



Sociology of Education

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1. Introduction

In the broadest perspective, education refers to all efforts to impart knowledge and shape values; hence, it has essentially the same meaning as socialization. However, when sociologists speak of education, they generally use a more specific meaning: the deliberate process, outside the family, by which societies transmit knowledge, values, and norms to prepare young people for adult roles (and, to a lesser extent, prepare adults for new roles). This process acquires institutional status when these activities make instruction the central defining purpose, are differentiated from other social realms, and involve defined roles of teacher and learner (Clark 1968). Schools exemplify this type of institutionalization.

The central insight of the sociology of education is that schools are socially embedded institutions that are crucially shaped by their social environment and crucially shape it. The field encompasses both micro- and macro-sociological concerns in diverse subfields such as stratification, economic development, socialization and the family, organizations, culture, and the sociology of knowledge. To understand modern society, it is essential to understand the role of education. Not only is education a primary agent of socialization and allocation, modern societies have developed formidable ideologies that suggest that education should have this defining impact (Meyer 1977).

Durkheim (1977) was the intellectual pioneer in this field, tracing the historical connections between the form and content of schools and larger social forces such as the rise of the bourgeoisie and the trend toward individualism. Largely because the field focuses so intensively on stratification-related issues (e.g., the impact of family background on educational attainment), the larger issues raised by Marx and Weber are readily evident in current scholarship. However, as Dreeben's (1994) historical account indicates, the direct contribution of the discipline's founders to the development of the sociology of education in the United States was minimal; indeed, even the foremost early American sociologists in the field did not decisively shape its development.

In the *Sociology of Teaching*, Waller (1932) examined teaching as an occupational role and school organization as a mechanism of social control. He emphasized the role of the school in the conflict-ridden socialization of the young as well as the interpersonal and organizational mechanisms that furthered students' acceptance of the normative order. Although now recognized as a classic, Waller's analysis stimulated little work for several decades.

Although less focused on education per se, Sorokin (1927) portrayed schools as a key channel of mobility with their own distinctive form of social testing. He argued that increasing opportunities for schooling would stratify the society, not level it. However, Blau and Duncan's (1967) paradigm-setting study of status attainment (see below) did not refer to Sorokin's analysis of education despite their appreciation of his larger concern for the significance of social mobility. Warner's and Hollingshead's community studies considered education integral to community social organization, especially through its connection to the stratification system, but their influence, like that of Waller and Sorokin, was more a matter of suggesting general ideas than of establishing a cumulative research tradition.

As a subfield within the sociological discipline, the sociology of education has been propelled largely by a host of practical, policy-related issues that emerged with the development of the mass educational system. Essentially, research has focused on whether education has delivered on its promise of creating more rational, culturally adapted, and productive individuals and, by extension, a "better" society. The field was particularly energized by the egalitarian concerns of the 1960s: How "fair" is the distribution of opportunity in schools and in the larger society, and how can disparities be reduced? These questions continue to animate the field.

2. Theoretical Debates

Much research, even the most policy-oriented, has been grounded, often implicitly, in more general analytic perspectives on the role of education in modern society. The two main orientations are functionalism and conflict theory, though other, less encompassing perspectives also have shaped the field significantly.

Functionalism. In the functionalist view, schools serve the presumed needs of a social order committed to rationality, meritocracy, and democracy. They provide individuals with the necessary cognitive skills and cultural outlook to be successful workers and citizens (Parsons 1959; Dreeben 1968) and provide society with an efficient, fair way of sorting and selecting "talents" so that the most capable can assume the most responsible positions (Clark 1962). Complementing this sociological work is human capital theory in economics, which contends that investment in education enhances individual productivity and aggregate economic growth (Schultz 1961). The criticism in the 1980s that poor schooling had contributed significantly to America's decline in the international economy reflects a popular version of this theoretical orientation.

However, in the 1970s, both the increasing prominence of critical political forces and the accumulated weight of research spurred a theoretical challenge. Important parts of the empirical base of functionalism were questioned: that schools taught productive skills, that mass education had ushered in a meritocratic social order, and that education had furthered social equality. A number of conflict-oriented approaches emerged.

