
Ari Antikainen, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu Campus (ari.antikainen(at)uef.fi)

A bird’s-eye view of the sociology of education

In today’s globalising society, the statement that sociology is like a common language understood by researchers in different parts of the world seems even more apposite than before. Even so, it does no harm to remember that sociology is a divided and contested field. For example, within American sociology of education there have been, according Richards (1970), four ways of combining theory and empirical research from the start. The general sociology group has concentrated on descriptive analysis of the social conditions and functions of education. The normative theory group has elaborated societal planning by aiming at “scientific definitions” of values. The social foundations group has been committed to wider social reforms and tried to promote teachers’ awareness of the social conditions of transformation. The social technology group, which has eventually become the mainstream, has focused on examining the adaptation of the individual’s character and personality to society as a solution to social problems. These four ways of seeing the relationship between theory and practice and their variants have recurred in the later development of the sociology of education. In discussions, their differences are often pruned back to a division into the mainstream and the radical or critical approach. (Antikainen 1992.)

Probably everywhere, the sociology of education developed from the study of socialisation into the study of education. Besides the study of education, the sociologies of the family, of youth, and of childhood diverged from the general study of socialisation at the same time. This change was part of a more general change in sociology, which has largely been organised into the study of the operating ranges of different institutions, such as the sociology of economics, the sociology of politics, the sociology of religion, the sociology of sport, etc. Similar development has been undergone by all mature disciplines and fields of research. Specialisations develop within disciplines, but such specialisation often means fragmentation as well. But surely the sociology of education, focused on schooling, can also display a wide perspective.
There are clear national differences in the sociology of education, which is quite understandable, considering that ever since its early stage of close connection with religion and the church, the development of education has been first and foremost coupled to the development of the nation state and national cultures. Besides, there are differences in the organisation of universities and disciplines among different countries, and these differences are reflected in the sociology of education. For example, the discipline of social pedagogy, developed in central and southern Europe, is a singular field within the sociology of education or rather, perhaps, applying the sociology of education. Contrary to the American technological point of view, it is characterised by a humanistic perspective.

The world atlas of the sociology of education is a little surprising. No doubt Anglo-American research is in a central position and dominates the most prestigious publications. Numerically, however, it may be Latin America and Russia that have the most sociologists of education. Whereas the conferences organised by the Research Committee on Sociology of Education of the International Sociological Association (ISA) are attended by about one to two hundred researchers elsewhere, the attendance in Latin America is over a thousand. Research in Latin America has centred on the politics of education and of the sociology of education. The centre stage is held by the heritage of the Brazilian Paulo Freire. According to Carlos Torres (2003), the educational systems in Latin America reflect an extremely eclectic mix of philosophical and pedagogical thought, from pedagogical positivism to spiritualism, humanism and normalism and on to the economics of education with its theories of human capital. Naturally, this situation is reflected in research, too.

In Russia, people have awakened to the fact that the changeover from the soviet system into a market economy has brought up the position of education also as an originator of differences and inequality (Konstantinovski 2003). Our colleague David Konstantinovski of the Russian Academy of Sciences published a 550-page book entitled 'Inequality and education' (in Russian, with an abstract in English) at the end of the year 2008. He points out that the largest subgroup in the Russian association of sociologists is made up of the sociologists of education and that the reasons for the popularity of the sociology of education are partly practical. All students and researchers have first-hand experiences of the school system and therefore find it easy to gather material on it. The same circumstance occurs in Finland, of course, but with us it manifests itself as a reason behind unwelcoming attitudes towards the sociology of education.
The regeneration of the sociology of education may have taken place rather similarly even in quite different countries. In the *International Handbook on the Sociology of Education* edited by Carlos Torres and myself, our Chinese colleagues Jason C. Chang and Zhang Renjie (2003) discuss the history of the field in Mainland China and Taiwan. A translation of an American textbook on the sociology of education into Chinese came out as early as 1917, and a book by Tao Menghe on society and education was published in 1922. Chang and Renjie find that the sociology of education of the 1920s and 1930s represented a national project that aimed at “saving the nation by means of education.” The goal was quite similar, then, to those in many other countries.

