Education and society:

Education is sees as a means of cultural transmission from one generation to another in any given society. Society is defined as the whole range of social relationships of people living in a certain geographic territory and having a sense of belonging to the same group. The relationships between the two concepts are so strong that it is not possible to separate them because what happens to one affects the other. Educational institutions are micro-societies, which reflect the entire society. The education system in any given society prepares the child for future life and instils in his those skills that will enable him to live a useful life and contribute to the development of the society. Education as a social phenomenon does not take place in a vacuum or isolation; it takes place in the society and this normally begins from the family, which is one of the social institutions responsible for the education of the child.

Major Sociological Theories of Education:

Historically, American education served both political and economic needs, which dictated the function of education. Today, sociologists and educators debate the function of education. Three main theories represent their views: the functionalist theory, the conflict theory, and the symbolic interactionist theory.

Like any other topic in sociology, the three major theoretical perspectives (functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction theory) each have different views on education:

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism, or, simply, functionalism, is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. Two theorists, Herbert Spencer and Robert Merton, were major contributors to this perspective. Important concepts in functionalism include social structure, social functions, manifest functions, and latent functions. Let's examine this perspective deeper and take a look at a few examples.

Social Structure and Social Functions

The structural-functional approach is a perspective in sociology that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. It asserts that our lives are guided by social structures, which are relatively stable patterns of social behavior. Social structures give shape to our lives - for example, in families, the community, and through religious organizations. And certain rituals, such as a handshake or complex religious ceremonies, give structure to our everyday lives. Each social structure has social functions, or consequences for the operation of society as a whole. Education, for example, has several important functions in a society, such as **socialization, learning, and social placement**.

Education is a social institution that sociologists are very interested in studying. This includes teaching formal knowledge such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as teaching other things such as morals, values, and ethics. Education prepares young people for entry into society and is thus a form of socialization. Sociologists want to know how this form of socialization affects and is affected by other social structures, experiences, and outcomes. Sociology of education is a field that focuses on two separate levels of analysis. At a macro-level, sociologists work to identify how various social forces, such as politics, economics, culture, etc., creates variation in schools. In other words, what effects do other social institutions have on the educational system. At a micro-level, sociologists look to identify how variation in school practices lead to differences in individual-level student outcomes. That is, when schools have different teaching methods or have different practices, how does that affect the individual students and what are the individual outcomes. A classic study by sociologist James Coleman done in 1966, known as the “Coleman Report” looked at the performance of over 150,000 students and found that student background and socioeconomic status were much more important in determining educational outcomes than were differences in school resources, such as per pupil spending. He also found that socially disadvantaged black students benefited and did better in school when they were in racially mixed classrooms rather than black only classrooms. This ignited controversy that still continues today.

The functionalist theory of education focuses on how education serves the needs of society through development of skills, encouraging social cohesion and sorting of students. According to functionalists, the role of schools is to prepare students for participation in the institutions of society.

The functionalist perspective argues that education serves many important functions in society. First, it socializes children and prepares them for life in society. This is not only done by teaching “book knowledge,” but also teaching the society’s culture, including moral values, ethics, politics, religious beliefs, habits, and norms. Second, education provides occupational training, especially in industrialized societies and most jobs today require at least a high school education, and many professions require a college or post-graduate degree. The third function that education serves, according to functionalist theorists, is social control, or the regulation of deviant behavior. By requiring young people to attend school, this keeps them off the streets and out of trouble.

Functionalists view education as one of the more important social institutions in a society. They contend that education contributes two kinds of functions: manifest (or primary) functions, which are the intended and visible functions of education; and latent (or secondary) functions, which are the hidden and unintended functions.

**Manifest Functions**

There are several major manifest functions associated with education. The first is **socialization.** Beginning in preschool and kindergarten, students are taught to practice various societal roles. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who established the academic discipline of sociology, characterized schools as “socialization agencies that teach children how to get along with others and prepare them for adult economic roles” (Durkheim 1898). Indeed, it seems that schools have taken on this responsibility in full.

