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The relation of education to social cohesion

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the ways education is related to social cohesion, mainly in sociology of education approaches. The notion of cohesion is used widely, especially as a noble aim worth striving at, in order to sustain the ties that keep society together. Education is viewed as an important institution that contributes to cohesion by socialising the new members of society, providing them with knowledge and skills in order to facilitate their social participation. Sustaining however current societal organisation implies that social inequality is also reproduced. Thus, we argue that, the question of cohesion is inter alia a political one.

KEY WORDS: Education, social cohesion, social ties, bonding, socialisation, sociology of education.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ
Το άρθρο εξετάζει τους τρόπους με τους οποίους η εκπαίδευση συνδέεται με την κοινωνική συνοχή, κυρίως στην κοινωνιολογία της εκπαίδευσης. Η έννοια της συνοχής χρησιμοποιείται ευρέως, ιδίως ως ένας ευγενικός σκοπός, που αξίζει να επιδιώκεται με σκοπό να διατηρηθούν οι δεσμοί που συγκρατούν την κοινωνία. Η εκπαίδευση θεωρείται ένας θεσμός σημαντικός που συμβάλλει στη συνοχή με την κοινωνικοποίηση των νέων μελών της κοινωνίας και την παροχή γνώσεων και δεξιοτήτων που διευκολύνουν την κοινωνική συμμετοχή τους. Η διατήρηση όμως της σημερινής οργάνωσης της κοινωνίας σημαίνει ότι αναπαράγονται και οι κοινωνικές ανισότητες. Επομένως, υποστηρίζουμε ότι το ερώτημα της συνοχής είναι ανάμεσα στα άλλα πολιτικής φύσης.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Εκπαίδευση, κοινωνική συνοχή, κοινωνικοί δεσμοί, κοινωνικοποίηση, κοινωνιολογία της εκπαίδευσης.

1. Introduction

This article examines some of the ways the education system relates to social cohesion from a sociological perspective in modern western societies. Education is considered an institution of paramount importance in sustaining and securing the historical continuity of current societal organization.

The term cohesion as a current concern appeared in political documents, and in Greece in a legislation text about education in 2001. More recently, the concept cohesion features in many policy documents across the globe, especially in many government related institutions in various

countries that advocate social cohesion as a noble aim worthy of striving at retaining (see internet sites from Europe to Latin America). Among the institutional means to retain cohesion, education is being considered a key factor.

Education is being linked to social cohesion, for its aims and provided training have been related to preserving society in future generation. In social sciences especially, theorising on this relation is as old as philosophy. More recently however, the establishment of sociology as a discipline in 19th and beginning of 20th century denotes the beginning of a systematic inquiry into the constitution of society and the organisation of social relations. Based upon from the theoretical framework set out by the founding theorists of sociology, approaches in sociology of education questioned the relation of education as an institution to society at large. The aim has been to study the relation of the parts, represented by institutions (such as education) to society as a whole. For this purpose, the concept of 'function' was employed. The notion function denotes both analytic connection and the effects or influence education has upon society (see Kantzara, 2009).

The question however of education to social cohesion forms currently a concern that occupies the minds of politicians and social scientists to a wide extent, leaving much often the question unanswered, what exactly constitutes social cohesion. In general, the concept cohesion refers to the perceived balance and relative stability of society, which is held together regardless of the degree of its complexity and differentiation. The next step has been to identify the bonds or ties that hold individuals together, especially in highly differentiated societies as the ones we live in today. A coherent society is seen as an integrated society, the lurking social fear being a disintegrated collectivity, succinctly described by the philosopher Hobbes as the 'war of all against all'. Thus the main questions have been, what structures and in what ways society is held together.

In this paper, the relation of education to social cohesion shall be examined by attempting to answer the following two closely interrelated questions: How does education contribute to maintaining social order? And, how does education affect social cohesion?

Starting point of the analysis that follows are approaches and perspectives set out by the founding theorists of sociology that theorised the relationship of education to society. The approach I adopt here could be termed as critical and draws on readings in social theory, sociology and sociology of education.

The text following this introduction refers first defining cohesion in the relevant literature. Next follows the history of establishing an education system and its link to maintaining social order at a social, economic and political level. The fourth part examines the ways which education affects social cohesion today conceptualised as securing social continuity. The text as it is customary concludes with a summary and some theoretical remarks.

