

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFLICT THEORY

Dr. Sudarshan Mishra

Reader, Department of Education
Ravenshaw University, Cuttack-753003, Odisha, India
E-mail: sudarshanmishra@yahoo.com

Abstract

Conflict arises out of inequality in the society. Inequality may be social, political or economic. Conflict theories are perspectives in social science which emphasize the social, political or economic inequality of a social group. Conflict theories draw attention to power differentials, such as class conflict, and generally contrast historically dominant ideologies. The author described about the views of various conflict theorists such as, Marx, Weber, Mills, Simmel, Mead and Cooley and their educational significance. Conflict theorists see the purpose of education as maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of the dominant class. It sees education not as a social benefit or opportunity, but as a powerful means of maintaining power structures and creating a docile work force for capitalism. Author described how schools develop those skills, values and attitudes in the working classes to accept their position as a lower-class member of society. How increasing private education system results the widening of conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is discussed. In order to reduce the conflict, the author advocated for free and compulsory education for all from KG to PG. Common School System of Public Education advocated by Kothari Commission was also emphasized. The author advocated for an education system based on critical pedagogy and dialogue-based pedagogy to bring the consciousness among the oppressed class.

Key Words: Conflict, conflict theory, curriculum, schools, common school system, pedagogy, critical pedagogy

Introduction

Education is a subsystem of the society. So, education needs to be studied in the context of society as a whole. In this modern, complex and ever-changing society, education performs many important functions in the society. If we accept this, it becomes essential to understand and examine education system in its social context. In order to understand the society and its context, one should have sound knowledge about the underlying theories. One of the Sociological theories which have prominent effect on education is Conflict theory.

Conflict arises out of inequality in the society. Inequality may be social (caste, gender, religion, etc.); may be political (unequal power distribution); and economic (unequal material distribution). Conflict theories are perspectives in social science which emphasize the social, political or economic inequality of a social group. Conflict theories draw attention to power differentials, such as class conflict, and generally contrast historically dominant ideologies. Certain conflict theories set out to highlight the ideological aspects inherent in traditional thought. Conflict theory sees the purpose of education as maintaining social inequality. According to this theory, education is a powerful instrument to preserve the power of those who dominate society. It sees education not as a social benefit or opportunity, but as a powerful means of maintaining power structures and creating a docile work force for capitalism.

Whereas the Marxian-oriented features of conflict theory emphasize class struggle, other theorists have moved towards emphasizing conflicts that occur between interest groups and the unequal distribution of

political power (Dahrendorf 1959). According to Bryan Turner (1988), modern societies are best understood as having a conflict between the principles of democratic politics (emphasizing equality and universal rights) and the organization of their economic systems (involving the production, exchange, and consumption of goods and services, about which there is considerable inequality). Therefore, while people have political equality, they lack social equality. This unresolved contradiction is relatively permanent and a major source of conflict. Hence, there is a need to study conflict in much detail in as it has great implications towards determining the aims of education, curriculum, pedagogical process as well as evaluation process.

Conflict and conflict theorists

Of the classical founders of social science, conflict theory is the most commonly associated with Karl Marx. Based on dialectical materialism, he posited that individuals and groups (social classes) within society have differing amounts of material and non-material resources. The more powerful groups use their power in order to exploit groups with less power. This relationship is unequal and favors the powerful groups. For example, a tenant may pay rent for 50 years and still gain absolutely no right or economic interest with the property. It is this type of relationship which Marx used to show that social relationships are about power and exploitation. Marx ushered in radical change, advocating proletarian revolution and freedom from the ruling classes.

Marx and Engels in “The Communist Manifesto” say, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. Marx argued that human history is all about the conflict, a result of the strong-rich exploiting the poor-weak. From such a perspective, money is made through the exploitation of the worker. Marx divided history into several stages based on broad patterns in the economic structure of society. The most important stages for Marx’s argument were feudalism, capitalism and socialism. For Marx, the central institution of capitalist society is private property, the system by which the capital (that is, money, machines, tools, factories, and other material objects used in production) is controlled by a small minority of the population.

According to Marx in all stratified societies there are two major social groups: a ruling class and the working class. The ruling class (called the bourgeoisie) derives its power from its ownership and control the forces of production. The ruling class exploits and oppresses the workers (called the proletariat). As a result there is a basic conflict of interest between the two classes. The proletariats, whose only property is their own labour, which they have to sell to the bourgeoisie. Owners are seen as making profits by paying workers less than their work is worth and, thus, exploiting them. Economic exploitation leads directly to political oppression, as owners make use of their economic power to gain control of the state and turn it into a servant of bourgeois economic interests. Police power, for instance, is used to enforce property rights and guarantee unfair contracts between capitalist and worker. In sum, the economic structure of society moulds the superstructure, including ideas and the social institutions that support the class structure of society (e.g., the state, the educational system, the family, and the religious institutions).

