

Unit 2

Theoretical Approaches

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain the role of education in society; and
- discuss the major theoretical approaches towards the understanding of education.

2.1 Introduction

In any society, there is an in-built mechanism to socialize the individual and to transmit its culture to the young. As a simple society transforms itself into an industrialized and a modernized state, instruction for the young becomes increasingly differentiated, complex and closely connected with other features of the society (Clark 1968). The resulting demands of the learning process are fulfilled by establishing a formal educational system. This system prepares the young for the transition from the confined and concentrated relationships of the family to the impersonal and diversified relationships of the larger society (Anderson 1968).

With the rise in importance of the educational system and related institutions in society, various scholars initiated their investigations on education as a legitimate field of study. The scholars are not from the discipline of sociology alone, but from different disciplines. As a result of the extensive input of scholarship and expertise from diverse disciplines, the boundaries between sociology of education and other participating disciplines are greatly blurred (Bidwell 1982).

In this Unit we will discuss the major theoretical approaches towards the understanding of the sociology of education. The Unit deals with education as a field of study and provides a broad overview of research and methods used by sociologists. It explains four major theoretical approaches used in the sociology of education: functionalism, conflict theory, interactionism, and postmodernism. The unit concludes with an analytical comment on theoretical developments.

2.2 Functionalism

Functionalism treats society as a self-regulating system of interrelated elements with structured social relationships and observed regularities. Functionalists perceive society as similar to a biological organism which is composed of many distinct but interdependent parts with each part contributing to the functioning or survival of the whole system. All the parts are not only interdependent but also coordinated and complementary to each other. A change in one part is believed to affect other parts; the malfunctioning of one part is dealt with by

other parts in a coordinated way so as to maintain the equilibrium of the whole system.

Functionalists do not give weightage to abrupt changes in the whole system. They lay emphasis on the absence of disruptive internal factors that disturb the overall stability of the system. Various components or units of the society operate in consonance with common perceptions, sentiments, values and beliefs of the system. This agreement or consensus is achieved through the socialization of individuals by guided principles of the society (Abraham 1982). In simple or folk societies, the family is the primary agent of socialization. In modern or industrialized societies, socialization is often mediated by educational institutions apart from families. Against this basic understanding, we will explore the approaches of two functionalists, Durkheim and Parsons.

According to Durkheim (1956) the major function of education is to transmit society's norms and values. The survival of society or collective life is possible only with a sufficient degree of homogeneity among various members of the society. Homogeneity among members is reached by adhering to rules and regulations laid down by the society. Education preserves and reinforces these homogenising principles of society in a child from the beginning. Durkheim (1956:17) writes, "Education is the influence exercised by the adult generation on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him by both political society as a whole and the social milieu for which he is specifically destined." He highlights the role played by education in instituting 'social being' in the 'individual being.' The individual being is made up of mental states that apply only to himself/herself and to the events in his/her personal life. The social being embodies a system of ideas, sentiments and practices of the group of which he/she is a part. The process of socialization of a newborn differentiates human beings from animals. In his own words, "Of what an animal has been able to learn in the course of his individual existence, almost nothing can survive him. By contrast, the results of human experience are preserved almost entirely and in detail, thanks to books, sculptures, tools, instruments of every kind that are transmitted from generation to generation, oral tradition etc." (Durkheim 1956:22). The role of the educational system becomes important in complex societies in which families or other primary groups are not fully equipped to prepare the young for adulthood in a way that is expected by the larger society. School operates as a model of micro social system in which a child learns to cooperate with other children who are not part of their primary group. The training acquired by children in school forms the basis of their behaviour outside the school.

Box 2.1: Nature and Role of Education in Society: Emile Durkheim

"In fact, however, each society, considered at a given stage of development, has a system of education which exercises an irresistible influence on individuals. It is idle to think that we can rear our children as we wish. There are customs to which we are bound to conform; if we flout them too severely, they take vengeance on our children. The children, when they are adults, are unable to live with their peers, with whom they are not in accord. Whether they had been raised in accordance with ideas that were either obsolete or premature does not matter; in one case as in the other, they are not of their time and, therefore, they are outside the conditions of normal life. There is, then, in each period, a prevailing type of education from which we cannot deviate without encountering that lively resistance which restrains the fancies of dissent" (Durkheim orig. 1956, rpt. 1985: 12-13):

