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Chapter 1

Introduction

THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE BOOK

The aims of this book are as follows; firstly, we wish you to take an active part in your own education. Knowledge, understanding, interpretation, application, analysis and evaluation are the central skills that new sociologists must demonstrate in any examination. Knowledge means showing you have learnt and have a good command of sociological concepts, evidence and theories and understanding is displayed in your accurate, clear usage of the material. Interpretation means that you should be able to look at different types of text, such as tables or newspaper articles, and be able to communicate your understanding of them. Application is the ability to take sociological and non-sociological material and use it in relevant ways to answer the questions set. Analysis means being able to demonstrate a detailed examination of the structure and composition of arguments, accounts, theories and evidence. Evaluation means being able to assess sociological debates and arguments through a consideration of evidence.

The best way of developing these skills is to practise them yourself. We have therefore designed a series of exercises that are tied to these skills, and if you carry them out you should be able to improve your performance in these areas. You will be able to identify the skills each exercise is designed to develop by looking out for the following symbols: [I] for interpretation, [A] for application, [AN] for analysis and [E] for evaluation. However we also want you to understand the interconnections between all the information in this book, so you will also find that there are link exercises for you to do. These will not only help you to perform skilfully, but also increase the sophistication of your understanding of the sociology of education and training.

Our second aim is to present you with sociological knowledge that is appropriate to and useful for your examination performance, as the ability to convey
knowledge [K] and understanding [U] is another skill that all examinations include. We decided that what we did not want to do was to present the knowledge you easily could glean from elsewhere. But we do want you to be as up-to-date as possible with the material you are familiar with, so that you can apply it in the examination. We have therefore focused on developments in sociology during the 1990s and early years of the 2000s.

We have not attempted to tell you all there is to know about sociology in this period, because to develop your sociological skills you should be finding out for yourself what has been happening in society and sociology during this time. We have, however, tried to give you an overview of the debates that have been going on, and the sociologists who have been writing about education and training in this period. You will find that much of the material concerns the theories and ideas of the New Right and of the postmodernists, and how other sociologists have responded to these developments during this period.

Our third aim is to help you to pass your exams, so we have included a series of exam-type questions, sometimes with answers and sometimes not, but always there is some task for you to do yourself. We believe that if you carry out the activities connected to these questions you will help yourself to pass the examination. It may be that you will prefer to conduct these activities with a teacher, and she or he will be able to build on the ideas and activities to improve further your performance. However, you can also use the examination activities as supplements to your classroom work, as you go through the course, or as a revision aid as you near the examination.

The important thing to remember is that we cannot do it all for you. You will gain most from this book if you approach it in an active way, and are prepared to take the information and skills and apply them in the examination itself. If you just read the text and miss out the exercises, you will only be doing half of what is necessary to pass the exam. Therefore you should develop your own revision system that you know works for you, and use the material in this book accordingly to fills gaps in your knowledge, to learn key theories and debates, and develop skills that you can display when being assessed. A revision system works best when it involves you actively in identifying which areas you need to work on, asking your own questions about material and your understanding of it, using past exam questions to guide your revision, and making sure you know how to display the skills you will be assessed on. Actively summarising, condensing and abbreviating all the material you have learnt will go a long way in helping you internalise and remember the key content of your course.
DEFINITIONS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the act or process of education as ‘systematic instruction and/or the development of character or mental powers’. These are fairly vague notions which perhaps are of little help in trying to define education in the modern world. We know that children in many parts of the world receive little or no ‘systematic instruction’ but are still responsible for the economic well-being of their communities. On the other hand, in Western industrial societies, children are required by law to go to school and to receive ‘systematic instruction’ until the age of sixteen or, more commonly now, eighteen. In short, most people spend more or less the first twenty years of their lives in various types of school – nursery, primary, secondary, further, tertiary, higher. The corresponding illiteracy rates are very low in Western societies, at below 5 per cent. However, throughout Latin America and many nations in Africa, illiteracy is commonplace. These societies often have ‘oral traditions’ rather than communicating through the written word.

Exercise 1.1

Try to think of a definition for education that goes beyond the Oxford Dictionary one. Think about aspects of learning that could also be included related to relationships, emotional maturity, independence, working with others or problem solving.

There is thus an international or global dimension to education, in which competitiveness in a world economy is linked to the density of education and training that the populations of countries receive. The idea here is that, as economies become more sophisticated and interlinked, in order to compete with other areas of the world, a country needs to invest heavily in the skills and education of its people. With the massive changes that occur in economies through developments such as the internet and virtual reality, in order for a society to be economically successful it needs a highly skilled workforce (see Castells 1996).