2. Defining social cohesion

Social cohesion has been the subject of investigation in different disciplines and is approached from diverse angles and points of view. The common difficulty is twofold, to provide an all encompassing and agreed upon definition of social cohesion, and to account for the phenomenon at the same time. This is not to underestimate the scientific endeavour; on the contrary our point is to accentuate that cohesion is a concept highly abstract, referring to numerous as well as diverse social processes that work simultaneously in order to produce the balance and relative stability a society has reached. The concept cohesion points to a level of analysis that customarily

is called macro (see Green, Preston & Janmaat, 2006). However, reaching a macro-level of analysis presupposes that processes taking place at micro or meso level and contributing to cohesion have also been identified.

In general and to put it simply, the term cohesion denotes that though modern societies are complex and highly differentiated, the whole, that is, the collectivity nonetheless has acquired a balance and continues to do so generation after generation in a more or less stable manner. This phenomenon is ascribed to the existence of social ties that according to theorists bind or hold people together. People enter in relations with one another according to customs, formal and informal rules and in doing so they simultaneously sustain the collectivity as well.

Social cohesion has been defined metaphorically as the 'glue' that holds people and/or structures together (see, for example the article on the free internet encyclopedia wikipedia). Dewey, a philosopher, has argued that school is functioning "as a cement in the social structure" using a mechanical metaphor, as he himself admits (Dewey, 1923: 514). Other authors wonder out loud 'what to do' regarding definitions of cohesion such as, 'the forces' that keep people together, or the 'total field of forces' that act on people to stay in groups, when scientific inquiry ought to identify and name them one by one (see definitions cited in Friedkin, 2004: 411; Moody & White, 2003). The concept of cohesion, moreover, has acquired a 'feeling good flavour' that according to some authors covers up the lack of 'precise meaning' (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008: 287). In a few words, the answer to the question what is social cohesion is neither simple nor straightforward.

Social cohesion has been studied at three analytical levels: individual, group and a macro or structural level (Friedkin 2004: 410, Green & Preston, 2001). At the individual level, studies focus on characteristics of people that facilitate their societal participation, as for example being a member of an association, labour related and/or doing voluntary work. At a group level, studies focus on ties holding members together in such a way that the group holds even when some of the members leave it. These two levels form a field of study mainly examined in the discipline of social psychology, using other concepts as well. The concept of 'relational cohesion', for instance, is employed in order to study the conditions under which individuals are committed and more likely to be engaged in a group. The answer points to positive outcome of individuals participating in an equal footing with others (Lizardo, 2010).

Cohesion has also been perceived in terms of community, a theme usually examined by geographers; they stress the importance of cohesion at a community level and therefore they focus on mechanisms that foster inclusion of individuals or groups. The sense of belonging and being respected are identified as two such mechanisms. Exclusion of individuals on the other hand, has been targeted as the force that threatens community cohesion.

At a structural or macro level, it is argued that democracy, equity, tolerance, trust, and social justice contribute most to societal cohesion as well as institutions (such as education) that not only promote but apply these principles in practice. Education is considered to be contributing to cohesion by socialising and providing students with credentials, cultural and social capital that generally are considered important means for them to participate fully in society. To this aspect I return in the next section.

However to theorise about the macro level one has to have figured out how processes leading to cohesion work at the micro level of analysis. Theorists who argue that equality is important they attempt to identify some measurable variables. Some of these are distribution of skills and income. At the end, however they reach the conclusion that these variables taken apart cannot account for social cohesion, for there are countries that are perfectly held together without equal distribution

of skills and income. The only conclusion however authors draw is that equality in education, as it is being for instance applied in comprehensive systems of schooling is more important in promoting social cohesion than in highly selective educational systems. This argument is not substantiated with hard data as the authors admit, but theoretically at least seems plausible (Green, Preston & Janmaat, 2006: 52-54). It is a perspective that links social justice, democracy, respect of rights and equity through education to social cohesion. According to this perspective, educational systems that promote equality in access to studies and among their students are more likely to preserve current social ties. Education is viewed as a valuable source that is becoming available to many and in doing this it binds then in a meaningful manner to society. This process then ideally fosters individuals' commitment, if not sense of belonging to the collectivity of which they feel of being an integral and valuable part.

