

# The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education

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**Editor: Dr B. Chenjerai Chisaka**  
Department of Teacher Education  
University of Zimbabwe  
P O Box MP167  
Mount Pleasant  
Harare  
Email: bcchisaka@yahoo.co.uk

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## THE ROLE OF THEORY IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF EDUCATION.

R. Nyoni

### 1.0 Abstract

*This study examines the role of theory in the sociological study of education. The concepts of social theory, sociology and education are defined and explained while the interrelationship between sociology and education is demonstrated. The characteristics of the main and broad sociological traditions, namely functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism are given and their contribution to education is considered. Feminist theory is also examined together with its contribution to sociological theory and educational practice.*

### 2.0 Introduction

A diversity of theoretical approaches is found in Sociology. Many people have contributed to social theory, a very broad field indeed. Some of the classical pioneers laying the foundations for the sociological discipline are Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857), Karl Marx (1818 - 1883), Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917), George Simmel (1858 - 1918), George Herbert Mead (1863 - 1931) and Max Weber (1864 - 1920).

Theories make connections between concepts and experience, and thus making academic study relevant. We experience life and then make generalizations and build ideas that we use to predict the future. This prediction enables us to plan accordingly. Theory is therefore not remote from reality. For example, Jean Piaget, out of experience with his own children, concluded that intellectual development took place in set stages that could not be artificially altered or speeded up (Piaget, 1981). His work is still regarded highly today as it guides us in examining the socialization of children.

### 3.0 Important Concepts

#### 3.1 Social theory

Social theory seeks to explain social reality (Fay, 1977). Robertson (1980.p.16) defines social theory as " a statement that organizes a set of concepts in a meaningful way by explaining the relationship between them." Cormack (1983) and Johnson (1981) view social theory as any generalization concerning social phenomena that is scientifically established to serve as a reliable basis for sociological interpretation. Haralambos and Heald (1984), Spencer (1996) and Cohen (1978) hold similar views on sociological theory. They see theory as a set of ideas which claims to explain how society or aspects of society work. Theory is therefore not an intellectual luxury for academics. It makes the facts of social life comprehensible. Its nature is such that it cannot be separated from practice.

Sociological theories vary greatly in their scope and sophistication. Some only attempt to explain a small aspect of reality while others confront large scale problems. Abrahamson (1990) looks at theory from two levels. The first level is what he calls meta-theories like functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism. These refer to broad overall orientations to the subject matter of Sociology. The second level is what may be referred to as specific theories. These are more narrowly focussed and represent attempts to explain particular sets of social conditions like Durkheim's theory of suicide and Mead's theory of the self. Usually, a "specific theory" fits into a broader category of meta-theories.

Theories can also be separated into levels of analysis such as micro and macro. Micro theories try to understand social behaviour at the face to face level of human interaction. Among these are such theories as symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, exchange theory and critical theory. The macro theories on the other hand try to understand links among large social units. Here we have such examples as functional analysis (functionalism) and Marxism.

### ***3.2 The concept "sociology"***

The term "sociology" was first used by Isidore Auguste Francois Marie Xavier Comte popularly known as Auguste Comte. Sociology has developed as a distinctive discipline to shed light upon the problems which have arisen in society as a consequence of developments stemming from the industrial revolution. Comte (1974) and Schaefer (1983) look at Sociology as the study of interaction between human institutions like the family, education and religion and how society changes. Babbie (1977) understands sociology as the study of disagreements involved in social interaction and social relationships, while Spencer (1996), Cormack (1983), Goodman and Max (1982) as well as O'Dennell and Garod (1990) see sociology as a study of the social relationships of individuals and society.

From the above views, it is clear that sociologists investigate social life. They do this by posing questions and trying to answer them by systematic research. The study of sociology is important since it increases knowledge as well as being a source of self awareness.

### ***3.3 The Concept 'Education'***

Education as a concept, or possibly as a process, is difficult to define. There are however a number of definitions which differ in length, character and degree of definitiveness (Schofield, 1982). Used in a wider sense, education is equivalent to experience, the experience of a living organism interacting with its normal environment.

Gunter (1980) gives an etymological definition of education. He says that the word comes from "educare" (Latin), "paidagogia" (Greek), "erziehen" (German), "elever" (French) and "opvoeding" (Dutch or Afrikaans). These words have the same basic meaning of bringing up children.

