THE WAY SCHOOLS WORK

A Sociological Analysis of Education

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Introduction

This is a book about schooling, a process which differs from education. The term *education* broadly refers to the process of learning over the span of one's entire life. Much of it does not take place in formal institutions. Human beings begin their education at birth and continue it through life in a great variety of formal and informal settings. Education as a process is concerned with individuals and the psychological processes involved in learning and cognition. Psychology is the primary discipline which concerns itself with these processes, and psychologists specialize in the study of how individuals learn.

Schooling, by contrast, is a social or group process, and sociology is its associated discipline. Sociology is concerned with the study of social groups, and the sociology of education is the study of groups of people within educational institutions. Sociologists have named the process of learning through which people pass while attending school the "process of schooling." This process is concerned with the understandings which people, generally children, acquire as they participate in formal institutions whose specific function is the socialization of designated groups within society. Sociologists also study the characteristics of people and institutions which make up educational systems, as well as the dynamics of their interaction and operations.

Because no one book can cover all topics in a discipline, we have imposed some arbitrary limitations on this volume. First, we have concentrated our discussion on schools in America, although we draw to some extent on research carried out in other countries. We feel that this is appropriate, given that schools in America differ considerably in organizational and professional structure from schools in other countries. We hope that the book might prove useful to people

interested in comparing the American system of education with those in other countries.

Second, we devote much of our discussion to elementary and secondary education, somewhat at the expense of pre-school and higher education. In truth, with the exception of studies evaluating the effectiveness of compensatory pre-school education, the range of research by sociologists on pre-school training is limited. We chose not to include a more extensive analysis of higher education *per se* simply because of limitations of space; we hope, however, that the insights contained in this book, particularly those pertaining to the training of teachers and the impact of race, class and gender on educational achievement—will generalize to your thinking about schooling in universities and colleges.

A special feature of this book is its strong historical bent, in terms of both the information presented and the way developments in theory over time have affected the way we look at and interpret the impact of schools. We have couched our discussion of contemporary schools within the context of their historical development because we believe the way schools currently are organized has been powerfully influenced by events and social policies of the past. Similarly, although our own interpretations of schooling and its effects, as well as the conclusions in this book, are informed by critical and feminist perspectives, they are, like the viewpoints of all social scientists, built upon and affected by the theoretical models and analyses of the past—especially functionalism and conflict theory. Because this text is an introduction to the way sociologists think about educational processes, we weave both classical and contemporary critical perspectives into each chapter. Each chapter usually begins with a descriptive, functional approach and concludes with a more recent critical analysis. We do this because we believe that it is easier to know where we currently are if we understand where we came from!

The chapters in this book derive from subfields in sociology: social theory, the sociology of organizations, the sociology of work and professions, the sociology of knowledge, and the study of class, race, and gender. Chapter One examines the theories which underlie how people conceptualize the purposes for which schools are organized, whose interests schools serve, and what should be taught. We have divided these theories into two categories: transmission theories of function and conflict, which posit that schools rather passively transmit the patterns of society unchanged from one generation to another; and transformation theories of interpretation and criticism, which describe the roles schools can play in transforming society.

Chapter Two examines the structure and dynamics of schools as social organizations. First, it presents an historical analysis of school organization, especially as it has been shaped by ideas and practices from business and industry. Then it examines both the internal organization and patterns of control within schools and districts, and the external matrix of local, state, and national agencies which impinge on their operation. It emphasizes both the apparent

ambiguity of patterns of authority in school and the degree to which political, rather than strictly pedagogical, concerns direct their workings.

Chapter Three is a detailed discussion of a group whose participation in schooling often is overlooked—the students. In it, we examine the impact of societal change on the way children experience childhood, the special ways children relate to and resist the influence of schools and their teachers, and the evolution and impact of student peer groups and youth culture on schooling.

Chapter Four examines the characteristics of school participants—teachers, administrators, parents, counselors, and members of state, local and national agencies—and the work they do. It describes trends which have given more control over teaching and classroom management to administrators, at the expense of teachers, and questions the extent to which teaching really is a profession. Chapter Four also examines gender-bias in the educational work force and its impact on the social power and professional prestige of teachers.

