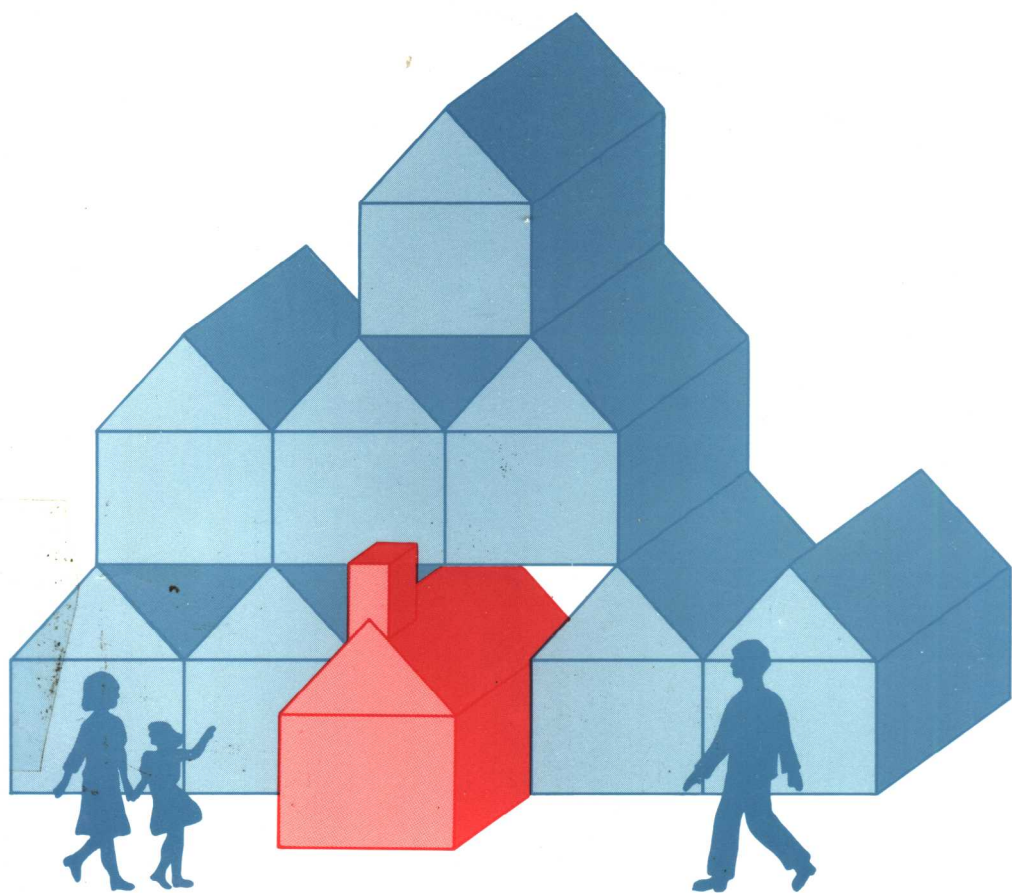# Schools and Society

A UNIFIED READER

SECOND EDITION

Jeanne H. Ballantine

Schools
and
Society

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Preface

The purpose of this text is to provide students with an overview of the scope, perspectives, and issues in the sociology of education, educational foundations, and related areas. After many years of teaching courses and assigning students reading materials, I decided a set of representative readings was needed. My main challenge was to include a balance of material that would effectively present well-rounded and interest-provoking summaries of the pertinent fields. The selections cover those major topics most discussed by instructors, according to survey data, and are tied together by introductions that summarize the contribution each article makes to its subject area. Presented within a systematic framework, the readings are designed to appeal to both graduate and undergraduate students, introducing the major theoretical perspectives, a sample of classic studies, current issues in the field, and applications of knowledge to particular educational problems.

The framework, explained in the introduction, is the open systems model. Social issues in education are sometimes presented as a disparate group of topics placed together under one heading; the open systems model, however, allows students to fully understand the scope of the field, the interconnections among topics, and the varied applications of the material.

According to a recent survey of instructors, the most frequently covered topics in social issues courses include stratification, school and classroom as social systems, historical background and development of education, schools as organizations and bureaucracies, socialization, and theory.[1] All these major topics are covered in this text. In addition, other issues of current interest are included: control of education, higher education, cross-cultural models, role expectations, sex roles, peer influence, achievement, school climate, public and private schools, school environments, the informal system, and change.

