

A Critical Sociology of Education Perspectives from Humanistic Sociology

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“It isn’t knowledge as a product or commodity that we need; nor is it a matter of remedying the situation by having bigger libraries, a greater number of terminal, computers and so forth, but qualitatively different knowledge based on understanding rather than authority, uncritical repetition, mechanical reproduction. It is not facts, but how facts are connected with other facts, how they are constructed, whether they relate to hypothesis or theory, how one is to judge the relationship between truth and interest, how to understand reality as history. These are only some of the critical issues we face, which can be summed up in the phrase, how to think.”

Edward W. Said 1935-2003

Whenever we discuss the subject of education, regardless of its types (religious or conventional school), we do not lose sight that we are essentially discussing about a *type of education*, which must fulfill some basic objectives for it to be worthy of being called as an educational system. These basic objectives, as enumerated by Syed Hussein Alatas, are: “(a) to acquire the necessary knowledge for living within the social and cultural system; (b) to acquire understanding of human and non-human life forms as well as other phenomena in the universe; (c) to ensure the spiritual, moral, psychological and intellectual development of the personality in the condition of physical well being; (d) to develop the proper sense of civic consciousness and social solidarity; and (e) to attain good life.”¹

¹ Syed Hussein Alatas, “The Philosophical Foundation of General Education: The Development of the Intellect,” *Akademika*, 53, July 1998, p.78

However, in the current and dominant educational discourse, “there is far less discussion on the aims and ideals of education as compared to methods and contents of education.”² But even if there is such a discussion, problematising the current or dominant ideology on education is not common.

Perspectives from Critical Sociology of Education

An intellectual tradition or structure of a society and its conception on education evolves throughout history. An educational paradigm that is cherished and persists in a society is more likely a product of a past historical period. But changes occurring in the contemporary world are moving so rapidly, that it often results in the inability of the education system to keep pace with the overgrowing changes. This generates more difficulties especially when the educational paradigm is given almost a sacred character, as in the case of religious education, where changes and reforms, are read as undermining its sanctity. But the functioning of a modern society cannot afford a sector within the community to remain aloof or ambivalent about changes that are taking place around them. Mannheim’s observation on this is relevant:

“Simpler and more traditional societies take themselves for granted and their educational aims and practices are relatively unquestioned.....In a society which is liable to change, those who have the historical perspective can become aware of the transitions which are taking place during their lifetime and in the larger span of historical tome which they are a part. People thus aware of change have to digest and assimilate the knowledge which is theirs through their education and to detect what are to become the important aspects of this knowledge. They have to prospect in ideas ahead of their time. They have to do all this without losing faith in what has been handed on to

² Syed Hussein Alatas, “The Meaning of Progress in Contemporary Education,” p.7

them from their past and what their contribution is going to be to the future.”³

Certainly, such ability as envisaged by Mannheim requires a historical-sociological appreciation of a situation, including a vision of reforming a system of ideas or an institution. The sociology of education, as an extension of sociology of knowledge, is therefore indispensable. By studying an education system sociologically, it means to consider the relation of societal thought and group interest in moulding that education and also to evaluate objectively the possible ramifications or consequences of an education system to the society at large. “In our age it is not enough,” writes Mannheim, “to say that this or that educational system or theory or policy is good. We have to determine for what it is good, for which historical aims it stands and whether we want this educational result.”⁴ Thus, “the study of education must concern itself with a clarification of both of what education is and what it aims at being. The definition of what education is involves an analysis of techniques and the definition of aims is concerned with an assessment of values which help to decide, among other things, what methods should be used.”⁵

The primary aim of sociology of education, in Mannheim’s term, is how to understand the prevailing education system, recognizing its strength and limitation, in order to set a reform planning, as part of the reconstruction of man and society. “Our investigation into the sociological foundations of education cannot be a purely academic

³ Karl Mannheim and W.A.C Stewart. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 33

⁴ Mannheim, *Introduction to the Sociology of Education*, p.44

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8

one, piling up facts for their own sake. There is something definite we want to know. We are in search of something which should never be lost sight of in our research. We want to understand our time, the predicament of this age and what healthy education could contribute to a regeneration of society and man.”⁶ Certainly this is a good point to reflect whenever we are attempting a reform for education. A multi-disciplinary approach, especially a critical diagnostic type of analysis, is much warranted. Mannheim puts it well:

“Anyone who wishes to make any pronouncements on how education should be practised has to be prepared to use all the relevant information he can discover from the study of politics, history, economics, the sciences, the arts and so on, because the whole enterprise of education aims at picking out certain essentials from that culture which are thought to be important.”⁷