Returning to an individual or micro level of analysis, factors contributing to cohesion had been identified as the degree of tolerance and acceptance of others in society, and the degree of trust in the functioning of public institutions or in other people. Though these factors seem to be important socially it is not certain exactly how they contribute to social cohesion, as there are examples in which the opposite relation is valid as well. Social capital has also been seen as contributing to cohesion and education is been viewed as "the most powerful generator of social capital" in our society (Green & Preston, 2001: 247).

For a moment, it seemed that the concept of social capital was the answer to the question not only what constitutes social cohesion but also how to study it or promote it adopting certain policy measures. Social capital is a notion that attempts to depict the interconnectedness of individuals and the mutual beneficial effect these relations may have upon one's social positioning. In a discussion note addressed to a meeting of an international organization, Putnam, (who, except from Bourdieu, has extensively theorised on social capital) identified two forms of social capital that are important for social cohesion. He calls them 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. Bonding capital refers to capital that facilitates relations developed between people horizontally as it were, that is, between different strata that enjoy more or less similar social status. Most important according to him is the bridging social capital that refers to capital facilitating relations that are developed across the 'cleavages' in society, that is, across strata on the social hierarchy. Education is thought of providing such a bridging capital to individuals (Putnam, 2004: 3). It is considered to be a capital because of its enabling effects in certain contexts. Furthermore, educational titles are considered to be a form of cultural capital that endows individuals with rights and provides access to social goods, such as labour. Educational titles are valued in society and may compensate for 'low' social origins permitting and facilitating upward social mobility. To this point I return in the next section.

Reviewing the literature, the rationale line about cohesion is as follow: it is generally thought that individuals who enter in relations with others sustain current social ties, holding in this way the collectivity together as well. Among factors influencing societal participation, education and learning feature as the most important ones together with democratic principles such as equality. Secondly, individual's voluntary participation in organizations and groups has been viewed as securing the bonding between individuals. Thirdly, equality of opportunities has been seen as a principle that unites individuals, as they believe that it facilitates for instance their attempt to succeed socially. In attempting to reach goals, individuals reinforce established rules, managing thus to reproduce society as well, while they refrain from challenging the status quo of which they aspire to become integral part. Fourthly, exclusion has been targeted as the 'enemy' of social cohesion processes, thus inclusion and related social processes have been seen as the main road

to achieve social equilibrium and stability. Fifthly, some of the views expressed are based on assumptions, as for instance that sameness between individuals promotes consensus and unity that ultimately lead to social order, versus, difference (defined variously) that leads to conflicts and social disorder that may endanger social cohesion. Conflicts are usually exorcised, while some perspectives point to its social nature. Conflicts arise, according to weberian perspectives, from the struggle to acquire access or keep control over valuable resources and for the marxist perspectives constitute the 'midwife' of history.

Additionally, several approaches view cohesion as something positive without asking themselves that if one strives at retaining the same society, then one inevitably has to answer the question, what about inequality, does it have to be retained too? In addition, in quantitative research, there is a tendency to reduce the relation of individuals to collectivity to a set of variables, which are then measured, but at the end one finds oneself unable to measure the whole picture (see also critique in Green & Preston, 2001; Green, Preston & Janmaat, 2006). At the same time, there is a lack in theorising participation and non participation of individuals as two facets of the same phenomenon: for example, some inclusive processes function properly and are of value when these exclude others. Such an example is to be found in university entrance exams. Additionally, if people participate in networks and sustain relations still there is a lack in theorising about its inherent value, because networks do not have only a positive effect on society but also a negative as power could be exclusively gathered in few hands. Tolerance or democratic institutions could form indicators of cohesion, but this is again questioned as there exists societies that are perfectly held together though they lack both tolerance and democracy. The question that is not usually asked here is for how long.

It exceeds the purpose of this article to review extensively the literature on cohesion. Instead, our aim is to discuss the relation of education to sustaining the social order, which is the aim of this article and subject of analysis in the following sections.

