

The Sociology of Education and the Sociological Approaches to Educational Disparities

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Abstract: In this article, we aim to briefly present the key stages, factors, and thinkers who contributed to shaping the sociology of education, as well as some theories that addressed the issue of educational disparities among students. This article focuses on sociological theories that have examined the topic of schooling, as it represents one of the primary concerns of the sociology of education. Among the issues addressed by these sociological theories, in particular, are inequality and educational disparities among students entering school, depending on the different social backgrounds from which they come. In this article, we will discuss some of the sociological approaches adopted by these theories in addressing this issue.

Keywords: Sociology of education; school, education; students; sociological theories.

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I- Introduction :

This article falls within the framework of the sociology of education. Through it, we aim to present the early sociological theories that contributed to shaping this discipline as an independent branch within sociology. We also seek to provide an analysis of some of the sociological approaches adopted by these theories concerning the school and how they addressed the issue of educational inequality, which persists among students based on their social backgrounds. This inequality has been a fundamental and prominent issue that sociologists have attempted to address.

In the field of the sociology of education, the school represents one of the key subjects that researchers have extensively studied. In this regard, multiple theories have emerged to examine the various issues raised by this institution from a sociological perspective. Some sociologists perceive the school as an institution that reproduces existing power relations and social inequalities, while others hold the opposite view, asserting that the school plays a significant role in fostering social integration and embodying the consensus upon which society is built.

Alongside these macro-sociological approaches, which focus on the role of educational institutions in shaping the future of students, there exists another category of approaches known as micro-sociological theories. These prioritize the individual over social structures. In the field of education, these theories argue that students, in reality, are the ones who determine the fate of educational institutions through the rational decisions and strategies taken daily by social actors, such as students and their families.

In this article, we first provide a brief overview of the key stages, factors, and thinkers who contributed to the emergence of the sociology of education. We then present the main sociological theories that have examined schools, highlighting the core ideas emphasized by these theorists. Finally, we compare two theoretical models to evaluate how each addresses the issue of educational disparities across social classes. As a conclusion, we will shed light on some of the theoretical orientations that contemporary approaches are beginning to outline regarding education.

I. The Sociology of Education

Although the initial contours of the sociology of education began to take shape around the turn of the 19th century, it was not fully established as a distinct branch of sociology until the second half of the 20th century. From the 1950s onward, the field of this discipline became clearer, as empirical research on schooling expanded to encompass various educational and academic issues. These early investigations in the field led to the emergence of multiple sociological theories, which aimed to interpret the growing contradictions within the education system and propose solutions for addressing them.

The early inceptions of this discipline emerged with the initial lectures delivered by Émile Durkheim on pedagogy and educational sciences at the University of Bordeaux in 1887, and later at the Sorbonne starting in 1902. Due to his significant academic influence during that period, Durkheim was able to introduce a sociological dimension to the educational issues he addressed in his lectures. In these teachings, he focused on the role of schooling in social integration and upbringing, successfully imposing this perspective within official circles until his death.

However, what characterized this early phase of the sociology of education -up until World War II- was the near-total absence of empirical investigations and theoretical studies in the field of education (Cherkaoui, 1986). Nevertheless, in the post-war period, the field of the sociology of education witnessed a significant rise in research. Since that time, as demand for education increased across various social classes and economic sectors—particularly with the emergence of the service sector—public authorities in many countries adopted new educational policies aimed at making education accessible to all social classes.

During this second phase, marked by the expansion of education across different social strata, numerous issues related to schooling began to emerge, necessitating empirical research to

provide answers. Various institutions and organizations, both governmental and socio-economic, called for studies on education. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, public authorities in many industrialized countries commissioned extensive research to explore the role of education in economic growth and the democratization of educational systems (Duru-Bellat & Von Zanten, 1992).