Most importantly, such thinking reflects an ability to recognize or grasp the problems that are to be addressed by the community urgently. In other words, the absence of problematising education, may also suggests an absence of thinking; it can also be an ideological comfort that prevents one from seeing the shortcomings of the education system itself, in the midst of ever-changing context and demands of modern society. As Mannheim puts it aptly, “the absence of certain concepts indicates very often not only the absence of certain point of view, but also the absence of a definite drive to come to grips with certain life problems.”⁸

⁶ Ibid., p.160

⁷ Mannheim, *Introduction to the Sociology of Education*, p. 113; Speaking of the need to utilize social sciences perspectives in the analysis of education, we should be reminded of Dewey’s thought: “...unless the field of education and its problems was conceptualized and embedded in the social sciences, it would go nowhere; its glaring inadequacies would not be understood, let alone ameliorated...” Read, Seymour B Sarason, “Some Features of a Flawed Education System,” *Daedalus*, Vol., 127, No.4, Fall 1998, p. 10

⁸ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 246

All educationists, including religious educationists, can certainly espouse an elaborated conception of education. But idealism may not necessarily guarantee the ability to address the current reality and challenges. There are scholars and writers who are more interested in constructing an impressive theory than assuming the task of addressing the problems of education in contemporary context.⁹ Mannheim, who calls for an integral theory of education, cautioned such tendency: “[I]n its sociological aspects, [the theory] does not object....doubt the fact that some ideals may be stated which survive the ages and are the basis of any decent way of life and social organization. What it objects to is that [the] theory is too aloof from history to be really helpful in concrete situations. Whoever tries to state such eternal values very soon realizes that they are bound to be too abstract to lend concrete shape to education at a given moment.”¹⁰

The Need for Education for Change

By highlighting some of the key points of Karl Mannheim’s sociology of education, it is hoped that we can be aware of the challenges and shortcomings of a regressive education system, which can manifest itself in faith-based schools or any other types of school. As a sociologist, Mannheim is concerned about the problem of valuations in contemporary society. The need for a progressive valuation can be impeded by the existence of regressive educational practices which “creates inhibitions and suppresses the development of personal autonomy and intelligent judgment. Most individuals are not educated to develop their

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas’ *Conception of Islamic Education* is a case in point.

¹⁰ Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p.56

intellectual powers but subjected to processes of imitation and emotional suggestion which train them for an unthinking acceptance of values and blind obedience.”¹¹ A school system which is not able, or remain ambivalent, to address these problems, deserves our serious attention. Another question Mannheim posed is: “Shall we educate for group conformity or shall we foster the growth of an independent balanced personality?” For Mannheim, “the answer is to be found in a kind of gradualism. Education by degrees: first for group conformity and then for the emergence of the many-faceted, balanced personality.”¹²

In traditional education or the schooling system of the past, the prevalence of the idea of instilling conformity and obedience is central in its educational ethos. According to Mannheim, conformity is not so much a problem, provided that it is blended with the level of spontaneous creativity. “The choice is not between absolute freedom and blind obedience. On the contrary. There are shades and grades between these two extremes....blended attitudes can be imparted”

There is indeed no justification by any groups that their educational ideal must be preserved in the name of authenticity or cultural/religious autonomy. This is because the changes amidst us cannot be stopped unless we are prepared for maladjustment and eventual alienation. Mannheim writes:

“We can neither call a halt to social changes, which our children will have to meet, nor wall the schools off from the rest of the world. Not even the most conservative expects his children to live in the world as he has known it. He is compelled to choose education for change, not for imitative adjustment, an

¹¹ Gunter W Remmling, *The Sociology of Karl Mannheim* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p.114

¹² Refer, “The Problem of Youth in Modern Society,” *Diagnosis of Our Time*, pp. 31-53

education based on the assumption that Junior will have to cope with new challenges of the future. Moreover, the school may be considered not only an introduction into an already dynamic society, but an agency of social change. This in turn intensifies its connection with other compartments of life.”¹³

It can be a *passé* when we affirm the fact the issue of education should be taken seriously. But one important aspect that cannot be ignored is the fact that a schooling system cannot afford to neglect its social and intellectual duty, both to the individuals and society. “The task of the school is to show how to learn more efficiently from life, how to draw correct conclusions from experience, how to become one’s own educator.”¹⁴ Though this pronouncement is not made in religious parlance, it is beyond doubt that such a task is nowhere contradictory to any religious understanding.¹⁵ In order to appreciate the importance of change that needs deliberations in any education system, it is important that we have some idea of what has been the concern and focus of education in the bygone era. “The schools of the past” says Mannheim, “were in every respect the diametric opposite of what has been described as the modern school. They were rather separated from life, had