Chapter Five is an analysis of the relationship between social class and education. It traces changes in social thinking about the origins of social class hierarchy, as well as what has led to the acquisition of social power in society. The chapter examines the impact of social class on the structure of society as well as on the educational and occupational attainment of individuals, and raises questions about the degree to which contemporary educational systems really are "fair," meritocratic, and egalitarian. Chapter Five sets the stage for similar analyses of the impact on educational achievement and occupational placement of minority status (Chapter Seven) and gender (Chapter Eight).

Chapter Six examines the curriculum, or what is both openly and covertly taught in school. It looks at the differences in power and prestige attributed to various kinds of knowledge, and examines how curricular differentiation, or tracking and ability grouping, serves to sort children into academic programs which prepare them for occupational niches roughly similar to those held by their parents.

Chapter Seven discusses the relationship between minority status and schooling. It examines the role of the federal government in attempting to provide equal opportunities for minority group students. It also analyzes various sociological explanations for the failure of minority students. This chapter concludes with a discussion of minority student responses in the form of assimilation, accomodation, and resistance.

Chapter Eight is an analysis of the relationship between gender and education. It looks at gender differences in both formal and informal curricula. In the formal curriculum, we provide a discussion of gender identified subject matter, engendered staffing of schools, and the portrayal of women in the context of curriculum materials. In the informal curriculum, we examine the hidden messages sent to females and males in school through class organization, instructional technology, and class interaction. This chapter concludes with a discussion of gender differences in academic performance and occupational outcome.

Chapter Nine presents a summary of the arguments in the book, as well as an examination of ways we feel sociological analysis and critical insights might be used to develop alternatives to the current system of education.

There are a few other special features in this book. At the end of each chapter you will find three sections.

First is a glossary of "key concepts" introduced in the chapter. They are listed sequentially—as they have been introduced in the text—rather than alphabetically, and are intended as both a memory aid and a reference. You will find that the textbook index is keyed to these concepts, so that referring to it will permit you to find all the places where the key concepts have been used.

The second feature is a group of exercises which challenge you to confirm the information presented in the book with your own first hand experience. We ask you to interview educators, observe in institutions, analyze textbooks and the media, and question your own assumptions. In so doing, we invite you to try out the critical analysis outlined in this book.

The final special feature is a list of suggested readings, which supplements the extensive bibliography of references listed at the end of the book. The suggested readings are divided into "classic works" and "modern works." These are, respectively, the books and articles which we feel are most typical of or seminal to the thinking reported in each chapter. We hope that you will turn to these volumes to deepen your understanding of specific subjects which interest you.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical and Historical Overview of the Purposes of Schooling

OVERVIEW

OVERVIEW (*cont'd*)

INTRODUCTION

- What is theory?
- What are the purposes of schooling?
- How does theory relate to these purposes?
- What are your own theories that explain the purposes of schooling?

This is a chapter about how sociologists, using different theories, explain the purposes of **schooling**. We begin with definitions of several key concepts, including the term **theory**, which we will use throughout the book. Because what one believes varies according to one's belief system or theoretical perspective, we then examine the various **theoretical frameworks** which have informed the sociology of education, showing how these frameworks alter the interpretations people have of the purposes and impact of schooling. We distinguish between theories of transmission and transformation. In our discussion of transmission theories we explain **functionalism** and **conflict theory**. In our discussion of transformation theories, we examine **interpretive** and **critical theories**. We conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of what we think may be future directions in the sociological theories informing education.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

What Is Theory?

In very simplistic terms, a *theory* is a world view, a way we organize and explain the world we live in. In social science research, we generally use theoretical models or perspectives to organize thought and inquiry. Theoretical models or perspectives are "loosely interrelated sets of assumptions, concepts, and propositions that constitute a view of the world" (Goetz and LeCompte 1984, p. 37) or some significant part of it. Gabarino (1983) describes theory as a "statement of the principles presumably regulating observed processes, or one that accounts for causes or relationships between phenomena" (p. 5). Human beings have created theories to explain the operation of the natural universe, such as theories stating the relationship between energy and mass, or between moisture and the growth rates of plants. We also have developed theories to

explain the workings of the social world, such as why job satisfaction and job performance are related, why people seem to develop conservative social attitudes as they grow older, or why higher occupational status usually is associated with higher levels of educational attainment.