Neo-Marxist Theory. Neo-Marxist scholars have provided the most thorough challenge to the functionalist position. For all the diversity within this conflict theory, the main point is that the organization of schools largely reflects the dictates of the corporate-capitalist economy. In the most noted formulation, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that education must fulfill the needs of capitalism: efficiently allocating differently socialized individuals to appropriate slots in the corporate hierarchy, transferring privilege from generation to generation, and accomplishing both while maintaining a semblance of legitimacy. Thus, the changing demands of capitalist production and the power of capitalist elites determine the nature of the educational system.

More recent neo-Marxist scholarship (Willis 1981) emphasized that schools are not only agents of social reproduction but also important sites of resistance to the capitalist order. Many neo-Marxists also have emphasized the "relative autonomy" of the state from economic forces and, correspondingly, the partial responsiveness of schools to demands from subordinate groups (Carnoy and Levin 1985). Other scholars in this general critical tradition have turned in "post-Marxist" directions, emphasizing inequities related to gender and race along with class, but the common, defining point remains that educational inequities reflect and perpetuate the inequities of capitalist society and that oppressed groups have an objective interest in fundamental social transformation (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985). This newer critical approach has developed with relatively little connection to mainstream approaches (i.e., positivistic, often

reformoriented research) despite some similarities in concerns (e.g., student disruptions and challenges to authority in schools) (Davies 1995).

Obviously, neo-Marxists do not share the essentially benign vision of the social order in functionalist thought, but both perspectives view the organization of schooling as "intimately connected with the changing character of work and the larger process of industrialization in modern society" (Hurn 1993, p. 86). These competing perspectives are rooted in similar logical forms of causal argument: To explain educational organization and change, functionalists invoke the "needs" of the society, while neo-Marxists invoke the "needs" of the capitalist order for the same purpose. Critics contend that both perspectives posit an overly tight, rational link between schools and the economy and concomitantly downplay the institutional autonomy as schools as well as the complexity of political struggles over education (Kingston 1986).

Status Conflict. Arising out of the Weberian tradition, the status conflict approach emphasizes the attempts of various groups—primarily defined by ethnicity, race, and class—to use education as a mechanism to win or maintain privilege (Collins 1979). The evolving structure of the educational system reflects the outcomes of these struggles as groups attempt to control the system for their own benefit. With varying success, status groups use education both to build group cohesion and to restrict entry to desired positions to those certified by "their" schools. However, as lower-status groups seek social mobility by acquiring more educational credentials, enrollments may expand beyond what is technically necessary. In this view, then, the educational system is not necessarily functional to capitalist interests or other imputed system needs.

Consistent with this view, a primary effect of schools, especially at the elite level, is to provide cultural capital, of which educational credentials are the main markers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). This form of capital refers to the personal style, social outlooks and values, and aesthetic tastes that make a person suitable for socially valued positions. (The point of comparison is human capital, an individual's productive, technical skills.) In this perspective, education is rewarded because occupational gatekeepers value particular forms of cultural capital, and thus education is a key mechanism of class and status reproduction.

The Interpretative Tradition. Sociologists in the interpretative tradition view schools as places where meaning is socially constructed through everyday interactions. This tradition incorporates the general orientations of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. Accordingly, micro-level concerns predominate—for example, what do teachers expect their students to learn, and how do those expectations condition their conduct in class?—and research tends to rely on qualitative techniques. This tradition is unified by a general sense of what kinds of questions to ask (and how to ask them) rather than a set of related theoretical propositions or a body of accumulated findings.

3. Empirical Studies

The highly selective review of empirical studies that follows focuses on the two key questions in contemporary American sociology of education: (1) How is education involved in the distribution of life chances? (2) How are family status and school characteristics connected to educational attainment and/or academic achievement? With few exceptions, analyses of education in other countries are not considered. The field is dominated by American research, and American sociologists have engaged in relatively little comparative research. Baker (1994) speculates that this lack of a comparative research tradition in the United States reflects both a belief in American "exceptionalism" (for instance, an extreme emphasis on mass access) and a strong focus on micro-level issues that do not necessarily call for comparative research designs.