In the People’s Republic of China, as in the Soviet Union and the people’s democracies, sociology fell into disfavour in 1949, and that situation lasted all the way till 1979. Some sociologists of education moved to Taiwan, where they worked mainly at departments of psychology and in teacher education. Chang and Renjie find that the 1960s marked the birth of the sociology of education in Taiwan, with the 1970s as the period of groundwork and the 1980s as the period of expansion. Although Taiwanese sociologists of education had to bow to the position of national consensus politics, that conflict theories, especially the Marxist theory, did not suit Taiwanese society, in all other ways the whole gamut of concepts and approaches flourished in the Taiwanese sociology of education, just like in the West. The central concepts included hidden curriculum and ideology, and feminism, postmodernism, Weberianism, reproduction theories, resistance theories, the critical theory, the dramaturgical theory, the structuration theory, ethnomethodology, and others found their way into Taiwanese research.

In Mainland China, a National Council for the Sociology of Education was founded in 1989, and it began publishing a newsletter. In Taiwan, an Association for the Sociology of Education was founded in 2000, and it began publishing the periodical *Taiwan Journal of Sociology of Education*, in which, incidentally, I have once published an article.

In the Nordic countries, the sociology of education is quite a small discipline, but it has a distinct identity. In Finland, for instance, its tradition is long but fragmentary. I have sought to nurture that tradition in collaboration with Risto Rinne and Leena Koski by publishing a popular textbook *Kasvatussosiologia* ['Sociology of Education'] (4th edition 2010), which has also been translated into Estonian under the title *Haridussotsioologia*. One of its characteristics is a strong historical emphasis á la Risto Rinne.
On the sociology of adult education

Opinions vary as to whether adult education and learning is a universal institution. At any rate, it is a very common institution that has spread all around. The *Unesco Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2010) classifies the supply of adult education into three categories according to the sophistication of the supply. The empirical criterion is the placement of the country on the Education for All Development Index. In countries of low development (which include some Arab states, South and West Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa), adult education has been defined in terms of adult literacy, in countries of medium development (which include some Arab states, Asia (ASEAN), Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa) in terms of human resources development, and in countries of high development (which include some countries in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and North America) in terms of a lifelong learning framework. The classification also reveals the key issues and the variability of the suppliers of education.

Historically, adult education has been connected with the development of the civil society but, as indicated by the above typology, its connection with the state has become closer in the past few decades. In addition, under current global capitalism the supply of adult education by the private sector has seen the strongest growth, both absolutely and relatively.

In the sociology of adult education, the most researched question by far is participation in adult education. It is well known to follow the class and stratum differences in the society. The studies carried out on adult education tell us how long the arm of social background is (Rinne & Kivinen 1993). Similarly to earlier education, adult education, too, clearly shows the class-based accumulation of material and symbolic resources (Fraser & Honneth 2004). Equally interesting research topics are furnished by the differences among different countries. Comparable material is available mainly from the developed countries, particularly from the OECD countries.

There are systematic differences in participation in adult education according to the type or model of the state, even among the OECD countries (Desjardins, Rubenson & Milana 2006, 35-73; Antikainen 2010). Participation is higher in democracies than in dictatorships or countries recently freed from dictatorship. The highest rate, with about 50 % of the adult population having taken part within a year, is in the Nordic countries. The lowest rate, below 20 %, is found in the East European
countries freed from the Soviet system and the Mediterranean countries freed from dictatorship. The high Nordic participation in work-related adult education is mainly matched by countries representing the liberal model, such as Great Britain, but in hobby-related adult education, the Nordic countries are clearly at a higher level of participation.

