Abstract

   This assignment discusses post-modernity and its effect on the UAE educational setting. Impacts of globalization, individualization, and uncertainty have all been explored in depth. In the first part of this essay, a definition of what it means to think sociologically has been provided and the importance of such thinking to understand the times we are living through has been analyzed. In the second part, I a discussion of the most important trends pertaining to late modernity has been provided and an overview of their consequences on society in general and on the individual in particular has been presented. In the final part, the implications of those trends for the curriculum and the educational setting will be considered.

Introduction

The gates of modernity are groaning shut, giving way to postmodernity, a term coined by French postmodern theorists. But "we are not yet at a moment that could be called postmodernity" (Agger 2002:3). According to Giddens (1991) and Lash (1992), important changes have taken place in contemporary societies, but people have not reached postmodernity yet. They are living in a transition period between modernity and postmodernity; a period referred to as 'late modernity', or as Zygmunt Bauman calls it 'liquid modernity'.

I do agree with the claim that we have not reached postmodernity yet. In our Arab world, for instance, we still have the same bureaucracy, the same institutional guidelines, and the same religiously-anchored beliefs. Religion and traditions still prevail and family ties are still strong, though the latter varies from one country to another. It is true that our Arab world is witnessing many developments at every level of society; however, this is not indicative of the transition to a postmodern era.

In the first part of my essay, I will try to define what it means to think sociologically and cast light on the importance of such thinking to understand the times we are living through. In the second part, I will set out to discuss the most important trends pertaining to late modernity and show their consequences on society in general and on the individual in particular. In the final part, I will consider the implications of those trends for the curriculum and the educational setting.

1. *Thinking sociologically*

Sociological insight into the form of life we lead nowadays will trigger many questions. How did we come where we are now? Why do we lead a life devoid of meaning and essence? Are the changes sweeping the world today the result of 'micro' aspects of society – individuals' internal self and identity - or the 'macro' picture of the state, multinational capitalist corporations, and globalization (Giddens 1991)? Only by thinking sociologically can we find answers to the questions above.
Thinking sociologically means to recognize the imprint of social structure on the person without forgetting the person's capacity for transforming social structure (Agger 2007).

1.1 The late modern 'self'

In this global era, every individual at every level of society can feel the impact of global changes. One can see and hear it in one's media, taste it in one's food, and sense it in the products that one buys (Rothkop 1997). Globalization has removed all cultural barriers, hence usurping traditional societies of their cultural heritage - through a process known as deculturalization - and individuals of their true identity. Many people in the UAE, for example, have loosened their grip on their traditions and become obsessed with an American outward appearance. Instead of wearing the disdacha, which is the national dress of the UAE nationals, locals in Dubai have started wearing T-shirts and blue jeans. Moreover, caps bearing American brand names have replaced the ghotra, the Arabic word for a head cover. A big number of UAE nationals have become Arab people in American garments. It is true that people today lack an historical imagination because they have relaxed their grip on the past. What really matters to them is the everlasting present. Consequently, they have become vulnerable to be shaped by "culture industries that produce selves just as other industries produce Ford explorers and gap jeans" (Agger, 2001:6). World influences, external cultural forces, social institutions, media and schools have all coalesced to contribute to what Agger (2001) calls our 'self-assemblage'. The 'self' with such a new identity is vulnerable to world influences. Therefore, worldliness has invaded it and is now precluding it from gaining agency, autonomy, and self-reflection.

1.2 Thinking historically about the question of identity

In traditional societies, there were no questions of identity. Choices were already prescribed by the traditions and customs. There used to be institutional guidelines that the individual person should abide by. Self-identity was stable because it was based on accounts of people's lives and on actions and influences that made sense to themselves (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In our Arab society, by way of example, we have the Holy Quran (Allah's Book) and the Sunnah (teachings of our prophet Mohamed). Any deviation from the norms set by the Quran and the Sunnah

was condemned to idiocy and culminated in rejection. Today, by contrast, questions of identity have emerged. The 'self' is no longer inherited, but rather made. It is shaped by external influences which are dispersing its constituents and extorting its agency and autonomy. Given their 'amnesia' about the past, people are sending old classifications into oblivion and formulating new ones, hence the emergence of 'selves' with multiple identities – Arabs in American garments - which makes it harder for societies to hold up and sustain cohesion. The new situation has given rise to what Durkheim (1893) calls a state of 'anomie'. It is no wonder, then, that solidarity has given way to conflictual coexistence.

