

The development and growth of national education systems

One of the most significant phenomena of the 20th century was the dramatic expansion and extension of public (i.e., government-sponsored) education systems around the world—the number of schools grew, as did the number of children attending them. Similarly, the subjects taught in schools broadened from the basics of mathematics and language to include sciences and the arts. Various explanations have been given for the substantial increase in numbers of youths as well as adults attending government-sponsored schools; social scientists tend to categorize the reasons for these enrollment increases as products of either conflict or consensus in the process of social change. In most cases these perspectives are rooted in theories of social science that were formulated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Education and social cohesion

One major school of thought is represented in the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who explained social phenomena from a consensus perspective. According to him, the achievement of social cohesion—exemplified in Europe's large-scale national societies as they experienced industrialization, urbanization, and the secularization of governing bodies—required a universalistic agency capable of transmitting core values to the populace. These values included a common history that contributed to

cultural continuity, social rules that instilled moral discipline and a sense of responsibility for all members of the society, and occupational skills that would meet the society's complex and dynamic needs. Durkheim recognized that public schooling and teachers—as agents of a larger, moral society—served these necessary functions. As he observed in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), “Education sets out precisely with the object of creating a social being.”

Durkheim’s thoughts, expressed near the turn of the 20th century, were reflected in the policies of newly sovereign states in the post-World War II period. Upon achieving their independence, governments throughout Africa and Asia quickly established systems of public instruction that sought to help achieve a sense of national identity in societies historically divided by tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and geographic differences.