This socialization also involves learning the rules and norms of the society as a whole. In the early days of compulsory education, students learned the dominant culture. Today, since the culture of the United States is increasingly diverse, students may learn a variety of cultural norms, not only that of the dominant culture.

School systems in the United States also transmit the core values of the nation through **manifest functions like social contro**l. One of the roles of schools is to teach students conformity to law and respect for authority. Obviously, such respect, given to teachers and administrators, will help a student navigate the school environment. This function also prepares students to enter the workplace and the world at large, where they will continue to be subject to people who have authority over them. Fulfillment of this function rests primarily with classroom teachers and instructors who are with students all day.

Education also provides one of the major methods used by people for upward social mobility. This function is referred to **as social placement**. College and graduate schools are viewed as vehicles for moving students closer to the careers that will give them the financial freedom and security they seek. As a result, college students are often more motivated to study areas that they believe will be advantageous on the social ladder. A student might value business courses over a class in Victorian poetry because she sees business class as a stronger vehicle for financial success.

**Latent Functions**

Education also fulfills latent functions. As you well know, much goes on in a school that has little to do with formal education. For example, you might notice an attractive fellow student when he gives a particularly interesting answer in class—catching up with him and making a date speaks to the latent function of courtship fulfilled by exposure to a peer group in the educational setting.

The educational setting introduces students to social networks that might last for years and can help people find jobs after their schooling is complete. Of course, with social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, these networks are easier than ever to maintain. Another latent function is **the ability to work with others** in small groups, a skill that is transferable to a workplace and that might not be learned in a homeschool setting.

The educational system, especially as experienced on university campuses, has traditionally provided **a place for students to learn about various social issues**. There is ample opportunity for social and political advocacy, as well as the ability to develop tolerance to the many views represented on campus. In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement swept across college campuses all over the United States, leading to demonstrations in which **diverse groups of students were unified with the purpose of changing the political climate of the country.**

Conflict Theory on Education

Conflict theorists do not believe that public schools reduce social inequality. Rather, they believe that the educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities that arise from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Where functionalists see education as serving a beneficial role, conflict theorists view it more negatively. To them, educational systems preserve the status quo and push people of lower status into obedience. Conflict theory looks at the disintegrative and disruptive aspects of education. These theorists argue that education is unequally distributed through society and is used to separate groups (based on class, gender, or race). Educational level is therefore a mechanism for producing and reproducing inequality in our society. Educational level, according to conflict theorists, can also be used as a tool for discrimination, such as when potential employers require certain educational credentials that may or may not be important for the job. It discriminates against minorities, working-class people, and women – those who are often less educated and least likely to have credentials because of discriminatory practices within the educational system.

According to conflict theory, the purpose of education is maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of those who dominate society. Conflict theorists do not see education as a social benefit or opportunity, rather a powerful means of maintaining power structure and creating a docile work force for capitalists. The prevailing education system perpetuates the status quo by indoctrinating a kind of value among the lower classes to become obedient workers. Schools develop those skills, values and attitudes in the working classes to accept their position as a lower-class member of society.

Conflict theorists contend that our school curriculum favours the elites. Research has shown that even the best teachers often evaluate students on the basis of their social class, race or ethnic characteristics. This tendency heavily influence student placement, regardless of intelligence and original thinking. In order to sort students, intelligence test is widely practiced. They argue that the tests, which claim to test intelligence, actually test cultural knowledge and therefore exhibit a cultural bias. For example, a question may ask: “Which one of these items belongs in an orchestra? A. accordion B. guitar C. violin D. banjo.” This question assumes considerable cultural knowledge. It has nothing to do with intelligence. Students from upper elite class are in an advantage to answer such question as they have considerable exposure to nuances of an orchestra such as, what is an orchestra, how does it differ from a band, and what are the instruments used in an orchestra. The question itself assumes exposure to a particular kind of music favoured by elite class. Testing experts claim they have rid modern examinations of such culturally biased questioning, but conflict theorists respond that cultural neutrality is impossible. All tests contain a knowledge base, and that knowledge base is always culturally sensitive. Intelligence is normally distributed over the population. Had the intelligence been the criteria for sorting students in educational institutions, students from all sections of the society would have been found in educational institutions proportionately. However, mostly students from upper or upper middle class were found in these educational institutions with few exceptions.