Education is seen as a guided development of the child to adulthood. Gunter goes on to say that, unlike teaching which is concerned with the development of the intellect and the hand, education is aimed at the development of the head, hand, will and emotions. It is

aimed at more than just the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and independent thought, it is also concerned with moral character and the entire personality.

For Durkheim (1956), education is a systematic socialization of the younger generation. Spencer (1996) adds that it transmits knowledge and skills while Ezewu (1983) views it as both a discipline and an institution. The focus of education as a field of study is the learner.

This is the focus in teacher education colleges as they prepare teachers for their dealings with learners.

The study of education from a sociological point of view (Sociology of Education) seeks to examine the links that exist between the learner, school and society. The sociologist is concerned with individuals in society, their behaviour, their ideas and institutions. The school as an educational institution is a physical representative of education as a social phenomenon. Conscious efforts are applied in order to create, develop and consolidate social relationships between the family, teachers (school) and the learner. The interaction so created enables the learner to learn what she/he has to know about her/himself as an individual and as a member of his society.

John Dewey (1859-1952), concerned with the dying of the spirit of cooperation and of mutual help in society, advocated for the relating of school knowledge to the learner's daily life experience. Parallel to this, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) saw sociology as the answer to the shaky social order in France towards the end of the nineteenth century. Meighan (1981) recognises the importance of exposing all intending teachers to a course on the Sociology of Education as part of their education.

#### **4.0 Meta-theories and education**

Beauty is elusive and that is why Shakespeare placed it in the eye of the beholder. This may also be true of social reality. Sociological theories vary in their scope and sophistication. It is very difficult and unlikely that any single theoretical perspective could cover all the aspects of human behaviour which is complicated and many sided. From the diversity of theoretical approaches, this study focuses on meta-theories and their relevance to education.

#### ***4.1 Functionalism (consensus or equilibrium theory)***

Functionalism draws its original inspiration from the work of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. Holmes (1988) identifies the following characteristics of functionalism: it stresses order and stability in society, emphasizes that society cannot survive unless its members share common values, attitudes, and perceptions; society is made up of parts and each part contributes to the whole; the various parts are integrated with each other and this interdependence keeps society relatively stable.

The ideas of Durkheim are very important in functionalism. He lived through the disastrous defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war, the chaos that followed it and the instability and internal conflicts of the Third Republic. As religion could not explain this, Durkheim saw

sociologism as the answer. According to Timasheff and Theodorson (1976), Durkheim's overriding concern was the problem of social order. He believed a new source of moral integration of society could be found through the scientific study of society (Sociology).

Haralambos and Heald (1984) add that societies have needs, requirements or functional prerequisites that are met by different parts of society, for example, the family functions for socialization and the economic system functions for the production of goods and services. Value consensus (Parsons), collective conscience (Durkheim), or consensus universalis (Comte) integrate the various parts of society while socialisation helps in the internalization and transmission of values and norms from one generation to the next.

Durkheim (1956) sees education as the transmission of society's norms and values. These may be deliberately taught in subjects where culture is a component, for example, languages, religious, moral and social studies. Some values will be learned through association with and observation of teachers, for example, punctuality, hard work, cleanliness, through emulation and imitation. Encouraging group work in and outside the classroom will encourage cooperation. Learners are provided with the opportunity to work with those who are neither their kin nor friends at sports, in group activities and other learning activities. Education therefore perpetuates and reinforces homogeneity among members of society by fixing in the learner from the beginning the essential similarities which collective life demands.

Schools are models of the social system and interaction in them is based on fixed rules in preparation for interaction in society. It is by respecting the school rules that the learner learns to respect rules in general, develops the habit of self-control and restraint. Education also teaches specific skills necessary for future occupations. Parsons (1964) identifies this function of education as socialization and selection.

From a functionalist perspective, the curriculum of the school should reflect and propagate the common culture while the teachers transmit this common culture. Teachers are strictly in charge and should treat their classes as whole items rather than deal with the individuals in them. In all this the learner is an empty vessel, a "jug" waiting to be filled with information by the teacher's "jug" (Blackledge and Hunt, 1981). The teacher's role is seen as ensuring the dominance of social needs in individuals. Learners are expected to accept and understand what society wants of them.