1.3 *Setting the self on the path of self-discovery*

The postmodern 'self', as described by Agger (2001), is literate, educated and knowledgeable. Unless this worldly knowledge that the self celebrates turns into real knowledge – 'theory', people will continue drifting aimlessly in a world bereft of any sense of meaning. I think that in order for people to 'theorize' their life, an 'aha' moment is required, a moment in which they engage into self-reflection, a moment in which they transcend worldly situations and come to view the world from 'Apollonian heights' of what ancient Greek and German philosophers have termed reason. Only when that 'aha' moment comes can people engage into self-questioning about who they are, what forms them, and how they can dismantle their self-assemblage that is depriving them of power and inhibiting them from gaining control over the world they live in.

1.4 *Deprofessionalizing sociology*

Agger (2001) advocates a deprofessionalized version of sociology. "Sociology is writing, one that does not conceal its literariness but confesses and even celebrates it" (Agger 2001:22). I believe that the scientific approach that most sociologists adopt is more of a hindrance than a help. It simply neglects a large audience whose contribution to the field of sociology is tremendously vital if we are to understand the 'postmodern self' and "transform it into an agent – someone who authors his life" (Agger 2001:11). According to Agger, it is crucial to establish an

interactive and interpretive model where people can interact with each other and interpret each others' experiences. It is through this model, in which the authorial presence dominates, that readers can turn into writers thus achieving a 'Derridean aim par excellence'. By writing self-accounts, people will lay themselves bare, think through their present problems, provoke others' thinking, learn how the present is connected to their past and how contemporary social structures have formed them. Once they have come to a full understanding of their problems, people can learn agency and gain control over their lives.

2. Trends in late modernity

Late modernity is an era characterized by social alienation, heightened superficiality, disorientation, malaise, anxiety and uncertainty. Postmodernists refer to this state as 'homelessness'. Many trends have come into existence and many concepts are being redefined. This is why many focal questions have emerged as a consequence of the sweeping changes that are affecting every level of our contemporary society: Who are we? What formed us? Why do we lead such a life? In what follows, I will mention some of the trends that have a direct impact on education in the UAE context.

2.1 Globalization

Globalization is a discernible trend in our times. It concerns the increasing interconnectedness and integration of international societies, occurring on a global level. The globalization process involves significant increase in trade, which obviously serves the capitalist system's interests. It also involves the infiltration of new political ideologies and a global exchange of culture on a large scale.

This process of globalization, which is often thought of in economic terms, has political and cultural implications. At the economic level, many worldwide production markets have emerged giving consumers a broader access to a wider range of goods and services. A good example of the expansion of capitalism into global economy is Mc Donald's Corporation, the world's largest chain of fast-food restaurants. Ritzer (1993) termed this process McDonaldization, which can be

summed up as the way in which "the principles of fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as those of the rest of the world" (Ritzer, 1993:1). At the political level, and as a result of economic globalization, capitalist and democratic political ideologies have infiltrated into developing countries and permeated every section of society. These ideologies constitute a real threat to the stability and cohesion of economically weak countries and as a result undermine national sovereignty. Even local activities are affected and sometimes "determined by remote events and agencies" (Giddens, 1996:9). At the cultural level, the globalization process manifests itself in the spread of Western values and ideas across the globe. Many sociologists think that globalization is not the integration of cultural systems across the globe. It is rather the Americanization of world culture and US dominance of world affairs. The spread of the American culture through its powerful media constitutes a real threat to other cultures. Also, the interference with world affair matters (e.g. American interference with Iraq and with Iran) may have serious repercussions for the world community.

2.2 The impact of ICTs

Another trend that has revolutionized the world we live in over the last few decades is information and communication technologies (ICTs). The impact of ICTs is a powerful and an invasive one that affects various arenas of social life. Global media networks have reshaped our sense of place and time. "We no longer have roots, we have aerials… We no longer have origins, we have terminals" (Wark, 1994: xiv). ICTs are credited with participating in global markets (the expansion of e-commerce), fostering the democratization process, improving the delivery of basic services, and promoting a broader global linkage. These new technologies have enhanced the efficiency and quality of many services such as banking, commerce, leisure, and education (J. Pakulski, 2004).

The issue of ICTs has polarized public opinion. On the one hand, optimists view ICTs as a golden opportunity to promote 'egalitarian change' especially in the political domain. These technologies enhance democracy by opening new avenues for the marginalized minorities to make their voice heard. On the other hand, critics

proclaim its polarizing potential from the rooftops, focusing on the gap existing between the technology haves and have-nots (the digital divide). They argue that ICTs are likely to widen the already existing gap at the international level – between developed and developing countries – and at the national level – "between the upper and lower strata: the information-rich and the information-poor" (J. Pakulski, 2004:146).