The solution Marxism proposes to this problem is that of an armed, violent revolution and a radical change of the culture, customs and values of a society. Other groups of social theorists deny the need for violence in order to bring about such Marxist ideals and have been politically active in various democratic institutes throughout the world. Some would argue that these changes would almost inevitably bring about the loss of individual freedoms and the creation of one despotic government present to impose Marxism at gunpoint.

Max Weber sees class in economic terms. He argues that classes develop in market economies in which individuals compete for economic gain. He defines a class as a group of individuals who share a similar position in market economy and by virtue of that fact receive similar economic rewards. Thus a person’s class situation is basically his market situation. Those who share a similar class situation also share similar life chances. Their economic position will directly affect their chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable in their society. Weber argues that the major class division is between those who own the forces of production and those who do not. He distinguished the following class grouping in capitalist society: the propertied upper class, the property-less white-collar workers, the petit bourgeois, and the manual working class.

Max Weber's approach to conflict is contrasted with that of Marx. While Marx focussed on the way individual behaviour is conditioned by social structure, Weber emphasized the importance of "social action" i.e., the ability of individuals to affect their social relationships. He says, social inequality is not based on just money, property, and relationships to the means of production, but also on status and political influence. Since all social systems contain such inequality, conflict inevitably results and conflict, in turn, is responsible for social change.

Modern conflict theorist *C. Wright Mills* says, social structures are created through conflict between people with differing interests and resources. Individuals and resources, in turn, are influenced by these structures and by the unequal distribution of power and resources in the society. The power elite of American society had emerged from the fusion of the corporate elite, the Pentagon, and the executive branch of government. Mills argued that the interests of these elite were opposed to those of the people. He theorized that the policies of the power elite would result in "increased escalation of conflict, production of weapons of mass destruction, and possibly the annihilation of the human race."

Georg Simmel considered conflict as a creative rather than a destructive force to strengthen existing bonds or establish new ones. Simmel never dreamed of a frictionless social universe from which clashes and contentions among individuals and groups would be forever banned. For him, conflict is the very essence of social life, an ineradicable component of social living. The good society is not conflict-free. It is on the contrary, sewn together by a variety of criss-crossing conflicts among its component parts. He says, association always involves harmony and conflict, attraction and repulsion, love and hatred. An entirely harmonious group could not exist empirically. Only a conflictive relationship though possibly painful for one or more participants in the group, ties them together to the social fabrics through mutual involvement. Conflict can serve as an outlet for negative attitudes and feelings, making further relationships possible. It can also lead to strengthening of position of one or more parties to the relationship, thereby increasing the individual's dignity and self-esteem. Peace and feud, conflict and order are correlative. Both the cementing and the breaking of custom constitute part of the eternal dialectic of social life. It would therefore be a mistake to distinguish a sociology of order from one of disorder, a model of harmony from one of conflict. These are not distinct realities but only differing formal aspects of one reality.

To George Herbert Mead, just as Simmel, conflict and cooperation are correlative to each other and no society can exist without both. He says, *A highly developed and organized human society is one in which the individual members are interrelated in a multiplicity of different intricate and complicated ways whereby they all share a number of common interests..... and yet, on the other hand, are more or less in conflict relative to numerous other interests which they possess individually, or else share with one another only in small and limited groups.* Thus, human individuals are interrelated to each other through the process of sharing common interest. But they are also in conflict with each other when they don't share certain interests.

Charles Horton Cooley conceived social conflict as necessary and ineradicable. He says, *the more one thinks of it the more he will see that conflict and cooperation are not separable things, but phases of one process which always involves something of both..... You can resolve the social into a great number of cooperative wholes of various sorts, each of which contains conflicting elements within itself upon which it is imposing some sort of harmony with a view to conflict with others.*

He viewed that conflicts are healthy and normal provided they proceed from a ground of underlying consensus about basic matters. He was a passionate defender of the virtues of democracy because he saw it as a mode of governance that arrives at moral unity not through the suppression of differences but through their acting out on the forum of public opinion. Cooley explained the conflict through four major processes: competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Competition he took to be a universal phenomenon. It was first clearly conceived and adequately described by the biologists as 'the struggle for existence'. It is the fundamental form of social interaction. Accommodation is the process by which the individuals and groups make the necessary internal adjustments to social situations which have been created by competition and conflict. War and elections change situations. Conflict subsides and the tensions it created are resolved in the process of accommodation. A man thoroughly defeated in war may realize not to have again. Accommodation establishes a new order by changing, not merely the status, but the attitudes of the parties involved. Assimilation, as distinguished from accommodation, implies a transformation of the personality which takes place gradually.