In his highly influential book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), Gösta Esping-Andersen proposes a classification of ideal types of welfare state. His point of departure is the concept of “decommodification”, i.e., “the degree to which they (= the welfare states) permit people to make their living standards independent of pure market forces. It is in this sense that social rights diminish citizens’ status as ‘commodities’.” (Ibid., 3) He distinguishes three types of welfare regime: liberal, conservative or corporativist, and Nordic or social-democratic. The United States, Australia, and lately also Great Britain would be examples of liberal welfare states, and the European Catholic-dominated states, such Italy, France, Germany, and Austria, would exemplify conservative or corporativist welfare states. Liberal welfare capitalism emphasizes individualism and the market, while the key elements of the conservative welfare model are an employment-based system of social security and the role of the family as a source of security. In both of these models, social rights are restricted and the rate of decommodification is low. The third regime cluster, the Nordic model, includes “those countries in which the principles of universalism and decommodification of social rights were extended also to the new middle classes.” They are called “social-democratic” regime types, in which “rather than tolerate a dualism between state and market, between working class and middle class, the social democrats pursued a welfare state that would promote an equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs as pursued elsewhere” (Ibid., 26-29).

All the three types of welfare state presented by Esping-Andersen are ideal types describing how each regime divides the responsibility for providing welfare among the state, the market, and the household/family. Real, concrete welfare states blend features of all three types.

The Nordic model is most often associated with social policy and the social security system, but it actually concerns the mode of operation of all public institutions, such as education, the labour market, and cultural services (Antikainen 2010). Indeed, researchers of the macro-determinants of adult education and lifelong learning posit that comprehensive education systems are bringing about a higher rate of participation (Desmedt & Groenez 2008).
Educational interventions by the state and the strength of the vocational education system may constitute further educational determinants of participation.

Furthermore, at least the striving towards full employment, the high degree of organisation among both employees and employers, and the cooperation between the state and the labour market organisations – a kind of labour market model - are organic parts of the Nordic model. Researchers also point out that an active labour market policy belongs to the macro-determinants of participation in adult education (Desmedt & Gronez 2008).

Whereas adult education has a low status in most countries of the world, that is not the case in the Nordic countries.

**Future prospects**

At the beginning of this contribution I mentioned that sociology and the sociology of education can be seen to resemble a common professional language. What does this language consist of, then? Michael Burawoy (2008), the new President of the ISA, would seem to offer us an answer. According to my reading of it, the common language consists of various aspects of sociology – or education as a social science - i.e., their professional, critical, policy and public engagement. Professionalism pertains to the solidity and accuracy of the analyses, criticality to not bowing to public authority, policy relevance to the applicability of the knowledge obtained, and publicity to interactivity and openness.

A global sociology built from down on up is not global in the sense of contextlessness – e.g., in the sense of passing over national circumstances; rather, it is context-specific, or circumstance-specific, sociology of globalisation. Building that sort of sociology also means globalising sociology. For an example of circumstance-specific sociology of globalisation, Burawoy refers to the action of South African sociologists towards eliminating racial segregation. Similarly, research carried out in the Nordic countries on the Nordic model, for example, can represent circumstance-specific sociology and pedagogies of globalisation, i.e., research efforts set up for Nordic circumstances.

The key questions are the following: is there a joint project to be found to unite sociologists – or rather, social science; is there a community that will create a space for discussion, and how can we use our common language to deal with the differences and inequalities among the nations and
regions of the world? Michael Burawoy suggests that the common project could be found in challenging market fundamentalism or, in practice, neo-liberalism. Sociologists could learn the common language from each other: professionalism from the United States and Britain, policy relevance from the Nordic countries, publicity from India, South Africa, and Brazil, and criticality from France. At any rate, there is a sore need for collaboration that is more versatile and more equal than it is at present. Sociology and educational research, like the social sciences in general, have their common foundations and challenges in universality and humanity.

I think Burawoy’s and his associates’ programme fits the sociology of education remarkably well. The programme is partly represented in the entry for the ISA Research Committee on the Sociology of Education in the ISA Sociopedia and in the longer article-form version of that entry (Antikainen et al. 2011).

NOTES:

[1] This paper is based on my talk “Remarks on the Sociology of Education and Adult Education” at the XVII ISA World Congress of Sociology in Gothenburg, Sweden, 11-17 July 2010 (RC 04 Sociology of Education, Session 2. Sociology of Adult Education).

References:


