

# Education and Schooling Revisited

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*[Although the structural-functional school has largely fallen out of favour in academic circles in the twenty-five years or so since this article was written, these ideas still sometimes crop up as part of the public's implicit understanding of the purpose of education and schooling. The structural-functional interpretation was so widely disseminated in the 1940s-1990s, that it became an almost unquestioned, hegemonic ideology. This article may help critique those ideas. The writings of Paulo Freire are, of course, timeless.]*

In the reading, "Education and Schooling", Taylor presents a sociological view of education based on the work of Durkheim, Shipman, Brookover, Grambs, and others. All of these sociologists are part of the same theoretical tradition, called "structural-functionalism". The structural-functional model of society dominated North American sociology for nearly fifty years, but it is not the only theory, and it may not be the best one.

This article will argue that a structural-functional approach to education contains a conservative bias. On the surface, the description of "education-as-socialization" sounds "scientific" and "objective", but at a deeper level the theory is revealed to contain several assumptions which should be challenged. Left unexamined, these assumptions could allow those in power to manipulate the sociology of education to their own ends.

This article raises four questions for which there may be no clear answers. How one responds to these questions may depend more on one's values than on scientific evidence. The object here is not to provide better answers—just better questions. Faced with a seemingly straightforward theory, it is always important to ask oneself if things might not be more complex than they at first appear.

Here, then, are four issues that readers should keep in mind when reading "Education and Schooling."

## A *Tabula Rasa*?

Although it is true that all education takes place in a social context, the view of education as socialization tends to overemphasize the "social" at the expense of the "individual". To truly understand education, we must be prepared to account for individual differences.

Babies are *not* a clean slate on which parents and teachers can write whatever they want. Babies come into this world with their own unique combination of predispositions, talents, and personality traits. Although it is true that a baby is unlikely to spontaneously compose a Mozart sonata or intuit Einstein's theory of relativity, it is equally clear that some children are born with perfect pitch while others are born tone deaf. It therefore follows that some individuals will find it easier to learn Mozart's sonatas than others. As education progresses, what is learnt is necessarily filtered through these individual potentialities.

Education, then, cannot be thought of as something that adults do *to* children; education is necessarily an *interaction* between adult and child, teacher and student. The learner is always an active participant in the process, and while the process is a social one, one must never lose sight of the individual.

This is an important point because one of the fundamental choices we make as educators is between curriculum-centered and child-centered learning.

If we view children as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate or an empty pitcher waiting to be filled with knowledge, then we will tend to emphasize *outputs*—what the child needs to learn to become an adult citizen—rather than *inputs*—the child's abilities, interests, readiness, etc. This in turn encourages the adoption of a curriculum-centered education.

This leads to what Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, calls the "banking" conception of education. Just as the wealthy withdraw money from a bank and dole it out to the poor as they see fit, teachers draw from the accumulated knowledge of the society and dole it out to students. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing. (p. 58)

If one starts from the assumption that the individual knows nothing and that the teacher knows everything, then it follows that the most appropriate teaching method is rote memorization. Why have the students search for answers if the teacher can simply dictate them? Similarly, there can be no question of allowing students to pursue their own interests, because they are too ignorant to judge their own needs. Teachers decide what is relevant, and if the student objects that Latin or the names of the seven centers of iron production in England seems remote from their immediate goals and concerns, that merely confirms the depths of their ignorance. Thus, in curriculum-centered school systems:

- a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- c) the teacher thinks, and the students are thought about;
- d) (d) the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
- e) (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;

- g) the teacher chooses the program content and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- h) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- i) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects (Freire, 1984, p. 59)

Thus, starting from the single premise of education-as-socialization, we end up with a traditional, conservative (and perhaps oppressive) school system. In Freire's words, "Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others . . . negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (p. 58).

Now contrast this with the approach that results from a definition of education as "personal growth through learning":

[Education is] . . . a process of human growth by which one gains greater understanding and control over oneself and one's world. It involves our minds, our bodies, and our relations with the people and the world around us. Whereas education takes many institutional forms, strictly speaking it is a process, an activity characterized by continuous development and change. The end product of the process of education is learning. (K. Ryan and J. Cooper, 1984, p. 139)

This definition of education encourages the child-centered focus of a "progressive" education. By focusing on personal growth, the individual is brought back into the equation as an active participant in the learning process. A child-centered education encourages learning through "discovery", through a problem-posing, questioning approach that downplays memorization in favour of critical thinking.

Of course, there is nothing in Durkheim's work, or that of the other structural-functionalist sociologists, which would rule out adopting child-centered learning as the best *method* of socialization. It is perfectly reasonable to argue that the proper socialization of children in our society requires a "progressive" education; that the best outcomes are achieved by a focus on inputs. Such an argument depends, however, on the recognition that the structural-functionalist approach contains a conservative bias. The danger is that a superficial reading of the

education-as-socialization approach appears to justify a curriculum-centered school system. In other words, one has to be aware of the bias implicit in the theory before one can begin to compensate for it.

## The Needs of the Individual or the Needs of Society?

Given individual differences, can we assume that the needs of the individual and the needs of the society will always coincide? If they do not, whose needs should be given the higher priority: the individual's or the society's?