Some of the shortcomings of functionalism given by Ballantine (1995) are that it fails to recognize the number of divergent interests, ideologies and conflicting groups; it assumes that when change occurs, it will be slow, deliberate and will not upset the balance of the system; it does not deal with the content of the educational process (what is taught and how it is taught); it is also difficult to analyze individual interactions such as classroom dynamics of learner-teacher or learner-learner interactions. Educators should therefore be critical of functionalist views and beliefs.

They should not take for granted that a learner is a *tabula rasa* (clean slate) on which they must build anew. The teacher is not the fountain of knowledge but a facilitator of learning. Learners have knowledge too, which could be utilized by the teacher.

#### 4.2 Marxism (critical perspective/conflict theory)

A radical alternative to functionalism is Marxism. Both perspectives assume that social structure affects human behaviour, but where functionalism emphasizes interaction, shared values and social stability, Marxism stresses contradictions, conflict, constraints, domination, coercion, power differences and social change. For Marxism, a society is inevitably divided into two competitive classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Trowler,1995). These groups (classes) which have both overlapping and competing interests seek to preserve, extend and to realise themselves by taking action, normally in the form of a revolution. The central thesis is that conflict is an inevitable fact of life and that society is constantly changing in response to social inequality and social conflict. Social order only results from dominant groups making sure that subordinate groups are loyal to the institutions that are the dominant group's source of wealth, power and prestige. Conflict is not restricted to class differences but many groups and interests such as learners and teachers, the old and the young, producers and consumers. The nature of the conflict is not always outright violence; it could be tension, hostility, competition, or disagreement over goals. Conflict can therefore have positive results.

Like functionalism, Marxism accepts that there is social order in society but differs in the explanation of the way the social order is brought about (Cuff and Payne,1981). For functionalism this is through agreement while for Marxism this is through a continual process of disrupted interaction between individuals and class struggles and the imposition of those in power. Periods of social order and equilibrium can occur in which class conflict is temporarily submerged. Dahrendorf, as cited in Meighan (1981.p.27), says that for Marxism, "coherence and order in society are founded on force and constraint and on the domination of some and the subjection of others".

The relationship between the views of Marxism and education can be seen in terms of how the economic structure determines the educational system. Education is seen as functional in the sense that it maintains the dominance of certain powerful groups in society. This, however, does not work for the benefit of all since knowledge is linked to the interests of those who produce it. Meighan (1981) says the school is seen as a phenomenon which is related to the distribution of resources and opportunities in a society rather than bringing social order. Conflict results from the unequal distribution of such resources. Conflict in school arises because the dominant class dictates its ideology for consumption by the oppressed class. Areas of domination include the distribution of education, organization of knowledge, curriculum and culture.

Althusser, as cited in Blackledge and Hunt (1985), says that it is the dominant group whose interests are served in education. Education transmits ruling class ideology, which legitimates and justifies the capitalist system.

It produces attitudes and behaviour required by major groups in the division of labour. It teaches the working class to accept and submit to their exploitation and prepares agents of exploitation and repression. While functionalists are in favour of the social system for which children are being socialised and selected, the conflict perspective disapproves of the society which is being reproduced. However, just as much as functionalists fail to say whose values and norms are transmitted by education, Marxists also fail to realise that the oppressed under capitalism may also benefit from the system. For

example, the colonial and capitalist education in Africa conscientised many Blacks about their oppression and positioned them to better articulate their political grievances. Besides, it prepared many African leaders for political leadership positions. In this respect, education helps in developing free individuals and creating many sided human beings.

Marxism may influence the teacher along the following lines: Which culture is being perpetuated? Is it that of the learners or that of the ruling class? Are teaching approaches subject centred or learner centred? In preparing learners with skills for future employment, what should be in mind - "the white collar job" mentality or self-reliance and the dignity of labour? Are learners being taught to be critical, creative, questioning or just to absorb everything since the teacher "holds power in the classroom"? In classroom management, is there "power sharing" with learners or they must accept to be ruled?

#### *4.3 Symbolic Interactionism (social constructionism)*

Functionalism and Marxism address society wide implications of individual human activity and build macro themes from them. An alternative theory which focuses exclusively upon individual activity within a specific context is symbolic interactionism. This micro perspective argues that social meaning is developed through interaction with others as a consequence of which individual roles are learned and reinforced. Individuals are viewed as active participants in the social world, not passively accepting a supposed consensus as in functionalism. A great deal of work draws upon the work of Mead (1934). Other contributors are Charles H. Cooley, William I. Thomas and Max Weber. Focus is on small scale interaction rather than the broader social interactions and concern is with action between individuals. Action is assumed to be meaningful to those involved and to understand an act, one needs to discover the meaning(s) held by the actors. Meanings are not fixed entities but depend on the context of the interaction (Delamont, 1990). They are also created, developed, modified and changed in interaction.

