

Sociology of Education

Alan R. Sadovnik

The sociology of education has provided important insights into the ways in which schools affect individuals and groups. Through an examination of the relationship between society and schools, sociologists have uncovered how educational processes affect the way people think, live, and work; their place in society; and their chances for success or failure. Research in the sociology of education has attempted to understand whether educational systems provide opportunities for all children to achieve based on their merits or whether they reproduce existing social inequalities.

Theory and research in the sociology of education seek to understand the limits and possibilities of schooling. In the United States, which has placed enormous faith in the power of schools to ameliorate all types of social problems, including poverty, and has viewed schools as the central institutions for social mobility, the sociology of education provides evidence about the extent to which schools can solve social problems.

The discipline of sociology developed at the end of the nineteenth century amid the promise and problems of industrialization, urbanization, and a developing belief in education in Europe and the United States. During this period, more and more children were required to go to school, and sociologists began to examine the relationship between school and society. As schooling became more available to increased numbers of children, many believed that schools would be critical to a modern era where merit, talent, and effort would replace privilege and inheritance as the most significant factors for social and occupational mobility.

Until the 1960s, sociologists for the most part shared this optimism about the role of education in a modern society. They examined important themes, including how children are socialized for adult roles, the school as a social organization, and the effects of schooling on students' life chances. Beginning in the 1960s, sociologists of education began to doubt that schools, by themselves, could solve social problems, especially problems of economic and social inequality.

Sociologists of education continued to believe that they could improve education through the application of scientific theory and research. Because of their scientific orientation, they are more likely to ask *what is* rather than *what ought to be*, although sociological research has been the basis for trying to improve and change schools. They want to discover what occurs inside of schools and what the effects of schooling are on individuals and groups. The distinctive feature of the sociology of education is empiricism, or the collection and analysis of empirical data within a theoretical context in order to construct a logical set of conclusions.

Thus, the sociology of education relies on empirical methods to understand how schools are related to society, how individuals and groups interact within schools, and what the effects of schooling are for individuals and groups of children. Its findings are based on an attempt to be objective and scientific. It examines individuals and groups in their social context and examines the social forces that affect them. The sociological approach to education is crucial because it

provides conclusions based on focused and tested observations. Without such an analysis, one cannot know *what is*; and without knowing *what is*, one cannot make *what ought to be* a reality.

The sociology of education has mirrored the larger theoretical debates in the discipline of sociology. From its roots in the classical sociology of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim to the contemporary influences of symbolic interactionism, postmodernism, and critical theory, sociology of education research has been influenced by a number of different theoretical perspectives.

Functionalism

Functionalist sociologists begin with a picture of society that stresses the interdependence of the social system; these researchers often examine how well parts are integrated with each other. Functionalists view society as a kind of machine, where one part articulates with another to produce the dynamic energy required to make society work. Most important, functionalism stresses the processes that maintain social order by stressing consensus and agreement. Although functionalists understand that change is inevitable, they underscore the evolutionary nature of change. Furthermore, although they acknowledge that conflict between groups exists, functionalists argue that without a common bond to unite groups, society will disintegrate. Thus, functionalists examine the social processes necessary to the establishment and maintenance of social order.

Functionalist theories of school and society trace their origins to the French sociologist Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) general sociological theory. Durkheim's sociology was concerned with the effects of the decline of traditional rituals and community during the transition from traditional to modern societies. Based on his research, Durkheim provided a sociological analysis of the effects of modernity on community.

For Durkheim, the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization led to the breakdown of traditional rituals and methods of social control, which in turn led to the breakdown of social solidarity and cohesion. He demonstrated empirically how the breakdown in traditional community resulted in the decline of collective conscience and the rise of individualism. Such a breakdown led to what Durkheim called *anomie*, or the condition of normlessness in individuals and society.

As the bonds that connected individuals to each other and to society became unhinged, modern societies faced disintegration from within. He did not believe that the solution to social disintegration was a return to the past, with its strict forms of social control and regulation. Rather, he believed that modern societies had to develop new forms of social control and cohesion that would allow for the newly developed individualism of modernity to exist within a cohesive modern society. Such a society would allow for a balance between individualism and community.

Durkheim was the first sociologist to apply sociological theory to education. Although he recognized that education had taken different forms at different times and places, he believed that in virtually all societies, education was of critical importance in creating the moral unity necessary for social cohesion and harmony. For Durkheim, moral values were the foundation of society.

