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The Relationship Between School and Society: Part I — Functionalist Perspective

The Practical Focus of Educational Preparation

For most teacher candidates, there is the tendency during preservice training to focus their attention upon what might be referred to as the technical aspects of instruction and of becoming an educator. They are often consumed with knowing how to address the myriad of instructional circumstances and student behaviors that will confront them, and spend most of their time acquiring the requisite knowledge and skills to prepare for those eventualities. It tends to dominate their thinking. An untrained observer might be forgiven for assuming, by the time educators commence their graduate studies and with it a focus upon advanced knowledge, content and intellectual development, that they might be sufficiently prepared in instructional delivery to then begin an examination of their very profession, its relationship to

the institution called school, and the relationship of each to the larger collectivity called society. But that assumption would be incorrect in most instances. With the increasing expectations from a multitude of educational stakeholders including the shifting demands that accompany the push for ever more effective delivery and assessment of the state curriculum, is it really any wonder that even upon return to graduate school, most educators remain focused largely upon technique and discipline content?

Simply knowing one's subject matter and formal place in a given educational environment and the roles and responsibilities one executes on a daily basis (be it as an administrator, teacher, or counselor), fails to provide any particular insights into or lens through which to begin an examination into the relationship between schools and society or

in their building each and every day. For it is only then that they can begin to initiate an enlightened internal review and reform of those beliefs and practices.

The social foundations of education offers educators several macro or societal level lens through which to examine the school-society relationship. With the revamping of the Foundations area curricula in the Grand Valley State University College of Education (COE), faculty have begun a more concerted effort to address that relationship through employing the sociological perspectives of functionalism, conflict theory, and interpretivism. Particularly in COE course ED672—Social and Cultural Foundations of Education, there is an expressed intent of having students begin to reflect upon the various acts and beliefs that comprise their profession and the role that schools play in an advanced capitalist society.

A Socio-theoretical Examination of Education

Functionalism. This general theoretical orientation actually derives from biology, as its label might suggest, though its social-theoretical version tends to be found in anthropology and sociology. It is to the latter and the school-society relationship that we turn. Drawing from the biological analogy, functionalists claim that to gain a better understanding of the social institution called school, we need to comprehend the function or social needs it serves in our social system. Given the social significance of the common school movement of the mid-19th century (i.e., Horace Mann), the subsequent push for mass, compulsory education, and its continuance, evolution, even refinement, over the past 150 years, there is a clear and abiding social value that we attach to our schools. The general questions that arise then are ‘what general purpose do they serve’ and ‘in what manner do they seek to address their role.’

The evolutionary state of our society as well as the size of its population are important considerations when addressing these questions because in earlier times, as we think back to the colonial days and their beginnings, many of the tasks associated with schools today belonged to the realm of the family or community. The knowledge and skills associated with life in their world, knowledge and skills of a different level of sophistication in keeping with the developmental state of the society then, were passed on from old to young often through familial and associated relationships, sometimes inconsistently so, and thus the long term fate of the family or the community were often dependent upon the success of that transmission.

But notwithstanding the rise of modern home schooling since the 1990s, much of which has faith-based reasoning behind it, numerous historical factors have contributed to the significant decline in the family’s educational

role in modern society:

- The evolution of American society from agrarian to industrial
- The expansion of the nation’s population and its demographic shift from rural to urban habitation
- The inability to keep pace with the explosion in knowledge and the sophistication and intensification of labor skills (i.e., development of human capital with specialized, highly technical skills)

Consequently, the persuasive argument for a compulsory social institution to adapt the new and the young to the values of an evolving social organism called America seems all the more reasonable when we also factor in:

- That the Jeffersonian vision of democracy necessitated a literate public
- That much of the population expansion resulted from immigration
- That the precepts of the American Dream and meritocracy envision knowledge and learning as the foundation of a productive country, as *the great equalizer* of the human condition and the potential *creator of wealth undreamed of*

Thus, the primary functions of this compulsory social institution are seen as role differentiation and social solidarity.

But such an explanation, while reasonable enough on its face, suffers from at least one major flaw—determinism. Biological and social functions are not qualitatively the same. Having a social function and being successful in its execution are different things. There is an assumption in functionalism that in being acted upon by the schools, all or most humans successfully internalize the curricula, both formal and hidden. Consequently, human agency or the capacity of individuals to make choices and to impose those choices upon their world is diminished; they become secondary to the power and influence of the school. But clearly, we are not all of a mind, our value systems differ, our visions for this society are not identical, social solidarity might be described as loosely coupled, and the American Dream is under attack. Yet, as fundamental as that flaw may be, most of our educational policy remains functionalist in intent as witnessed by the various schools reforms of the past two decades. The fact that human beings cannot be educationally and thus socially processed doesn’t prevent social engineers from engaging in such attempts. A complex industrialized society like ours needs such a social institution as school lest we be left to our own devices and social chaos erupts. However, the debate will always center on what knowledge and values are being imparted, the same discussion that erupted when Horace Mann began his social experiment with compulsory education in Massachusetts in the 1830s. ☺

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those very educators’ role in that relationship. Rather, it is an awareness of the function that schools have come to play in our society, understanding what drives the various mandates and counter critiques, that will afford educators an opportunity to more greatly comprehend their part in that most important social institution, and thereby, allow them a fuller appreciation of the implications of their own and their colleagues’ role in the social and intellectual development of students imparted by a particular curriculum as well as the associated behaviors and dispositions enacted