

Analysis of Theoretical Approaches to Education

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Abstract— Studying education has a long tradition in many social sciences. This text makes a retrospective of the most significant theoretical approaches to education within the sociology of education. The subject of analysis is functionalism, the theory of social conflict and symbolic interactionism. This text analyzes the basic characteristics and accomplishments of each of the indicated theoretical approaches.

Index Terms— Education, Sociology of Education, Functionalism, Social Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism.

1 INTRODUCTION

EDUCATION is one of the most important social segments and as such an object of analysis of a range of social sciences, primarily pedagogy, but also the sociology of education, which tries to put education and the whole educational process into a broader social context. In the sociology of education, several topics dominate. These include the treatment of education as an instrument of social mobility, the globalization of education, the impact of peer groups on education, juvenile violence, the analysis of school processes, the social status of teachers, the connection of the education system with the labor market, educational policies etc.

Emile Durkheim is considered the founder of the sociology of education. According to him, education is a social subsystem with services for transferring culture from one generation to another, establishing solidarity in society, establishing and maintaining the social order. In the development of sociology of education, Karl Marx has a significant place. His theory focuses on the ideological bias of the state in the educational process, which takes place in a way that helps to maintain the status quo in the society. Max Weber also has an important contribution to the development of the sociology of education. He has built a multidimensional approach in the analysis of education. It recommended that in the analysis of education on one side attention should be paid to individuals who make the education process, and the other side to focus on the social structure in which the educational process takes place. However, it seems that Weber analyzes education, primarily from the aspect of the active factors of the educational process, such as students, teachers, parents and their interactions (Dworkin et al., 2013: 1). Based on the theoretical approach of Emile Durkheim, the sociology of education developed a functionalist perspective. Similarly, the theoretical opus of Karl Marx was the basis for the development of critical theory, which, among other things, was used for the analysis of education. Within this theoretical perspective, the theoretical paradigms of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, Basil Bernstein's theory of language codes, Randal Collins's Weberian theory of social exclusion, which are known collectively as theories of structural conflict (Dworkin et al. 2013: 1). Max Weber's theoretical opus was again used by George Herbert Mead to develop symbolic interactionism, which is the third influential perspective through which the sociology of education analyzes the educational process. Within this text we will briefly present each of the

three perspectives, the way in which they analyze education, as well as their positive and negative sides.

2 FUNCTIONALISTIC VIEW OF EDUCATION

Functionalism as a perspective is based on the theoretical positions of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. According to functionalism, society is a system of interconnected and interdependent subsystems, which harmoniously exist to maintain the balance, that is, the equilibrium of the social system. Each of the subsystems has its social functions, that is, contributes to the balancing of the social system. For example, the family has a function of social reproduction and socialization. Education has the function to ensure the transfer of knowledge, skills and culture from one generation to another. The police has the function to coordinate and manage various social subsystems. The economy has a function of providing production, distribution and consumption of products and services.

Social subsystems are mutually adaptable and the changes in one also cause changes in other social subsystems. For example, the growth in the number of single mothers has caused changes in the labor market, where the number of temporary jobs grows, but also in the education system where kindergartens start to accept children at a young age, and the school is increasingly becoming a full-time activity for children. Education as a subsystem must be linked to family, economics, politics, culture as social subsystems. Education has its own functions in maintaining the entire social equilibrium. Thus, the knowledge that is included in educational curricula is justified and legitimate, only if it contributes to building solidarity and integration in society. The needs of society are always ahead of the needs of individuals, and teachers should be a model for their students (Sever 2012: 652).

Parsons looked at the schools as the most important institutional agent of socialization. Schools are social constructs and places where an institutional transfer of knowledge and skills takes place. Schools are important because through them society ensures equality of chances for success of members of society. Of course, the family and its commitment to education play an important role in school success, just like individual motivation. But from the point of view of the functioning of the social system, it is very

important that every member of society has equal opportunities for success. Of course, schools rank students, but such differences are based on the qualities and efforts that students put into the educational process and therefore justified (Parsons 1961)

Education occurs in society and cannot exist outside of it. Durkheim viewed education as a social fact, external to those involved in it and who shaped their way of thinking and behavior. Education is social glue that produces solidarity, connects different generations and social groups and keeps society together. It enables the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to another and from one social group to another (Sever 2012: 652).

