functionalist (Durkheimian), conflict (neo-Marxist and Weberian), and interactionist approaches to analyze the relationship between social class and educational practices and how they manifest themselves in different pedagogic practices in the classroom.

Chapter 9, “The Effects of Education as an Institution” by the Stanford University sociologist John W. Meyer, provides the foundation for institutional theory as developed by Meyer and his colleagues since the 1980s. Institutional theory argues that mass public education as an institution has been a worldwide phenomenon and examines comparative and international similarities and differences among educational institutions as they have developed in different countries since the nineteenth century.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- 1 How do functionalist and conflict theorists differ in their assessment of the role of schools in helping to change societies?
- 2 How does interactionist theory differ in its focus from functionalist and conflict theories? Can it complement one or both of the other theories?
- 3 Is research in the sociology of education scientific? Should it be? What do you think of trying to make educational research similar to medical or pharmaceutical research?
- 4 What did Emile Durkheim see as the major functions of schools? Can you give some contemporary examples of these functions in the twenty-first century?
- 5 How do Bowles and Gintis view the potential for educational reforms to reduce poverty and to provide economic mobility for low-income children?
- 6 How would Randall Collins view proposals to require a master's degree as the entry-level credential to become a teacher or a nurse?
- 7 How does Ray Rist analyze the classroom processes that result in the maintenance of social class-based inequalities? How is this article an example of both conflict and interactionist theories?
- 8 How do social class differences in pedagogic practices, which Bernstein identifies through visible and invisible pedagogies, affect working-class and middle-class students? In the 1970s, Basil Bernstein was criticized as a cultural deprivation theorist; that is one who argued that low-income children do less well in school because their culture is deficient compared with middle-class and upper-class children. Do you agree with this criticism and why? Do you think that Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital are examples of cultural deprivation theory? What are the similarities and differences between Bourdieu's and Bernstein's theories? What are the similarities and differences between Bourdieu's and Coleman's theories?
- 9 Many economists argue that mass public educational systems developed around the world to meet the increasing demands of technology and the high level of skills required by technological societies. How would John Meyer respond to this argument? How would Randall Collins? How would Bowles and Gintis?

Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education¹

ALAN R. SADOVNIK

The sociology of education has mirrored the larger theoretical debates in the discipline of sociology. From its roots in the classical sociology of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim to the contemporary influences of symbolic interactionism, postmodernism, and critical theory, sociology of education research has been influenced by a number of different theoretical perspectives. This chapter provides an overview of the major theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—as well as contemporary theoretical approaches: the code theory of Basil Bernstein, the cultural capital theory of Pierre Bourdieu, the status-competition theory of Randall Collins, the institutional theory of John Meyer, and postmodern critical theory.

Functionalist Theory²

Functionalist sociologists begin with a picture of society that stresses the interdependence of the social system; these researchers often examine how well parts are integrated with each other. Functionalists view society as a kind of machine, in which one part articulates with another to produce the dynamic energy required to make society work. Most importantly, functionalism emphasizes the processes that maintain social order by stressing consensus and agreement. Although functionalists understand that change is inevitable, they underscore the evolutionary nature of change. Further, although they acknowledge that conflict between groups exists, functionalists argue that, without a common bond to unite groups, society would disintegrate. Thus, functionalists examine the social processes necessary to the establishment and maintenance of social order.

Functionalist theories of school and society trace their origins to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1858–1917) general sociological theory. At its center, Durkheim's sociology (1947, 1954) was concerned with the effects of the decline of traditional rituals and community during the transition from traditional to modern societies. Durkheim's analysis of the differences between mechanical and organic solidarity in *The Division of Labor* (1947) and his concept of anomie in *Suicide* (1951) examined the need for societies to create rituals and institutions to provide for social cohesion and meaning. Like Ferdinand Tönnies's (1957) analysis of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim provided a sociological analysis of the effects of modernity on community.

For Durkheim, the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization led to the breakdown of traditional rituals and methods of social control, which in turn led to the breakdown of social solidarity and cohesion. In *Suicide* (1951), he demonstrated empirically how the breakdown in traditional community resulted in the decline of collective conscience and the rise of individualism. Such a breakdown led to what Durkheim called anomie, the condition of normlessness in individuals and society.

As the bonds that connected individuals to each other and to society became unhinged, modern societies faced disintegration from within. Durkheim, however, was not a reactionary; he did not