
SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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The sociology of education is a core field within the discipline of sociology; however, it is also considered a part of the discipline of education. This dual existence is one of the unusual characteristics of the sociology of education, and some say that one source of tension is the difference between those who see the sociology of education as a pure science and those who see it as an applied field of study.

Within sociology, the sociology of education overlaps with many other subfields, such as social stratification, race and ethnicity, and religion. Because of the broad range of topics within the sociology of education, there is hardly a subfield in sociology in which it does not have something to contribute.

This pervasiveness of the sociology of education is reflected in the popularity and general state of the discipline. In the International Sociological Association, the Research Committee on the Sociology of Education is one of the largest in terms of membership. Similarly, in the American Sociological Association, the section on the sociology of education is one of the largest. This pattern is reflected in other national sociological associations such as Australia's. The sociology of education is also represented in various professional education associations, including the American Educational Research Association, where it is visible as a special interest group. It is common for the subject to be taught in one or both academic departments in universities.

The sociology of education is a rapidly growing discipline in many countries. Reviews of the subdiscipline in

the English-speaking world have been reported for the United States, Britain, South Africa, and Australia, and in other countries such as Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and India. The sociology of education is a growing and relevant subdiscipline in sociology in many countries, even where it was once out of political favor.

Despite this popularity, the sociology of education has sometimes struggled for recognition and prestige compared to some other sociological subdisciplines, and some suggest that this is because of its dual representation in both sociology and education. For example, in the United Kingdom, Young (2002) reports that during the 1980s and 1990s the sociology of education began to disappear from university curricula, especially in departments of education and teacher training. As Young observed:

It was in part a product of the specific location of the sociology of education in the United Kingdom in university education departments and was reflected in the tension between the theoretical demands of the subdiscipline and the practical demands of relating theories and findings to the problems facing teachers in schools and classrooms. (Young, 2002, p. 564)

What then is the sociology of education, and why is it so distinctive and important within sociology, and why is it sometimes contested? In this chapter I examine the sociology of education, its origins, its defining characteristics, its dominant theories and methods, some of its

internal divisions, and some of the issues that are important today.

What Is the Sociology of Education?

The sociology of education is the study of educational structures, processes, and practices from a sociological perspective. This means that the theories, methods, and the appropriate sociological questions are used to better understand the relationship between educational institutions and society, both at the micro and macro levels.

The sociology of education is dominated by tension between those who regard it as a science and those who see it as an applied and policy-related discipline, and the tension is between the empirical and the normative, which is between the study of education scientifically as it is and the study of it in terms of what it ought to be. In the early history of the sociology of education, this distinction was sometimes reflected in the name used to describe the discipline. Those who saw the discipline as an objective science used the label “sociology of education,” and those who saw it in policy and reform terms used the label “educational sociology.”

This distinction is more than academic: it is reflected in differences in how the sociology of education developed in universities in various countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. Apart from being taught as another subfield in sociology departments, sociology of education was taught in departments of education for teacher training in the United States. Often it was called “Social Foundations of Education” or some similar title. In the United Kingdom, the sociology of education early became identified with political arithmetic and thrived in the use of surveys and statistical analyses to learn how education was related to occupational attainment and career mobility (Floud, Halsey, & Martin, 1957). Some have argued that the first use of the sociology of education more closely reflected a Durkheimian approach in which education was seen in functional terms in the maintenance of social order, whereas the second was more closely linked with the notion of social transformation as espoused by Karl Mannheim. To understand this distinction, one needs to start at the beginning and examine how education became intertwined in the early beginnings of sociology itself.

The Early History of the Sociology of Education

Modern sociology was born out of the Industrial Revolution and the increasing awareness of radical shifts in the social structure of society, in particular in Europe and England. But it was during this period that education as we know it was also expanding, so that in a way, industrialization and educational expansion went hand in

hand. Education did enter into the writings of the early classical sociologists, although not always in well thought-out forms.