Several criteria were used in selecting articles for this text. I chose articles that:

1. Illustrate major concepts, theoretical perspectives, and issues;

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1. American Sociological Association, *Teaching Sociology of Education*, Washington, D.C.: ASA Teaching Resources Center, 1984; 2nd ed. forthcoming 1989.

2. Are written at a level of sophistication appropriate to students in advanced undergraduate or graduate courses;

3. Represent recent, original contributions by those doing research in the field;

4. Are applicable to students with various majors — in sociology, education, and other disciplines — who are likely to take the course;

5. Are drawn from a wide range of sources — scientific studies, commentaries, popular articles, and other publications;

6. Carry through the open systems approach to the text and provide unity to an often disparate group of topics.

All the selections except the most recent ones have been tested for readability and interest level with graduate and undergraduate students; all were seen as useful and important contributions to understanding the field.

This reader can be used alone, with a text, or with other readings. Discussion and study questions are included to connect each article to the field and to other sections and articles in the text.

A number of colleagues have served as reviewers. I would like to thank the following for their invaluable suggestions and comments on both the introductory material and the selections: Robert Arnove, Indiana University; James E. Clarke, Colgate University; David Olday, Moorhead State University; and Theodore C. Wagenaar, Miami University (Ohio).

Contents

Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself what would happen if there were no schools, why there is controversy over what to teach in school, or even when children should start school? Why do some children do better in school than others? Or why has busing become such a heated topic? Sociologists examining education address a range of issues concerning schools, including these. This text will acquaint you with several of the primary sociological perspectives on educational systems as well as some major studies addressing these and other issues. To give you an idea of the variety of topics covered in education and sociology, here are some examples of questions addressed by recent research:

1. How do the physical setup and program of an educational organization affect such variables as learning, communication between faculty and students, and subject areas taught?
2. How effective are different teaching techniques, styles of learning, and classroom organizations in teaching students of various types and ability levels?
3. What are some community influences on schools? How do these affect their decision making, especially as related to socialization of the young?
4. How do professionalization of teachers and teacher militancy affect the school system?
5. How do issues such as equal opportunity and integration affect schools? Can minority students learn better in an integrated school?

As students, parents, taxpayers, and perhaps educators, you can make more effective decisions concerning schools if you have knowledge about these and other educational issues.

When you have read this text, you should have gained some understanding of the fields of sociology and education, what they contribute to the study of educational systems, and some specific issues that concern sociologists and education professionals.

WHAT DO SOCIOLOGISTS STUDY IN REGARD TO EDUCATION?

Sociologists study people interacting in groups, organizations, and institutions of society, family, education, religion, economics, and politics. Institutions constitute the major structural parts of any society. Sociologists study-

ing education focus on the *institution of education and the structure, processes, and interaction patterns within it.* These aspects of education vary greatly across societies. In some societies, children learn their proper roles and adult traits by observing their elders and imitating or modeling after adult behavior. In others, children attend formal schools from a young age and learn skills and knowledge necessary for survival. The kind of knowledge passed on through schools may be a matter of disagreement, but regardless of who controls decisions on the content of knowledge, educational institutions are the vehicle for passing on this information.

Education and other institutions are interdependent within a society. Change in one brings change in others. For instance, a family's attitudes toward education will affect the child's school experience. Many of these interrelationships fall within the parameters of sociology, including

1. Teacher-student interactions
2. Group dynamics in classrooms or teachers' organizations
3. The structure and functioning of educational systems
4. Societal and world systems of education

You will note as you read the selections that each focuses on one or more of these *levels of analysis,* from interaction between teachers and students to international influences on national educational systems.

THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

At whatever level of analysis we study the system, *processes* are at work. These are the action part of the system, bringing the structure alive. Examples of processes include teaching, learning, communication, decision making, socialization, and stratification. They are essential dynamic parts of the educational system.

The *structure* of a system includes the hierarchy and roles people play — administrators, teachers, staff, and students — as well as the physical structure — classroom and school layout. Nor can we ignore the school's *environment,* which consists of individuals, groups, organizations, other institutions, and even world systems outside the school that influence its functioning. For instance, the Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) may put pressure on schools to revise the curriculum; other schools provide competition in academic achievement and sports; families influence their children's success in school; and the political-economic system determines funding available to schools. In short, no school exists in a vacuum. This *open systems* perspective will be the uniting theme in your textreader.