Conflict Theory and its Educational Significance

According to conflict theory, the purpose of education is maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of those who dominate society. Conflict theorists do not see education as a social benefit or opportunity, rather a powerful means of maintaining power structure and creating a docile work force for capitalists. The prevailing education system perpetuates the status quo by indoctrinating a kind of value among the lower classes to become obedient workers. Schools develop those skills, values and attitudes in the working classes to accept their position as a lower-class member of society.

Conflict theorists contend that our school curriculum favours the elites. Research has shown that even the best teachers often evaluate students on the basis of their social class, race or ethnic characteristics. This tendency heavily influence student placement, regardless of intelligence and original thinking. In order to sort students, intelligence test is widely practiced. They argue that the tests, which claim to test intelligence, actually test cultural knowledge and therefore exhibit a cultural bias. For example, a question may ask: "Which one of these items belongs in an orchestra? A. accordion B. guitar C. violin D. banjo." This question assumes considerable cultural knowledge. It has nothing to do with intelligence. Students from upper elite class are in an advantage to answer such question as they have considerable exposure to nuances of an orchestra such as, what is an orchestra, how does it differ from a band, and what are the instruments used in an orchestra. The question itself assumes exposure to a particular kind of music favoured by elite class. Testing experts claim they have rid modern examinations of such culturally biased questioning, but conflict theorists respond that cultural neutrality is impossible. All tests contain a knowledge base, and that knowledge base is always culturally sensitive. Intelligence is normally distributed over the population. Had the intelligence been the criteria for sorting students in educational institutions, students from all sections of the society would have been found in educational institutions proportionately. However, mostly students from upper or upper middle class were found in these educational institutions with few exceptions.

In our society we find two kinds of schools: Government schools and Private schools. Private schools meant for upper elite classes who are rich. They can afford to pay higher salary, attract better teachers and purchase newer and better texts and more technology. Students who attend these schools gain substantial advantages in getting into the best colleges and universities. They are also being tracked into higher-paying professions. Students in less affluent government schools do not enjoy these advantages. They are less likely to go to good institutions and hence, more likely to be tracked into low-paying manual professions. Therefore, inequality to access quality education creates conflict among the rich and the poor students. With the neo-liberal policy of the government, private education system is increasing at an alarming rate. As a result, the social conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have not's' widening. The parents from affluent and even middle-class family send their children to private schools and the poor parents send their children to public funded government schools. Patnaik (2009) says, "...the higher education system in countries like ours must be oriented towards carrying forward the task of nation-building". In order to gear this task of nation-building, he says, it must largely be state-funded. Further, treating higher education as a commodity (by opening private institutions run of commercial lines) necessarily comes in the way of its nation-building task. Secondly, he says, ".....higher education system oriented towards nation-building must not only be open to all but also make itself inclusive in a deliberate sense by drawing students and teachers from hitherto excluded and marginalized communities through affirmative action, of which the simplest and the most effective form is reservation." He further commented that talent and academic ability are more or less evenly distributed across the various social groups in a society. Hence, the best quality of education system would thus be one where the group-wise composition of students and teachers, would closely approximate the group-wise composition of the population as a whole. This can minimize the conflict between the rich and poor students and bring equality in the society.

In order to reduce conflict, education should be made free and compulsory for all. No country has achieved universal elementary education without the state assuming the primary responsibility for it. After six decades of independence, India made education as fundamental right between 6 to 14 years of children. However, it does not talk about the education of children below the age of six years and above the age of fourteen years though education at these levels is also equally important. Again, the act says, private schools shall admit at least 25% of children from weaker sections; no fee shall be charged to these

children. The entire debate was diverted away from the issue of the Common School System to the problems of private schools in finding resources for such reservations and the cultural gap between those who pay fees and those who do not. Sadgopal (2011) says, if 25% of this capacity of the private school sector is reserved for the weaker sections, the number of the so-called 'beneficiaries' can in no case exceed 1 crore children. What about the Right to Education of the remaining 19 crores (190 millions)? Clearly, the provision of 25% reservation in private schools has nothing to do with either the issue of Right to Education or Common School System. It is an obligation on the part of the government to deliver good quality education to the citizens. Education is neither commercial to be delivered nor charity to be given to citizens. Citizens are not customers when it comes to basic human rights. The total public expenditure on education in India is a little over 3% of the GDP. Many of the committees and commissions recommended for at least 10% of GDP to be spent on education which is a farsighted dream. This can only bring quality education which can be equitable accessible to all section of the society.

