

CHAPTER FIVE

Understanding Sociology of Education

M.N. Sule

Introduction:

The point of convergence of the interdisciplinary approach to the issues of education by sociologists and educators constitutes the sub-discipline of sociology of education. In spite of this convergence, the uniqueness of the components remains as separate disciplines. It is therefore, only appropriate to quickly appreciate that, issues in the field of sociology of education will aptly be understood and explained where a proper understanding of the components of the sub-discipline which are “Sociology” and “Education” is achieved. The first component, which is sociology, has many definitions, which have been advanced by sociologists. Peil (1977), in her book, “An introduction to sociology” stated that, the word ‘Sociology’ was created by Auguste Comte in 1837 when he combined the Latin word for society (socio) with the Greek word for science (logy). According to this thinking, sociology is thus, the science of society. This perception of sociology does not take us very far, as it is a science in a rather limited sense and there are many ideas on the precise meaning of the word society. In response to the above and in a rather wider perspective, Peil defined sociology as “a social science, which studies the social relationships between people as individuals and as groups and the influence of social conditions on the relationships”. To her, it involves the study of the origin, development, organization and functioning of human society. Sociology is perceived to deal with human society and social behaviour, which focuses on groups, institutions and social organizations.

Bates (1975), Turner (1981), Horton and Hunt (1982) and Bolarin (1988), see sociology as the study of patterned social behaviour, examined in the forms of their antecedents and consequences. According to this reasoning, social behaviour exists whenever the behaviour of one person affects and is affected by that of one or more other persons. Social behaviour is patterned when the conduct of two or more persons toward each other has some degree of predictability, that is, when in given circumstances, it tends to occur again and again. Antecedents are the hosts of factors that precede and sometimes

bring about and explain patterned social behaviour. On the other hand, consequences are vents that occur at least partly because of patterned social behaviour.

In “An introduction to Sociological Studies”, Otite and Ogiunwo (1985), define sociology as a study of social aggregates and groups. That, it studies man and the consequences of his being a member of society and that it also deals with social institutions and their organizations in different societies down the ages as well as concentrating on social systems and sub-systems. The focus of sociology in this context is that of examining the nature of human interactions which is thus, the scientific study of behaviour or social action in human groups.

Similarly, Hurd (1973), perceives sociology as a particular way of studying human society. To him, sociology focuses on the interaction between the parts of society. These parts include social institutions and organizations, the interaction of social groups, the means of social control and the process of social change.

From the various definitions articulated, sociology can be considered as the study of human behaviour in groups. Since the central concern of sociologists is social order, the sociological viewpoint is therefore to observe and interpret human behaviour in society as related to social order. Sociologists want to understand the nature of human behaviour in different social set ups, so that they can explain the nature of such behaviours. Human nature is affected by values, norms and belief-systems of society, which shape individual and collective social actions.

Curiosity is the inducement for sociological investigations and such investigations are carried out at the levels of groups and communities and not at individual levels. For instance, a sociological study can be focused on finding out why members of a particular community have persistently resisted the use of western methods in the treatment of illness. This study can assume a comparative nature, where this community can be compared to another that has adopted the western methods for treating illness. The behaviour of both members can be compared after observations are made.

Sociologists therefore generally agree that, human behaviours are affected by certain factors and these factors are essentially affective when individuals actually live in groups. These groups are organized such that,

individuals actually live in communal relationships. These groups are organized such that, individual members play specific roles assigned to them.

Sociological studies are to find out the nature of social situations, which include; social relationships and the consequences of such relationships. Such studies have nothing to do with the moral value or justifications for observed behaviours. Sociology is not interested in whether a social value is good or bad, right or wrong. The sociologist's main pre-occupation is that of understanding the social structure and giving explanations to unfolding social events and situations. A deduction from the above shows that, sociology can be defined as the study of groups or sub-groups of social system. These groups and sub-groups are studied in terms of their patterned behaviours. The sociologist is therefore concerned with the causes of what are seen and discovered of human behaviours.

The second component of sociology of education is education. Similarly, it is variously perceived by scholars. However, generally, it conjures-up a variety of ideas including 'instruction' 'training' 'curriculum and so on. None of these is in anyway exclusively equitable to education and so it is necessary to scrupulously determine the exact meaning of the concept which will help in further understanding sociology of education.