I am of the opinion that ICTs have the potential of making this world a better place to live in. Thanks to ICTs, I am undertaking a Med with Deaken University. We should not lay all the blame on technological developments. We should think of how best we can put these technological inventions into good use. Governments should also try their best to make ICT accessible to everyone. In Tunisia, for instances, the government cancelled taxes on important computers. The cost for internet access has been reduced, too. This is a good step towards bridging the gap between technology haves and have-nots.

2.3 Individualism

There is an earnest desire among people all over the world nowadays to lead a life of their own. We live in an age in which "collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997:2). In traditional societies, people's identity was determined by the social strata they belonged to. They had to follow certain rules, conform to certain norms, hence any deviation from those norms was condemned. Today, by contrast, society is viewed as a collection of individuals, where the individual person is free and sovereign. Therefore, every person is an end in himself and no person should be sacrificed for the sake of another (Stata 1992). Individualism also stipulates that individuals are not duty-bound to any socially-imposed morality and should be free to choose their own identity and lifestyle. From this perspective, Giddens views individualism as "a major corrosive of class and a destroyer of traditional forms of solidarity and association" (J. Pakulski 2004:144).

In order to survive the race and fit perfectly in today's society, one has to become someone whose like does not exist. One has to be unique in the deep sense of the word. One should be imaginative, innovative, creative and inventive. Moreover,

one should be proactive, making cautious and careful choices and being responsible for everything one does or fails to do (Stata 1992).

Today, the life of the individual is characterized by fear and anxiety. In this world of uncertainty and insecurity, any failure is ascribed to the individual person. There are no 'safety-nets' that could protect him, as was the case under collectivism. The common belief prevailing today is: "Your own life, your own failure" (U. Beck & E. Beck-Gersheim, 2002:24).

2.4 *Uncertainty and job insecurity*

Late modernity has created a new social context typified by uncertainty and job insecurity. Unemployment and increased competitiveness are characteristic of this postmodern age. This is often experienced by young people who leave education and set out to find suitable employment related to their studies.

As soon as they step into the labor market, young people come to the full realization that it is by no means an easy task to establish themselves into working life and adulthood in a world "perceived as a dangerous place in which [they] are constantly confronted with risks" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997:3).

In order to chart their path towards their career goals, teenagers need to make a number of choices within a context of risk and uncertainty. One of the choices young people make is to get involved in paid or unpaid employment, a chosen strategy aimed at gaining foothold in a desired career. Other choices include obtaining further education, combining study and work, and networking with influential people to stand a better chance of securing full-time employment in the future (Ball et al, 2000).

These actions undertaken by the sweeping majority of teenagers are indicative of how serious young people are in the pursuit of job opportunities to 'earn a degree of economic independence.' They are also indicative of the myths about the youth lifestyles established by media. Young people are not hedonists striving to maximize their pleasure as often portrayed by media; they are ambitious people who are giving everything a go, turning their hands on anything, exploring all avenues that would eventually lead to a job in a world of uncertainty but to no avail. It is "no wonder

[then that] they turn to alcohol and drugs and go on the dole" (Dwyer & Wyn 2001:12).

3. Implications for the curriculum and educational setting

It goes without saying that both the curriculum and the educational setting are affected by the trends I have discussed in the previous part. However, one should take into consideration that the degree of impact may vary from one society to another or from one school to another.

3.1 The impact of globalization

Globalization has an extensive potential to influence various arenas of developments. What are the implications of the global processes for the curriculum and the educational setting in general?

3.1.1 Global Spread of English

It is by no means easy to define the word *curriculum.* I will quote Lovat's definition which goes in line with my conception of the curriculum. It "is a repository of the ideas and assumptions of a social group about what is important to be learnt" (Lotav, 1995:104). When placed under scrutiny, the old UAE curriculum suggests an inclination towards Arts subjects such as Islamic studies, history and Arabic. This explains why the majority of the local graduates majored in Arts disciplines. Today, by contrast, the focus has moved to scientific subjects, with English and IT being top of the list. English is now taking hold in the UAE, and elsewhere, just as it has done in many other countries. There is a burning desire among UAE policy-makers to teach all subjects in English, save for Arabic and religious education of course. English is no longer viewed as merely a subject matter in the curriculum, but as a way of accessing the wider world and a passport to economic prosperity in this global era. Stimulated by a nationwide drive to make English the linguistic medium in all schools and universities alike, the UAE Ministry of Education (UAEMOE) has launched a series of educational projects such as recruiting qualified language experts, changing textbooks, and hiring native speaker teachers to raise students' achievement in English.