Durkheim's emphasis on values and cohesion set the tone for how present-day functionalists approach the study of education. Functionalists tend to assume that consensus is the normal state in society and that conflict represents a breakdown of shared values. In a highly integrated, well-functioning society, schools socialize students into the appropriate values and sort and select students according to their abilities. Educational reform is supposed to create structures, programs, and curricula that are technically advanced and rational and that encourage social unity.

Functionalism is concerned with the functions of schooling in the maintenance of social order. Whereas conflict theory argues that schools function in the interests of the dominant groups in a society, functionalism sees schools as functioning in the interests of the majority of citizens, at least within democratic societies. Therefore, functionalists examine the specific purposes of schooling and their role in society. These purposes or functions are intellectual, political, social, and economic and refer to their role within any existing society. Functionalists, however, are most concerned with the role of schools in modern, democratic societies.

Modern functionalist theories of education believe that education is a vital part of a modern society, a society that differs considerably from all previous societies. Schooling performs important functions in the development and maintenance of a modern, democratic society, especially with regard to equality of opportunity for all citizens. Functionalists argue that inequality was functional and necessary in all societies, as it ensures that the most talented individuals will fill the functionally most important positions. Nonetheless, modern democratic societies differ from previous, traditional agrarian societies because they are meritocratic; that is, talent and hard work should determine the allocation of individuals to positions, rather than accidents of birth. Thus, in modern societies, education becomes the key institution in a meritocratic selection process.

This democratic-liberal functionalist perspective views education as a vital institution in a modern capitalist society defined by its technocratic, meritocratic, and democratic characteristics. Although considerable inequality remains, society in this framework is characterized by the movement from ascription to achievement, with equal educational opportunity the crucial component. The historical pattern of academic failure by minority and working-class students was a blemish on the principles of justice and equality of opportunity expounded by a democracy. This educational pattern necessitated the formulation of reform programs to ensure equality of opportunity. Even though functionalist theorists disagreed on the causes of academic failure, they vigorously believed that the solutions to both educational and social problems were possible within the capitalist social structure.

The central distinction made by the functionalist perspective was between equality of opportunity and equality of results. A democratic society is a just society if it generates the former. Therefore, functionalist theory rests on a positive view of meritocracy as a laudable goal, with education viewed as the necessary institutional component in guaranteeing a fair competition for unequal rewards. The just society is one where each member has an equal opportunity for social and economic advantages and where individual merit and talent replace ascriptive and class variables as the most essential determinants of status. Education is the vehicle in ensuring the continual movement toward this meritocratic system.

Education plays a significant function in the maintenance of the modern democratic and technocratic society. In a political democracy, schools provide citizens with the knowledge and dispositions to participate effectively in civic life. In an increasingly technical society, schools provide students with the skills and dispositions to work in such a society. Although schools do teach specific work skills, they also teach students how to learn so they may adapt to new work roles and requirements.

Functionalist theory was the dominant paradigm in sociology and the sociology of education until the 1960s. In the 1960s, conflict theory emerged as a significant critique and alternative to functionalism.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists argue that schools functioned in the interests of dominant groups, rather than everyone, and that functionalists confused what is with what ought to be. According to this critique, whereas schools ought to be democratic and meritocratic, the empirical evidence did not support the functionalist contention that they were. Although the specific nature of conflict theory is developed in the next section, it is important to note some of the problems with

functionalism. First, conflict theorists argue that the relationship between schooling, skills, and jobs is far less rational than functionalists suggest. Second, conflict theorists point out that the role of schools in providing equality of opportunity is far more problematic than functionalists suggest. Third, large-scale empirical research on the effects of schooling casts significant doubt on the functionalist assertion that the expansion of schooling brings about an increasingly just and meritocratic social order.

Conflict sociologists of education do not believe that society is held together by shared values and collective agreement alone, but rather on the ability of dominant groups to impose their will on subordinate groups through force, co-optation, and manipulation. The glue of society is economic, political, cultural, and military power. Ideologies or intellectual justifications created by the powerful are designed to enhance their position by legitimizing inequality and the unequal distribution of material and cultural goods. Conflict sociologists see the relation between school and society as problematic. Whereas functionalists emphasize cohesion in explaining social order, conflict sociologists emphasize struggle. From a conflict point of view, schools are similar to social battlefields, where students struggle against teachers, teachers against administrators, and so on. These antagonisms, however, are most often muted for two reasons: the authority and power of the school, and the achievement ideology. In effect, the achievement ideology convinces students and teachers that schools promote learning and sort and select students according to their abilities, not according to their social status. The achievement ideology disguises the “real” power relations within the school, which, in turn, reflect and correspond to the power relations within the larger society.