Dubey, Edem and Thakur (1979), in their book, 'The sociology of Nigerian Education' stated that, education is a means by which society ensures its stability. That, it is through the educational system that, young members of society are taught the expected behaviour of the society. Education is thus, seen in this context as a process of learning the society's values, norms and belief systems.

Connel (1974), asserts that, education is a process of instruction. That the teacher who has accumulated a body of knowledge and certain ideas communicates such to the students. Wisdom and knowledge flow through him and the other sources to which the student's attention is directed while the students absorb such according to their varying capabilities.

Since the question of the meaning of 'education' has frequently occupied educational thinkers, it is not surprising that diverse views have been expressed of the meaning of the concept. This is because, it has to do with human dispositions and preferences related to our belief of man, society and the value of human conduct. Other definitions which have been summarized

go in the fashion that, it is a way of developing and disciplining of the mind. This means that, it is a method of absorbing facts and ideas as well as the cultivation of mental abilities. Bolarin (1988), agrees thus that, education should assist in cultivating better ways of thinking, because it is believed that, an educated man should be able to lead more productive life than a person who is not educated. Whatever differences there are in the statement of definition of education, at least most educational thinkers agree that, it is concerned with producing desired changes in human beings. Accordingly, a contextual and functional definition of education can be given as: the acquisition of acceptable values, knowledge and skills by individuals in a given society. These attributes are so internalized that they form his actions, general attitudes as well as his approach to life in a positive manner. This perception of education is directly related to an individual's survival in his social set up.

Educational Sociology and Sociology of Education

Writers in this field have continually distinguished between the early work labeled as 'Educational Sociology' and the subsequent and current work referred to as 'Sociology of Education'. Reid (1980) in his book "Sociology: Perspectives on School and Education" remarks that, the term 'Educational Sociology' has a 'curious ring' to it. That this terminology could suggest that, this type of sociology is educational, implying either that, the other types are not or it might be argued that, it includes all sociology since the subject is itself educational.

Corwin (1965), has described it as a 'mixed marriage' of educationists and sociologists. Reid says, it attempted to solve educational problems in a practical way using sociology. In his book, "Educational Sociology", Jensen (1965), maintains a distinction between Educational Sociology and Sociology of Education that, the problems of Educational Sociology are derived from education while that Sociology of Education are derived from Sociology. However, in a more remarkable attempt to narrow the perception gap, Banks (1968), maintained that, the concept 'Educational Sociology' is fast giving way to the new and current concept of Sociology of Education. While this could have been a lead way out of the perception problem situation, Taylor (1976), argued that, it might be useful to keep both terms with their quite distinctive

meanings, by implication to agree with Jensen (1965) that, “Educational Sociology focuses on educational and social questions while ‘Sociology of Education’ emphasizes sociological problems. Even as the extinction of ‘Educational Sociology’ is doubted, scholars in this field have focused more on the term “Sociology of Education”.

Sociology of Education

The issues in the social demand for education and for the hopes and provisions of educational opportunities have become significantly sensitive in social life. Since sociology is the study of social relationships and social institutions, and education is a form of social institution, issues in education have become a form of greater concern for both educators and sociologists.

Thus, sociology of education has been defined by Musgrave (1978). in his book “The Sociology of Education” as the relationship between society and education. Since this definition does not specify what the nature of the society is, it is difficult to properly conceptualize it. Society has many elements which are understood in diverse ways. A more precise and earlier definition was given by Ottaway (1962), who sees it, as the study of the relations between education and the society, which examines the extent to which education as a social institution is influenced by the social and cultural forces of the society and vice versa. As a social institution, education plays the role of transforming the society. Wheeler (1967) and Nwagwu (1976), see education as an instrument for enculturation, socialization, social reconstruction and cultural regeneration of society. It is a tool necessary for the transformation as well as the economic and social enrichments of the society. Education is also emphasized as a crèche for economic, social and political development while a panacea to redress all social ills of the society. It is thus, the most important instrument for social change. The expansion and progress of education in society as related to services rendered leads to social and economic advancements. This can be explained within the context of the politicization of education in any particular society, the social demand for education and socio-demographic factors.