Classical Origins

Karl Marx (1818–1883) never fully developed or integrated education into his theory of capitalism and social class. But he and Fredrick Engels did refer to education frequently in their writings about the class struggle. They advocated education for all, but they were primarily concerned with the type of education that was given to the children of the working classes and how this education served the interests of the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, in maintaining their social dominance. Although Marx did not focus directly on education in his theory of society, his ideas have formed the base of what later would become known as neo-Marxist sociology of education. This perspective is very much related to forms of reproduction theory, in which education is thought to serve as a mechanism for reproducing the class structure of society, thereby reproducing the privileges of the dominant class.

Max Weber (1864–1920) is not normally regarded for his focus on education in his early sociological writings. Nevertheless, his theory of social structure and the interplay between social class, social status, and power did acknowledge the importance of the mechanisms through which one social group could maintain its position in society. Credentials that reflected the possession of knowledge were one way in which individuals could make a legitimate claim for membership in particular class, status, or power groups. It follows implicitly that education, as a mechanism for the development and transmission of knowledge, is an important social institution in this stratification process.

The notion of education as a source of knowledge and its manifestation in educational credentials was also important in Weber’s notion of bureaucracy and the increasing rationality of society. Weber believed that European society was developing a new kind of organization as forms of societal authority changed from traditional structures (for example, a monarchy) to rational structures (an elected Parliament). He thought this shift permeated the economic facets of society and particularly society’s productive sectors. Industry and manufacturing gradually shifted from domestic and cottage production to factory production, and this required a new form of organizational structure called “the bureaucracy,” or a type of hierarchical authority structure based on rational and legal rules. For Weber, the bureaucracy represented “the purest type of legal authority,” and the concept has since become the foundation for sociological studies of organizations in modern society.

Weber’s ideas have had a major effect on studies of the social organization of schools, and within them, the roles of principal and teachers and the hierarchical relationships between them. The study of teachers as professionals and

of workers owes much to Weberian sociology. The study of teacher burnout and teacher accountability in the present trend toward high-stakes standardized testing is ultimately rooted in Weberian principles of organizational sociology and the sociology of bureaucracy.

The third, and perhaps the most important, of the classical sociologists who influenced the development of the sociology of education was Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). Durkheim held the chair of sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he taught future teachers. Over and above his sociological writings, Durkheim wrote three works directly related to education in which we find the foundation of modern sociology of education: *Education and Society* (1922), *Moral Education* (1925), and finally *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France* (1938). These works are primarily the lectures for three of the courses that Durkheim gave to students, but they were preserved and published and today form the basis of any Durkheimian study of education.

Durkheim was a functionalist, which means that he was interested in the role that various social institutions played in society and in particular how they contribute to the maintenance of social order. This idea was important to his interest in and understanding of education. Durkheim believed schools were the primary socialization agent for the production of future adults. This is reflected in his work on moral education, which places the development of consensus and solidarity in society in the hands of the school. Durkheim did not believe these functions of education came about without conflict. Indeed, in his work *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, Durkheim traces the constant conflict between the church and state in France over the control of education. He did not see this as a conflict between a particular religious or theological dogma and the state, but rather as a conflict between the sacred and the secular, which he regarded as “the germ of that great struggle” (Durkheim, 1938/1977, p. 26).

Durkheim described education as a contested social institution in society. On the one hand, education established and maintained social consensus and solidarity through its socializing function, but on the other hand, the self-interest of individuals and groups requires the state regulation of education. Durkheim insisted education was responsible for the production of the ideal adult, yet he also recognized that education was a profession for those who participated in it. Many issues and areas of research in contemporary sociology of education are embedded in a Durkheimian understanding of education: the role of merit in educational selection and attainments, the role of teachers in schools, and the study of government and private schools, to name but a few.

Other Classical Sociologists

Other early social scientists recognized the importance of education. Three worth noting are Herbert Spencer

(1820–1903), Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), and Karl Mannheim (1893–1947). Although these social scientists did not have the same effect on the development of the sociology of education as did Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, they nevertheless merit mention because of the specific insights that each had about education.