Functionalists distinguish between manifest and latent functions of education. In doing so, the manifest functions of education are those that are obvious i.e. self-evident, while latent ones are those that are hidden. For example, the manifest function of the education is the transfer of knowledge and skills to the new generations. The latent function of education is to contribute to institutional care for children, while parents are at work. Through the latent curriculum, students adopt the dominant value system and moral norms in society, and thus they become generally accepted. In the school children have the opportunity to learn about the distant regions of the countries in which they live, about the national heroes, about the important historical events and thus in the children build the sense of patriotism. Also, children have the opportunity to learn certain values characteristic for the culture in which they are educated. Thus, through education, children in the United States and the United Kingdom adopt individualism as a value, while children in the Far East countries adopt collectivism.

Within the educational process, children have the opportunity to accept certain values that are compatible with the economic system. For example, in schools, children from small towns learn to compete for grades, a skill that will be needed in further work engagement. Part of the hidden curriculum that children learn is respect for discipline in schools, a skill that will be needed when they need to respect the discipline at work. Similarly, through respecting teachers, children learn how to respect the superiors in the future workplace. Through the diligence in learning to get a higher grade, students learn that when they grow up they will have to work hard to earn their salary.

Education has the function to select the best students and enable them to qualify for the performance of the most important social roles. Education as a subsystem is open and accessible to all members of society. The selection of the most sophisticated students according to functionalism is based on meritocracy, that is, of the results that students achieve in the educational process. According to Hadson and Lawson (1996), selection is part of a more sophisticated process of identifying the preferences, affinities, and qualities of students and, depending on that, specializing in certain professions. Once professional affinities are identified, the next function of education is to provide students with professional training and acquiring the necessary skills to be able to successfully deal with a particular profession.

One of the more important functions of education is to enable young people of different backgrounds to create friendships. Also, the important function of education is the maintenance and changing of the culture.

Functionalistic understanding of education has undergone serious criticism. The most important criticism is that this theory neglects the role of ideology and social conflict in the educational system. Educational institutions are not independent social agents, but function in the interests of those who dominate society (Sever 2012: 654). This was particularly shown by the Coleman report. Based on the success achieved by his study *The Adolescent Society* (1961), Coleman was given the opportunity to do a great research whose results were published in the *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966). Coleman asked the question whether the school allows to overcome the differences with which students start their education and whether the resources of the school, such as the quality of teachers, the size of classes, equipment, and expenses per student, are an important factor in the success of the students. The study included 600,000 students and 3,000 primary and secondary schools. Coleman, came to the following conclusions

- The family background, statistically, plays the most important role in the success of students at school
- The school has no significant role in the success of the students
- There is an asymmetric context effect. Weak students achieve better results when they are among the better students. Better students, however, have no negative repercussions from the presence of weaker students (Lindenberg 2003: 96)

3 ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE THEORY OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

The roots of the theory of social conflict are in the positions of Karl Marx. The theory of social conflict emerged in the 1920s, in Germany, with the founding of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The theory of social conflict sees society as a whole created by different groups and interests competing for power and resources. In the analysis of society, the theory of social conflict starts from the analysis of groups that have the power and benefit of certain social arrangements. For example, feminist theory claims that men control key social institutions. Hence, like feminism, and the theory of social conflict, it is committed to social changes and the establishment of a more egalitarian society.

According to the theory of social conflict, the dominant social class uses education to legitimize its power and its reproduction. According to this theory, education does not provide equal opportunities for all in society, but social inequalities are also reflected in the educational process.