Perhaps at the earliest stages of socialization it is safe to assume that the child's need to learn fundamentals (such as language) closely corresponds with the society's need to pass on its accumulated knowledge to the next generation. In the more advanced stages of education, however, what the individual wants to learn and what the society is willing to teach may not be the same.

The clearest example of this is in the mismatch between the formal education system and the labour market in advanced industrial societies. If a nation's economy is based on heavy industry, there may be a great demand for steel workers, oil riggers, and truck drivers; but does this mean that the schools should be geared solely to turning out steel workers, oil riggers and truck drivers? Should the school system develop each student's potential, or only that potential which the society currently needs?

These are very real issues, both for educational planners and for individual students. For example, is there any point in the Faculty of Education admitting more new students than there are jobs available to be filled? What if Canadian schools do not need as many teachers as there are student teachers? Can we afford to "waste" precious resources training people for non-existent jobs? But, on the other hand, can we turn away individuals who want an education degree simply because they are not needed? (Remember, this is *you* we are talking about.) So whose needs are more important, the individual's or the society's? Once again, there is nothing specific in structural-functionalism that says society should limit the size of university enrolments. Nevertheless, by defining education as an aspect of socialization, this approach tends

to focus on society's need-to-teach rather than on the individual's need-to-learn, and therefore to emphasize society's needs over those of the individual. Whatever side of this issue one takes, it is important that everyone recognize this bias lurking in the structural-functional approach.

## Education for Reproduction or for Change?

Another problem with this approach is that it emphasizes "social reproduction" over social change. By defining education as the reproduction in the next generation of the accumulated knowledge of the society, the theory tends to downplay education's potential for social change. If one is busy memorizing the answers from the past, one is unlikely to come up with many *new* answers, let alone new questions. To quote Freire:

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.

The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the student's creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. ...

Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them"; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated (1984, p. 60).

In fairness, the education-as-socialization approach implies that if we change the content of the socialization process (i.e., the curriculum), then we can change the shape of the next generation. Obviously, then, education *can* bring about social change.

Superficially, this seems liberal enough. Note, however, that the responsibility for initiating change is left in the hands of "society". Once again we find a conservative bias in the assumption that the learner plays a passive and subordinate role in the socialization process. To again quote Freire:

It follows logically from the banking notion...that the educator's role is to regulate the way the world "enters into" the students.

His task is to..."fill" the students by making deposits of information which he considers to constitute true knowledge. And since men "receive" the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated man is the adapted man, because he is better "fit" for the world. Translated into practice,

this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well men fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it (1984, pp. 62-63).

In other words, the education-as-socialization approach implies that the  $\square$ individual has to learn to fit into society $\square$ . That's fine if one believes, as Durkheim did, that the current society is the best one possible. But what if one believes society should be changed? What if the society happens to be corrupt or evil? Should we always insist on the individual learning to adjust to society? Why not have society adapt to better meet the needs of individuals?

Because structural-functionalists are interested in describing social structures and how these function (thus the name), they often seem to imply that the way things *are*, is the way things *ought* to be. When structural-functionalists point out that a society must teach the next generation its language, culture, and values if it is to survive, we often forget to ask if that society *ought* to survive. Might there not be changes in the language, culture and values that would make it a better society?

For example, from the structural-functional point of view, a Nazi concentration camp guard who refuses to kill Jews represents a *breakdown in the socialization process*, since Nazi society

has failed to pass on to that individual the values necessary to perpetuate Nazism. If this failure is wide-spread, Nazi society would be threatened. But can we really believe this act of defiance represents failure? Isn't it more appropriately seen as a shining example of an individual who has been able to transcend the limitations of his socialization?

A similar, but less extreme example, is provided by the women's movement. To reproduce itself, Canadian society of the 1950's had to convince girls that they wanted to grow up to be housewives, teachers, nurses, or airline stewardesses. From the education-as-socialization perspective, business career women represented a breakdown in socialization, a failure to reproduce the family values that said the woman's place was in the home. From the perspective of the woman's movement, however, the change represents a triumph of the individual over a repressive society, the liberation of women from a restricted role. Who is to say which interpretation is the correct one?

One needs to be aware, then, that any definition of education as socialization implicitly, but inevitably, favors the status quo.

## Who Is Society?

Perhaps the most serious flaw of the structural-functional approach to education is the tendency to reify "society". Society is not an object or person one can point to; it is an abstraction. Sociologists have a bad habit of forgetting this and glibly talking about the needs of society as if it were some kind of living organism.

Society actually consists of a multitude of competing groups and individuals, each with their own needs and demands. Some groups are more successful than others and they naturally try to preserve this success by (a) setting up the rules so they always win, and (b) convincing everybody else that their way is the best way. One way of achieving these two aims is for them to pretend that they represent "society".