Herbert Spencer was a contemporary of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, but is not normally considered one of sociology’s founding fathers. As a British evolutionary sociologist, Spencer is best known for his work *First Principles* (1862), in which he put forward a social Darwinist view of society. Like Durkheim, he was one of the few early sociologists who wrote a separate work on education, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1861). He believed that education should act like other social institutions for the beneficial evolution of society. His work and ideas, particularly those relating to laissez-faire government policies, are relevant to issues such as school choice, the drift in enrollments from government to private schools, and the relationship between the vocational and academic curricula (Peel, 1971).

Thorstein Veblen was an economist interested in the behavior of social classes in industrial society. He argued that education was a site where social class issues were resolved and that working class children received an education which prepared them for their place in society while the leisure class children were prepared for a life of leisure. In this respect, Veblen’s ideas resembled those of later neo-Marxist thinkers concerning the function of education in a class society. Veblen was also interested in large business corporations, and he studied how American universities were increasingly coming under the influence of big business and were declining as institutions of liberal education and intellectual curiosity.

Karl Mannheim, an immigrant to England from Germany after the Nazis rose to power, is primarily known for his work in the sociology of knowledge. His ambition was to develop a sociological epistemology whereby the truth of a statement could be explained in terms of the social location of its author. Mannheim was also concerned with the use of sociology for changing and transforming society—to avoid the pitfalls of Nazism—and to create a society based on rationalism and planned thinking. For Mannheim, education was an essential part of this process: “. . . to educate the individual out of his dependence on mass emotion . . .” (Coser, 1977, p. 440). Mannheim believed that education could bring about an integrated society with a common morality—almost the same type of integrated society which Durkheim believed education could produce. Mannheim’s lecture notes were posthumously published and became one of the first systematic books in the sociology of education (Mannheim & Stewart, 1969). His contribution to the sociology of education was more applied than theoretical. Because he related education to social planning and social reconstruction, Mannheim frequently referenced Dewey in the United States, whom he admired (Coser, 1977).

These three sociologists followed closely in the footsteps of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim and helped lay the groundwork of modern sociology of education during the classical period. Their legacy can be found in the wide diversity of theoretical approaches and empirical work undertaken by sociologists of education today.

Contemporary Theoretical Approaches

By the 1970s, the sociology of education was a mainstream subfield within sociology but also was a contested field, sometimes scorned by outsiders and also disputed from within. Many disagreements within the sociology of education were manifestations of disagreements within sociology itself—the struggle between those who saw sociology as a science and those who saw it more in interpretive terms. In 1963 in the United States, the journal *Educational Sociology* was taken over by the American Sociological Association, and to emphasize the scientific rather than normative character of the journal, its name was changed to *Sociology of Education*.

Turner and Mitchell (1997) note that there are contemporary theoretical paradigms in the sociology of education that are exact derivatives of the three classical theorists. The functionalist theoretical perspective (derived from Durkheim) was particularly popular during the 1960s and 1970s. It made macrolevel attempts to explain the function of education in the maintenance of social order. Talcott Parsons was a key functionalist who saw the school and its classrooms as reflections of the social system; he also described the university's role in the maintenance of social order. He and his colleague felt that universities carried out four functions, namely (1) undergraduate training, (2) research and graduate training, (3) professional schools, and (4) relations between universities and the broader society (Parsons & Platt, 1973).

The Marxist legacy in sociology of education today is reflected in a number of theories that focus on education as a site for class conflict. Although Marx said little about education, neo-Marxists such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci established the importance of education in their interpretation of the dynamics of modern capitalism and the class struggle. Althusser (1971) argued that the schools in capitalist societies help preserve the position of the dominant class by teaching the dominant ideology whereby children learn to know and accept their place in society so that there is no challenge to the class structure. In this respect, schools are part of the ideological state apparatus whereby the dominant class maintains its dominant position. Where the dominant class has other state apparatuses at its disposal, such as the police, the school represents a form of symbolic violence through which the dominant ideology is maintained and the relevant knowledge, skills, and material relations to production are learned.