Despite the widespread implementation of universal education policies at the time, several problems and contradictions gradually emerged within the education sector. These included deepening educational inequality among different social classes, school failure, and dropout rates—issues that predominantly affected children from the working class. In response, sociologists began to analyze these contradictions in schooling, applying sociological theories they had previously used to examine other societal issues such as industrialization and religion.

The sociological approaches to schooling, which form the theoretical foundation of the sociology of education, are divided into two main categories—both of which have shaped sociological theory since its inception. On one hand, there are macro-sociological theories, which argue that the school determines children's futures. These include reproduction theories (*les théories de la reproduction*). On the other hand, micro-sociological theories assert that the individual, as a rational actor, is solely responsible for determining their own educational trajectory. Between these two perspectives, a third category of theories has begun to emerge in studies on education—those that fall within the framework of symbolic interactionism (Ferreol & Noreck, 1989).

All these theories, which will be examined in the following section, along with the field investigations focused on the educational institution, have significantly contributed to understanding the mechanisms governing the functioning of schools and educational systems, as well as the necessary reforms to address their deficiencies. As a result, Cherkaoui (1986), a contemporary expert in the sociology of education, states that in recent decades, the field has experienced remarkable growth, reflected in the increasing number of research centers, scholars, academic journals, and other related developments.

II. Sociological Theories on Schooling

Since the 1970s, the sociology of education has developed several sociological approaches to studying the issues surrounding schooling and education. These approaches can be broadly categorized into four main theoretical frameworks. The first is the functional theory, the second is reproduction theory, the third is the perspective adopted by Raymond Boudon, and the fourth is the approach that has developed within the framework of symbolic interactionism.

1. Functional Theory:

This section presents the perspective adopted by Émile Durkheim regarding the educational institution in France, followed by the views of Talcott Parsons in the United States.

1.1. Émile Durkheim:

Émile Durkheim is among the first theorists to focus on the issue of education, primarily for theoretical reasons. As is well known, both his theoretical and empirical works were dominated by a strong social dimension. He was particularly concerned with the "social question" (*la question sociale*), which arose from the social and political transformations that France experienced throughout the 19th century.

Durkheim, fearing the social fragmentation that threatened French society during this period, sought ways to rebuild social cohesion. This concern led him to study various socially significant

topics, including labor, law, schooling, religion, morality, socialism, education, and pedagogy. The themes of social integration and solidarity became central to all his work until his death in 1918. The core question that guided his research was: How can individuals be integrated into society to achieve social cohesion?

Regarding education, Durkheim is regarded as a founding figure in educational sciences in France and was one of the first scholars to lecture on education, initially at the University of Bordeaux in 1887 and later at the Sorbonne in 1902. He authored several key works in this field, including:

- L'éducation morale (Moral Education)
- Éducation et sociologie (Education and Sociology)
- L'évolution pédagogique en France (The Evolution of Pedagogy in France)

Durkheim adopted a sociological approach in his studies on education, considering it an essential domain within the field of sociology (Plaisance & Vergnaud, 1998). He viewed education as a social phenomenon inherently linked to other social phenomena within society (Plaisance & Vergnaud, 1998). Thus, educational phenomena (les faits éducatifs), like other social phenomena, exert coercion on individuals.

Among the institutions responsible for education, Durkheim emphasized the role of the school, which instills fundamental values in individuals to facilitate their integration into society. Unlike sociologists who perceived schools as sites of conflict and contradictions, Durkheim -who consistently sought to establish social cohesion- was convinced that the primary function of the educational institution was to achieve consensus rather than rivalry (rivalités) (Ferréol & Noreck, 1989).

Durkheim placed great importance on schools for the socialization of individuals, especially since traditional institutions such as family and religion had begun to decline in industrialized societies due to economic, social, and political changes. He saw the school as an instrument that prepares individuals to lead morally and socially responsible lives, thereby fulfilling his key concern: social integration.