Sociology of education which is best seen as a particular approach to the explanation of educational phenomena can be recognized as a discipline by a set of reasonable expectations or criteria as follows:

i. Theoretical Characteristics:

The understanding is that, sociology of education goes beyond pure description. It is concerned with explanations of educational phenomena which are made in forms beyond mere consideration of the characteristic of the educational phenomena being explored. Educational phenomena are thus explained within the context of certain theoretical principles. This explains the availability of alternative explanations for educational issues.

ii. Empirical Characteristic:

This discipline depends on observation of one type or another. This characteristic exposes sociology of education to a wide variety, which includes collection of data from existing sources by using questionnaire, test and interview. Thus data can be treated statistically. This method is important as such knowledge can be verified by further observation either by replication or the use of other methods. In this way, the knowledge gained is both developmental and cumulative.

iii. Objective Characteristic:

The expectation of the discipline is that, it must attain some degree of objectivity. This can be achieved only if experts in the field view educational phenomena from a variety of perspectives or be explicit in the use of proportion, use proper data in their work, be explicit in their use of values and evidences.

Sociology of education, according to Uche (1985 p.282), specifically examines the links between schools and society, of which the following embrace:

- i. How the culture of the people affects the number of schools, their organization and curricula;
- ii. How vice versa, schools affect the culture, and social organization of people in society; and
- iii. How schooling influences society and how society conversely influences the school.

Uche, maintained that, knowledge in these areas can provide valuable insights into the educational process and the relationship between education and society for policy makers, administrators and teachers. Although.

sociology of education has been accepted as a valuable discipline in the development of the relationship between society and education in Nigeria. a limited number of reading materials in the field on the Nigerian Sociology of Education is available.

Some of the major content areas of the Nigeria Sociology of Education, which are being taught and researched upon, include the following:

- i. The learner and his socialization;
- ii. The school teacher and factors of influence to his/her role. This pertains to the perception of teaching as a profession as determined by the social status of the teacher;
- iii. An examination of the school environment. This is seen in the context of performances of both teachers and individuals in schools. It is related to the fact that, some schools are located in rural centres while others are in urban centres. School environmental factors can be related to teachers' quality, experience and retention;
- iv. The effects of child rearing practice as impetus for educational development of societies;
- v. Home and school as factors of academic success and intellectual development;
- vi. Social-class, social change and social stratification influences on the educational opportunities of children;
- vii. Parents' and pupils' interest, attitudes, aspirations and motivations as related to teaching and learning.

Although, these content areas are being taught and researched upon, Uche (1985), asserted that, none of them appears to have been systematically explored wide enough to give the promise of being a growth point in sociology of education in the Nigeria context. It is imperative that, future research work in Sociology of Education should therefore be related to analytical inquiry with the aim of finding out specific cultural variables that are important for the Nigerian child's social and intellectual development. A lot more work needs to be done and the task required for the actualization of the objectives of the discipline.

Importance of Sociology of Education to Teachers

Like any field of human study, sociology of education has the following objectives:

- i. Promotion of objectivity in the organization and administration of schools. An understanding of the nature and operations of social institutions, which make up society, can bring about effectiveness in the running of schools. Knowledge gained in the study of sociology of education can be utilized by school policy makers and managers to create objectivity in the running of schools.
- ii. Provision of knowledge for the formulation of policies to guide educational administration and practices. The school is an institution of the society. All institutions of the society are meant to serve and enhance its survival. Since the school is one of such institutions, its policies and aims must reflect the desires and aspirations of the society where it is located.
- iii. Provision of relevant knowledge for the teacher and learner. Knowledge and information emerging from sociological studies on education are important for understanding the society and also its influence on schooling.
- iv. It aids in the enhancement of community-school relationships. Sociology of education subscribes to the fact that, the ideas of education cannot be reasonably achieved without a consideration of what happens in the society. Education can only be meaningfully understood and practiced when it is known for what society and the purpose that individuals are being educated. It helps to define the meaning of education and brings closer the relationship between the school and society while showing education as an important venture.
- v. Generally, sociology of education should help in the understanding of the different social forces that influence education. A combination of these social forces includes the family, economic, political, religious and social class structures. For instance, a thorough understanding of the political ideals of a particular society can make members to appreciate the reasons for the introduction of certain policies for education.