Antonio Gramsci focused his attention on the difference in knowledge available to the dominant and subordinate

classes, and argued that the subordinate classes should ensure that they obtain the same knowledge as the dominant class. Only then, he thought, will the working classes be in a position to improve their place in the class structure. In other words, the working class has to compete on the same footing as the capitalist class if the class structure is to be changed. The problem, as Gramsci saw it, is that schools are controlled by those who control the dominant ideology, and therefore the ideas of the ruling class become the ideas taught in school.

Neo-Marxist ideas about education have played an important part in the development of the sociology of education since the 1960s. Many writers with this perspective have proposed their own versions of how education is controlled by the elite and how it helps to maintain elite status. Some examples of these writers and their works are Carnoy's *Education as Cultural Imperialism* (1974), Apple's *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979), Giroux's *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling* (1981), and Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (1977). But the overdeterministic versions of reproduction theories were challenged by some who argued that through culture, some disadvantaged students actively resist the kind of knowledge that could provide them with opportunities of social mobility. Such was the finding of Willis (1977) in his study of working class students in an industrial British town.

Closely related to the neo-Marxist approaches are a range of approaches that can be termed *critical theory*. Beginning in Germany with the Frankfurt School, various writers developed a perspective that regarded technology and the bureaucracy of late capitalism as the dominating force in society in ways difficult to recognize. They typified social life under capitalism with concepts such as the totally administered society, one-dimensional man, and communicative competence. This perspective applies to education and other social institutions. Critical theorists strive to both study and emancipate society from capitalist oppression. They seek to unmask the intrusion of this form of capitalism over social life, and therefore emancipate individuals from their false beliefs. In education, critical theory is relevant to the critical study of the curriculum (and the hidden curriculum), educational administration, and teacher education.

Not all conflict-oriented theories are derived from Marxist origins. As noted earlier, Weber also saw education as a source of credentials or legitimacy for claims to status positions. Therefore, ownership or control over the credentializing process constitutes a struggle or conflict between different societal status groups. Weberian approaches to the study of education are less likely to focus on social class, the economy, and the class struggle. Weberians tend to focus on the culture and lifestyles of different status groups and on the competition over credentials. Several classic examples of a Weberian approach are Collins' *The Credential Society* (1979) and Archer's *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (1979).

Other Weberian-related approaches in the sociology of education concern research on the bureaucratic structure of education. This field of study is less easily classified as a type of conflict theory, but it represents a link with Weber's writing. Recent work on aspects of education leadership, teacher professionalism, teacher satisfaction, teacher burn-out, teacher accountability, and teacher unions, insofar as the studies take into consideration the bureaucratic structure of schooling, has Weberian origins.

The legacy of Durkheim in modern sociology of education is best reflected in studies of how schools contribute to the socialization of the young and how education contributes to a range of life outcomes, especially occupational attainment and social mobility. Durkheimian sociology of education tends to be functionalist. Therefore, studies that tend to take a positivistic approach to the study of educational processes, in particular those based on empirical data and explicit or implicit causal assumptions, are linked with forms of Durkheimian functionalism. Although sociologists now recognize that Durkheim did not ignore the presence of conflict in educational processes (Saha, 2001), there are few studies that have analyzed educational processes from his conflict perspective.

Contemporary sociology of education owes much to the founding fathers of sociology. Even the contemporary theoretical approaches are embedded in the foundation theories of sociology. The influence of these early "classical" sociologists remains influential in the discipline today.

The Interactionist Perspective

The legacy of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim in the sociology of education focuses on macrolevel processes, even though the unit of analysis might be the individual. In other words, both the functionalist and conflict paradigms direct attention to the relationship between aspects of social structures and the individual or groups. But there has long been a strong microlevel tradition in the sociology of education that focuses on the patterns of interaction in educational processes. The most well-known of these perspectives is symbolic interaction theory, which focuses on how the actions and interactions between people are the result of the meanings that people attribute to objects and to other people's actions. In short, symbolic interactionists take the view that in symbolic interaction theory, everything from the self to the patterns of interaction between individuals is the result of social processes.