3.1.1.1 Hiring native-speaker teachers

Acting on the premise that English is best taught by its native speakers, the UAEMOE made contracts with Canadian native speakers the majority of whom were not certified as English teachers: they were simply speakers of English who have no practical experience as English teachers. Unfortunately, the whole project was declared a failure, and the UAEMOE terminated the contracts of the Canadian 'teachers' as a result of their low performance and the numerous complaints lodged against them by the students' parents.

3.1.1.2 Changing the curriculum

Another measure taken as an endeavor to enhance students' achievement in English was having recourse to language experts. The language experts suggested to decision-makers that changing the textbooks would be the best solution. Since most of the experts are more into business than into finding practical solutions to the problem, changing textbooks was the only alternative opted for. As a result, students in Model Schools have been exposed to a wide range of textbooks: (UAE Parade 1998, The World Through English 2000, Cutting Edge 2002, UAE Skills in English 2006). Millions of Dirhams found their way into the US and UK treasury to stuff school libraries with encyclopedias, dictionaries, stories, textbooks, English language programs, etc. Putting those textbooks under careful scrutiny, one can easily notice the foreign culture embedded in the target language. Alptekin (1993:138) maintains that "most textbook writers are native speakers who consciously or unconsciously transmit the views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of their own English-speaking society – usually the United States or United Kingdom". It is worth noting that education, which is supposed to be a producer culture, turned out to be a consumer one. No wonder, then, that 'going to mosque for prayer' was a relic of the old curriculum which has been replaced with 'going to disco to have fun'. There is a great risk that students will assimilate other cultures into their own and as a consequence lose their cultural identity.

3.2 Implications of individualism for the school community

The influence of individualism is pervasive and can be easily felt in school communities. It is discernible at the level of both the teachers and the students.

3.2.1 Individualization of instruction

Nowadays, many teachers have a predilection for "operate[ing] in professional isolation behind their classroom doors" (Hayes et al, 2006:183). They are reluctant to work collaboratively because doing so may constitute a threat to "the ethic of their individual self-fulfillment and achievement" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:22). In order to survive the race, teachers act on the premise that they have to be hard-working, active, and inventive. I think we should not lay all the blame upon teachers, but on the administrative guidelines which compel the self-thematization of teachers' biographies. It is a common practice among teachers in the UAE Model Schools to photograph and videotape all classroom activities, put them in a teacher's portfolio, and eventually hand them to the school principal at the end of each academic year. This individualized attitude towards teaching has resulted in negative outcomes for students, because teachers do not engage in teaching their students to raise their level of competence. They only get them involved in meaningless activities that do not enhance their learning such as decorating the classroom, preparing for the National Day, etc.

3.2.2 Individualization of learning

The constructivist learning theory holds that learning is a highly individual process (Dubs, 1995). Individualization of learning, then, is a condition where individual students engage in a self-created process to complete a learning task. It releases students' "commitment by giving them the freedom to act, to try out their new ideas, and be responsible for producing [desired] results" (Senge, 1990: 287-288). At the beginning of a course, for instance English, students take a learning style test to figure out the way they learn best. Once they have known their learning style, students will be able to make up for their weaknesses and capitalize on their strengths.

Students of grade 12, by way of example, are required to write 2 reports on any topic of their choice in all the subjects they study at school. Right from the very beginning, students feel a sense of ownership in choosing the topic of their interest. Individualization is manifested when students try out their own ideas, become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and try to overcome their weaknesses (Ming & Jesucita, 2002:19). Students assume responsibilities for interpreting their own work and constructing their own meanings. Therefore, in case of failure, they are the only ones to blame. "Your own [report] – your own failure" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:22)

It is true that human beings are different in many respects. Being different does not entail leading a life of one's own. On the contrary, we should try our best to bridge the gap existing between us. We should understand that we are social beings by nature. This means that we have to cooperate and collaborate with one another to face all the contemporary challenges. Teachers should understand the importance of working on a commonly shared goal, which is enhancing students' performance and preparing them for a better future. It is only in this sense that schools can make a difference. Instead of basing their teaching on the premise that students have different learning styles, teachers can think of designing classroom activities that would bring all the students together through the implementation of cooperative learning strategies. Such activities would inevitably obliterate the individualization tendency among students. As a result, students will feel they belong to a community where equity prevails, where everyone complements each other, and where everyone appreciates the contribution of each other.

3.3 Job insecurity

Education employment in the UAE is characterized by insecurity, a feature of late modernity trend. It is known for a fact that job insecurity leads to reduced commitment and devotion to work. Most of the teachers who work for the UAE Ministry of Education have a deep sense of insecurity. They know pretty well that their contract may be terminated at any time without prior notice in the absence of teachers' trade unions and a well-defined bill of rights for them.