So when I said earlier that Canadian schools currently need fewer new teachers than there are graduates, this should not be interpreted to mean that "society" needs fewer new teachers. What it actually means is that some provincial

governments have decided to set funding levels such that there is not enough money to hire more graduates. There is a big difference, however, between saying "we only *need* X number of teachers" and "we are only going to *fund* X number of teachers". It may well be that the educational needs of many groups in the society are not being met; that there is a teacher surplus because the government is satisfied with a student/teacher ratio that makes it impossible for teachers to properly address the needs of their students.

Similarly, the nurses' unions claim that there is a nurse shortage because there is more work than they can easily handle; the government claims there is not, because all the positions it is prepared to fund are filled. So who is society: the taxpayer who says no more taxes, or the individual lying in a hospital corridor for lack of sufficient hospital beds?

Thus, whenever someone starts to talk about "society's needs", their statements must be closely examined for self-interest. Exactly who in the society needs these things, and should the rest of us go along with it? For example, in "Education and Schooling" we read:

The emergence of various subgroups within the population...produced cultural pluralism and value conflicts, producing a need for formal educational measures that could foster consensus and social integration.

In other words, one function of schooling is to reduce social conflict by teaching everyone the same values. But the question immediately becomes, whose values should we teach? Your values or mine? And *who* needed to establish value consensus in the emerging industrial order? The "society", or the dominant group who felt their values and their dominance threatened by the emergence of these new groups? Similarly, we can all agree that schools have to teach language, but whose language? We can all agree that schools need to transmit the accumulated knowledge of the culture, but whose culture?

For example, if we decide that the schools should teach only in English, it not only means that children from other linguistic backgrounds will be at a disadvantage when competing with Anglophone students on assignments and tests, but also that these other cultures will be virtually

wiped out because their languages are *not* being transmitted. So when we talk about "society's" needs, are we talking about everyone in Canada or just the English majority?

Similarly, if we design a school which teaches students to show up on time, to work quietly at their desks, and to put up with boring and pointless assignments, then our graduates will make good employees who are punctual, hardworking, and satisfied with boring and pointless jobs. This is great for employers but less great for the workers. So is socializing children to sit quietly in their desks good for society, or only for employers?

If we decide to teach a middle class version of reality in the schools, then the knowledge, culture and values of less economically and politically powerful groups is effectively destroyed. Remember shop class? Lots of emphasis on woodworking skills, taking care of tools, being neat, and so on; everything boys need to know to become good factory workers. Nothing wrong with any of that, right? It is simply a matter of passing on society's accumulated knowledge of woodworking. But did anyone ever mention anything about the role of the union shop steward? Did anyone ever mention anything about the labour laws that protect the worker? Was there anything about minimum wage, maximum weekly hours, overtime, holiday pay, unemployment insurance, workman's compensation, severance pay, wrongful dismissal, or seniority? Who decided that these things were not important to include in the curriculum? Who decided that students could figure out these complex things on their own, but that keeping the shop tidy was an essential skill which could only be taught in school?

When I have asked students why they want to become teachers, most have responded in terms of their love of children, their love of learning, or—more pragmatically—the good salary and two months holidays. Relatively few say they chose teaching because it affords unique opportunities to oppress working class children, to wipe out linguistic and cultural minorities, or to help perpetuate the ruling elite. Yet, if one blindly accepts that the schools are agents of "society" and forgets that schools are designed and run by specific people for specific purposes, then one is likely to become an unwitting

participant in the exploitation of the weak. The first step in changing schooling from an instrument of social domination into one of liberation is to ask, "why is this knowledge considered important?"; "who does this knowledge serve?"; and "what other knowledge, what other view of the world, is *not* being taught?"

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the uncritical acceptance of the structural-functional definition of education encourages us to adopt a banking or curriculum-centered school system and that this may benefit a selfish elite rather than our students. The more important moral here, however, is that even the most abstract theory or seemingly harmless generalization can have important and dangerous implications for educational practice. Left unexamined, our theories can gloss over assumptions and hide agendas that cast us unintentionally into the role of oppressor.

It is easy to simply accept and memorize and rewrite on exams whatever our textbook authorities tell us. Concerned with getting the marks to pass the course, to get the degree, to get the certificate, to get job, many students are willing to jump through the hoops without worrying too much about where those hoops are leading them. It is harder (and riskier) to question authority, to seek out and identify underlying assumptions, to think through implications, and to challenge conclusions. But I would argue, *that* is the true difference between education and schooling.

As you learn, so shall you teach. It is easy to dictate your lessons to students, to simply pass on unquestioning what you have been taught. It is easier to hand out answers than to raise questions; easier to assert your authority than to free students; easier to meet the demands of the curriculum than to meet the needs of the students; easier to school than to educate.

So the question becomes, do you want to be a teacher—or a banker?

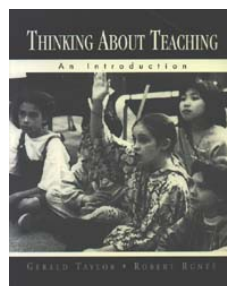
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Robert Runté spent ten years as a Test Developer with Alberta Education, then over 20 as a sociologist in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. He took early retirement to become Senior Editor at Five Rivers Publishing, SFeditor.ca, and EssentialEdits.ca. (He says editing books is like having only the very top graduate students.)

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