Durkheim's approach to schooling is functional in nature, as he viewed the school's role in society as twofold:

1. Instilling moral values and educational ideals that are imposed on students to ensure social cohesion and collective integration necessary for the continuity of society.
2. Preparing individuals for specific roles in the division of labor, as schools contribute to assigning individuals to various occupations (Duru-Bellat & Von Zanten, 1992). However, for Durkheim, the division of labor had a social function rather than merely an economic one (De la division du travail social).

1.2. Talcott Parsons:

Talcott Parsons, a key figure in structural-functionalism, extended Durkheim's perspective on education and socialization. He emphasized the school's role in reproducing shared social values and norms, which contribute to social cohesion and societal continuity. According to Parsons, children learn in school how to achieve individual success (*accomplissement individuel*/achievement), and how to accept educational selection (*sélection scolaire*) as a logical and rational process dictated by competition (Duru-Bellat & Von Zanten, 1992).

Parsons argued that individuals acquire their social status based on merit, in accordance with these rational standards. Like Durkheim and other functionalists, Parsons viewed schools as vehicles for progress, change, and social mobility.

However, Parsons and functionalists generally did not critically question issues such as educational selection and systemic contradictions within the school system. These issues only gained significant attention during the 1970s, with the work of scholars like Establet, Baudelot, and Bourdieu, who analyzed the functioning of the school system from a more critical perspective.

2. Reproduction Theory:

This section explores two major approaches within reproduction theory:

1. The approach of Roger Establet and Christian Baudelot.
2. The approach of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron.

2.1. Roger Establet and Christian Baudelot:

For Establet and Baudelot, the school is an institution mobilized within the broader struggle between social forces in capitalist societies. The ruling classes use the school as a tool to protect their interests and maintain their dominance.

From their perspective, the educational system serves to reproduce both the division of labor and the production relations dictated by the capitalist system. For example, in France, capitalist institutions—based on Taylorist work organization, which separates manual labor from intellectual labor—have shaped the structure of the educational system (Ferréol & Noreck, 1989).

As a result, the French educational system produces two distinct educational tracks:

1. A primary-vocational track, leading to manual or technical work.
2. A secondary-academic track, preparing students for higher intellectual professions.

This division ensures that the class-based social hierarchy is perpetuated through the school system, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than promoting real social mobility.

The first educational track leads to the training and preparation of the workforce for the benefit of capitalist institutions, while the second track leads to the preparation of executives who work on reproducing the existing power relations in society.

Since these two educational tracks pursued by students reflect, on a social level, the existence of two contradictory social classes, the bourgeoisie and the working class, it is the working class that directs its children towards this vocational education track because they lack the means to allow their children to pursue long-term educational paths and remain in school for an extended period.

For its part, the capitalist system does not wish to invest heavily in further education for the children of these classes. Meanwhile, the children of the bourgeois class come from wealthy family backgrounds, where their families can afford to invest in their education in prestigious schools, knowing that the degrees they obtain will have high market value, securing them high-ranking positions in the job market.

Thus, Establet and Baudelot adopted a critical reading of the school and its pedagogical practices. According to both scholars, the high failure rates among students from working-class families are not due to the social environment in which they live but rather to reasons related, as Establet and Baudelot argue, to the school itself.

This institution is an ideological apparatus serving the capitalist system, and its goal is to reproduce the class-based structure of society as it exists. The school, which claims to be neutral, in reality, interacts with students in a discriminatory and biased manner.

Finally, this institution primarily seeks to satisfy employers, as it trains a workforce at the level desired by capitalist institutions. Main Books:

- L'école capitaliste en France (Baudelot, Establet)
- L'école primaire divise (Baudelot, Establet)
- L'école est-elle rentable ? (Establet)

2.2. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron:

For Pierre Bourdieu, sociology helps to unveil the reality of power relations and structures in society, which serve the interests of the wealthy classes at the expense of lower classes.

The school, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is among the social institutions that work on reproducing these power relations, relying on what he calls symbolic violence, which is exercised through the type of education provided by this institution to the children who enter it.