Mead (1934) says that a process of negotiation occurs from which the definition of a situation emerges. Unlike functionalists, interactionists see roles in society as often unclear, ambiguous and vague. The unclear situation provides actors with room for negotiation, manoeuvre, improvisation and creative action. Roles, like meanings and definitions, are negotiated in the interaction process. The social situation is the most powerful determinant of behaviour. Keddie as cited in Haralambos and Heald (1984) says that to understand and explain educational success and failure, the interaction process in the classroom must be examined.



Teachers need to enter into the right relationship with learners in order to understand them. Interactionism is therefore a theory of change as it recognizes that society is not static but dynamic. If the purpose of education is to offer maximum chance for individual development, then interactionists have room for this. Learning and teaching must be a dialogue with the teacher and learners exchanging and sharing ideas. Timasheff and Theodorson (1976) see the individual not merely as a creature of society but also as a creator of society. Society is continuously modified through the interaction of its members.

Interactionism has a lot to offer to the teacher. Because of Mead's concept of 'significant others' it should be easy to see the possible influence teachers might have on the way a learner thinks about her/himself (her/his self concept). The perspective has something for the

teacher in his/her overall approach to teaching, interacting with learners, colleagues and parents. Teachers need to understand that learning is an exchange of ideas, not that the teacher has to fill up the empty "vessels" as implied by functionalism. The teacher is one of the learners' "significant others" and learners may model their behaviour after her/him. S/he must be a good example for the learners.

#### *4.4 Feminist theory*

There are a number of contemporary movements whose origin lies largely outside Sociology which never the less have greatly influenced the development of the discipline. Feminism is one such movement whose impact on Sociology is undisputed. According to Trowler (1995), feminism is a combination of the view that women have been systematically disadvantaged throughout history and across cultures and the commitment to act to rectify this situation.

Roughly feminism can be divided into four perspectives; radical, Marxist, socialist, and liberal feminism. While these perspectives advocate for change, the extent and direction of the suggested change differ in each case. Radical feminism sees male control of women (patriarchy) as the main problem in the exploitation of women by men. The belief is that there is a deliberate oppression of women by men throughout all attempts of social life and that patriarchy permeates the whole of society and the whole of the education system. As a result of men's dominance in the academic world, most knowledge will not only be approved by male experts but will also be about males, it is male knowledge (Spender, 1983). Because of the dominance of males in defining knowledge and in overseeing its transmission, it is not surprising that females are disadvantaged when knowledge is used as an instrument of oppression.

Males also control dominant positions in the educational institutions. They are disproportionately the heads of schools and colleges, even where men comprise a very small proportion of the staff. In a patriarchal society the rule is that the further up the hierarchy one goes, the more men and the fewer women are to be seen. A way out of this oppressive situation for women is to educate and train them away from men and in their own forms of knowledge. Radical feminists seek to raise girls' awareness of the structure of patriarchy in schools, the work place and within families. Single sex schools may be beneficial to girls as they remove the negative influence of boys.

Marxist feminism on the other hand sees capitalism rather than patriarchy as the source of women's oppression and capitalists as the beneficiaries. The major reason for women's oppression is their exclusion from public production and that their struggle for emancipation is an integral part of the fight of the working class to overthrow capitalism. Capitalist systems oppress women through low wages, temporary work and unpaid employment in the home. Education reproduces the exploitation of women by preparing them for low paid jobs. In order to abolish patriarchy, there is need to attack the capitalist system. Socialist feminists argue that women's oppression is an aspect of both capitalism and patriarchal relations. An end to capitalism, they argue, will not automatically lead to the emancipation of women who also need to fight to free themselves from control by men. Marxist and socialist feminists therefore relate the oppression of women to the production of wealth while radical feminists attribute greater importance to the reproduction of species in the family.

Liberal feminism believes that unequal opportunities between males and females originate from socialization. Socialization on gender roles has the consequence of producing rigid and inflexible expectations of men and women. It blames no one for the existing gender inequalities and believes that nobody benefits from such a situation. Both men and women are harmed because the potential of females and males alike is suppressed by patriarchy and capitalism. Liberal feminism is a reformist perspective concerned with uncovering the immediate forms of discrimination against women and to fight for legal and other reforms to overcome them. Its basis is commitment to equal opportunities for males and females who should be entitled to the same treatment in the main areas of public life including education. Liberal feminism probably enjoys greater popular support than the other perspectives because of its moderate aims. Since the main problem in gender inequality is believed to be the socialization of boys and girls in the family and the school, the strategy for the elimination of women's oppression is seen as positive action for women, for example, having girls in science and technology programmes, changing attitudes and abolishing stereotypes.

There is overwhelming evidence about gender inequality in education. In many societies, the education of girls and women has been considered less important than that of boys. Parents are not only less likely to encourage high educational aspirations for their daughters, but where funds are short, they are likely to spend them on their sons' education (Banks, 1976). In many African societies, social expectations on marriage and payment of lobola influences parental choices on the level to which they are willing to pay fees for their daughters (Fundire, 1994). At home, a lot more of the females' time is spent doing domestic chores than that of males. Boys get more leisure and study time, hence the disparities in the performance levels which tend to be skewed in favour of boys.

The present situation in Zimbabwe and many other third world countries shows imbalances in education between males and females in favour of males, something which is cause for concern. Dropout rates in education are generally higher for girls than those of boys; the gap between male and female enrolments in secondary education has not closed; girls dominate in the arts and humanities and constitute a minority in Science and Mathematics programmes and sex segregation is even more pronounced in vocational and technical education (Nziramanga, 1999 and Gordon, 1995).

At universities, female students are unequally distributed among faculties due to the subjects studied at 'A' level. Sciences, Engineering and Medicine have the lowest proportions of female students while arts faculties have the highest proportion of female students.

Education can become a force for liberating women rather than oppressing them. There is need for a gender sensitive education system which will ensure that more girls are educated. Teaching materials need to change so that they do not reflect men and women in stereotype roles. There is also need for curriculum review and evaluation with the view of making the curriculum content more sensitive to gender issues. Oshako (1995) suggests that teachers must try to promote non sexist language. In the use of English language which is the medium of instruction in Zimbabwe, the male form is favoured in words like postman, chairman, businessman, and spokesman. This is also true of the use of "he" and "man" for both men and women and humanity in general. Phrases like 'man made' and 'the man in the street', can be avoided too. Their usage makes children think exclusively of males and that renders females invisible.

There is also need to eliminate gender stereotypes. Sex role stereotypes are common in curriculum materials. Women are often described as housekeeper, cook, nurse, while men are portrayed as technicians, engineer, scientist or surgeon. Textbooks will either relegate women to a subordinate role or will make them invisible by not focusing on them at all. Sometimes women are treated inadequately. Geography books, for example, will ignore the crucial role women play in farming. History books deal almost exclusively with exploits of men and ignore women in such situations as war. In Mathematics, Science, Engineering and Technology textbooks, the world depicted is a male one. Textbooks play an ideological function, reproducing and reinforcing both patriarchal relations and assumptions about the nature of the subjects we study. In this way they set the problem of gender identity and the gendered nature of subjects. Education must promote the social and occupational status of girls and women. Learners must be made aware that women can go beyond the traditional roles and can make positive contributions in school and society.

### 5.0 Conclusion

An attempt has been made to examine social theory; Sociology and its three main traditions (functionalism, Marxism and symbolic interactionism); education and feminism and how all these relate to each other. For functionalism behaviour is mainly directed by norms and values of the social system while for Marxism behaviour is ultimately determined by the economic superstructure. In interactionism, social reality consists essentially of the subjectively meaningful social actions of individuals. Feminism on the other hand offers a basis for a revision of standard sociological theories.

These theoretical perspectives have implications for the curriculum, teaching approaches and situations. Marxism is useful in explaining situations where conflicts exist and in encouraging critical thinking among both the learners and the teachers. A functional analysis may be used to suggest certain functions of education and to specify certain relations between education and the other parts of society.

The ideologically conservative nature of functionalism may prolong resistance to changes in the curriculum, teaching methods and entry requirements in school as suggested by Marxism and feminism.

The implications of symbolic interactionism for education have been to re-emphasize the importance of the micro and in particular, the processes and interactions which take place in the formation of the social reality of education. Feminism gives us an opportunity to investigate the teaching environment in schools in order to find out why women have remained invisible and what can be done to treat them equally with men.

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