The roots of symbolic interactionism are complex. They embrace phenomenologist philosophers such as Schutz and Husserl, but also some elements of the late Durkheim and Mead (Turner & Mitchell, 1997). The term *symbolic interactionism* was first used by Blumer (1969). Symbolic interactionism has evolved into a number of related perspectives, in particular the dramaturgical perspective Goffman described in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and the ethnomethodological per-

spective, which Garfinkle developed in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). The first of these focused on how the individual managed the social self in the process of interaction with others. The latter focused on the methods and social competence individuals use to construct social reality. These theoretical perspectives have influenced the understanding of interaction patterns between individuals in schools, especially the interactions between teacher and student, and student and student.

Interactionist theory also was important in the development of role theory, a perspective which focuses on the definition and perceptions of relevant roles that individuals follow in their daily lives. In some cases, the roles are in society, the result of social consensus. In other cases, roles are constructed. Role theory continues to be an important theoretical perspective that informs much of the way that administrators, teachers, and students go about their everyday duties (Biddle, 1997). In spite of some problems in role theory, Biddle comments that ". . . it is clear that the role orientation continues to offer insights for educators and a challenge for those who seek to understand what it means to be a teacher in today's world" (p. 515).

Emerging Perspectives for the 21st Century

The sociology of education is a dynamic field. Theory and research methods are continually evolving, and new perspectives have emerged that have little connection to traditional approaches. Toward the end of the 20th century, many attempts were made to evaluate the state of the sociology of education. These attempts called for a break with the past paradigms primarily because of the perceived breaks in the nature of society itself.

Torres and Mitchell (1995) identified three departures from the past that future research in the sociology of education must take: (1) there must be a new epistemology that differs from positivism and empiricism; (2) the sociology of education must confront the dilemmas caused by the break between modernism and postmodernism, and structuralists and poststructuralists, and (3) the sociology of education must resolve the challenges posed by these new theoretical approaches for educational research. Torres and Mitchell argue that today's increasing unpredictabilities render the previous notions of a scientific sociology of education difficult to sustain. Their critique of the sociology of education is actually a critique of sociology and social science generally.

Torres and Mitchell argue that the scientific model of linear and causal explanations cannot be sustained currently where behavioral events are more discontinuous and discrete. Thus, traditional notions of objectivity can be expected to give way to subjective approaches, which take into account both the knower and the known in attempts to understand a social world that is more complex and global than previous paradigms have recognized. Torres and Mitchell advocate a new sociology of education that incorporates topics hitherto neglected or unrecognized and that

focuses on creating an educational system that produces a more democratic society free of prejudices and injustices.

Dale (2001) agrees that theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education are not linear. He argues, however, that the emergence of new theoretical perspectives is due to what he calls “the selection principle,” namely through the political and social contexts within which sociologists of education operate. The evolution of theories in the sub-discipline is not due to any kind of inner dynamic. The sociology of education, unlike other subdisciplines in sociology, is closely tied to the training of professionals (that is, teachers). So, for Dale, political orientations toward the education profession affect what sociologists of education think and do. Therefore, every time there is an education reform, there will be a comparable effect on the theoretical orientations of sociologists of education, at least those affiliated with teacher training faculties.

Similarly, Hallinan (2000) has argued that the sociology of education lacks adequate education-related sociological theory: “The heavy reliance of sociologists of education on general social theory and on ideas and models from other sociological subdisciplines to study schooling demonstrates the greatest weakness in the area” (p. 3). Hallinan contends that education-specific theories need to be developed if sociology of education is to progress beyond its present state of knowledge. Her own volume reflects the types of theoretical developments she has in mind, for example a social-psychological theory of the social context and social construction of schooling, a theory of the organizational context of schools, and a sociological theory of race and ethnicity that would be relevant to research on these issues in schools.