3. Institutionalising education and the link to social order

Today, it is a very common and almost taken for granted that almost every child attends school in order to be educated till a certain age. Schooling is compulsory for everyone (or nearly so) and this phenomenon is relatively novel in human history. The education system as we know it today has been established in the 18th and 19th century in the western world (Bowen, 1980). Forms of education existed in all known societies before this period, but there was not a system that is addressed to all the population of a country educating them on a basis of a common, national curriculum.

Among the reasons leading to institutionalisation, it is worth mentioning that education has been thought of as a means to ameliorating society, contributing to social progress in the 18th and 19th century western world. This in turn was based on ideas of ameliorating the human character as it was thought that its flaws are responsible for the social malaise of the time. Extreme poverty and high degrees of criminality were thought to have two sources: human character and/or social conditioning. Thus, the establishment of an education system would solve both at once as it would teach proper behaviour and equip individuals with knowledge, in order to exercise a trade or find labour elsewhere. Instituionalisation of the education has been characterised as a relatively inexpensive way to solve social problems. At the same time, such an institution gives an extensive

opportunity to the state to exercise 'control' over individuals and is doing this by teaching them the elements of a common culture and a national identity. Historians call the institutionalization of the education system as a 'massive machine of social control' (Reisner, 1930). Related to this is the thesis put forward and defended by many that education today accomplishes different and sometimes contradictory functions, which have as an effect to contribute both to the continuation of the existing status quo (by using other means) as well as to its transformation with peaceful means. The functions of education were our focus of analysis in a previous work, in which it was concluded that education may be both, conservative by nature and progressive by design (Kantzara, 2008, 2010).

The institutionalisation of the education system was achieved when education was thought useful facilitating and securing social continuity by promoting existing social order in future generations. Among the founding theorists who captured this aspect of education was Durkheim. Critique that was addressed, especially after the 1970s showed that the desired effect of education on society has one major flaw, that is it contributes to reproducing social inequality. From a Marxist point of view the relation of education and economy was examined in order to prove that education was not a neutral institution, as it ought to be. The third perspective founded on the work of Weber theorises the relation of education to exercising power or social domination. In a few words, the relation of education to sustaining existing social order was examined at three level, defined mostly analytically, at a social, an economic, and a political level.

3.1 Education and social relations

Durkheim tried to work out the relation of education to society following his conceptualisation of how individuals relate to society. His work on education was influenced by the disastrous effect of First World War as he witnessed it in France; at the same time, the state attempted to secularise education in order to diminish the influence of the church and Durkheim was asking How could society be held together and what is the role of education in this? To answer these questions first he had to answer the question what constitutes society. Durhkeim pointed that society is constituted by a division of labour, more or less extended (the famous distinction between 'organic' and 'mechanical solidarity') and a collective consciousness ('conscience collective'). The latter entity in his view consists of learning common ideals and beliefs and of morality. Schooling prepared young members of society in both terrains. According to him, education could teach morality on basis of lessons such as history and sciences in order to teach logical thinking. The morality or ethical dimension did not mean to distinguish between right and wrong, but how to achieve being part of a whole and at the same time act independently. Drawing on the work of Kant, Durkheim argued that the most important function of education is 'methodic socialisation', so that the young pupil learns to discipline himself, attach himself to groups and learn to do all these by his own, acquiring a sense of autonomy (Durkheim, 1973).

A second point Durkheim accentuated is that a society is held together also because people learn to react to social stimuli in a certain manner; in doing so, individuals' reactions become similar and thus predictable over time. Thus, similarity in behaviour, acting alike, makes social relations possible and not thinking alike.

Durkheims' theory found a successor in Parsons, the American sociologist, who postulated that education has to create 'needs dispositions' in pupils, one of these is the need of achievement. Why is this important one might ask? Individuals attempting to succeed in designated fields of achievement operate towards society's equilibrium, because they have to use the accepted means

of success, thus reinforcing rules on their way and reproducing positions, and social institutions. At the same time, Parsons argued that education has to teach students to feel responsible to fulfill the role they undertake, hoping that students will do the same later as adults in their work related duties. In doing so, again people help with their actions to sustain existing social order. Until here the role of education and its function is to bind individual pupils internally to existing social order, by socializing them according to desired patterns informed and set out by society at large.