3.3.1   Anglicizing the curriculum and principals' abuse of power

Perceptions of risk of job loss have intensified due to the dramatic shift towards *anglicizing* (making English the linguistic medium of) the curriculum. The sweeping majority of the teachers who teach scientific subjects are monolingual. Their English language repertoire does not go beyond 'hi' and 'how are you?' In order to face the threats posed to them, they have to learn English willy-nilly. They either fit into the new environment or simply quit. The IELTS test they are supposed to take gives them nightmares and compounds their stress.

Another factor that has compounded feelings of insecurity is the abuse of power in most of the UAE sate schools. It is a common phenomenon that almost all local school principals exercise the power granted to them by the Ministry of Education over expatriate teachers. As a teacher, you have to be servile and sycophantic to survive the race. You have to be an expert at satisfying the school principals' fragile egos.

3.3.2   The rise of private tuition

The feelings of insecurity coupled with the inadequate remuneration have led many teachers to turn their hands on offering private tuition to their very students to make as much money as possible before the eventual termination of their contracts. Students in Model Schools, who are lazy by nature, now have lost interest in many subject matters because they know that they will get a passing grade as long as they are paying their teachers.

For teachers to feel secure and abandon offering private tuition, the Ministry of Education should consider ways of remunerating its staff in order to foster their motivation and devotion. It should also instill faith not fear into its staff to make them cherish feelings of job security.

3.4 Implications of ICT for the school community

Education can be transformed using ICT which brings new capabilities and capacities. Optimists hold that ICT has enormous potential for maximizing the

learner's overall performance through creating interactive environments with unlimited teaching and learning possibilities. But one should admit that for any change in education to be effective, good planning and tactful implementation are a requirement.

In order to keep up with the latest trends in Information technology, the UAE Ministry of Education has heavily invested in an educational project known as the 'e-future project'. The aim of the project is to "further[ing] IT literacy in the education sector" (AME Info, April 30, 2005). In theory, the e-future project looks great. It was meant to bring together parents, teachers and students. In practice, however, the project proved to be ineffective due to a variety of factors.

3.4.1 Upgrading teachers' IT skills

Abu Dhabi Educational Zone (ADEZ) launched a series of ICDL training courses for all teachers and school administrators alike. Most of these training sessions were conducted evenings, thus adding extra teacher workload. After the ICDL implementation, teachers took other training courses in Technology Tools for Teachers (T3), Composer, and Microsoft Front Page. Worth noting is the fact that teachers' motivation is a critical factor in IT adoption, and this was often neglected.

3.4.2 Project communication failure

Effective communication among all project stakeholders is one of the key factors that lead to the success of any project. Not a single meeting involving both parents and teachers was held to disseminate the rationale behind the creation of the 'e-future project'. Moreover, teachers were not aware of the substantial benefits the project may yield. For them, the project meant one thing only: an additional load to their daily school schedule. What's more, most of the students' parents are computer illiterate who cannot have access to the internet. All these factors coalesced to hinder the success of the e-future project.

Not because developed countries have been successful in incorporating technology into the classroom we have to immediately follow suit. There should be

careful planning beforehand. The e-future project, as I see it, is a waste of money since it did not meet its declared objectives.

Conclusion

Sociological thinking is very important in the sense that it gives insight into the past and urges us to reflect on our current times. When appropriately implemented, it helps us to understand our present in terms of our past and explore in depth the linkages existing between macro and micro aspects of society. Once we have come to a fertile understanding of the times we are living through, we can engage in a logical and reasonable evaluation of our social problems, while maintaining a full awareness of world influences affecting our life.

Throughout my essay, I have tried to establish a link between the macro and micro aspects of society to show how much education is affected by the new trends of late modernity. The ongoing changes in the curriculum are a mere reflection of what is going on in the world. The incorporation of modern issues - global warming, deforestation, nuclear weapons, etc - into the curriculum is indicative of the impact of some trends on the curriculum. The emergence of new approaches to teaching such as constructivism is also an indication of the individualization trend that is characteristic of this late modern age.

We have to understand that we no longer live in isolation. Our life has been bound together due to the rapid spread of ICTs. Our mission as educators, then, is to help our students – the future generation – to come to grip with their past in order to understand their current times and act towards a better future, thus honing their sociological imagination is a priority. Stephen Ambrose, an American historian and biographer (1936 – 2002), once said: "The past is a source of knowledge and the future is a source of hope. Love of the past implies faith in the future".

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