Common School System

The Education Commission (1964-66) had recommended a Common School System of Public Education (CSS) as the basis of building up the National System of Education with a view to "bring the different social classes and groups together in order to minimize the social conflict and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society." The Commission warned that "instead of doing so, education itself is tending to increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions." It further noted that "this is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for the children of the rich and the privileged groups" since "by segregating their children, such privileged parents prevent them from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact with the realities of life. also render the education of their own children anaemic and incomplete". The Commission contended that "if these evils are to be eliminated and the education system is to become a powerful instrument of national development in general, and social and national integration in particular, we must move towards the goal of a common school system of public education."

There are three widespread misconceptions about CSS, often promoted by its detractors, which we must deal with before going ahead. They are:

1. *CSS is misperceived as a uniform school system.* On the contrary, the Education Commission itself advocated that each institution should be "intimately involved with the local community be regarded as individuality and given academic freedom."
2. *It is wrongly claimed that CSS will not permit a privately managed school to retain its non-government and unaided (or aided) character.* Again, on the contrary, CSS implies that all schools – irrespective of the type of their management, sources of income or affiliating Boards of examinations – will participate and fulfil their responsibility as part of the National System of Education. In no case, however, a school will be allowed to use education for profit making, increasing disparity or spreading disharmony. The only expectation from the private schools shall be to function in consonance with the Constitutional, in general, and provide free elementary education of equitable quality upto the 14 year of age.
3. *CSS does not mean complete government control over schools.* Government grants necessarily lead to government control. In developed countries like USA and Canada, the school system is entirely funded by the state governments but it is entirely managed locally in a decentralised mode. In the light of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, decentralized management of schools with full accountability is now a statutory expectation. This, however, does not absolve the government from fulfilling its obligations towards financing, monitoring and making policies.

Therefore, Common School System is the only alternative towards forging a sense of common citizenship and nationhood. The nation-building aim of education in a geo-culturally diverse country like, India cannot be achieved without implementing Common School System based on Neighbourhood Schools. Common School System is the only option that provides the necessary framework for resolving conflicts between rich and poor, between different ethnic and linguistic groups, between the states and so on.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is heavily influenced by the works of Paulo Freire. Freire's analysis of the social situation is based on the ideas of dialectical materialism; an oppressor class oppresses and an oppressed class is oppressed. The oppressed class is submerged, having accepted the *thing* status into which they are oppressed. The historical vocation of the oppressed class is to struggle against the oppressor and realize their humanity which the oppressor denies them. Only the oppressed class can realize humanity, but they do it for all. That is the oppressed class has the role of liberating the oppressors, as well as itself, from their role as oppressors, thus resolving a contradiction in which they neither are fully human.

Freire heavily endorses students' ability to think critically about their education situation. This way of thinking allows them to "recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded." Realizing one's consciousness is a needed first step of *praxis*, which is defined as the power and know-how to take action against oppression while stressing the importance of liberating education. *Praxis* involves engaging in a cycle of theory, application, evaluation, reflection, and then back to theory. Social transformation is the product of praxis at the collective level.

Critical pedagogists say students should be encouraged to question dominant or common notions of meaning and form their own understanding of what they learn. Students will be able to build their own meaning while learning. Teachers should facilitate the process rather than "force" meaning upon the students. They should help students "unlearn" previous lessons that may enforce dominant thought and "relearn" their own ideas. There is not a single "correct" interpretation. Students are encouraged to build their own meaning based on their own experiences and views. Freire advocated for problem-posing education. In this approach to education the teacher student teaches the student-teachers. This indeed recognizes a truth; it is never the case in fact that the teacher always knows and the student never does. A meaningful *dialog* should take place between teacher and students.

Concluding Remarks

Conflict theory sees the purpose of education as maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of those who dominate society. Private schools meant for elite classes have more money. They can afford to pay higher salaries, attract better teachers, and purchase newer texts and more technology. Students who attend these schools gain substantial advantages in getting into the best colleges and being tracked into higher-paying professions. Students in less affluent government schools do not enjoy these advantages are less likely to go to colleges and are more likely to be tracked into vocational or technical training. Although it is difficult to overcome the barriers to equal education, policy makers and educators should look for ways to promote educational equality. Desegregated, inclusive classrooms with an atmosphere of mutual respect can improve academic performance. Multicultural education curriculum that emphasizes differences among gender, ethnic, and racial categories should be promoted. Common School System of Public Education (CSS) as recommended by the Education Commission (1964-66) should be the basis of building up the National System of Education.

The higher education system in countries like ours must be oriented towards carrying forward the task of nation-building. Treating higher education as a commodity necessarily comes in the way of its nation-building task. In order to gear this task of nation-building, it must largely be state-funded. Talent and academic ability are more or less evenly distributed across the various social groups in a society. Hence, the best quality of education system would thus be one where the group-wise composition of students and teachers, would closely approximate the group-wise composition of the population as a whole. This can minimize the conflict between the elites and the masses.

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