

Chapter 1

Sociology of Education

Education is a process that starts when we are born and continues until the day we die. In this sense, education is a societal institution and does not just refer to institutional education.

The Field of Sociology of Education

The field of sociology of education deals with issues such as:

- “When should a child start to school?”
- “How should education be funded?”
- “What type of teachers and classroom environments provide the best learning experience?”
- “How effective are different teaching techniques, styles of learning, and classroom organization in teaching students of various types and ability levels?” etc.

Since sociology studies people in-group situations, education is of great interest for sociologists. Especially in countries like ours, sociology can help reforming the educational system through showing the relationships between education and other institutions of the society.

Studying sociology of education can give the individuals a better understanding of how education affects the social life and social change.

Theoretical Approaches and the Development of Sociology of Education

Sociology of education is a relatively new field of study. What has been done in this field can be evaluated as studies describing education as a part of the whole societal institutions, studies about different parts of the educational system and studies about the interactions of educational settings.

Theoretical perspectives give us frameworks for a better understanding of the whole. The followings are major theories related with education:

Functionalist Theory

Functionalism emphasizes the interdependence of discrete institutions forming the society. Functionalist theorists assume that each part of the society cooperates with others to keep the whole system in equilibrium.

Emile Durkheim, a famous French sociologist, made great contributions to sociology of education. His approach was to consider education as a social institution that should interact with other institutions in the society. He stated that education and society reflect each other. We can observe this fact very clearly in our country. Political and economical inequalities in our society are reflected in our educational system. A very small part of our society, controlling the majority of our resources, benefits from the few institutions of education of higher quality. On the other hand, the majority of our society is faced with severe socioeconomic problems that prevent it to benefit from educational services efficiently.

There are shortcomings of the functionalist theory. It has been criticized for defining the society as an entity in an equilibrium state in which changes occur very slowly without disturbing the equilibrium. However, rapid changes can be observed in the society.

Conflict Theory

In contrast to the functionalist theory, the conflict theory assumes a continuous tension in the society, which is caused by the “competing interests of individuals and groups”. The ones who have power, wealth, material goods, etc. are in conflict with others who want to have a larger part of the society’s wealth. This tension between conflicting groups is the source of potential changes in the society. Educational system is also one of the fields in which this ever-present tension is reflected. “It is the interests and purposes of the dominant groups in society which shape the schools.” Max Weber thought of education this way.

In Turkey, the educational system clearly shows the mentality of the ruling social classes. While the Turkish-Islamic ideology has become the essence of our educational system after 80’s, neo-liberal economic policies were introduced as the remedy for our chronic socioeconomic problems. The idea of “free education for all” was considered old-fashioned. The progressive parts of the society were put under pressure. This picture is coherent with Weber’s point of view.

Since the conflict theory deals with the power relationships between groups that have conflicting interests, it fails to account for the balance a system may have.

Interaction Theories

These theories focus on the interactions between individuals. “...interactions between groups-peers, teacher-student, teacher-principal; (...) student attitudes and achievement; and socioeconomic status as it relates to student achievement” are possible issues interaction theories may deal with.

Considering the strict teacher-student relations in our schools, these theories may help us to understand how our students are effected by the authoritarian behaviors of their teachers. Moreover, the differences between the socioeconomic classes in our country are so dramatic that the interaction theories can provide us a useful framework for sociological studies dealing with interactions between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Labeling theory, stating that people tend to play the role expected of them, and exchange theory, emphasizing the costs and the rewards involved in our interactions, are examples of interaction theories that may be useful in understanding the different types of relationships in school settings.

Other Recent Theories in the Sociology of Education

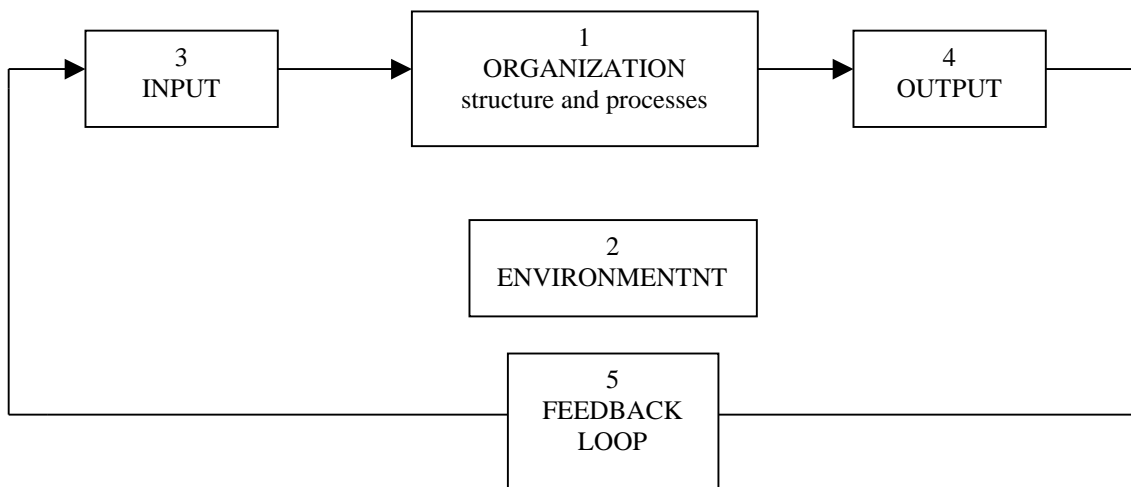
Attempts to combine the micro- and microcosmic approaches, emphasizing our commonsense views of reality are examples of new sociological perspectives. A proponent of the former approach states the necessity to integrate the structural and interactional aspects of the system. The latter approach deals with issues such as “the management and use of knowledge, the question of what is to be ‘educated’, curriculum content” etc.