According to Durkheim, specific skills imparted in the educational institutions are necessary to maintain the division of labour in society. As society shifts from simple to complex form there is a corresponding increase in the complexity of division of labour and the emergence of more specialized occupations. In simple societies, division of labour demands generic skill sets that can be passed on easily through families. In complex industrial societies, however, families find themselves at a loss to impart complex and specialized skill sets. Maintaining equilibrium among various layers of occupational structure or divisions of labour is important in maintaining social order. Educational institutions give the required specific skills to their members according to the demands of the society and prepare them to play role sets offered by the society. Durkheim explains that the state holds the responsibility of governing the educational system and it decides the nature of moral principles taught to the members. Teachers at the schools are representative of the state. There is an underlying assumption that nature of norms, values, and skills imparted by the educational systems are decided without any bias or discrimination to any unit of society aiming at social solidarity.

Parsons's views (1959) on educational system are similar to those of Durkheim. According to Parsons, two critical issues are paramount in the context of education in society. The first is that of the internalization of commitments and capacities among children in classrooms for adult roles. Here, the school class may be treated as an agency of socialization through which children are motivated and trained to perform adult roles. The second is the allocation of human resources within the role-structure of the adult society. He recognizes the role played by various socialization agencies like family, informal peer groups and others in moulding the young by the society. He lays importance on school class as a focal agency of socialization that begins with entry of children to first grade (standard) and lasts till their entry into the labour market or marriage. According to Parsons (1959:51), the school develops commitments and capacities in individuals that are required for future role-performance of individuals. Commitments include "commitment to the implementation of the broad values of society and commitment to the performance of a specific type of role within the structure of society". Capacities include "competence or the skill to perform the tasks involved in the individual's roles", and "role-responsibility or the capacity to live up to other people's expectations of the interpersonal behaviour appropriate to these roles."

Parsons maintains that the school also serves as an allocation agency that prepares human resources and allocates them within role-structure of the society. He observes that completion of high school is increasingly becoming a norm of minimum satisfactory educational attainment by any individual in society. Also, the performance or achievement of a child in elementary school determines the nature of college courses. Thus the educational system works as the 'first socializing agency in the child's experience which institutionalizes a differentiation of status on non-biological bases' (Parsons 1959:51). In early stages of schooling, the achievement of a child is measured through assessment of two components: cognitive and moral. Cognitive component is related to the intellectual ability of the child in terms of written language and mathematical skills. Moral component is related to responsible citizenship behaviour within the school community. This includes respect for the teacher, cooperative behaviour with classmates, and good work habits etc.

During early days at the school, children do not understand that achieved rather than ascribed characteristics are the proper bases for most societal rewards. School convinces them that they would be evaluated on the basis of achievement, and makes them understand that there is basic consensus on what constitutes achievement in the larger society. In early years of schooling, children often deal with a single teacher who takes the place of mother or parental figure for them in school. The teacher often remains affectively neutral,

treats all children as equal and follows the rules and regulations of the school. Parallel to the socialization process experienced at the school, students tend to develop relationships among their own peer group. The socialization process among peers is different from the family and the school and offers "a field for the exercise of independence from adult control" (Parsons 1959:59), and also provides alternative sources of reward.

Functionalists are criticized for their perception that the educational systems operate as an integrative mechanism of the society and treat children equal. These criticisms arise from critical theorists who argue that the educational system is a medium of the ruling elite and not representative of entire society. According to Collins (1972), the functional role played by education in fulfilling the needs of division of labour is criticized as an exaggeration. There is no evidence to prove that education supplies knowledge and skills necessary for occupations. Only a minor part of the expansion of the education in advanced industrialized countries directly serves the demands of industry in terms of skills, training and knowledge. Most of the occupations involve training in the job itself and employing organizations provide their own training. Further discussion along similar lines by conflict theorists is presented in the next section.

Reflection and Action 2.1

Compare and contrast the ideas of Durkheim and Parsons on education.

2.3 Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists stand out in sharp contrast to the functionalists in terms of the basic approach. According to conflict theorists, society is in a state of perpetual disequilibrium, yet it is maintained as a body by powerful social groups that coerce cooperation from the less powerful. They treat society as divided into dominant and subordinate groups that are characterized by a constant power struggle between themselves. It is not necessary that different units would operate in a way that solidarity of the whole society is maintained. There is an impending possibility of social instability. Society and its units are continuously changing. This dynamism needs to be accepted as a normal characteristic of any society. An interaction between two units involves some form of conflict which is essential for the continuity of society. Factors of conflict are both internal and external and range from individual to national levels. The impact of conflict on society could be varied: positive and negative; latent and manifest; and gradual and violent. Conflict theorists tend to be more specific and limit their analysis to the interrelationship between two or more units within society (Abraham 1982).