PERSPECTIVES

Since the origins of sociology as a discipline, sociologists have provided valuable insights into how society works. The major perspectives used by sociologists to study society are also used by sociologists to study education.

Chapter 2 outlines several of these perspectives, which help us understand educational systems as well.

Sociology as it applies to education has a recent origin as a distinct field. The nineteenth-century French educator Emile Durkheim was the first to apply the sociological approach to the study of education. Many of his ideas centered on the contribution the educational institution makes to societal cohesion and order. Society and the institutions in it are intertwined, each reflecting the changes in the other. Durkheim wrote about a number of ideas that influence sociologists studying education today, and his work laid the foundation for the structural-functional perspective sociology takes of education. His works are discussed in the first chapter.

The writings of Karl Marx and Max Weber laid the groundwork for conflict theory and its applications to sociology and education. Whereas Durkheim assumed that education would contribute to societal cohesion by teaching a culture's shared values, Marx argued that institutions, including education, were controlled by the economically powerful and served to perpetuate the class structure. The "haves" control power, wealth, material goods, privilege, and influence; the "have nots" constantly present a challenge to those in power as they seek a larger share of society's wealth. This struggle for power influences the structures of institutions. Power is used to control knowledge taught at various levels of education as well as access to elite education; in classrooms, power systems between teacher and students prevail. This approach, which implies a volatile, changing situation in schools and society, is reflected in several readings in the text.

In the United States, the first interest in applying sociology to education took a problems approach. This early work, which was stimulated by efforts to reform society, including educational systems, was supplanted by the view that educational systems were sources of scientific data. Today, sociologists studying education combine both approaches; they study systems and make practical policy recommendations. Recent theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as substantive areas of interest, are equally influenced by societal trends (as the articles in Chapter 2 illustrate).

FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION

Defining the main purposes or functions of educational systems in society provides the foundation for much sociological work, both classical and modern. These *functions* are the important roles played by education in society, especially in preparing its young to become members of society; they are at the root of functional discussions of education. Sociologists using the functional approach see the survival of society at stake; if a society fails to train its members in the skills and knowledge necessary for contributing to society, order and social control will be lowered.

Each function of education has generated controversy. Conflict theorists, for instance, point out problems in the functionalists' interpretation of each function, a debate you will observe throughout the text. The following are

some functions identified by sociologists. As you read the selections in this text, you will be able to associate many of the issues discussed with one of these functions.

1. *Socialization.* Society provides the mechanism for teaching each new generation the "three Rs" — their rights, roles, and responsibilities — so that initiates will understand and accept society's expectations. Through this process, young people learn to be productive members of society and teachers pass on its culture. Socialization continues throughout the life cycle, taking many forms both formal and informal: early childhood education; public schooling; university education; technical schooling; adult education; advanced training; workshop training; learning from observation, criticism, and peer interaction. How this socialization function is carried out varies from society to society, as the examples on cross-cultural education will show. In some societies learning by imitating elders is a primary mode of education, whereas formal classroom settings take precedence in others.

    Socialization is not always a smooth process. What to teach, whom to teach, and how to teach are worrisome questions to educators, societal leaders, and community members. Where several interest groups (racial, religious, socioeconomic) coexist, conflicts over control of educational systems can create schisms in communities, as exemplified in the Kanawha County textbook controversy described in Chapter 7.

2. *Selection, training, and allocation.* In this function, positions in society are filled through selection and placement of individuals. Education prepares, sorts, and places people. It prepares by teaching needed skills and knowledge. It sorts by testing and controlling. It places by tracking, credentialing, grading, and ultimately filling positions in society.

    The controversies surrounding equality of educational opportunity are closely related to this function. Do all groups of children receive the same educational opportunities? What are long-term job placement results if they do not? Conflict theorists are concerned with the results of testing, tracking, and placement for children from various backgrounds; examples of this position are presented in Chapter 5.