In American sociology of education, a new approach is noted. Educational system is subject of sociology in two aspects:

- A) It is a field to be studied objectively by sociologists for scientific purposes.
- B) It has to be reformed according to the scientific findings, in cooperation of sociologists with schools.

The Open Systems Approach

This is a framework for a better visualization of different parts of any system. The systems model doesn't have any content relating to any field of study. But it enables us to show how a system interacts with the environment, what are the inputs, outputs, and the feedback the system receives. In fact, the systems model emphasizes the common qualities of every system or organism. So it becomes quite easy to analyze complex structures.



Systems Model

Research Methods in Sociology of Education

Participant observation, surveys, secondary analysis, controlled laboratory studies, and case studies are examples of different methods that are used for studies that are scientifically more meaningful. Usage of empirical data is a rather a new tendency among sociologists. Prior to 1950, it was a common habit to illustrate the arguments with “anecdotes and value judgements”.

Chapter 2

Conflicting Functions and Processes

Conflicting Functions of Education

It is a crucial point that schools are part of a larger entity, the society. Therefore, in realizing their functions, educational systems are greatly influenced by different groups in the society.

Function 1. Socialization:

New generations learn the behavior patterns of the society they live in and the roles expected of them by the society through education. However, the differences among students such as socioeconomic, ethnic or racial backgrounds bring about different experiences in school systems.

Function 2. Transmission of Culture:

Every group wants to impose its values, programs etc on the educational system, whereas students may get different qualities in schools due to different positions they will hold in the society.

Function 3. Social control and personal development:

Social control is a controversial issue in the sense that the rights and the different social backgrounds of students make the subject very difficult to deal with.

Function 4. Selecting, training, and placement of individuals in society:

Education may help maintain the current social structure through reproducing the hierarchy of social classes. An additional concern is how successful are educational systems in giving the necessary skills and characteristics for educational and occupational success.

Function 5. Change and innovation:

Institutions are conservative about changes because this requires additional efforts besides their everyday duties.

The Importance of Processes in Systems

Change is the essential fact about the social environment around us. Processes are the paths or the appearances of social changes. "Educational systems affect our change process, and in turn are affected by processes in their environment, or surroundings." Structure is accompanied by the processes that make it alive. They cannot be thought of separately when considering the society as a whole.

The Function of Socialization: Who Gets Ahead in the Process?

The Early Childhood Education Controversy

The questions of conflicting parts are about who should provide early socialization: the **family** or **society**?

Kindergarten is the major transition for many children to formal institution of the school. Before that the family, relatives, neighbors etc play an important role in child's socialization. Donald Peters states that the function of kindergarten is to teach children how to be a student. He also reports that research on the alternatives to home care doesn't have negative effects in the following subjects:

- Damage to the infant-mother attachment
- Retardation of cognitive development
- Lack of self-control, aggressiveness or passivity
- Too great a reliance on peers or unsatisfactory later peer relationships
- Usurpation of the mother's responsibility for the child

Other critiques argue that early children education helps the class structure to be perpetuated.

Researches show that preschool education helps the development of intelligence and the future educational success of the individual, which cuts human and financial costs later.

Another aspect of the problem is that more and more women participate in the economic activities. Therefore, it becomes necessary for children to attend preschool institutions.

Role of the Media in Socialization:

"Do the educational benefits of TV outweigh the negative outcomes?" This question lies in the center of debates concerning the educational aspect of the media. On the other hand, the affects of watching TV on school achievement are another important issue. "Teacher complain that the TV generation expect to be entertained in school or they turn off." Moreover, TV gives a simplistic and often distorted picture of what really happens.

Behavioral affects of TV watching are of great concern. Although there is no clear evidence, it is widely argued whether TV increases the tendency toward aggressiveness or suicidal behavior.

Parents play an important role in how TV watching may affect their children. How they inform their children about the outer world or what kind of a picture they have about their environment due to more or less TV watching is crucial in the socialization and learning processes of elementary school students.