¹³ *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*, p. 248

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.250

¹⁵ Psychologically speaking, one of the aims of education in the context of modern society is to ensure the creation of a democratic personality type as opposed to an authoritarian type. The limitation of the latter is best explained by Mannheim himself:

“[An] authoritarian society is bound to produce the dominative type of character. The very existence of an authoritarian order is based upon the socially guaranteed and absolute control of a commanding individual and his retinue, all other authority being derived from them. Thus by its very structure this society produces the status-ridden personality who draws all his strength and confidence from this pre-established status and not from the continuous approval of his authority by his equal. Inability to bear criticism or the strain of real discussion is an essential feature of the status-ridden personality, as sooner or later the validity of his alleged superiority will be questioned by both...the status-ridden person cannot perform the function of integrating groups from within, nor can he, in his foreign policy, do anything but strive to subject greater territories to his rule. He may master material techniques, but cannot learn the art of evolving creative—not dominating—pattern of social integration, simply because his imagination is limited to concepts of suppression and exploitation.” (*Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*, p.231)

their peculiarly bookish, scholastic atmosphere, and were for the most part resistant to social change...Moreover, in the past the school was considered a training ground for imitative adjustment to an established society.”¹⁶ In such educational ethos, the main task is to hand down to the younger generation the knowledge, without any need of adjustment, accommodation or reform based on the current needs. In such a milieu, conformity is idealized for it is thought that it “would guarantee the smooth functioning of society...to make social life predictable, [thus] it was necessary to establish fixed habits and customs, not to foster deviation.”¹⁷

Any viable education system must give greater exposure for students to understand the problems confronting their society. As Mannheim reminds: “[Education] has to prepare members of a society to conform on the one hand, and if it is a democratic society, to have the opportunity and scope for individuality on the other. Therefore, we must pay attention to what society wants of its members as, for example, respect for the law, participation in election of government, a relatively general acceptance of conventions, and more or less clear understanding of economic motivation.”¹⁸

This means the primary tenet of curriculum planning must be based on considering the intellectual, socio-cultural and economic well being of the students once they complete their studies. This reminds us once again to what Mannheim emphasizes:

¹⁶ *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*, (eds.) Hans Gerth and Ernest K Bramstedt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 248

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 240

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10

“The method of training can no longer be based upon the imparting tricks of the trade but have to be transformed into a social education which primarily calls for the development of an all-round approach to the pupil whereby a widened horizon and human understanding of the person become more important than the simple assessment of intellectual progress. The emphasis is now no longer on instruction and learning but rather on development of living. The educational institutions themselves have to become true societies and the course for the preparation of teachers has to be modified to take into account these changes.”¹⁹

Reforming an education system must not only takes into account the integrated curriculum, but also effective pedagogical approach or educational training that enables the graduated students to be able to function effectively in the modern economy and pluralistic environments. Equally important is that any discussion on it must be cognizant of the significance of “the new education agenda”, that is, “the emphasis is on the cultivation of critical enquiry or the inner/aesthetic realization of truth. It involves serious rethinking on the curriculum. Instead of attaching importance to the quantity of information one acquires (number of lessons, chapters, books), it privileges the intensity of qualitative knowledge and experience. After all, information is not retained for long. What remains alive is the critical consciousness; the eternal curiosity....”²⁰ It is also important that our leaders and teachers should receive an education and exposure such that they are able to understand the meaning of change:

Equally important is the fact that, in a school system where there is an exclusive religious-cultural setting, curriculum planners and educators have to constantly be on guard against any ideas or situation that will encourage prejudicial sentiments amongst the school

¹⁹ *An Introduction to the Sociology of Education*, p. 32

²⁰ Avjit Pathak, *Social Implications of Schooling: Knowledge, Pedagogy and Consciousness*. (Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2002), p. 239

population (i.e. student and teacher alike). Sociologists of education have made ample reminder of this danger: “In education any claim to absoluteness would lead to fanaticism which is to be avoided in a rapidly changing society such as our own”²¹ and that “the monopolization of spiritual capital may in the end be more harmful than that of material capital.”²² Therefore, we should be constantly be aware that “no teaching is sound unless it trains man to be aware of the whole situation in which he finds himself, and that after careful deliberation, he should be able to make his choice and come to a decision.”²³ It is in this sense that Ortega’s call (for the transmission of culture being made the fundamental objective in any education system) is pertinent, although Ortega speaks specifically on university education: “[I]t is imperative to set up once more...the teaching of the culture, the system of vital ideas, which the age has attained....One must have an idea of the time and place in which he lives: in a word, the ‘culture’ of the age. Now then, this culture is either received, or else it is invented.”²⁴

