

THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

*A Systematic
Analysis*

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JEANNE H. BALLANTINE

Wright State University

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PREFACE

This book attempts to capture the scope and usefulness of the sociology of education. It emphasizes the diversity of theoretical approaches and issues in the field and the application of this knowledge to the understanding of education. Education is changing rapidly; it is no easy task to present the excitement of a dynamic field with diverse and disparate topics. To present the material to students in a meaningful way, a unifying framework—an open systems approach—is used. It is meant to provide coherent structure, not to detract from the theory and empirical content of sociology of education.

After teaching sociology of education to many undergraduate and graduate students and using a variety of materials, I was concerned that the materials available, though excellent in quality, were not reaching my undergraduate students who were from sociology, education and other majors. The level of many texts was too advanced, the themes of some books made their coverage or approach limited, or the books presented research in such depth they were boring or beyond the grasp of undergraduates. During my work with the Project on Teaching Undergraduate Sociology I focused on presentation of materials to undergraduates, and I have attempted to translate these ideas to the present text. The book is best suited for sociology of education and social foundations of education courses.

Several goals guided the writing:

1. To make the book comprehensible and useful to undergraduate students. Realizing that most students are interested in how the field can help them deal with issues they will face, emphasis is placed on usefulness of findings. Choices had to be made concerning which studies and topics to cover. Those chosen should have high interest for students and help them as they interface with school systems.
2. To present material in a coherent framework. The instructor has leeway within the open systems approach to add topics, drop sections of the text, rearrange order of topics without losing the continuity and integration present in this framework.
3. To present diverse theoretical approaches in sociology of education. Several valuable perspectives exist today; the book gives examples throughout of theories as they approach issues in the field.
4. To include as major sections several topics which have not been singled out by many authors but which are important current or emerging topics and of interest to students. Separate chapters have been devoted to higher education, informal education ['climate' and the 'hidden curriculum'], the school's environment, and educational movements and alternatives.
5. To indicate how change takes place and what role sociologists play. With the increasing emphasis on applied sociology more courses are including information on applied aspects of topics covered. This is the focus of the final chapter but is covered throughout.
6. To stimulate students to become involved with educational systems where they can put to use the knowledge available in textbooks. This text can be used to stimulate discussion and allow other topics of interest to be introduced into the course in a logical way. Useful features of the book to enhance the teaching effectiveness include projects at the end of each chapter, the coverage of issues, and the instructor's manual complete with film list, classroom teaching techniques and aids, and test questions.

The book does not attempt to use one theoretical approach to the exclusion of others. Rather it focuses on the value of several approaches and their different emphases in dealing with the same issue. Because the book is for undergraduates it surveys the field rather than providing comprehensive coverage of few topics. This allows instructors flexibility to expand where desired.

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Finally, interest in this field is constantly stimulated by the diverse and ever-changing experiences of my children as they pass through the stages of schooling and share their experiences, and by Hardy whose knowledge and creative ideas in the field of education gave original impetus and continuing support and encouragement to this work.

Jeanne H. Ballantine
Wright State University

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CHAPTER ONE

SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

A Unique Perspective on Schools

THE FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Education begins the day we are born. It ends the day we die. It comes in many forms, ranging from the "school of hard knocks" to formal institutional learning. Its structure varies from society to society, from industrial to non-industrial communities, from urban to rural settings, and from age group to age group.

The purpose of this chapter is to acquaint you with the unique perspective of sociology of education: the questions it addresses, the theoretical approaches it uses, the methods employed to study educational systems, and the open systems approach used in this book. Sociologists are interested in group life, and consequently in this major area of social life—education. In this book we will consider problems faced by educational systems such as schools, and subsystems such as classrooms, and will review the contributions social science can make to understanding these problems. For instance, consider the following problems:

When should a child start to school? Some argue that children should be removed from a total home environment by age three and exposed to other children, stimulation, and ideas. Others feel that removing children

from the home deprives them of a secure early-childhood environment and even weakens the family. It is an emotional issue which has reached government circles as concerned groups push for legislation to help fund day care. What are the results of these different early-childhood policies?

Should minimum competency in reading and math be required for high school graduation? In Chicago and other cities, students are required to take reading exams in order to enter high school and to be graduated from it. Some educators argue against mandatory standardized tests, feeling that teachers will become concerned primarily with teaching for the tests. Others support such testing, stating that schools should be held responsible for the literacy level of students who move through the system. What are some implications of requiring these tests?

What are the social and educational results of busing? Busing and integration are major issues in many communities across the country. Court battles rage over the type and degree of desegregation required. A closely related issue is how to achieve equal educational opportunity. Research data on curricula, testing, tracking, and busing have produced findings which can help sort out these complex issues.

How should education be funded? Across the country, taxpayers are defeating school levies, teachers are striking, and schools are being forced to close because there is no money. Is this a protest against the job schools are doing? Is it a demand for the development of other funding sources? Is it a bid for more community control?

Social scientific research knowledge can shed light on such issues and thus help citizens, educators, and policy makers with decision-making processes. These and other issues will be addressed in this book, using an open systems approach to sociology of education as a framework. First we must lay some theoretical groundwork.

What Sociologists Study

Sociologists study people in groups. With so many potential areas of interest, there are many specialties within the field. These can be divided into studies of institutions in society, studies of processes, and studies of other group-related situations. The structure of society is represented by the five major institutions which constitute subject areas in sociology—family, religion, education, politics, and economics. Formal, complex organizations such as schools are part of the structure and institutions of society. Processes, which are the action part of society, bring the structure alive.

Through the process of socialization people learn roles expected of them; the process of stratification determines where people fit into the social structure and their resultant lifestyle; change is an ever-present process which is constantly affecting our lives. All of us are being educated, both

formally in a school setting and informally by our family, peers, media and other influences on our lives. Not all children in the world receive formal school education, but they are trained in some way for adult roles they will hold.

The institution of education interacts and is interdependent with each of the other institutions listed above. For instance, the family's attitudes toward education will affect the child's response in school. Other examples throughout the book will make this apparent, as will the open systems model diagram on page 17.

Why Study Sociology of Education?

There are several answers to this question. Someday you will be a taxpayer, if you aren't already; you may be a parent with children in the school system; you may be a professional in the field of education or in a related field; right now you are a student involved in higher or continuing education. If you are a sociology major, you are studying education as one of the major institutions of society; if you are an education major, sociology can give you a new perspective on your field. You may be at college in pursuit of knowledge; and it may be that this course is required, you need the credit, the teacher is supposed to be good, or it fits into your schedule. Let's consider these reasons further:

1. Taxpayers: Taxpayers finance schools. Almost 100 percent of the bills for physical plants, materials, salaries and other essentials came from tax monies. Approximately 27.2 percent of these funds are from local taxes, 36.9 percent from state, 10.3 percent from federal, and 25.6 percent from other taxes on a national basis in the United States.¹ (Of course, there are variations within and between states.) Sociology helps taxpayers know about the school system.

2. Parents: Forty percent of our population are in the primary parenting years of 18 to 44²; the average size of families in 1979 was 3.31 members, meaning the average family has one or more children.³ According to the Gallup polls on adult attitudes toward education, adults expect schools to teach basic skills, discipline children, and instill values and a

¹ *Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 1980, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, p. 141 estimated 1980 funding.

² *Ibid.*, Table 33, p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, Table 62, p. 45.