

The social-functional, social conflict and symbolic interaction theories of educa...

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The Social-Functional, Social Conflict and Symbolic Interaction Theories of Education

The ultimate goal of education is the effective participation of an individual in social situations. Education, in the field of sociology, is basically the process which brings about changes in and through a person in a group. It has always been one of the more important topics discussed in sociology. In the long history of sociology, many significant works have been written from which several major theoretical perspectives have stemmed. These perspectives are often applied to the various social institutions to further understand them.

These theoretical perspectives include the structural-functional, social conflict, and symbolic interaction theories. The social-functional theory, first advocated by Emile Durkehim, Charles Horton Cooley, W. I. Thomas and Wilfredo Pareto, states that like a biological structure, society consists of parts that are interdependent with one another, but each with a certain function (Witt, n.

d.). These parts are called the social institutions, which are “ complex social forms that reproduce themselves such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems” (Miller, 2007). Education has always been counted as of the most important social institutions which bring about the greatest change in a person. It is in school wherein individuals first get to interact with people all their own age. It is also the best learning environment, as the education aims to give information to the students better than any other environment.

Education also plays a big role in shaping the future of a person, as his knowledge is gauged to know on what level of society he will belong. Using the social-functional theory, education is used to determine to what group a person will belong when he finishes with his studies. In other words, every individual goes through the same stage of education, and when they have finished with this, they find their own niches in society that is more suitable to them.

This is a socialization process which helps one determine his roles and the expectations of him. The second theory, the social conflict theory, stemmed from the ideas of Karl Marx and Max Weber. They proposed that society can best be studied through conflict and power struggles. “ Conflict theorists emphasized the importance of interests over norms and values, and the ways in which the pursuit of interests generated various types of conflict as normal aspects of social life, rather than abnormal or dysfunctional occurrences” (Marshall, 1998). Conflict is believed to be a constant aspect of social life which involves a wide range of groups or interests (like political and educational groups) which somewhat fight against each other for wealth, power and prestige. This may be connected to education in the sense that the conflict theory “ sees the purpose of education as maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of those who dominate society” (“ Theories of Education”, n. d.

). Although it agrees with the social-functional theory that education is a social institution wherein one can learn more from than any other institution, it says that individuals do not have the same level of intelligence—some

people are naturally smarter than others. This will create inequalities between the members of society, and those with lesser knowledge will be shunted aside as members of the lower class.

Conflict, then, arises between the so-called “ higher, more knowledgeable” and the less intelligent classes. Another point that may be taken in connection to the theory is how in a person’s development, there is conflict between the different social institutions as to which of these most had a hand in changing the behavior and thinking of a person. The family, for example, being the most basic and first social institution of every man, believes itself to be most important, as it nurtures man from infancy to childhood, which are the stages wherein the mind of a human is most impressionable. What one learns as a child, he brings until his adulthood.

Education, however, refutes this by saying that a large portion of the life of a person is spent in school. All the things he learns in more than ten years of education, he applies and uses until he is older. The last theory is the symbolic interaction theory, proposed by Herbert Spencer, Durheim and Marx.

This theory basically discusses on how society affects individuals and vice-versa. Society is reflected in every individual and that its external forms and structures are reflected though the social interactions occurring among individuals at the symbolic level. It focuses on how humans are set apart from animals with their words, gestures, rules, and roles (Plunkett, n. d.). In the education institution, “ symbolic interactionists focus on how teacher

expectations influence student performance, perceptions, and attitudes" ("Theories of Education", n.

d.). In relating symbolic interaction to the classroom, it is assumed that teachers and students rely on symbols, whether these may be done consciously or not, both to create and "read" the learning environment. "Teachers and students do not typically respond directly to each other's actions as stimuli, but assign meanings to the actions and act on the basis of the meanings" (Chapman, n. d.).

For example, in mathematical lessons, a teacher does not only teach the subject as is, but also uses other factors in the classroom, like the time left from their hour allotted for math, to emphasize her subject. There are other theories of education, but the aforementioned theories are the most popular in the educational institution. Although sociologists may have different takes on this social institution, there is no doubt that they agree that it is most useful in shaping all members of society. In the end, though, these theories will always be based on the actual individual and his relationship to others. Education, therefore, must only do its job, and impart the knowledge it is supposed to impart to all individuals, and let them decide as to what their roles in society will be in the future.

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