The theory of social conflict opposes the claims that education functions as a mechanism for social mobility. It believes that inequalities that exist in society are reflected in education, which results in children in most cases taking up

the social status of their parents. In that sense rather than promoting social mobility, education serves as a mechanism for preserving the social structure of the society. More than that, education is used as a justification for the social status of individuals in society. The results of the research "Changing the social structure in Macedonia with special emphasis on higher education" made in 1998, and in which 2,100 people were surveyed, showed significant immobility, i.e. reproduction of all social classes. The reproduction of the existing social status is greatest among the workers (64%) and in higher education (58%). Half of the farmers' sons (49.8%) are recruited in workers, while (36%) of them remain farmers. This means that almost 86% of the farmers' sons became farmers or workers. The results of the survey also show that there are no serious differences in immobility among the surveyed people and their grandparents. This means that immobility is a chronic social problem present for decades (Georgievski 2012: 134).

One of the central remarks of the theory of social conflict is that it can not raise above the analysis of education from the perspective of differences in interests between particular social groups / classes. For example, the results of the American College Testing (ACT), a test that gives students the right to enter college, for 2005, show that the English average was 20.4; for mathematics 20.7; for reading 21.3 and for Science 20.9. According to these results, 49% of high school students in the United States do not have adequate reading skills. In mathematics and biology, the results were even worse. If we analyze the results by ethnic groups, we will see that the best results has Asian Americans with 22.1, followed by Caucasian with 21.9, American Indian with 18.7, Hispanic with 18.6 and finally African American with 17.0. This test does not measure students' intelligence, but what they learned during high school. Of course, theorists of the social conflict would be expected to analyze the test as biased, towards those belonging to marginalized social groups. Particularly biased are standardized tests because they take the cultural model of the dominant social group as a standard. Regardless of the bias of the test, the results for all students from all social groups are not enviable. The remark referring to the theory of social conflict is that instead of analyzing the overall education system, which obviously shows serious problems, it can not be raised above the analysis of the conflict of individual social groups (Sever 2012: 652).

4 THEORIES OF STRUCTURAL CONFLICT

Theories of structural conflict are more contemporary theories of social conflict. Here, above all, the theoretical approach of the French sociologist Bourdieu stands out. According to Bourdieu's theory of praxis, society is a reflex of the history of accumulation. Education is part of social and cultural reproduction. Cultural reproduction is related to cultural capital. Cultural capital is associated with the origins of students, the opportunities to acquire certain experiences and social networks in life. The difference in social status is reflected in the difference in the cultural capital of individuals (Dworkin at. Al., 2013: 1). Similarly, Berstein's "code theory" analyzes the

success of working class students in education and argues that socialization is based on class. School, language and culture reproduce differences between classes. According to Coleman's, social capital is based on trust and the community, in particular the relationship between the school, the student's family and the community. Social capital is based on the social resources and network of friendships the student's family invests in the educational process, which has an impact on the opportunities that the student is opening up in the educational process and the success that he / she achieves. It is a combination of material and symbolic resources that have an impact on students' results (Dworkin at.al. 2013: 1). The difference in the success of students who come from different classes inspired Bourdieu to create the concept of cultural capital. In analyzing cultural capital, Bourdieu, on the one hand, includes the social structure, and on the other, the autonomous action of individuals, i.e. their habitus. According to Bourdieu, in the process of education individuals internalize the social structure and its products. Habit is formed depending on the positioning of individuals in different fields, such as depending on the social status of the parents, but also from their everyday experience. Although the class does not determine the chances of an individual, it has a great influence on them to be significantly larger or smaller. According to Bourdieu, the culture and cultural capital of the higher social strata embodies schools and they lead to their reproduction.

The cultural capital of the higher social strata in schools is accepted as a natural and only acceptable type of cultural capital. Legitimate cultural capital allows those who possess it through the school to acquire educational capital, i.e. qualifications. This puts students from lower strata's in a subordinate position. To acquire educational capital, they need first to acquire a legitimate socially acceptable cultural capital and renounce their cultural capital associated with the social strata to which they belong. For students from the lower strata, it is much more difficult to achieve success in the educational process, because they need to provide a new way of articulation of reality, a new way of expressing and using the language, they must go against their own instincts and what they learn in primary socialization. Subjective expectations influence the formation of objective structures and contribute to the elimination of students from the lower strata of the educational process. The process of social reproduction does not mean that no student from the lower strata can count on success in the educational process, but only that a smaller number of students from the lower social strata will have such success.

5 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

In contrast to functionalism and the theory of social conflict that are macro theoretical perspectives and try to explain the functioning of the whole society, symbolic interactionism is a micro-theoretical perspective. The most notable representatives of this perspective are George Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, Erving Gofman, Herbert Bloomer. According to the representatives of symbolic interactionism, the behavior of individuals depends on the situation in which

they are and the meaning and the interpretation they attach to the given situation. Individuals build their behavior more according to their own understanding of the situation they are in, rather than on the basis of the objective situation. Symbolic interactionism studies the interaction between teachers and students. In doing so, the expectations that the teachers have from the students are significant. If teachers have low expectations from a particular student, it affects his self-concept, he accepts teacher's assessment as objective and requires another field in which he can build a more positive image for himself. Also, if the teacher builds high expectations for a particular student, he tries to encourage the student to act in accordance with his expectations. Even in a situation where the student does not show the expected knowledge, the teacher tries to include him in additional activities, to fulfill the potential, which the teacher is confident that the student possesses. Similarly, if the teacher forms an opinion for a particular student that he does not have high potential, he will not be given the attention paid to the better students. For example, if a teacher from the middle social strata forms an expectation for students from the lower social strata that they do not have the potential to acquire more significant knowledge, he can act in accordance with his expectations, so that the students from the lower strata do not pay the same attention like the other students, ignore their questions as irrelevant, or not help them by giving directions on how to write homework (Fritszerg 2001). In a study that is often presented as a classic case that illustrates how teachers 'expectations affect students' results, Robert Rosenthal gives teachers the results of IQ tests to their students, informing them that after a certain period of time new tests will follow. For some students who have average success on the test, teachers are told that they have very high results. The expectations of the teachers from these students are significantly raised, they begin to pay much greater attention to them and before the second test these students achieved higher success (Harris 1991).

Studies show that the role of teachers in the transition of students from primary to secondary education is extremely important. Usually during this period, students become more independent from teachers and they establish more official than private relationships, but research shows that reducing the addiction of students from the teachers has negative repercussions after their success. Students need a positive personal connection and when it is interrupted, students have difficulty adjusting to the new environment and show less affinity for the school (Barber and Olsen 2004). Also, an important factor for students' success in transition from primary to secondary education is the shifting of class and competition among students in newly-formed classes (Ames 1992).

Symbolic interactionism studies students as a factor in the educational process. For example, Wilson and Wilson (1984) find that children in elementary education learn from each other how to draw. Unfortunately, they have not done more serious research on the influence of the external environment in the learning process. Alland (1983) studied the way in which children from six cultures draw and found that culture influences the way of drawing, especially after the period in

which they will learn to write. Some researches within symbolic interactionism also show that there is a difference between games that boys and girls play in the school yard. Girls play more games that require co-operation, while boys play more games that require a competition between participants (Thorne 1993).

According to Vygotsky, learning as a process depends on the interaction between the learning subject and the social environment that encompasses parents, teachers and peer group. He asks the question, what kind of instructions should be given to students? In order to answer this question one should have knowledge of the process of developing the intellectual capacities of the students. If the instructions are not seen as an end in itself, then the learning process should be successful, and attention should be paid to the relationship between the student and the teacher. That is why Vygotsky developed the concept of the zone of proximal development (Chaiklin 2003: 40). Zone of proximal development is the difference between the current level of student's cognitive development and the level of potential cognitive development the student achieves by solving tasks with the help of a teacher or more capable peers. What the student is capable of doing today with the help of the teacher, tomorrow, he will be able to do it himself. This is one of the most important concepts developed by Vygotsky and used in teaching on reading, writing, learning mathematical operations, foreign languages, etc.

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