Parallel to the above, there is an external tie that helps bind individual pupils to the society they live in, and that is labour. Social participation of individuals passes through their ability to work, being part of production of goods (in the broad sense of the word) in society; in a sense through labour people participate in (re)producing society. Social rewards and social security benefits are based on such participation through labour, such as a salary, health insurance, pension rights, parental leave or further training, to name but a few; no less important is the accrued social status or prestige.

Education thus contributes to preserving current social ties, by binding individuals internally (ontologically), and externally. The first is achieved through socialisation, as pupils internalise various cultural aspects of current society, while the second is accomplished by preparing them to participate in the division of labour that for most people is a necessity. Both aspects could be up to a degree problematic as they reinforce the existing social hierarchy and help reproduce it in the future.

3.2 Education and economic relations

There seems to exist a consensus among politicians and also among social scientists about the inherent value of social cohesion as it maintains a state of peace, facilitating social co-existence and progress or development. Nonetheless critics point to the point of sustaining inequality as an intended or unintended consequence of striving at social cohesion. If education, according to the relevant rationale, helps and contributes to perserving existing social order, then it helps reproduce the same organisation of social relations to the next generation. Social relations however are organised on basis of inequality, as these are expressed in exploitative conditions of labour, for example or unequal relations of power. Thus, if education contritubes to societal maintenance and continuity then it helps reproduce unequal social relations in the future; the pertinent question then asked, Is this an noble aim education ought to strive at accomplishing?

Challenging the functioning of education has been historically the second source upon which the plea to social cohesion has been based. Marxist approaches most notably have argued that education contributes to sustaining current societal arrangement, and in doing so it helps perpetuate the current unequal, capitalist system. An inequality that though based in the economic sphere, it is social in nature as it is created and finds expression in social and political institutions and arrangement that express the basic divide among those who own and rule and those who do not own and are ruled.

According to Althusser (1987), a French philosopher, education is part of the 'ideological state apparatus' that helps in preserving current social order. Education is accomplishing this by teaching (and according to some theorists, instilling) good manners and the dominant ideology to pupils. Dominant ideology legitimises current social arrangement as fair or democratic, and the positioning of individuals within the dominant division of labour. In other words, education permits but a few to move on and the rest who fail to pass are made to believe that it is their personal fault for failing in exams and other evaluation means according to which students'

school performance is evaluated and monitored. While today this argument may seem obsolete, nonetheless the institutionalisation of the education system reflected the class composition of the societies of that era, as different tracks in secondary education most remarkably those between technical-vocational and general education were meant for the descendants of middle (or lower) classes and for descendants of higher social classes respectively. Education had acquired the target of helping students realise and accept their social positioning of their origins.

The general public, however believes in a neutral social institution that functions impartially, as the task of education is not only learning but evaluating the learning and granting pupils the earned educational titles. In their turn, titles are significant in social life as they carry many meanings and promises, securing labour, help one rise socially and/or facilitate occupying positions of power.

The Marxist perspective forms an important field in sociology of education. Here we only referred to an aspect of this perspective (see overview Kantzara, 2008: ch. 4). In a few words, socialising and selecting pupils, two functions of education, mean that pupils are socialised into accepting their inferior social statuses and are directed into accepting labour according to their status of origin. The possibility of upward social mobility is but limited.

3.3 Education and relations of power

The third level of analysis focuses on the relation of education to exercising power or social domination. The relevant approaches are based on Weber. Weber showed in his historical studies on major religions that the ideal traits of the personality to which learning aims at, are similar to those who occupy positions of power (religious or secular). Today, with the bureaucratic state and the concomitant secular power, the ideal that is promoted in education is expertise (Weber, 1948, 1973).

More recently, Collins' approach utilizes Weber's insight as follow. Collins (1979) argues that educational titles are increasingly becoming a 'currency' in society, for these can be exchanged for rights (e.g. access to labour) or privileges; at the same time, an educational title is used as a 'credential', because it replaces former nobility titles that accredit the kind of personality an educated person has acquired that makes him fit in the existing available positions. Furthermore, high status groups use these credentials in order to control the entrance of new members in their group. Both basic arguments of marxist and weberian approaches are not apparent, one cannot 'see' them as it were. The link between the kind of power and positions prevalent in our society seem open to fair competition, while those who occupy such positions are expected to be very capable. The various schools and curricula that link students to their prospective role in society is masked. So how one can prove that education is not functioning neutrally but has a vested interest instead?