²¹ Mannheim, *An Introduction to Sociology of Education*, p. 44

²² John Dewey, cited in H.J Muller, *Science & Criticism: The Humanistic Tradition in Contemporary Thought* (New York , G. Braziller, 1956), p. 4

²³ Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time*, p. 68

²⁴ Ortega, *Mission of the University* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1946), pp. 46-7; Ortega emphasis on the transmission of culture can be further enhanced if we ask ourselves what culture should mean. Antonio Gramsci’s definition then is useful: “We must rid ourselves of the habit of conceiving culture as encyclopedic knowledge; a concept in which man is regarded as a mere receptacle to be stuffed full with empirical data and disconnected brute facts... culture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming to terms with one’s personality; it is the attainment of a higher consciousness by means of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value, one’s own function in life, one’s own rights and duties...” Joseph A Buttigieg, “On Gramsci,” *Daedalus*, Summer 2002, pp. 68-9

Education and Social Awareness

Last but not least, Mannheim's deliberation on the importance of social awareness is instructive to conclude our discussion here. A social awareness, according to Mannheim, is precisely what is needed in any rethinking of an educational curriculum. "Awareness means both in life of individual and of the community the readiness to see the whole situation in which one finds oneself, and not only to orientate one's actions on immediate tasks and purposes but to base them on a more comprehensive vision. One of the ways in which awareness expresses itself is the correct diagnosis of a situation."²⁵

"In a changing society like ours only an education for change can help. The latter consists in an undogmatic training of the mind, which enables the person not to be driven by the current of changing events but to rise above them... There must be an informed mind which can discriminate between those genuine elements in the tradition which are still alive and make for emotional stability, and those human attitudes and institutions on the other side which decay because they have lost function and meaning in a changed society. It is our ignorance of the dehumanizing effects of industrial civilization upon the mind which allows the growth of that void into which the witch-doctors of propaganda pour their poison."²⁶

But such awareness can only be nurtured and developed if a specialist type of curriculum or over-specialization in education is being reevaluated thoroughly. An education system, especially one that gears towards a specialist type, must thoroughly be reassessed over time. Economic or religio-cultural consideration in producing such specialist education, especially in the absence of a general broad education, plus its insistence of preserving its exclusivity, cannot be expected to nurture social awareness. Again, Mannheim's insight is

²⁵ *Diagnosis of Our Time*, p. 61

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.59

relevant: “In a society in which the main changes are to be brought about through collective deliberation, and in which re-valuations should be based upon intellectual insight and consent, a completely new system of education would be necessary, one which would focus its main energies on the development of our intellectual powers and bring about a frame of mind which can bear the burden of skepticism and which do not panic when many of the thought habits are doomed to vanish.”²⁷

Conclusion

Reforming the educational system must be subjected to continuous revision, readjustment and revaluation. Reform must be seen as an attempt to improve the educational system with the main aim to ensure that the graduates of any educational institutions could function effectively in the modern society that they lived in. Thus, before we can speak of many benign idealism of what an educational paradigm should and could produce, it will be wiser if we seriously identify some of the key obstacles to the improvement of the *present* education system. Approaches to educational reforms, ideally speaking, and historically proven, are initiated by the dominant group in power. In a more democratic setting, the will and concern for educational reforms can come from various groups where elements of politics and interests inevitably resurface to the expense of genuinely addressing the reforms itself. In this sense, Freire is right that those in the educational scene must realize that knowledge is never “a neutral activity; therefore, education is never neutral.” To be aware of the politics of education is essential. This in turn requires a critical sense from one’s socio-political, economic and cultural setting. Surely

²⁷ Ibid., p.23.

Mannheim's apt words are a good reminder for those who believe in nurturing a humanistic ethos in the critical sociology of education: "One can understand the contemporary world in its rapid change only if one learns to think sociologically, if one is capable of understanding changes in ways of human behaviour by reference to the changing conditions of society. This, however, also requires acquaintance with recent findings in psychology and philosophy."²⁸

²⁸ Cited in *From Karl Mannheim*, p. 95