3. *Change and innovation.* This is the function of expanding knowledge frontiers and adapting to changing environments. Culture accumulates; it builds on itself. Individuals in educational systems, especially those in institutions of higher education, research, write, create new technology, help set social policy, and contribute ideas for the advancement of knowledge. In addition, citizens expect schools to solve many societal problems: In our society, assimilation of immigrants

has rested largely with schools, which were expected to create a "melting pot" and prepare newcomers to take a productive role in the society. This plan was abandoned in favor of cultural pluralism, allowing each group to maintain its heritage. With cultural pluralism, however, comes the distinct possibility of differential treatment of groups, a fact experienced by racial and religious minorities.

When change is introduced, it threatens existing patterns. Moreover, the nature of the change may itself be controversial. Consider busing to achieve integration and facilitate equal opportunity, for example; the article by Braddock, Crain, and McPartland in Chapter 5 addresses this issue.

4. *Social and personal development.* This function of education introduces young people to expectations of the world outside the family. Children learn quickly that teachers accept, reject, reward, or punish by judging them in relation to other children and to a set of standards and expectations. This transition from the family world, where the child is accepted and belongs, to the outside world, where more formal, judgmental secondary relationships govern interactions, forces painful assessments of one's strengths and weaknesses. We all learn techniques for coping with the expectations of schools and the bigger community, some of which are discussed in Paul Willis's article in Chapter 4.

PERSPECTIVE OF YOUR TEXT

Theoretical perspectives are based on differing assumptions about interaction and societal order. Each perspective contributes to our understanding of issues in sociology of education. To present only one perspective, however, would be limiting your knowledge base and the value of sociology for understanding current educational issues.

Therefore, this book uses the *open systems* approach to present sociology's study of education as a coherent, integrated field in which each topic relates to a larger whole. Several theoretical perspectives are discussed in Chapter 1 to acquaint you with alternative ways of understanding and interpreting sociological issues in education.

Each of these perspectives is useful for understanding some aspect of the open system of education. The following discussion explains this approach in detail.

The Open Systems Approach*

Suppose that we want to understand an educational system as a whole, integrated, dynamic entity. We are faced with a problem. Most research studies focus on parts of the whole system, and most theoretical approaches

have biases or limitations. An open systems approach is not a panacea for all the problems we face when trying to get the total picture, but it can help us conceptualize a whole system and understand how the small pieces fit together into a working unity. A model provides a useful way of visualizing the many elements in the system; it helps order observations and data, and represents a generalized picture of complex interacting elements and sets of relationships.[1] The model given in Figure 1 refers to no one particular organization or theoretical approach, but rather to the common characteristics of many educational settings.

While this model indicates the component parts of a total system, it does not imply that one theory is better than another for explaining situations or events in the system. Neither does it suggest which is the best methodology to use in studying any part of the system. It does allow us to visualize the parts we may read about or study in relation to the whole system — to see where they fit and what relationship they bear to the whole.

In describing a systems model, Marvin Olsen has said:

> It is not a particular kind of social organization. It is an analytical model that can be applied to any instance of the process of social organization, from families to nation. . . . Nor is [it] a substantive theory — though it is sometimes spoken of as a theory in sociological literature. This model is a highly general, content-free conceptual framework within which any number of different substantive theories of social organization can be constructed.[2]

Figure 1 shows the basic components of any social system. These components are the organization, the environment, input, output, and feedback. We will discuss each of these by following five steps.

Step 1. Focus your attention on the center box, *the organization.* This refers to the center of activity and the central concern for the researcher. This box can represent a society (such as the United States), an institution (such as education or family), an organization (such as a particular school or church), or a subsystem (such as a classroom). For purposes of discussion, we shall refer to this as "the organization." It is in the organization that action takes place, illustrating that the organization is more than structure, positions, roles, and functions. Within the organizational boundaries is *a structure* consisting of parts and subparts, positions and roles. Though we speak of the organization as though it were a living entity, we are really referring to the personnel who carry out the activities of the organization and make decisions about organizational action. The *processes* in the system bring the organization alive. Decision making by key personnel, communication between members of the organization, socialization into positions in the organization — these are among the many activities that are constantly taking place.