Haralambos and Heald (1980) discuss the contributions made by Louis Althusser, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, and Ivan Illich from a conflict perspective. According to Althusser whose ideas are derived from Marxism, society is divided into the capitalist class (which owns the modes of production and exercises control) and the labour class (which renders service in the production systems and remains subordinate to the former). The capitalist class requires continuous supply of labour power the exploitation of which generates profits. Educational systems are used by the capitalist class to produce the required labour power. Workers are socialized to accept the ideology of the ruling class which legitimizes the capitalist system and submits to the exploitation of the capitalists. Bowles and Gintis (1976) explain that the capitalist system requires surplus amount of labour power to enhance its bargaining potential while employing the workers. The educational system raises surplus of workers whose skill set is suited to cater to lesser-paid menial jobs. Unemployment and availability of replaceable labour brings control over the workers and keeps the wages to minimum. The governing structure and curricula of the educational

systems are determined by the capitalist class. Social relationships in the school replicate the hierarchical division of labor in work place. Students' lack of control over work of importance (e.g. decision and policy making) in school, for example, is similar to the situation they encounter at work place when they grow up.

The proposition that the dominant class determines the nature of educational system is presented by Apple and King (1979). According to them schools pursue a hidden agenda (through the curriculum) that seems uniquely suited to maintain the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in the society. They write, "Schools seem to contribute to inequality in that they are tacitly organized to differentially distribute specific kinds of knowledge. This is in larger part related both to the role of the school in maximizing the production of technical cultural 'commodities' and to the sorting or selecting function of schools in allocating people to the positions 'required' by the economic sector of society" (Apple and King 1979: 295). They also argue that educational knowledge is a form of the larger distribution of goods and services in a society. Social meanings that constitute educational knowledge imparted to the children do not relate with the vision and meanings of all groups of the society. Apple and King suggest that the historical process involved in curriculum designing has legitimized the social meanings of the dominant class in schools. Curriculum specialists were predominantly drawn from the school of scientific management that supports the capitalist class. Their concern for social meanings in schools was invariably linked to the notions of social control. Using the case of kindergarten, they demonstrated that teachers thrust social meanings on the minds of the children. The children often are not in a position to bring about any change in the course of daily events in the classroom. Children are made to undergo the process of socialization which consists of learning norms of social interactions. The socialization process includes segregation of activities into work and play by the children. Work activities are mandatory, teacher-directed, and time-specific. These activities may include drawing an object as specified by the teacher, waiting in the line etc. whereas play activities are performed only during free time. They are not necessarily directed by the teacher.

Though not exclusively included under the conflict school, theories particularly of Bourdieu's cultural reproduction (see Majoribanks 1985) strengthen the views of the conflict theorists. In the words of Giddens (1993: 438), "Cultural reproduction refers to the ways in which schools, in conjunction with other social institutions, help perpetuate social and economic inequalities across the generations. The concept directs our attention to the means whereby, via the hidden curriculum, schools influence the learning of values, attitudes and habits. Schools reinforce variations in cultural values and outlooks picked up early in life; when children leave school, these have the effect of limiting the opportunities of some, while facilitating those of others." According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) the major role of the educational system is the reproduction of culture of dominant classes. Dominant classes are able to impose their own meanings as legitimate the basis of the educational system. They maintain that educational systems tend to hide their objective function, by which is meant masking the objective truth or its relationship to the structure of the class relations. Children from dominant culture who already possess the cultural capital tend to achieve higher grades and perform well, more so because the educational system transmits social meanings that are familiar to them. Children from non-dominant cultures encounter an in-built barrier in the educational system as they are made to learn social meanings that are alien to them. They are predominantly from a working class background and often get eliminated from the educational system as they fail to understand the dominant culture. This educational failure in turn reinforces their underprivileged position in the society. In this way the reproduction of the relationship of power and privilege is perpetuated among social classes. The educational system, however,

continues to project itself as a neutral body based on meritocratic principles providing equal opportunities to all.

Kumar's discussion (2004) on what is worth teaching provides a critical analysis of the educational system. Though his discussion is rooted in the Indian context, it provides ample insights for a critical look at the world educational system. He agrees that the nature of knowledge available in schools for distribution of knowledge represents overall classification of knowledge and power in the society. Education in early India, for instance, resisted science teaching due to its struggle against colonialism. School curriculum remained confined to knowledge associated with the dominant castes. He points out that participation of children in curriculum development is nearly impossible as they lack the capability to articulate their ideas. Furthermore, their preferences change as they grow up. He highlights the need for deliberations while designing the curriculum providing space for non-dominant castes to voice their opinions.

2.4 Interactionism

Interactionism emerged as an alternative perspective to understand the relationship between individual and society. In its unit of analysis, interactionism shifts importance from the larger society to the individual. Drawn largely from a social psychological perspective, interactionism starts by examining the nature of interaction itself and thenceforth explores the nature of interaction between members of the society. Opposing the role of external conditions to explain an individual's action in relation with the larger society, interactionism tries to understand how an individual constructs meaning in the process of interaction (Abraham 1982). An individual in his/her interaction with others interprets and defines situations, develops meanings which direct his/her action and so constructs his/her own social world (Haralambos and Heald 1980: 208).

Interactionists focus on easily observable face-to-face interactions rather than on macro-level structural relationships involving various social units. They study social interaction through qualitative methods like participant observation, rather than surveys and interviews. Interactionists insist that close contact and immersion in the everyday lives of the research subjects is important for understanding the meaning of actions, and the process by which individuals construct the situation through their interaction. They are, however, criticized for being overly impressionistic in their research methods and possible bias in their observations. Developments in interactionism led to the birth of various sub-theories or perspectives like phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. Some of the significant contributors to this perspective are Cooley, Mead, Blumer, Schutz, Garfinkel, and Berger and Luckmann. Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self shows how an individual develops the meaning of self by reflecting others' perception of who he is. This process of one mind responding to other minds involves how we imagine our appearance to others; how we imagine others' judgment of that appearance; and our personal feeling about that judgment (Haralambos and Heald 1980). According to Mead, individuals construct the self through the process of role-taking. Role taking involves the individual imaginatively taking the role of the other person with whom he is interacting. Goffman equates social world with theatrical drama in which actors present their self in everyday life through impression management.

Employing the interactionistic perspective, sociologists of education seek to explore the ways in which teachers and students interpret and assign meaning to their interactions. Interactionism suggests that the status of the students in an educational system is decided by the nature of interactions with teachers where meanings are constructed beyond academic parameters. A study by Howard Becker (1971) delineated meanings by which teachers evaluated the

students. The study demonstrated that teachers constructed the image of an 'ideal student' as one who came from non-working class and of 'problematic student' as one who came from working class. Another study by Cicourel and Kitsuse (1971) confirms that students were classified based on their class background rather than academic performances and other non-academic factors like their appearance, and manners etc.

Apart from evaluation, teachers' perception about students also affects the nature of knowledge imparted. Keddie (1971) finds that the social class is an important factor in defining and classifying students. Though students were supposedly divided in terms of ability, students within each group exhibited similar socio-economic background. In other words, in classification of students into various groups, students who belong to upper socio economic background formed the higher level, and lower level was occupied by students from lower socio-economic background. Though teachers were expected to impart similar knowledge, they modified their methods and nature of information imparted to different categories of students. Students who belonged to different groups also responded differently to the nature of the knowledge imparted to them. For instance, what is an 'ideal family' as told by the teacher was accepted by higher-class students, not by lower-class students. Keddie reasons that lower class students' non-acceptance was due to their different construction of meaning for family based on their own socio-economic background.

Reflection and Action 2.2

Visit a government school and a public school in your area. Discuss the nature and content of education with at least two teachers of primary classes in each school. Do you find a difference between the two schools in this context?

2.5 Postmodernism

Postmodernism is emerging as an alternative theoretical framework to modernism in understanding the real world, but has not yet developed as a single coherent thought or theoretical perspective. Practitioners have appropriated, transformed and transcended ideas from various theories and there is lack of consensus on the nature of ideas that can be covered (Ruttan 1993). In sociology, ideas of postmodernism are related to the emergence of the post-industrial society. Postmodernism rejects grand theories in understanding society and lays importance on local identities. A postmodern society is dominated by the market-oriented world of consumption with decentralized production systems. Society itself is a fragmented and pluralistic community of heterogeneous groups with diverse cultures and lifestyles, where nation-state is shrunk by privatization, globalization and new forms of citizen and civil rights. The traditional ruling class is rejected in favor of micro-political activities or social movements (Thomas and Walsh 1998).

Echoing postmodern concerns, Illich (1973) questions the notion of compulsory education followed almost all over the world mentioning that in the process traditional skills of self-sufficient people were being discarded. Schools work as repressive systems that induce students to passively consume whatever is taught to them. They are not allowed to think critically. They are made to conform to the rules laid down by the ruling class. Students are expected to follow whatever is taught of education. They by have no control over what they learn or how they learn it. Illich proposes the idea of de-schooling society (which is also the title of his widely acclaimed book) that rejects the existing educational system. He suggests that mechanisms should be built in a such way that allows direct and free involvement of the students in any part of the learning process. In other words, young in the society will retain control over what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Illich's idea of de-

schooling society appears as a utopian one. It may seem to be realistic when a student's performance in the educational system loses link with its status attainment in the larger society. In other words, decline of paid employment is a central concern of society (see Giddens 1993).

A similar argument is evident in the work of Freire (1970) who suggests replacement of curriculum based education with dialogue based informal education. He criticizes the existing educational system in being akin to the banking process in which the student is viewed as an empty account waiting to be filled by the teacher. He seeks to abandon the teacher-student dichotomy and favours introduction of reciprocity in the minds of teacher and student.

Box 2.2: Dialogue based education: Freire

"Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. Education which is able to resolve the contradiction between teacher and student takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition to the object by which they are mediated. Thus the dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets the student-teacher in a pedagogical situation, but rather when the former first asks himself *what* he will dialogue with the latter *about*. And preoccupation with the content of dialogue is really preoccupation with the program content of education" (Freire 1970:153).

2.6 Conclusion

In discussions related to theoretical developments in sociology of education, there is disagreement among scholars with broader theoretical schemes under which various contributions fall. For instance work of Bourdieu, and Bowles and Gintis can be discussed under conflict school as well as under a separate scheme of theories of reproduction. Lewis (1977) reviews the nature of research studies conducted by sociologists of higher education that can be generalized for sociology of education. According to him, there are three levels of analysis, macro, micro and middle. At the macro level, relationship between systems of higher education and wider social structure is considered. One example of this could be a study of how curriculum is modified or changed according to the changes in the occupational structure. There is also a cluster of studies that focus on education from a social stratification point of view. Here, attempts were made to understand sources and consequences of inequality within educational system and how they are related to the class position one holds in the society and other variables like race, religion, ethnicity and gender.

At the micro level, social relations within the education process are examined to understand learning outcomes of different teaching styles and strategies; the difference between formal instruction as against informal settings with faculty members or peers; mode of instruction; characteristics of the instructor; and system demands on the student. In between these two ends, there is middle level analysis that looks at the structure and function of institutions of educational institutions as organizations. Some of the issues focused by this analysis are: distribution of power and status, value system, disparity and tension between the formal and informal systems and organization of social roles and norms in the institutions.

Brookover (1982) identifies three areas of research undertaken in the field of sociology of education: (i) education and society – which deals with purposes and functions of education in the society, education in the process of social change, education and stratification of the society, and relationship between education and other units of society; (ii) education as a social system – which

analyzes organization and structure of the educational system from school district to classroom, and informal structure and culture of these units; and (iii) outcomes of education for students that examines the impact of education on various aspects of students from aspirations, career, further education and social status. Brookover further comments that methods followed are also varied and different. Broadly, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used including cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal studies, case studies, ethnographies, and experimental studies. However, there is a preponderance of research studies that investigate activities related to learning within the context of schools in comparison with colleges and universities (Feinberg 1996). Studies that compare out-of-school and in-school subjects in understanding of the impact of schooling vis-à-vis other social factors are inadequate.

Rubinson and Ralph (1986) suggest that there are three widely researched topics in the study of educational change: contribution of education to economic output; technological change and the expansion of schooling, and educational expansion as individual utility. They highlight the methodological problems related to inferences across levels of analysis in studies irrespective of nature of theoretical approach followed. There is also criticism that existing theoretical models in sociology are inadequate to bring about a scientific understanding of education (Carr 1990; Lewis 1977). Theories of sociology of education are reflective of times. Different theoretical approaches dominate different periods of time. There is a need for the development of a theoretical perspective to integrate the macro and micro analysis of education sociologically.

2.7 Further Reading

Freire, Paulo 1997. "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." In David J Flinders and Stephen J Thornton (ed.) *The Curriculum Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge

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