The answer to this problem came unexpectedly by Turner (1960), a functionalist in principle sociologist, who showed that the education system is patterned after promoting two types of social mobility, the competitive and the sponsored one. Competition is a characteristic of an education system where students are selected before passing the gates of the university. This system holds in the United States of America, in France and in Greece, to name a few countries. Sponsored is called the system where from a very young age pupils are selected and from thereon are promoted to follow the beaten track, which accidentally goes along their class origins.

Still it is not again apparent, how the mechanisms and the processes work in a way that inequality inside schools persists and is reproduced generation after generation. Education is considered socially to be an impartial institution serving the interest of no particular social group but of society at large. Goals as well as the training education provides refer to the all the member of

society preparing the future citizens; the institution of education has no vested interest to let people not succeed. Thus how education contributes to inequality? This question till now forms a field of study and theorising is going on. The space does not suffice here to go further on this subject.

In sum, critical voices towards education showed that not all has been well in schooling and that behind shine windows inequality lurks. Maintaining existing social ties implies continuation of existing inequality, which in the long run poses a problem to sustaining social cohesion. Some of the extensive changes that education underwent meets some of the criticisms and point to a mediating role that this institution plays in societies today, trying to retain social stability and at the same time attempting to monitor social change up to a point.

The next section shall focus on answering the second question posed in the introduction, namely, how education affects cohesion today.

4. Education affecting social cohesion: Theoretical notes

Education contributes to cohesion in various ways as its institutionalisation was clearly related with societal preservation and continuity. In the sections above, we examined some of these ways. From the analysis so far becomes apparent that to study education one has to take into account different angles and purposes education is socially used for or fulfills. To put it a bit more concretely, currently individuals ask for (more) education for a variety of purposes all related to a meaningful societal participation, most notably related to labour and the social or personal benefits accruing from it. Various groups, especially status ones to borrow a term from Weber, use educational titles as a means to regulate entrance of new members in their group or and so to attempt making highly valued positions more or less hereditary. Governments use education to manage and control society, in cultural and behaviour terms, to promote a sense of belonging (national identity) and monitor social change as some of the new ideas are accepted and legitimised through education. From a societal point of education is a necessity and a valuable resource. Individuals need to be educated in order to become integral part of society. Education could not accomplish all these tasks if it was not a 'massive' institution.

After the Second World War education was gradually transformed into an institutional means that facilitated social and economic development or it was argued to do so. Asking for more education by the population at large went hand in hand with an unprecedented expansion of providing educational services, on the part of government in western countries, at a variety of levels and for a wide variety of purposes. Most commonly today education is used to learn a craft and receive expertise in order to secure employment. Today, tertiary education is characterised as 'massive', for the unprecedented increase of student population reaching internationally more than 90% in the last couple of decades (Wolf, 2002). Though the term massive obscures the workings of education, it shows a tendency to include more individuals and for many more years of schooling than a few generations before them.

Currently education is considered a social good, access to which should be unhindered to the many up to a certain level; the selective few, who exhibit extraordinary talents, are permitted and even encouraged to continue studies at postgraduate level.

This expansion has actually evolved through measures that has made schooling attractive, one of these being the expanded possibility to learn a craft and secure employment. The value of education has risen in western societies, though many more individuals study today than, for

example, a generation before; and this expansion goes hand in hand with the developments in economy and especially the service sector to which graduates of secondary and tertiary education usually find employment. Expansion of education was accompanied as it was inevitable with a rise of bureaucratic services involved for reasons of managing and controlling an education system.

Education is not only a social good, or a form of capital (Bourdieu) but also provides a valuable opportunity to rise socially, allowing for a degree and promising a valued upward social mobility on basis of education received and/or on basis of occupational success. At the same time the fact that almost all the population spends some time in schooling turns this institution into a handy means of governing society from a distance (Kantzara, 2010: 174).