These processes do not take place in a vacuum. The decision makers holding positions and carrying out roles in the organization are constantly
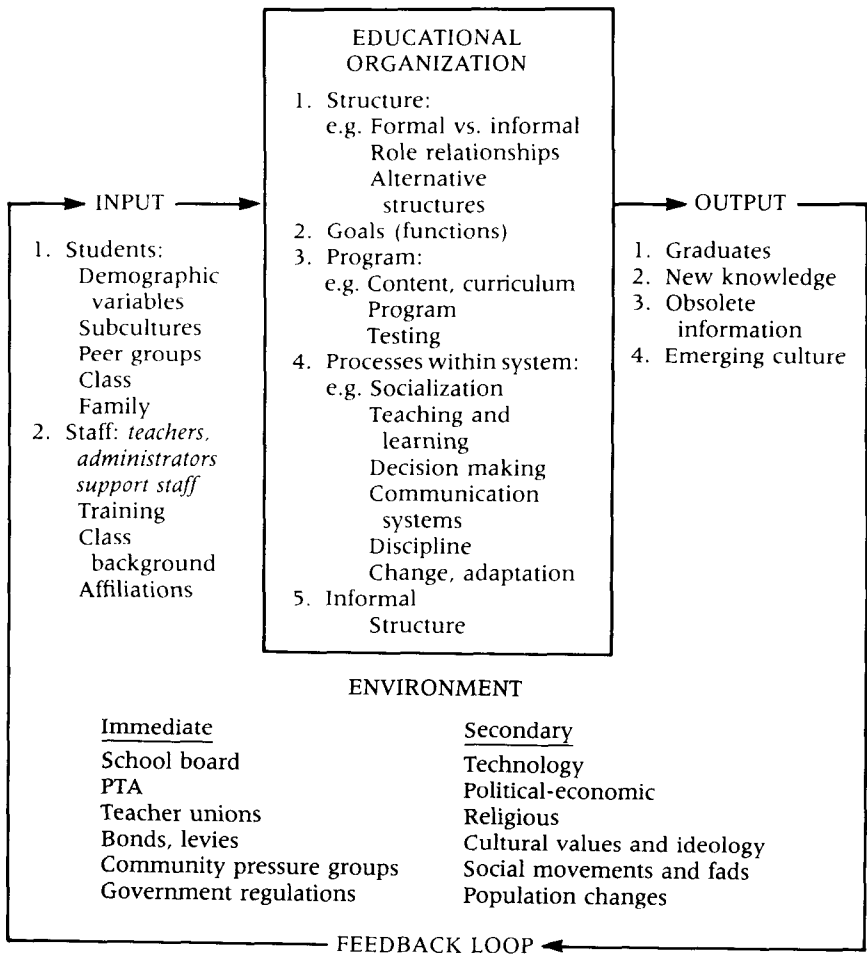
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                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │     EDUCATIONAL             │
                    │     ORGANIZATION            │
                    │  1. Structure:              │
                    │     e.g. Formal vs. informal│
                    │         Role relationships  │
                    │         Alternative         │
► INPUT ──────────► │         structures          │ ► OUTPUT ──────
                    │  2. Goals (functions)       │
1. Students:        │  3. Program:                │ 1. Graduates
   Demographic      │     e.g. Content, curriculum│ 2. New knowledge
    variables       │         Program             │ 3. Obsolete
   Subcultures      │         Testing             │    information
   Peer groups      │  4. Processes within system:│ 4. Emerging culture
   Class            │     e.g. Socialization      │
   Family           │         Teaching and        │
2. Staff: teachers, │          learning           │
   administrators   │         Decision making     │
   support staff    │         Communication       │
   Training         │          systems            │
   Class            │         Discipline          │
    background      │         Change, adaptation  │
   Affiliations     │  5. Informal                │
                    │         Structure           │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
                         ENVIRONMENT

           Immediate                    Secondary

           School board                 Technology
           PTA                          Political-economic
           Teacher unions               Religious
           Bonds, levies                Cultural values and ideology
           Community pressure groups    Social movements and fads
           Government regulations       Population changes

                ───── FEEDBACK LOOP ◄─────────
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F I G U R E 1
Systems Model of Education

responding to demands from both inside and outside of the organization.
The boundaries of the organization are not solid, but rather remain flexible
and pliable in most systems to allow system needs to be met. We call this
"open boundaries" or an *open system.*

Capturing the informal relationships in the school—who eats lunch
with whom, who cuts classes, what subtle cues teachers transmit to students,
what is the gossip in the teachers' lounge—can tell us as much about its
functioning as observing formal roles and structure.