In our society we find two kinds of schools: Government schools and Private schools. Private schoolsmeant for upper elite classes who are rich. They can afford to pay higher salary, attract better teachers and purchase newer and better texts and more technology. Students who attend these schools gain substantial advantages in getting into the best colleges and universities. They are also being tracked into higher-paying professions. Students in less affluent government schools do not enjoy these advantages. They are less likely to go to good institutions and hence, more likely to be tracked into low-paying manual professions. Therefore, inequality to access quality education creates conflict among the rich and the poor students. With the neo-liberal policy of the government, private education system is increasing at an alarming rate. As a result, the social conflict between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have not’s widening. The parents from affluent and even middle-class family send their children to private schools and the poor parents send their children

to public funded government schools. Patnaik (2009) says, “…the higher education system in countries like ours must be oriented towards carrying forward the task of nation-building”. In order to gear this task of nation-building, he says, it must largely be state-funded. Further, treating higher education as a commodity (by opening private institutions run of commercial lines) necessarily comes in the way of its nation-building task. Secondly, he says, “………..higher education system oriented towards nation- building must not only be open to all but also make itself inclusive in a deliberate sense by drawing students and teachers from hitherto excluded and marginalized communities through affirmative action, of which the simplest and the most effective form is reservation.” He further commented that talent and

academic ability are more or less evenly distributed across the various social groups in a society. Hence, the best quality of education system would thus be one where the group-wise composition of students and teachers, would closely approximate the group-wise composition of the population as a whole. This can minimize the conflict between the rich and poor students and bring equality in the society.

**In order to reduce conflict,** education should be made free and compulsory for all. No country has achieved universal elementary education without the state assuming the primary responsibility for it. After six decades of independence, India made education as fundamental right between 6 to 14 years of children. However, it does not talk about the education of children below the age of six years and above the age of fourteen years though education at these levels is also equally important. Again, the act says, private schools shall admit at least 25% of children from weaker sections; no fee shall be charged to these children. The entire debate was diverted away from the issue of the Common School System to the problems of private schools in finding resources for such reservations and the cultural gap between those who pay fees and those who do not. Sadgopal (2011) says, if 25% of this capacity of the private school sector is reserved for the weaker sections, the number of the so-called ‘beneficiaries’ can in no case exceed 1 crore children. What about the Right to Education of the remaining 19 crores (190 millions)? Clearly, the provision of 25% reservation in private schools has nothing to do with either the issue of Right to Education or Common School System. It is an obligation on the part of the government to deliver good

quality education to the citizens. Education is neither commercial to be delivered nor charity to be given to citizens. Citizens are not customers when it comes to basic human rights. The total public expenditure on education in India is a little over 3% of the GDP. Many of the committees and commissions recommended for at least 10% of GDP to be spent on education which is a farsighted dream. This can only bring quality education which can be equitable accessible to all section of the society.

**Common School System**

The Education Commission (1964-66) had recommended a Common School System of Public Education(CSS) as the basis of building up the National System of Education with a view to “bring the differentsocial classes and groups together in order to minimize the social conflict and thus promote the emergenceof an egalitarian and integrated society.

Symbolic Interactionism: Herbert Blumer & G.H Mead

In sociology, interactionism is a theoretical perspective that derives social processes (such as conflict, cooperation, identity formation) from human interaction. It is the study of how individuals shape society and are shaped by society through meaning that arises in interactions.

The symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on social interaction in the classroom, on school playgrounds, and at other school-related venues. Social interaction contributes to gender-role socialization, and teachers' expectations may affect their students' performance.

Symbolic interactionists limit their analysis of education to what they directly observe happening in the classroom. They focus on how teacher expectations influence student performance, perceptions, and attitudes.