Parallel to the above is the inclusion of students in schooling, who come from differing social and cultural backgrounds that currently is named multicultural or intercultural education. Al the more, education is considered the institutional means through which to accomplish the integration of newly arrived or newly born members of society. In this function, schooling operates as a 'melting pot', while it cultivates tolerance and understanding among segments of the population; at the same time it provides a valuable recourse to new members accentuating and promoting citizenship and the sense of belonging. In doing this, education is accentuating valuable ideals, some of them contradictory, such as the value of competition and the value of solidarity. It is an institution with powerful cultural, social, economic and political dimensions, all in one.

Behind educational expansion one can trace two conflicting views: attempt to secure continuity of current society in the future, without changing anything; and on the other, permitting some changes so that current form of organising social relations survives in the future. There is a third vision, which considers education as a means to change society radically. Though all fail to fulfill their vision up to a certain extent, these are nonetheless kept 'alive' as it were through education for the next generations. National curricula are an example worthy of further study of how various views and stakes in education conflict and the negotiations that take place before a policy document is accepted (see Ball, 1990: 133).

Notwithstanding the differing views, education managed to create the basis of a socially considered 'neutral' institution, the managing of which is a collective concern served by government policy. Education is socially so important as the right to ownership is. One of the first Constitution article about education in the newly created Greek state defined that the right to education equals the right to own property. Education is a form of capital and the educational titles increasingly are considered a credential, individuals need to be equipped with in order to book social and individual success (Collins, 1979).

A major change schooling underwent refers among other things to its aims. Two centuries ago education aimed at creating more or less homogenous people, ethnically speaking; today the thinking paradigm is that of accepting differences in the sense that diversity may be even beneficial for society. Novel is also the idea that different categories of the population should see themselves be reflected in education in various ways. The view however that education continues to be socially a neutral institution in which success solely depends upon one's own efforts is still prevalent.

At the same time, current social order is legitimised through education. The massiveness of the institution makes it a handy instrument in the hands of governments to manage society as a whole, monitoring acceptance of knowledge, or of some new ideas and promoting new models of conduct, for example in relation to physical environment. This constitutes one side of the coin the second one refers to managing social conflicts.

An emerging role of education seems to be that of mitigating social conflicts: a. as the arbitrator of differences as education teaches which matter and which do not; and b. as the mediator of aspirations: various classes and social strata seek access to a valuable resource for recognition, or a basis of power or just a title to facilitate them in seeking employment, which on top of this as years go by does not lose its integral value. Education is like an instrument that can be used for different purposes, and each social group can find something that is of value to itself. In addition, social conflicts sometimes are staged and sometimes are played out in education, which is another subject and will deal with it in more detail in another text.

Given the equality claim expressed usually by lower (on the social hierarchy) social groups and societal developments that requested more education the question asked today is more complex, as for example, How does education help sustain such a diverse society? Or should it do so? New dilemmas are formulated, such as, Do we need to educate the young according to the culture of their origins or do we need to give them a common curriculum first? These academically speaking or pedagogical questions reveal the social ramifications that go beyond learning and touch maintenance of current organization of social relations.

Retaining a neutral character, education functions on two principles that put into practice and translate the ideal of equality, namely equal opportunities and meritocracy. Equal opportunities however as a principle does not imply and does not guarantee equality of origins or living conditions each participant lives in. Thus while schooling seemingly responds to pleas for equity at the same time it retains its selective character.

It could not be far fetched to argue that education is playing this role, because it increasingly acquires functions similar to that of a religion as an institution. Education like religion represents the collectivity and its values, unites and binds individuals in various ways, it gives meaning to their lives, and a sense of self and identity; it is at the same time a valuable means for individuals to ameliorate their living conditions both materially and immaterially; and those who try hard the most they are more likely to be rewarded in this lifetime.

Education serves social cohesion, for it forms a condition and a means for various purposes: a) for individuals education is a valuable key providing access to social participation; b) for groups is a means to preserve or better their social position; c) for governments, education is an institutional means to manage and control society from a distance; d) additionally, expanding access to education is used as a means to control and mitigate social conflicts relating to accessing a valuable resource; e) for societal purposes of preserving social ties, education cultivates interdependence of individuals and on society of which they aspire to be part; and f) education historically carries and transmits different meanings and valuable ideals, among others the sense of commitment, belonging and solidarity together with a vision of a more just society.

