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The Relationship Between School and Society: Part II - Conflict Theory

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The Relationship Between School and Society: Part II — Conflict Theory

Another Socio-theoretical Examination of Education

As Part I indicated, functionalism represents a general theoretical orientation that seeks to explain the school-society relationship through the perceived “function” of schools—the social needs they serve in our social system. But for many within the field of social foundations of education, the robustness of its explanation remains suspect. Freedom of choice by individuals appears to be denied. Furthermore, while sociology of education is concerned

about the ways in which students are socialized for adult status, including viewing the schools as a social system with its attendant effects or influences upon those students’ life chances, research since the 1960s has also been increasingly critical of that social institution’s ability to adequately address society’s inequities. Rather than being the great equalizer, there is a sociological perspective that argues just the opposite, that schools largely reproduce those same inequities thereby maintaining the position of power for the dominant social group. In the closing to Part I, the issue was also raised about what knowledge and values are being imparted by our



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ignores the obvious conflict of values and interests that exists throughout society. Instead, the significance of power and the struggle in social life should be emphasized. Social behavior is best understood in terms of the tension between competing groups. And so rather than interpreting social life as essentially cooperative and harmonious (i.e., a willingness to compromise), conflict theorists view society as an arena or “social battlefield” (Semel, 2010) where different individuals and groups contest one another in order to obtain scarce and valued resources, most of which have economic implications which, in turn, have implications for access to influence in our society and the so-called “levers of power.” If the reader can accept the general assumption that in our economic system, wealth is power, and that we also have a stratified social system (i.e., social classes) that is differentiated primarily by the ability of its members to generate wealth, then it seems fairly reasonable to argue that not all social groups have equal wealth and thus do not have equal access to power. It is not a much greater leap from there to then accept the notion that the interests of those with power don’t necessarily coincide with those lacking that access, and, in fact, may disadvantage the latter on occasion.


What does this have to do with schools and the role of educators? In short, conflict theorists see schools as an instrument of elite domination (and social reproduction). They are viewed as one of the “arenas” or “battlefields” where the struggle between social groups is played out (e.g., the school’s attempt to makeover the knowledge, dispositions and values of lower class or immigrant children).

Arguably, the assumptions underlying conflict theory provide it with a legitimate *raison d’être* as well as a thoughtful if not provocative lens for examining our schools, especially if we consider:

- An increasing disconnect between the social class and cultural values of educators and those of their students (i.e., teachers are mostly middle and upper middle class, and approximately 82% in elementary and secondary are white while 45% of public school population was non-white in 2008) (IES, 2010)
- A selective curriculum and attendant values (hidden curriculum) that speak less and less to the life experiences of many, if not most, students than to those from a suburban middle class non-minority existence
- The processes and their implicit assumptions by which students are

deemed gifted or learning disabled

- The increasing emphasis upon specific knowledge and the acquisition of credentials as the pathway for young adults seeking any hope of attaining financially rewarding occupations and navigating the existing social structure
- The educational and social advantages derived from merely attending particular schools, not necessarily because of curricular content, but because of their reputations (i.e., elite/prep versus public)
- The reinforcement of the achievement ideology (meritocracy) while confronted by its contradiction

Important in the brief overviews of functionalism and conflict theory rests the understanding that our educators, and particularly those in the earlier part of their careers, need to develop a deeper level understanding of the institution called school and its role in our social system. Why? Because that which is unidentified, unrecognized, unspoken, that which is largely taken-for-granted, and is not examined, not questioned, not interrogated that calls out for greater scrutiny. It is the need for educators to move beyond the everyday level of classrooms and schools, to see educational institutions in their societal context—the big picture—that cries out for our attention. That in no way devalues or diminishes the importance of advanced content or instructional refinement, the bedrock of any educational training program, preservice or graduate. Rather, it contextualizes it. It represents an argument in favor of educators evolving from increasingly deskilled technicians to constructive social and educational critics with the knowledge and analytical capacity to examine their roles and the role of their schools in the development of our young, and through them, our society. It represents an opportunity to shed light on the myriad of ways that schools help to construct people and to ask in whose interests, to whose advantage? 

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schools. Strictly speaking, this is less a matter of functionalism than it is the domain of conflict theory. It is to this that we turn next.

Conflict Theory (CT). The functionalist school of thought envisions society as governed by a consensus of values. Our social system works largely because members strive to get along in those critical areas where they need to. But conflict theorists argue that portraying society in this manner