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

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The Relationship Between School and Society: Part I — Functional 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

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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