There is another implication for education in the idea of a global economy. Whereas, in the past, education has been predominantly the preserve of the young, and adults tended not to become involved in education except as parents or teachers, the global economy demands that individuals become ‘life-long learners’. It is no longer sufficient that we learn to become adults through
Education and Training

Education or workers through training when we are young; we must continually be learning new skills and theories if we are to make our way in the world, both as individuals and as a society.

Education and training in a society is thus a valuable resource and, like all resources, become the object of conflict and competition, because there is a scarcity aspect to them. We have already noted how, in many parts of the world, there are low levels of skills and limited educational opportunities for many segments of the population. Yet many children and their parents will make huge sacrifices to obtain an education or be trained in a skill that has value in the workplace. In many developing countries, it is investment in education that is seen as a route to development and prosperity, but it is not everybody who is lucky enough to receive an education. Freire (1972), a Brazilian educator, developed literacy programmes for the poor to help them take control over their lives. His projects were supported by a left-wing government and became part of the Liberation Theology in Latin America. He argued that formal education was a means by which powerful groups in society could impose their value-system on the people, Freire was eventually imprisoned by a new right-wing government and went into exile. However, one of his key ideas was that education could transform the social order.

Exercise 1.2

Imagine that you were given the power to create an education system. What would your main priorities be? How would decide what subjects to teach? How far does learning need to relate to societal norms and values?

This brings us to another aspect of education and training that must be taken into account. Access to education and training is not equal, nor has it ever been. Education and training is a ‘site of struggle’. What this means is that social groups will compete with each other to gain education and training, and those that lose out are likely (but not inevitably) to be disadvantaged in the workplace and in the opportunities they have in life more generally. Education is therefore ‘classed, gendered and racialized’, as social groups compete for access to education and training, and to certain types of education and training. It has always been so. In the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century, education was the preserve of ‘gentlemen’. This implied that, not only was education not for the lower orders or for women, but also that the aim of education was social as much as economic. That is, it was aimed at producing a well-rounded, erudite upper-class individual with a prescribed set of manners.
and a particular way of looking at the world. It was clearly an education and not training. As education, under economic imperatives, was made available to the lower orders (mainly the males), it was a different form of education that was designed for them, with much more training involved. Thus, basic literacy and numeracy (still a mantra in the twenty-first century) was seen as the proper form of education for workers, so that they could perform their work functions more effectively.

Similarly, education in the United States was not for slaves or, with the abolition of slavery, for black Americans, except for the most rudimentary provision. It was not accidental that the 1960s’ Civil Rights Movement in America was concerned with access to schools and universities in the struggle for black emancipation. Alongside the right to vote freely, access to education on an equal footing with whites was seen as the most important step towards ensuring that black Americans would find a place in American society that would liberate them from racism and oppression.

On a contemporary theme, the issue of female access to education has been the dividing line between those who support the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and those who adopt a more ‘modern’ approach to educational issues. The Taliban’s destruction of schools for girls is not just some knee-jerk fundamentalist response, but a calculation that education can set people free to make decisions and choices with little regard to traditional authorities, and the Taliban see this as a dangerous and unacceptable development. The more liberal Middle-Eastern states such as the United Arab Emirates do provide education for girls and women, albeit separate from men. In some senses the cultural norms in such societies, which see the lives of men and women as separate spheres, lags behind the educational system, and once ‘educated’, women do not ‘naturally’ go out to find employment but rather return to the domestic sphere. Projects are beginning to emerge to encourage women to make this step into the world outside the home. On the other side, the courage of those who build such schools, and who teach and learn in them, suggests that the thirst for education is widespread and deep. This is a struggle over education of the most radical and life-threatening type. The next time you find yourself a little bored in an educational setting, think about the sheer privilege you are enjoying that others have died for.

**CONTENT OF THE BOOK**

The content of this book is broken down into nine areas. In Chapter 2 we consider the background and context to the development of educational policies and systems in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. In Chapter 3, we examine more
recent developments in the curriculum that have occurred in the last part of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first. Chapter 4 looks at the changes in policy and education systems that occurred in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and the sociological research on them. The book then moves on to various explanations of differential educational attainment. Chapter 5 looks at class differences in educational performance. Chapter 6 addresses the debates on gender inequalities in educational achievement. Explanations of ethnic differences in educational attainment are covered in Chapter 7, and at the end of this chapter we draw together the social factors of class, gender and ethnicity, to explore the connections between and implications of looking at them together when we consider educational performance and underperformance. In the next two chapters, we go on to consider the role or function of schooling and training: Chapter 8 looks at the purpose of education and training from a functionalist perspective, while Chapter 9 offers a conflict analysis.
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