As the sociology of education enters the 21st century, there is no single paradigm or theory that dominates the subdiscipline. Some sociologists argue that a unique theory still needs to be developed, and others appear content with a plurality of general sociological theories. Various reasons for this lack of consensus have been put forward. Two explanations have merit. First, the subdiscipline includes both a normative (applied) dimension and an objective (scientific) dimension. Researchers within each group have their own perceived appropriate theoretical perspectives. Second, the social and cultural contexts within which sociologists of education work have an effect on both the relevant substantive issues and the appropriate methodologies. According to some, however, this diversity in the sociology of education is precisely what gives the field its vitality and promise.

Empirical Methods in the Sociology of Education

Sociologists of education tend to use the full array of methodological techniques, both quantitative and qualitative, in their studies of education. Sociologists of education also have contributed to the development of both research

methodologies, which have made important general contributions to sociology.

LeCompte (1997) observed that the use of qualitative research methodologies within the functionalist tradition were very popular in the early to mid-20th century. These studies used participant observation to provide a holistic view of schools and their location in community systems, like Hollingshead’s *Elmstown’s Youth* (1947) or an interpretive perspective, such as *Making the Grade* (1968) by Becker, Geer, and Hughes. These types of qualitative studies have continued and have adopted newer theoretical and methodological approaches such as the postmodernist theories and interpretive and narrative methodologies (Denzin, 1997). But LeCompte claims that the rapid development of large-scale quantitative studies from the 1950s onward dominated research in the sociology of education virtually until the end of the century (LeCompte, 1997). She argues that in the 21st century a newer qualitative tradition influenced by critical theory has returned. There are many labels for these new qualitative methodologies, from critical ethnography, where the researcher critically connects data with both its source and subjects under study, to biographical and narrative approaches, where the focus is on the subjects’ lived experience.

While advances were made in qualitative methods, equal—if not more dramatic—developments in quantitative approaches were also made. Rapid improvements in computer technology and sophisticated advancements in statistical techniques facilitated these developments. Hallinan (2000) claims that since the 1960s sociologists of education have borrowed from econometrics and other fields to develop linear models for studying educational processes, and she points to the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) as an important example of this development. From this approach, many different strands of statistical analysis emerged. Perhaps the most important of these is the Wisconsin Model by Sewell and his colleagues (Sewell & Hauser, 1980), which focused on the relationships between educational aspirations, grades, and occupational attainments. This model has been replicated around the world, in places such as Canada, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, with surprisingly similar results.

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), another recent development in statistical analysis, has revolutionized research in the sociology of education and in sociology generally. The study of students in schools has always presented challenges for researchers because students are members of classrooms, and classrooms are part of schools. One could go further and note that schools exist in neighborhoods which in turn are parts of cities. Clearly, at each of these levels there could be some influence on schools, classrooms, and individual students. Traditionally, researchers nested the variables at one level, then used aggregate level values for the other levels for each student. But the development of hierarchical linear models makes possible the analysis of each level

separately and linked (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Thus, the study of the multiple levels of analysis that affect individual student academic achievement becomes more powerful and precise.

Because of the unique nature of educational research, various statistical techniques have been developed that eventually were incorporated into the research repertoire in the general sociological community. Researchers in sociology of education have led the way in the advancement of analytic techniques that continue to uncover new levels of understanding of what goes on in schools (Saha & Keeves, 2003).

The increasing availability of large longitudinal data sets and large comparative data sets across countries has also advanced quantitative research methods in the sociology of education. Longitudinal data are of particular importance to the study of educational processes “within the black box of the school” (Schiller, 2002, p. 403). Longitudinal studies can be either trend studies, where the same population is followed over time, or panel studies, where individuals are followed over time. The latter is more commonly used in sociology of education research (Schiller, 2002). Longitudinal studies play an important role in understanding the multiple factors that contribute to educational outcomes. These studies of education have been conducted in many countries by individual researchers and increasingly under government sponsorship. For example, the advances made by the development of the Wisconsin Model were based on longitudinal data. Between 1972 and 1996, the United States National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted five major government-funded longitudinal studies, spanning students from primary to tertiary education.