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron published two books, in particular, that have become classics in the field of education:

- Les Héritiers, 1964

- La Reproduction, 1970

In these books, the authors attempted to present a critical study of the educational system in France, offering an analysis of social disparities among university students, which had begun to emerge through the first field investigations on schooling in France.

Among Bourdieu's significant contributions to the sociology of education is his emphasis on the ideological role of the school. This institution, which operates under the pretense of merit and academic excellence, in reality, legitimizes the dominance of classes that possess cultural and social capital over other classes. The educational system generally functions to promote and disseminate the values and culture of the educated bourgeois classes in order to reinforce their social status at the expense of lower classes.

The theory of reproduction, adopted by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in their sociological approach to schooling, asserts that the school culture acquired by students at various educational levels is closer to the culture of children from wealthy classes. Consequently, these children feel that school culture is an inheritance for them. Meanwhile, for children from the working class, the gap is significant between their original culture and the school culture they must assimilate. This entire assimilation process takes place passively (Duru-Bellat & Von Zanten, 1992).

Moreover, the school is indifferent to these existing cultural capital disparities among students, as Pierre Bourdieu argues (*l'école est indifférente face à ces différences*). It seeks to present itself as a neutral institution, advocating equality among the diverse groups of students it receives, despite their different cultural and social backgrounds. However, in reality, while the school is officially responsible for education, it also performs another implicit function—that of reproducing legitimate culture (*la culture légitime*), which belongs to the bourgeois classes.

3. The Theory of the Actor with Raymond Boudon:

Raymond Boudon, who represents a distinct theoretical current in sociology in France known as Methodological Individualism (*Individualisme Méthodologique*), developed a different sociological approach to the study of schooling compared to the perspectives previously discussed.

Unlike Pierre Bourdieu, who emphasized the importance of social structures over the individual in the educational process, Raymond Boudon reversed this logic, arguing that the individual is the one who determines their own educational path and choices. According to Boudon, the individual is a rational actor who acts (Cherkaoui, 1986), and makes decisions after assessing the cost-benefit ratio of their choices. He asserted that this theoretical approach could also be applied to explain school-related phenomena.

In a book he published in 1973, titled: *Inégalité des chances* (Inequality of Opportunities)

Boudon attempted to analyze statistical data available at the time regarding the state of education in France through the lens of this theory.

In this book, like Pierre Bourdieu, he studied the relationship between educational inequalities among students and social mobility in France. However, Boudon reached a different conclusion than Bourdieu and Passeron, who, as discussed earlier, argued that inequalities in education and student outcomes are linked to structural factors beyond individual will and choice.

For Boudon, the issue is one of strategies, not one of social or cultural determinism.

According to Raymond Boudon, the functioning of the school (le fonctionnement de l'école) follows a rational logic to which all students are subjected. The school serves as a space for competition, where individuals from all social classes strive to realize different educational and social projects based on rational decisions they make regarding their education.

At every stage of this educational path, students and their families build winning strategies by evaluating the cost-benefit ratio of the academic project they wish to invest in. For example, "a low-income worker cannot risk enrolling his child in secondary education unless he is certain that his child has a real chance of success".

At a time when the school's bias in favor of children from higher cultural capital backgrounds—to the detriment of working-class children—was becoming evident, Boudon's theory of Methodological Individualism (Individualisme méthodologique) emerged as a counterargument to the theoretical framework proposed by Bourdieu and Passeron (Boudon, 1979).

According to Boudon, a student's success or failure in school does not depend on the school itself, or on the child's cultural or social heritage, but rather on the correctness of the decisions and projects they undertake to achieve their educational goals. In Boudon's view, an essential part of the school experience is shaped by students' choices, which can gradually influence the direction of the educational institution to align with their aspirations.