Although Karl Marx (1818–1883) did not write a great deal about education, he is the intellectual founder of the conflict school in the sociology of education. His analytic imagination and moral outrage were sparked by the social conditions found in Europe in the nineteenth century. Industrialization and urbanization had produced a new class of workers—the proletariat—who lived in poverty; worked up to eighteen hours a day; and had little, if any, hope of creating a better life for their children. Marx believed that the class system, which separated owners from workers and workers from the benefits of their own labor, made class struggle inevitable. He believed that the proletariat would rise up and overthrow the capitalists, and, in doing so, establish a new society where men and women would no longer be “alienated” from their labor. Marx’s powerful and often compelling critique of early capitalism has provided the intellectual energy for subsequent generations of liberal and leftist thinkers who believe that the only way to a more just and productive society is the abolition or modification of capitalism and the introduction of socialism. In the 1970s, political economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis used a neo-Marxist perspective for examining the growth of the American public school. They argued that there is a direct correspondence between the organization of schools and the organization of society, and until society is fundamentally changed, there is little hope of real school reform. Other conflict sociologists of education, however, argue that traditional Marxism is too deterministic and overlooks the power of culture and human agency in promoting change. They suggest that Marxism places too much emphasis on the independent effects of the economy and not enough on the effects of cultural, social, and political factors.

An early conflict sociologist who took a slightly different theoretical orientation when viewing society was Max Weber (1864–1920). Like Marx, Weber was convinced that power relations between dominant and subordinate groups structured societies, but unlike Marx, Weber believed that class differences alone could not capture the complex ways in which human beings form hierarchies and belief systems that make these hierarchies seem just and inevitable. Thus, Weber examined status cultures as well as class position. Status is an important sociological concept because it alerts us to the fact that people identify their group by what they consume and with whom they socialize. Weber also recognized that political and military power could be exercised by the state, without direct reference to the wishes of the dominant classes. Weber had a critical awareness of how bureaucracy was becoming the dominant type of authority in the modern state and how bureaucratic ways of thinking were bound to shape educational reforms. Weber made the distinction between the “specialist” and

the “cultivated man.” What should be the goal of education—training individuals for employment or for thinking? Or are these two goals compatible?

The Weberian approach to studying the relation between school and society has developed into a compelling tradition of sociological research. Researchers in this tradition tend to analyze school organizations and processes from the point of view of status competition and organizational constraints. One of the first American sociologists of education to use these concepts was Willard Waller. Waller portrayed schools as autocracies in a state of instability. Without continuous vigilance, schools would erupt into anarchy because students are essentially forced to go to school against their will. Rational models of school organization disguise the tension that defines the schooling process. Waller's perspective is shared by many contemporary conflict theorists who see schools as oppressive and demeaning and portray student noncompliance with school rules as a form of resistance.

Contemporary conflict theory includes a number of important approaches. First, a major research tradition that has emerged from the Weberian school of thought is represented by Randall Collins. He believes that educational expansion is best explained by status group struggle. He argues that educational credentials, such as college diplomas, are primarily status symbols rather than indicators of actual achievement. The rise of “credentialism” does not indicate that society is becoming more expert but that education is increasingly used by dominant groups to secure more advantageous places in the occupational and social structure for themselves and their children.

A second school of conflict theory is based on the work of Stanford sociologist John Meyer and his collaborators. Called institutional theory, Meyer argues that the expansion of education worldwide has not been due to functional requirements or labor market demands but rather to the worldwide process of citizenship and the democratic belief that educational development is a requirement of a civil society. Like Collins, Meyer does not believe that such expansion is a proof of democracy, but rather the belief that educational expansion is necessary. Through comparative, historical, and institutional analysis, Meyer and his colleagues argue that educational expansion often preceded labor market demands and that educational expansion is legitimated by institutional ritual and ceremony rather than actual practices.

Third, a variation of conflict theory that has captured the imagination of some American sociologists began in France and England during the 1960s. Unlike most Marxists, who tend to emphasize the economic structure of society, cultural and social reproduction theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, examined how the social and cultural processes of schooling reproduced society. For Bourdieu, cultural capital (particular forms of culture, such as knowledge of music, art, and literature) is passed on by families and schools. The concept of “cultural capital” is important because it suggests that, in understanding the transmission of inequalities, we ought to recognize that the cultural characteristics of individuals and groups are significant indicators of status and class position. There is a growing body of literature that suggests that schools transmit specific social identities that either enhance or hinder students' life chances.

Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) argued that the structural and interactional aspects of the educational system reflect each other. He examined how speech patterns reflect students' social class backgrounds and how students from working-class backgrounds are at a disadvantage in the school setting because schools are middle-class organizations. Bernstein's early work on social class differences in language distinguished between the restricted communication code of the working class and the elaborated code of the middle class. His critics labeled him a deficit theorist, alleging that he was arguing that working-class language was deficient. Bernstein rejected this interpretation, arguing that difference became deficit because of unequal power relations. Bernstein's later work examined the connection between communication codes and the processes of schooling. He analyzed the processes of schooling and how they related to social class reproduction, concluding that unequal educational processes reproduced social

inequalities.

Interactionist Theory

Interactionist theories about the relation of school and society are critiques and extensions of the functionalist and conflict perspectives. The critique arises from the observation that functionalist and conflict theories are very abstract and emphasize structure and process at a societal level of analysis. Although this level of analysis helps us to understand education in the “big picture,” macrosociological theories hardly provide us with an interpretable snapshot of what schools are like on an everyday level. What do students and teachers actually do in school? Interactionist theories attempt to make the “commonplace strange” by turning on their heads everyday, taken-for-granted behaviors and interactions between students and between students and teachers. It is exactly what most people do not question that is most problematic to the interactionist. For example, the processes by which students are labeled “gifted” or “learning disabled” are, from an interactionist point of view, important to analyze because such processes carry with them many implicit assumptions about learning and children. By examining the microsociological or the interactional aspects of school life, we are less likely to create theories that are logical and eloquent, but without meaningful content.

Interactionist theory has its origins in the social psychology of early twentieth-century sociologists George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929). Mead and Cooley examined the ways in which the individual is related to society through ongoing social interactions. This school of thought, known as *symbolic interactionism*, viewed the self as socially constructed in relation to social forces and structures and the product of ongoing negotiation of meanings. Thus, the social self is an active product of human agency rather than a deterministic product of social structure. Interactionist theory is usually combined with functionalism or conflict theory to produce a more comprehensive theory of society. One of the most influential interactionist theorists was Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982), whose work examined the microsociology of everyday life and the functions of interaction rituals in holding society together. Goffman was interested in how everyday, taken-for-granted patterns of interactions serve to hold society together. Goffman's brand of interactionism was functionalist, as he viewed social interaction patterns as rituals that served to maintain society through an invisible micro social order. Although Goffman did not directly study education, his writings on mental hospitals, on the labeling of so-called deviant behavior, and on patterns of interpersonal behavior provided a rich tapestry of concepts for sociologists of education, particularly through the use of labeling theory, which has been applied to the study of teacher expectations, ability grouping and tracking, and the study of schools as total institutions.

Ray Rist has provided some of the most important insights on the ways in which school processes affect educational achievement. Rist's research into the everyday processes of schooling in an inner-city school provided an understanding of how school practices, such as labeling and ability grouping, contribute to the reproduction of educational and social inequalities. He argued that interactionism has provided important understandings of the way in which the everyday workings of schools, including teacher and student interactions, labeling, and linguistic discourse, are at the root of unequal educational outcomes. Drawing upon labeling theory, originally a key approach in the sociology of deviance, Rist demonstrated how teacher expectations of students based on categories such as race, class, ethnicity, and gender affect student perceptions of themselves and their achievement. Rist argues that the processes of schooling resulted in educational inequality mirroring the larger structures of society. He concluded that education produces the opposite of its stated intentions—instead of eliminating class barriers, it perpetuates inequalities. Combined with the findings of conflict theory, Rist's interactionist approach provides an empirical documentation of how schools reproduce inequality.

Methodological Approaches in the Sociology of Education

Beginning in the 1960s, quantitative methods dominated research in the sociology of education. Large-scale data sets, such as High School Beyond, the National Educational Longitudinal

Study, and the School and Staffing Surveys collected by organizations such as the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and the National Center for Educational Statistics, were mined using sophisticated statistical techniques. The purpose of this type of research was to examine the independent effects of schooling on educational and economic outcomes while controlling for a series of independent variables, both inside and outside of schools. These quantitative analyses examined the explained and unexplained variation in academic achievement among different groups based on race, social class, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, and others. This type of research also examined school effects on these groups by comparing different types of schools, including public, private, and charter schools, as well as the effects of school organization and processes, including ability grouping, tracking, and school and class size.