International organizations have increasingly supported standardized questionnaire studies of school-aged youth across countries. These large international data sets have become popular among researchers who are interested in one or several countries. Examples of these studies are those of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). These data sets have not only made it possible to advance our knowledge in a comparative context, but also have been responsible for the development of methodological strategies for dealing with cross-national analyses.

Some Research Themes in the Sociology of Education

The sociology of education is characterized by a number of dominant research themes. Often these themes are driven by research interests and sometimes by practical necessities. There are many areas in which sociologists of education work, but only a select few will be discussed here: gender, race and ethnicity, and teacher accountability and burnout.

Gender

Gender has not always been on the research agenda for sociologists of education. Before 1970, studies of educational achievement and attainment were often based on male-only samples, both in the United States and the United Kingdom. Since then, because of the feminist movement and educational expansion, more attention has been given to the education of girls. The gender gap is a persistent research theme. Early studies focused on male dominance in academic achievement and in education attainment, a pattern found across virtually all countries for which data were available. But in many countries the gender gap has been closing. In some countries, for example Australia, girls have overtaken boys in retention and attainment, and also in achievement in some subjects. The reversal has been so dramatic that discussions now focus on the “boy problem.” Researchers have put forth biological, structural, and socialization or child rearing explanations for these gender differences.

Race, Ethnicity, and Minority Group Status

Sociologists have traditionally placed strong focus on the effects of race and ethnicity on a wide range of social and economic outcomes. In the United States, sociologists are particularly interested in the educational attainments of African American and the Hispanic populations. But in general, similar attention has been given to all minority groups, especially since movements of populations across national boundaries have increased, both voluntarily and nonvoluntarily. The study of racial and ethnic minorities has included indigenous, migrant, and refugee populations. Sociologists of education in the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia have been particularly active in this research. They have identified many factors that work to the disadvantage of minority groups. Ogbu (1992) argued that a strong core curriculum was one factor that affected the learning process of these minority groups. Cultures of various racial and ethnic groups hold differing expectations about education that may affect the ways these students encounter a school system. Research has also found that the attitudes and values of various minorities affect educational attainment and achievement, particularly where multiple attitudes conflict with each other or attitudes conflict with the goals of the school (Mikelson, 1990). This conflict can exist between the attitudes and values of the home and the school.

Teacher Accountability and Burnout

Sociological studies regarding the teacher fall into two categories: the teacher as a professional and the teacher as a worker. Studies of the teacher as professional have examined teacher recruitment, the decision to become a teacher, and the professional careers and life cycles of teachers. Willard Waller (1932) conducted perhaps the first classical

sociological study of teachers and teaching. A more recent study, itself a classic, is Lortie's *Schoolteacher* (1975), which looked at teaching as an occupation.

Some researchers argue there is a division between teaching as a profession and as an occupation, and that the increasing structural constraints of accountability, salary issues, and prestige have eroded its professional nature. These pressures have produced stress and alienation, resulting in increased teacher burnout. Often considered a psychological phenomenon, burnout also has a sociological dimension that seriously impedes teacher performance and effectiveness (Dworkin, 1987).

How effective are teachers? To answer this question researchers have conducted research in classrooms and investigated topics like teaching styles, teacher interaction with students, and teacher expectations, all of which have an effect on student outcomes (Good & Brophy, 1997). How the expanding practice of high-stakes testing is changing the roles of teachers is another recent research topic. Valli and Buese (2007) found that the passing of the Education Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind) has increased teacher workloads and accountability, deteriorated classroom pedagogy, lowered the quality of teacher-student interaction, and increased teacher stress.

Conclusion

The sociology of education, as a subdiscipline of both education and sociology, has contributed much to the understanding of educational processes. As a source of information and training for future teachers, and as a source of information for policy makers, it continues to draw attention to the social context of what goes on in schools. The tensions within the sociology of education will no doubt continue, but the subdiscipline as a whole is so eclectic and robust that this can only be a sign of its strength. In either case, the sociology of education uniquely focuses attention on the social context of educational structures and processes, and its contribution will continue to be invaluable for understanding and reforming educational systems, particularly as they change to accommodate new social needs and new technologies.

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