Political Socialization

The way schools educate us in political sense can be summarized to five topics:

- National loyalty (we/they phenomenon)
- Political authority (obedience, justification of the political system)
- Concerning citizenship (good citizens obey laws, pay taxes, vote etc)
- Facts of political life (knowledge of history and governmental structure)
- Democracy (values of majority rule, participation, importance of the vote)

The Function of Cultural Transmission and Process of Passing on Culture

Some Factors Affecting Learning

Not only the teacher and the school setting, but also the personality of the student and his/her attitudes toward education are very crucial factors affecting learning. More generally, student's relationships with his/her environment effect the educational success. Intelligence shouldn't be considered as the only factor affecting the achievement in school.

How to Pass on Culture

Dewey argued that what children learn in schools must be related with their lives. He added that children learn better if they actively participate in the learning process. Others developed child-centered curricula that give the student the possibility to choose the courses s/he finds interesting or important.

Critical thinking is a progressive method in contrast to an educational system based only on facts. It aims to make the students reflect on what is introduced them as a fact.

Homework may help slower students to keep up with high-ability students. The nature of the course and abilities of students are decisive factors in what kind of and how much homework has to be given.

What Culture to Pass on

What should schools give to students is a controversial issue. An assumption about the educational system is that the present knowledge of the student has to be enhanced and his/her misconceptions have to be corrected.

While functionalists see education as a tool to prepare the young for society, conflict theorists believe that educational systems dehumanize and alienate individuals through giving them the values and norms that serve to perpetuate a capitalistic society. However schools are not the only means of transmitting cultural values and it is questionable how effective they are in this transmission. Many factors influence the curricula in schools. Some are other institutions, and others are societal trends, expectations etc.

To what extent educational systems remain out of external pressure and influence depends on different factors. Uncontroversial curricula and staff or centrally planned educational systems are two factors that prevent external interference in decision-making processes or, at least, they help minimizing such influences.

Controversial issues, e.g. sex education, conflicting religious dogmas and scientific theories or near political and economic history, cause extensive debates on who shall control what has to be taught in schools. Parts of the population living in economically, socially and culturally different regions within a country may have different expectations of what their children should learn in the school. This may bring about further controversies in the issue.

The Function of Social Control and Personal Development:

Preparing the Individual for Society

“Schools are expected to instill values related to social control and individual development”, so that students become adapted to society. However, conflict theorists oppose this functionalist point of view through stating that the social control mechanisms serve to preserve the unequal class system that prevails in the capitalistic society.

Discipline in Schools

“Power struggles between students and adults” seem as one of the sources of discipline problems in schools, and it will remain so unless the power structure surrounding students is changed.

Corporal punishment is the central issue in the discipline matters. In many States in the USA and in Britain, physical punishment is allowed in extreme cases. However, in Sweden it is banned even at home. There is a common point of view among academicians that physical punishment may cause further problems instead of solving the present one.

Teachers have different approaches in dealing with problematic students: Some of them believe that understanding the student’s problem and supporting him/her to solve it by him-/herself is sufficient. Others prefer to limit student’s possible behavior choices to different extents.

Student’s Rights

Different measures taken in the process of discipline arouse debates about students’ rights. The fact that the school is expected to instill society’s values and students’ rights as individuals may conflict with these expectations is one reason of controversy.

The Function of Selection and Allocation: The Sorting Process

Testing is a widespread method to assess the success of students and to determine their educational and occupational orientation.

IQ tests are very controversial because it isn’t clear how we should define intelligence and there are genetic factors as well as environmental ones that affect the intelligence and there is no consensus on how great is the effect of each factor. Another problem is whether it is possible to devise culturally unbiased tests. Many other variables affect test scores: the region of the country from which a person comes, the race of the person in charge of the testing situation, the sex of the test-taker, the motivation of the test-taker, etc.

As a conclusion, “intelligence- as typically measured –is not a fixed, inherited attribute, but a variable depending on stimulation and on cultural and environmental factors.”

Achievements are very decisive means of student selection in our educational system. Every year more than 2 million students take either the high school or the university entrance exam. Only a low percentage of them have opportunity to attend

a university or a relatively better high school. The debates about achievement tests focus on how successful they are in measuring the academic performance of a student in a few hours. Another point of discussion is that schools become less important due to private preparatory courses for the university exam. It is argued that school courses are not designed to prepare the students for their test achievement. The proponents of this argument, parents of students attending the private courses for example, imply that it is more important that secondary education institutions prepare the students for the entrance exam instead of for their future higher education.

The Function of Change and Innovation: The Process of Looking to the Future

Due to the inevitability of change, it is important how this change takes place and who controls it. The last quarter of the 20th century revealed through dramatic technological advances that the possessors of high-tech knowledge would rise in the hierarchy. Since our politicians aren't aware of this fact, we still don't have a clear science and technology policy and the necessary institutions to realize it. Technology must play an important role in educational systems however even for the majority of our university students is it a luxury having access to a PC in their schools.

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