Although this type of research provided important evidence on the effects of school organization and processes and the independent effects of factors outside of schools, interactionists argued that research based on large-scale data sets often missed the reasons for these effects, as they did not examine school processes. As an antidote to large, data set, quantitative research, qualitative researchers provided complementary approaches to understanding schooling using ethnographic methods. Researchers such as Annette Lareau, Lois Weis, and Michelle Fine provided important analyses of how school processes affect students from various backgrounds.

Some qualitative researchers have remained squarely in the scientific tradition, insisting on objectivity, rigorous research design, and examination of causality. Others are more rooted within interpretive traditions, including symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, postmodernism, feminism, critical theory, and cultural studies, and in varying degrees they reject postpositivist notions of scientific rigor. Despite critiques of qualitative research as unscientific, qualitative research continues to be an important part of research in the sociology of education.

Based upon their strengths and weaknesses, both quantitative and qualitative methods should be an important part of sociology of education research. Qualitative research in the sociology of education has made valuable contributions to our understanding of educational problems and has offered policy makers useful data for school improvement. Quantitative large-scale data set analyses have provided essential evidence on the effects of schooling and have been invaluable to policy makers. Whether studies are quantitative or qualitative or part of a mixed-method approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, sociology of education research provides important data for public policy.

Conclusion

The sociology of education originated in the concerns of classical sociology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It came of age in the 1960s onward and concentrated on the significant questions regarding meritocracy and equality. Contemporary theories in the sociology of education have attempted to synthesize the major theories in the field—functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism—and have provided a rich theoretical foundation for empirical work.

Today, the sociology of education is at a crossroads. The twentieth century represented the attempt to refine and empirically test the theoretical insights of the classical sociology of the nineteenth century. Through sophisticated methodological approaches, sociologists of education provided important empirical evidence on the effects of education on different groups and have been an important source of data for discussions of the achievement gap. Qualitative researchers provided an alternative to what they perceived as the overly scientific, quantitative focus of much of the sociology of education research. For many sociologists of education, this response has weakened the scientific base of educational research. For others, sociology of education of all types has been too removed from policy and practice. In the coming years, sociologists of education need to combine varied research methodologies, quantitative and qualitative, to examine the most important question common to functionalist and conflict theory

—why students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do less well in school—and provide pragmatic policy recommendations for successful school reform and reduction of the achievement gap. Although sociological theory in the sociology of education will continue to be an important part of this project, the separation of theory, research, and practice needs to be diminished.

Alan R. Sadovnik

10.4135/9781412963992.n346

See also

- [Reproduction, Educational \(n309.xml#n309\)](#)

Note: This article is adapted and revised from A. R. Sadovnik, P. W. Cookson, and S. F. Seniel, *Exploring Education: An Introduction to Foundations of Education*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992, 2001, 2006, pp. 20, 110–118; used by permission.

Further Readings

Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, education, and cultural change* (pp. pp. 71–112). London: Tavistock.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.

Coleman, J., et al. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Collins, R. Functional and conflict theories of educational stratification. *American Sociological Review*, vol. 36 (no. 6) 2009., pp. 1002–1019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2093761>
(<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2093761>)

Collins, R. (1978). *The credential society*. New York: Academic Press.

Durkheim, E. (1947). *The division of labor in society*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press. (Original work published 1893)

Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press. (Original work published 1897)

Durkheim, É. (1977). *The evolution of educational thought* (P. Collins, ed. , Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Fine, M. (1992). *Framing dropouts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Lareau, A. (1989). *Home advantage*. New York: Routledge.

Lareau, A. (2004). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Meyer, J. The effects of education as an institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 83 (no.

1) 2009., pp. 55–77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/226506> (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/226506>)

Meyer, J., & Rowan, B. (1977). The structure of educational organizations. In M. Meyer & Associates (Eds.), *Environments and organizations* (pp. pp. 78–109). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Meyer, J., and Rowan, B. Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 83 2009., pp. 340–363.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/226550> (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/226550>)

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Persell, C. H. (1977). *Education and inequality*. New York: Free Press.

Rist, R. Student social class and teacher expectations: The self fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 40 2009., pp. 411–451.

Rist, R. (1977). On understanding the processes of schooling: The contributions of labeling theory. In J. Karabel, ed. , & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. pp. 292–305). New York: Oxford University Press.

Sadovnik, A. R. (Ed.). (1995). *Knowledge and pedagogy: The sociology of Basil Bernstein*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society (Vols. 1 & 2)* (G. Roth, ed. , & C. Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Young, M. F D. (Ed.). (1971). *Knowledge and control: New directions of the sociology of education*. London: Collier-Macmillan.