Symbolic interactionist studies of education examine social interaction in the classroom, on the playground, and in other school venues. These studies help us understand what happens in the schools themselves, but they also help us understand how what occurs in school is relevant for the larger society. Some studies, for example, show how children’s playground activities reinforce gender-role socialization. Girls tend to play more cooperative games, while boys play more competitive sports.

Interactionism is a theoretical perspective in sociology that focuses on the everyday interactions between individuals as the basis for the development of society. Interactionism focuses on humans as social actors rather than just focusing on the role of society.Jul 27, 2015

. The symbolic interaction view of education focuses on interactions during the schooling process and the outcomes of those interactions. For instance, interactions between students and teachers can create expectations on both parts. The teacher begins to expect certain behaviors from students, which in turn can actually create that very behavior. This is called the “teacher expectancy effect.” For example, if a white teacher expects a black student to perform below average on a math test when compared to white students, over time the teacher may act in ways that encourage the black students to get below average math scores.

Another body of research shows that teachers’ views about students can affect how much the students learn. When teachers think students are smart, they tend to spend more time with these students, to call on them, and to praise them when they give the right answer. Not surprisingly, these students learn more because of their teachers’ behavior. But when teachers think students are less bright, they tend to spend less time with these students and to act in a way that leads them to learn less. Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968) conducted a classic study of this phenomenon. They tested a group of students at the beginning of the school year and told their teachers which students were bright and which were not. They then tested the students again at the end of the school year. Not surprisingly, the bright students had learned more during the year than the less bright ones. But it turned out that the researchers had randomly decided which students would be designated bright and less bright. Because the “bright” students learned more during the school year without actually being brighter at the beginning, their teachers’ behavior must have been the reason. In fact, their teachers did spend more time with them and praised them more often than was true for the “less bright” students. This process helps us understand why tracking is bad for the students tracked down.

Other research in the symbolic interactionist tradition focuses on how teachers treat girls and boys. Many studies find that teachers call on and praise boys more often (Jones & Dindia, 2004). Teachers do not do this consciously, but their behavior nonetheless sends an implicit message to girls that math and science are not for them and that they are not suited to do well in these subjects. This body of research has stimulated efforts to educate teachers about the ways in which they may unwittingly send these messages and about strategies they could use to promote greater interest and achievement by girls in math and science (Battey, Kafai, Nixon, & Kao, 2007).

\_Interactionism or symbolic interactionism is a social action or micro theory based around the idea that individuals create meaning based on their interactions with others. In the context of education, interactionists focus on the interactions between pupils and between pupils and teachers, looking at concepts such as labelling at the processes and relationships that happen within schools. They would tend to look at such processes to explain differential achievement for different social groups, rather than looking to structural external factors like capitalism or patriarchy.

Schools ideally perform many social functions in modern society. These include socialization, social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation. Education plays a large part in the socialization of children into society. Most American children spend the required 180 days each year in school from the first grade through high school. Most of a child’s day through these years is devoted to activities involving school such as attending classes, doing homework, and participating in extracurricular activities. The school format is designed to teach children to be productive members of society. Schools bear most of the responsibility of preparing young people for the working environment. Children learn punctuality, time management, and to respect the authority of their teacher which prepares them to respect their boss. The curriculum also plays an important role. A class in civics teaches a child to be a good American, and a class in home economics teaches a child how to operate a household. Most socialization, however, occurs beyond the curriculum. Extra-curricular activities such as student government, being a part of a school newspaper, or being in a business club provide anticipatory socialization for adult jobs.

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Social benefits of education:

On average across 15 OECD countries, a 30-year-old male tertiary graduate can expect to live another 51 years, while a 30 year-old man who has not completed upper secondary education can expect to live an additional 43 years. A similar comparison between women in the two educational groups reveals less of a difference than that among men. In 27 OECD countries, on average, 80% of young tertiary graduates say they vote, while only 54% of young adults who have not completed upper secondary education do so. The difference in voting rates by level of education is much smaller among older age groups. Education can bring significant benefits to society, not only through higher employment opportunities and income but also via enhanced skills, improved social status and access to networks. By fully recognising the power of education, policy makers could better address diverse societal challenges.