Schooling and Life Chances. Throughout the twentieth century in all industrial countries, there has been a dramatic upgrading in the occupational structure and a dramatic expansion in educational systems. Ever more jobs have come to require academic qualifications, a process that usually is interpreted as being driven by the rationalism and universalism of modernization. In this functionalist perspective, academic skills are presumed to be technically required and meritocratically rewarded, transforming the stratification system so that individual achievements rather than ascriptive characteristics determine life chances.

This interpretation has been subject to empirical test at two levels: (1) the individual level—to what extent, absolutely and relatively, does education affect economic attainment? and (2) the macro level—to what extent have educational expansion and the increasing significance of schools for occupational attainment increased overall equality of opportunity?

At the first level, as part of the general analysis of status attainment, researchers have concentrated on measuring the connection between individuals' schooling and their economic position. Building on Blau and Duncan's (1967) work, researchers have repeatedly documented in multivariate models that education (measured in years of schooling and degree completion) has by far the largest independent impact on adult attainment (Featherman and Hauser 1978; Jencks et al. 1979). By comparison, the net direct effects of family status (usually measured in terms of parental education and occupation) are modest. Indeed, among the college-educated in recent years, higher family status confers no extra advantage at all (Hout 1988).

Earlier in life, however, family status is substantially related to educational attainment. The total effect (direct and indirect) of family status on occupational attainment is therefore substantial, though its impact is mediated very largely through educational attainment. In effect, then, education plays a double-sided role in the stratification process. Education is the great equalizer: It confers largely similar benefits to all regardless of family origins. However, it is also the great reproducer: Higher-status families transmit their position across generations largely through the educational attainment of their children.

The strong connection between schooling and occupational attainment is open to diverse interpretations. Most prominently, human capital theory suggests that education enhances productivity, and because people are paid in accordance with their marginal productivity, the well educated enjoy greater prospects. In favor of this interpretation is the fact that schooling is demonstrably linked to the enhancement of academic competencies (Fischer et al. 1996) and that basic academic skills are substantially correlated with job performance in a wide variety of settings (Hunter 1986).

By contrast, credentials theory portrays the educational institution as a sorting device in which individuals are slotted to particular positions in the occupational hierarchy on the basis of academic credentials, often with little regard for their individual productive capacities. The fact that possessing specific credentials (especially a college degree) has positive career effects, net of both years of schooling and measured academic ability, provides indirect support for this view. That is, there appears to be a "sheepskin effect," so that employer's value the degree per se, although people with degrees may have unmeasured productive capacities or dispositions that account for their success (Jencks et al. 1979). Moreover, the credentialist argument is strengthened by the fact that in some elite segments of the labor market, employers primarily recruit graduates of certain prestigious programs and make little effort to discern differences in the academic-based skills of those included in the restricted applicant pool (Kingston and Clawson 1990).

Both views seem to have some merit; indeed, they may be partially complementary. Employers may generally use educational attainment as a low-cost, rough proxy for productive skill, and for certain positions they may favor holders of particular degrees because of their presumed cultural dispositions and the prestige that their presence lends the organization. The relative explanatory power of the human capital and credentialist perspectives may vary across segments of the labor market.

At the macro level, it might be expected that the great expansion of access to education has reduced the impact of family origins on educational attainment, increasing equality of opportunity, but that has proved to be more the exception than the rule. A rigorous thirteen-country comparative study identified two patterns: greater equalization among socioeconomic strata in the Netherlands and Sweden and virtual stability in the rest, including the United States (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993), where the strata have largely maintained their relative positions as average attainment has increased. Thus, the impact of educational policies designed to promote equality appears minimal; even in Sweden and the Netherlands, the trend toward equalization emerged before reforms were introduced.

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