Here I would like to mention Parsons again, for he argued that a society survives when four conditions are met: the parts are integrated to the whole, society is adapted to the environment, aims are set so that people strive to succeed them. Education is an institution that fulfills these conditions. The question however is, Would it be possible that education function otherwise?

Last, education is related to social cohesion for it is linked to maintaining current societal organization. The question that needs to be further asked in my view is how education is related to social transformation, so as to appease and control critique and social dissatisfaction.

5. Concluding remarks

Social cohesion is a term used to denote that a complex whole such as society has reached a level of equilibrium and stability. The question that has been asked is how the parts constituting society function in such a way so as to produce a coherent, integrated whole. In general terms, studies focus on three interrelated levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro-level. Analysing however cohesion at the macro level, one has to resort to some kind of assumptions at a micro level that refer to the individuals and the ways they participate in society.

Many authors point to the functioning of groups as important intermediary between individual and society as a whole. The next question was what facilitates participation in a group and foster commitment of individuals. The various answers given mostly in social psychology, point to the sense of belonging and equality principles among group members. At a macro level, equality, comprehensive schooling, trust, tolerance and social capital are considered as contributing to cohesion.

Education is linked to social cohesion in two broad ways, internally and externally. Internal points to the formation of personalities and external, as educational titles that could be used in labour foremost, which is the means by which individuals are linked to society and participate meaningfully. An aspect that has been less studied is how the construction of an institution, which is considered neutral, that is, impartial, and the various meanings it has acquired facilitate the use by different people for different reasons, committing them and unintentionally perhaps binding them to continue to do so.

In Marxist approaches education is considered to be an instrument in the hands of dominating classes, but at the same time is a means in the hands of dominated classes, an aspect rarely as far as I know touched upon. Education however manages to be in the hands of governments that collaborate within international organizations in order to bring about changes at a continental if not international level. This new developments that took place after the Second World War show the concern and the vested interest of politicians both to avoid extensive social conflicts and to manage society from a distance. The question how to approach and study social conflicts is of paramount importance in social sciences. The expansion education still undergoes does not avoid this question, though it gives a partial answer.

In addition, the way we think about achieving social cohesion through education has changed. From attempting to create homogenous people in cultural and ethnic terms, education moved to accepting diversity; at the same time, currently it promotes an axiomatic claim of accepting people's difference. The social mosaic made out of differing cultures and life styles, all comprising society, are supposedly mirrored in education. It seems we move towards a point, where balance is achieved, because differences among individuals are not considered a threat to societal survival but as an enriching material instead, at least culturally. The question that again arises is what kind of differences is meant, which ones are viewed as important or which ones are considered socially 'harmless'.

The answer to these questions relate to theorising on the constitution of society and the function of education in preserving societal ties and historical continuity. Durkheim analysed division of labour and collective consciousness as important elements that hold society together. Thus education could contribute by preparing pupils on both terrains. Marxist approaches point to that such a function reproduces society and in doing so education replicates relations of exploitation and domination. Working class kids usually get a working class education and then a working class job, is in short the argument.

The aspect of upward social mobility is making education socially important and as educational stratification is related to social stratification, titles are highly valued and could be used as a credential permitting entrance to highly esteemed status groups. Education is becoming according to weberian approaches an institution that partakes to the conflict dimension of social life, the result of the quest for power.

The question arising is what is meant by social cohesion, is it the absence of social conflict or a fear that social ties will be dismantled? Though the use of the term of social cohesion is broad and indefinite, still shows a social concern about current societal organisation and its future. Dewey used the term 'cement', as I mentioned in the second section above, in order to describe the function of schooling in relation to society. Continuing with this metaphor, a cement could cover the differences of the material that are fixed into place. This act fixes differences but does not make them disappear. Is this, one wonders the function of education, to segment differences further and perpetuate them?

Paraphrasing Marx, education is like a religious doctrine that may function as 'opium', promising people a paradise in this lifetime and not in the next one. Additionally, education carries ideals that are highly valued and contribute to creating individuals that according to theory at least look beyond their own short term, self-centered, egotistical interest; education on basis of its long history is considered a means to achieve a better and more just world. The question in times of crises as the ones we live now is, How does education could help to transform society in order to achieve a better and more just world? To my opinion such an effect of education shall undoubtedly contribute to retaining social cohesion and peace for longer periods of time.

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