Both social theory and scientific theory evolve because both are affected by developments in their current historical and cultural context. While some kinds of speculation, especially in mathematics, generate theory independent of empirical, or observable data to confirm it, in general, theories change as we develop the need for more accurate interpretations of existing facts or to explain changes in what was previously believed to be true. Science, for example, has been affected for centuries by the beliefs of religious and philosophical thinkers who theorized that the sun revolved around the earth. Consequently, during that period all scientific inquiry was organized to support that belief. In time, however, as scientific observations were able to provide empirical support for a heliocentric view of our immediate planetary system, cultural and social beliefs also changed so that good science no longer was viewed as heresy.

In the realm of social science, people have observed throughout history that individuals who have higher levels of education tend to have higher social status. A number of theories or interpretations have been developed to explain this observation. At first people simply believed that the wealthy were smarter. Then, belief in the redemptory effect of education on human nature led first to a corresponding belief that acquiring education would ameliorate or eliminate baser human characteristics, including poverty, disease, and antisocial or immoral behavior. In practice, this belief justified the institution of schools for the poor, compensatory education programs, and a variety of social service practices. Later developments in social theory have altered our beliefs about the role and purpose of education. Now, rather than leading to elimination of poverty and social differences, it appears that educational experiences in schools may actually act to reinforce existing differences.

The theory about education described above is a social science theory. However, we all have acquired from various sources rather unscientific "pet theories" that we use to explain what goes on around us in the social world. For example, one of our students who had obviously been having difficulties with the men in her life sarcastically explained her favorite theory about them: "Men go through a series of adolescent stages and then they die." Obviously some theories are more valid than others in explaining phenomena, but all of them help us to organize and understand our worlds. Many govern what we think about our educational experiences. At this point, you might stop to consider some of your own theories. What theories do you use to answer the following questions?

- Why are some students or teachers more successful in school than others?
- Why are teachers generally so little respected as professionals?
- Why is the public so dissatisfied with the public schools today?

Sociological Theories of Education

One of the primary theoretical issues addressed in the sociology of education involves social transmission and socialization. By this we mean the process by which a society's ways of life, values, beliefs and norms, or standards for appropriate behavior are transmitted from one generation to the next. In the traditional functionalist view of social transmission, each elder generation passes on to each succeeding generation the rules and regulations, habits, and appropriate behaviors for operating in the society. The task of individuals is to learn and accept their roles within the society. We refer to the organization of social roles which people assume within society as the *social structure*.

Sociologists believe that society is understood by studying its structure, the way it is organized, and the roles people play within it. Theories of *transmission* are concerned with the description of the structural aspects of society and their transmission from one generation to the next (Parsons 1951, 1959; Weber 1947). The theories are more concerned with how existing social structures facilitate the general functioning of society than with the role of change or social transformation. For example, a sociological analysis based on transmission theory may examine the social system within a school to understand how the values and behaviors of the society are passed on. American values such as neatness, efficient use of time and obeying authority, for example, are evident in the daily routines of the classroom.

Social transmission frameworks examined in this book are (1) functionalism, and (2) conflict theory. In contrast to functionalist and conflict theories, a less static view of social transmission involves a contrasting "sociology of control," or "action." Its central concern is the *transformation*, rather than reproduction, of the society (Burtonwood 1986). Central to this perspective is a different view of the role of individuals. Whereas static models of social transmission view individuals as passive, the transformative model views individuals as active. They have the capacity to become "empowered," or to engage in the critical thinking which permits them to identify the forces which oppress and constrain them (Ellsworth 1988). Rather than to accept the world as it is, they become agents for social action and changes which potentially could improve their situation. Within this framework we will discuss (1) interpretive theory and (2) critical social theory. It is important to remember that it is difficult to make neat distinctions among these perspectives, because many of them overlap, and many borrow heavily from each other.