III. The Sociological Explanation of Educational Inequality among Students:

This section examines how educational inequalities—in terms of success rates and social mobility differences across various social classes—are explained through two theoretical models:

1. Pierre Bourdieu's approach
2. Raymond Boudon's approach

1. Pierre Bourdieu's Perspective on Educational Inequality:

Pierre Bourdieu argues that educational disparities arise because of the school itself, for several reasons. The school is culturally closer to children from wealthy and educated backgrounds, such as intellectuals, professionals, and teachers. This advantage manifests in the school's curriculum, which reflects the values upheld by pedagogical traditions, the content, and form of culture that it imposes on students—values and traditions that closely resemble those of the wealthy classes.

Furthermore, the school fails to acknowledge the cultural differences among students, which are evident from the very beginning of their educational journey.

For children from wealthy backgrounds, school is not significantly different from their social and cultural environment, meaning they do not have to exert much effort to adapt. In contrast, the school environment is completely foreign to working-class children, whose cultural background is ignored by the educational institution. As a result, children from wealthy families tend to succeed more, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds struggle.

Consequently, Bourdieu argues that the school legitimizes these social disparities in education, which in turn leads to the monopolization of social positions (*les positions sociales*) by bourgeois children, who excel in school, while children from lower social classes find it much harder to achieve significant social mobility.

2. Raymond Boudon's Perspective on Educational Inequality:

Raymond Boudon, on the other hand, attributes success or failure in school primarily to students themselves, considering them rational actors.

At each stage of their educational journey, individuals assess their situation and future prospects within the school system. They voluntarily choose whether to continue studying, pursue a specific field, drop out, or make extra efforts to improve their academic performance. If continuing education does not entail significant costs and can enhance their future social status, students choose to persist. However, if the cost outweighs the expected benefit, they adopt alternative strategies.

For Boudon, the reason educational disparities exist and why schools fail to achieve equal social mobility across all classes lies in the decisions made by individuals themselves.

Educational differences among students are not caused by cultural factors but rather by different choices and strategies made by students and their families throughout their academic journey.

In some cases, schools experience what Boudon calls an "aggregation effect" (*effet d'agrégation*), where the accumulation of individual choices leads to an imbalance in the educational system. For instance, when a large number of students choose the same specialization, the school becomes unable to accommodate everyone's aspirations.

According to Boudon, this phenomenon results in unintended negative consequences (*effet pervers*), which are among the core concepts in his sociological analysis—not only in education but also in his broader work on society as a whole.

IV- Conclusion:

In concluding this article, we would like to highlight some of the new theoretical trends that currently dominate studies and research in the field of the sociology of education. While the critical

theories concerning education that we previously examined are experiencing a decline within the sociology of education, new theoretical approaches -particularly those within the framework of micro-sociological theories- are emerging.

This theoretical renewal in the field of the sociology of education can generally be explained by the changes occurring in the education sector in contemporary societies. Today, more than ever before, schools are welcoming a large number of students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Additionally, educational systems have become increasingly complex due to the multiple challenges posed by current local, national, and international contexts, as well as the need to focus on mastery and the teaching of new skills.

Modern sociological studies have adopted a different approach to analyzing schools. Unlike earlier theories that emphasized structures and systems, these new theories place greater importance on situations, interactions, and the processes they generate. According to these perspectives, the functioning of educational institutions is shaped by the actions and behaviors of various actors, such as students, teachers, and administrators. Educational issues are therefore constructed daily and continuously.

This theoretical framework, currently embraced by sociologists of education, places the student at the center of analysis, viewing them as an actor whose daily actions within the school environment matter. Sociologists infiltrate the school setting itself and attempt to understand and interpret social realities from within, following Max Weber's methodological approach (Il s'agit d'une sociologie de la compréhension à la weberienne).

To understand the logic behind individual actions, sociologists reconstruct students' experiences, their relationship with the knowledge acquired in school, and their ways of expressing themselves and communicating during lessons. For example, François Dubet's Theory of School Experience (La théorie de l'expérience scolaire) is one such approach that seeks to explore these dynamics.

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