

Running head: SOCIAL THEORY IN THE FUNCTION OF EDUCATION

Social Theory in the Function of Education

Terresa Fontana

University of Phoenix

Social Contexts and Contemporary Issues

EDD711

Dr. Janice Fipp

February 3, 2007

## Social Theory in the Function of Education

According to Young Pai and Susan A. Adler, authors of *Cultural Foundations of Education* (2001), “It is important to remember that education always occurs in a particular sociocultural context” (p. xx). Consequently, developing an understanding of the various social theories that have both influenced and responded to the field of education is critical for today’s educators as well as anyone involved in educational policy reform or curriculum development. This paper will present an introduction to each of four major social theories that have impacted education, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each, and suggest which theory best explains the role of education within American society today. Finally, through the reflection on each social theory, the author will discuss which theory is most compatible with her personal philosophy of education.

### *Structuralism/Functionalism*

Throughout the twentieth century, the structural or functionalist theory has predominantly shaped the social sciences (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 5). Functional theorists view society as a living organism, akin to the human body, composed of a variety of interconnected structures that carry out various functions in order to survive and thrive (deMarrais & LeCompte, p. 5; Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 130). Traditional functionalists consider schooling to be one of the principle structures of society, one that transmits the ideals, mind-set, and characteristics of one generation to the next (deMarrais & LeCompte, p. 6). Through education, functionalists believe that children learn to be independent, realize the importance of personal achievement, and understand that they are grouped with others who have similar characteristics (“universalism”) while also being acknowledged for their individual qualities (“specificity”) (Pai & Adler, p. 131).

For those who view schools as the arena in which children learn to be good citizens and develop the leadership skills that will serve them as they are our future leaders, the educational system that operates based on the functionalist theory provides the most effective and successful school experience. It trains children to function as adults within their current socio-economic class and prepares them for a future similar to that realized by previous generations in their individual families. For critics of functionalism, however, this type of educational system is unsuccessful and ineffective because teachers and administrators within these schools may apply different strategies to children based upon their socio-economic status. “For example, upper-class children are more likely to be taught such qualities of self-control, leadership, and creativity; lower-class children tend to be instructed to respect authority, comply with instructions, and conform to the dominant norms” (Pai & Adler, p. 135). Consequently, children may not receive equal educational opportunities within a functionalist school and, therefore, are not prepared to reach their full potential as future members of the American society.

#### *Marxism and Neo-Marxism*

Although there are many similarities between functionalism and Marxism, the “Marxist educational theory arises from a conception of the human being as a natural person whose social nature is based on the means and modes of economic production” (Guttek, 1997, p. 237). Conflict theorists despise the reproduction of social class structure and the resulting inequality that exists within functionalist school systems (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 12), yet believe that schools exist solely to proliferate the economic and social classes of society. Both Marxists and Neo-Marxists view the educational system as a “scene of struggle between contending groups for power, prestige, and social dominance... [Further], schools are designed to serve and advance the interests of the dominant class” (Guttek, p. 238). Consequently, the divisions in social class

are, therefore, established and solidified while children are young. While the Marxist educational theory focuses mainly on the reproduction of social class from an economic standpoint, Neo-Marxism extends the theory to include the cultural and political aspects of such reproduction in regards to education and schooling (p. 241).

In past societies and in an historical context, Marxism and Neo-Marxism may have had more of an application within the American educational system. As it tends to be rather radical in its origins, however, there are very few current implications of Marxism in American education. While there may be some truth to the idea that a capitalist society, such as America, reproduces its social and economic classes within the school setting, there are many opportunities for children to overcome their socio-economic status because of their educational experiences. A 2005 study on the beliefs of college students regarding the American class system reveals that, in general, today's college students believe that a person's social class is a direct result of his/her personal ambition, achievement, and educational opportunities. The study reveals that college students believe "individual achievement [is] based on education and ability... [Further], social differences are justified because of differences in individual effort and opportunity... High social position means special ability and accomplishment... [Still, regardless of opportunity and social position, they believe] that success is based on education and ability" (Abowitz, 2005, p. 722). Therefore, the inequalities found in society in regards to economic, social, or political standing that Marxist and Neo-Marxist theorists attribute to students' educational experiences may, in reality, be a result of the students' desire to succeed, or the lack thereof, rather than education.

### *Interpretivism*

The Interpretivist believes that human beings respond to each other in regards to the "meanings assigned to people and settings by the people in them" (deMarrais & LeCompte,

1999, p. 20). Concerning education, the interactions between students, teachers, administrators, and peer groups must be understood in order to interpret the role of the school in society (Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 145). In contrast to the functionalist and Marxist or neo-Marxist theories, interpretivism upholds the ideal that socialization begins in the home and is only extended into the school setting. Further, according to Basil Bernstein, a leading interpretivist, “the family’s social class has the most formative influence on the child’s education and future work” (as cited in Pai & Adler, p. 146). Additionally, rather than a school forcing upon its students a certain social class, the school is viewed as a place in which a child is able to construct meaning through social interaction with peers, teachers, and administrators (deMarrais & LeCompte, p. 25).

The strengths of this theory include the need to observe and analyze the interactions between people within the school setting and to determine the ways in which a student constructs his/her own meaning of society and the American class system. Still, the interpretivist theory does not provide any suggestions on how students can overcome class struggles nor on how society as a whole can “eliminate or even substantially reduce social inequities in society” (Pai & Adler, p. 147).

### *Postmodernism*

In direct contrast to functionalism, Marxism and neo-Marxism, the postmodernist social theory proposes that the purpose of education should not be to “perpetuate the social, political, and economic interests” of those in the dominant class (Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 149). Further, rather than taking meaning from social interactions as believed by interpretivists, postmodernists believe that people construct and reconstruct meaning based on the changes in society and social structures (p. 149).

A strength of the postmodernism approach in education is that it “fosters the ability to think critically and question assumptions underlying claims to knowledge” (Roer-Strier, 2005, Abstract). Possibly the strongest weakness of postmodernism is that, because of its rejection of “school knowledge,” the educational outcomes proposed by this approach are “abstract and global [rather] than concrete and specific” (Pai & Adler, p. 149). As a result, teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers would find it difficult to strictly adhere to a postmodernistic approach to education.

### *Conclusion*

After a thorough review of the four major social theories and a reflection upon their impact on American education, the structural/functionalist approach appears to have the most significant role in education today. Children are, indeed, taught to be good citizens in classrooms throughout the country. Further, leadership skills are both directly taught and inherently fostered in children from their first day of school through to high school and beyond. Additionally, the writer has determined that functionalism is that which is most compatible with her personal philosophy of education. Because she believes that an eclectic approach to most everything concerning education is the most appropriate and effective approach, her philosophy of education will include components from each of the aforementioned social theories. Nonetheless, it will share many similarities with the structural/functionalist social theory in regards to education in America today.

## References

- Abowitz, D. A. (2005, December). Social mobility and the American dream: What do college students believe? *College Student Journal*, 39(4), 716-728.
- DeMarrais, K. B., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *The way schools work: A sociological analysis of education* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc..
- Gutek, G. L. (1997). *Philosophical and ideological perspectives on education* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Pai, Y., & Adler, S. A. (2001). *Cultural foundations of education* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice-Hall.
- Roer-Strier, D. (2005, April). Human development education for social workers in multicultural societies. *Social Work Education*, 24(3), 311-326.