Differences between Theories of Transmission and Transformation

The primary difference between theoretical frameworks concerned with transmission and those addressing transformation is explained by Weiler (1988) in terms of *reproduction* and *production* of culture. Reproduction, or transmission, is concerned with an examination of the ways in which existing social structures are exactly copied from generation to generation, regardless of external forces such as the activities or desires of groups or individuals. By contrast, theories of

production, or transformation, give the specific activities and desires of individuals an important role in the creation of culture. Weiler refers to "theories of production" as those which describe the ways in which

> both individuals and classes assert their own experience and contest or resist the ideological and material forces imposed upon them in a variety of settings. Their analyses focus on the ways in which both teachers and students in schools produce meaning and culture through their own resistance and their own individual and collective consciousness (p. 11)

SOCIAL TRANSMISSION THEORIES

Functionalism

The first theoretical frame we will discuss is called "functionalism." The language and analyses of functionalism use analogies from biology. Functionalism holds that, like living organisms, all societies possess basic functions which they must carry out to survive. Functionalism has been the prevailing theoretical framework in the social sciences throughout the twentieth century, and argues by analogy that society operates like the human body. For example, the human body is composed of many interdependent organs, each of which carries out a vital function. Each of the organs must be healthy and work together in order to maintain the health of the entire body. If the heart, liver, or any other organ malfunctions and is out of equilibrium with the other organs, the entire body is at risk of dying.

Similarly, societies must be able to carry out vital functions, such as cultural transmission, reproduction, distribution of goods and services, and allocation and control of power in order to survive. Families, churches and schools are the major social institutions which serve as transmitters of the culture. If one of these institutions is not fulfilling its function, another will take over more of that role to maintain the equilibrium of the society. For example, in today's society it can be argued that with the increasing need for both parents to work to support their families, schools have taken over many of the functions formerly accomplished within the home. Functionalists not only identify the various functions within a society, but also the connections between the component parts of societies and the relations of one society to another.

Structural Functionalism

The search for societal *functions* led to a search for *structures*, like bodily organs, which carry them out. This variation of functionalism has been called structural functionalism. Structural functionalists generally believe that social structures must function effectively and in cooperation with others in order for societal health to be maintained. This point of view often led social investigators to believe that any social structure found in a system *must* have some function, and probably one which serves to perpetuate the system and keep it healthy.

Some social scientists have used this argument to oppose any alterations of traditional societies, on the grounds that even practices they find morally offensive, such as the cremation of widows upon the death of their spouses, must have some reasonable utility within the given cultural context. They have argued that to remove such a structure might cause great harm to the system, and should, like surgery to the human body, be undertaken only with great care and in extreme circumstances.

Central to structural functionalism is the conviction that the natural healthy state of a system, like that of a living body, is to be in equilibrium or stasis. Conflict, like an illness, is felt to be an aberration which the normal healthy system avoids and seeks to resolve as quickly as possible. Change, as a consequence, takes place only gradually in healthy systems.

Functionalists view educational systems as one of the *structures* which carry out the *function* of transmission of attitudes, values, skills and norms from one generation to another. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim (1961), Talcott Parsons (1951, 1959), Robert Merton (1967), and Robert Dreeben (1968) have described how educational systems and the process of schooling transmit culture. According to functionalists, educational systems perpetuate the "accepted," or dominant culture. The concept of "accepted culture" implies the existence of consensus on the values, attitudes and behaviors that should be transmitted by the schools to children. When conflict over values does occur, adjustments and adaptations are made to regain a state of consensus and to keep the entire system balanced. For example, in midtwentieth century America, conflict arose over whether school curricula should portray America as a white-dominated society in which immigrants were expected to assimilate completely, or a multicultural society in which accommodation to differences was celebrated. The past several decades have witnessed a variety of adaptations and adjustments in curricula, each reflecting what could be viewed as attempts to arrive at a new consensus.

Functionalism has been criticized because it assumes the existence of consensus or shared values and beliefs in society, especially with regard to the allocation and use of power. It presents a benign, unquestioning view of the social system and accepts existing class structures as appropriate. Critics of functionalism also contend that it rejects the notion—integral to conflict theories—that conflict and contradictions are inherent aspects of social system, which, in fact, serve to stimulate the system's adaptation to new conditions. Functional analysis has become an inescapable part of the training and worldview of all social scientists. Although social scientists may not accept all the tenets of traditional functional social theory, especially its rejection of conflict and change as viable and often valuable social processes, all social scientists use structural functional categories as basic analytic tools to describe social systems and the relationships among them.

Some practitioners of functionalism, called "methodological empiricists" (Karabel and Halsey 1977), also have been criticized both for their reliance on large-scale quantitative analyses and for their assertion that their results produce "objective," neutral or truly "scientific" unbiased findings. In part, they may