Theoretical Perspectives of Sociology of Education

The importance of theoretical perspectives in the sociology of education, like any other field of study, can simply be stated. Although, theory is commonly viewed as abstract, difficult and detached from reality and practice, it is constantly used in experiencing social reality. Theory is thus, within the context of this exposition simply described as universal categories or basic assumptions concerning the nature of everyday happenings and events.

Reid (1980), posits that, theory is a supposition which explains or attempts to explain something, especially a supposition based on principles that are independent of what is being explained. A theory must attempt an explanation in terms other than the characteristics of phenomena being explained.

Theory in sociology of education provides by way of its assumptions, a framework or structure within which an individual recognizes problems to be solved and frames questions and hypotheses to be answered and tested respectively. The findings, which the individual obtains, help in shaping the observations, which he makes of a particular or sets of events, or happenings. Generally, theory in sociology of education, like other fields, affects observation and observation affects theory but this process has no obvious commencement point.

Sociological theories like most statements about man or society can be seen to contain or reflect an ideology. An ideological principle for instance which reasons that, parts of society, or sub-systems are related to each other and conflict between them has been wrapped in agreement or acceptance of certain values can be characterized as being conservative. This theory suggests that, society is an institutional representation or right or simply that, it is in a state of equilibrium. Understanding in Sociology of Education has thrived on this theory where it has been accepted and its monopoly derived. The principles of the teaching profession have been well fitted in this conservative ideology. McLeish (1970), asserted that, teachers and teacher-education institutions have been found to be basically conservative. The views of social reality as partly presented by sociology of education, explains teachers' perceptions of the teaching as well as their relationship with children and society.

With emerging knowledge and awareness, another teachers' professional ideology had rejected some of the ideological principles of the conservative thought approach. It rather emphasized the uniqueness of each teacher and each class. This ideology created the tendency for the rejection of suggestions from sociologists of education that teachers were merely performing roles for society at large. The climate paved the way for the imperative sociology of education with emphasis on the uniqueness of social situations and individuals.

It also might have introduced alternative ideological principles to the body of knowledge referred to as sociology of education. This development had already broadened the scope of contemporary sociology of education with alternative interpretations of happenings in school and society.

In order to appreciate issues in society and education, it is necessary to have some awareness of the basic theoretical stance or perspective from which particular research was conducted or statement made. Only with such appreciation, is the reader able to compare, contrast and perhaps evaluate the content of what is being offered. By this the reader can equally be equipped to decide how well, in sum, a particular aspect of the field is covered. Some of the basic theoretical perspectives include:

- i. **Structuralist Sociology:** This is viewed as the main problem, which is given by the explanation of social order. The main concern is why do societies and social systems exist? The two main types of Structuralist-society are, one based on the idea of consensus and the other on conflict. The most typical form of consensus is the structural functionalism, which contemporary sociologists now simply refer to as functionalism. The idea being that functional part of the whole which experiences change is necessary for the efficiency of the whole. The best-known example of the second is Marxist sociology. These two views appear to be incompatible and directly opposed to each other.

Dahrendorf (1959), had suggested that, they vary in their utility depending on the particular situation in which one is observing. However, Van den Berghe (1963), agreed that, both theories contain elements of the reality of social life and of each other. Accordingly, the two overlap or converge as Reid (1980) stated as follows:

- Both share an evolutionary model of social change. Conflict sees a dialectical process towards progress while consensus perceives society as moving towards greater structural complexity.
- Both theories have a holistic view, seeing society as a system of interrelated parts and may be criticized for over stressing this factor while understanding the relative autonomy of some parts of society.

ii. **Symbolic Interactionism of Society:** The principles of this theory rest on the basic ideas of G.H. Mead, a classical social philosopher. The major conceptual idea of Mead was that of the self. That man has the ability to be an object to himself where he sees himself, communicates with himself and even acts towards himself. In a social situation, man is perceived as capable of deciding what his needs are and how they can be satisfied. He can review the possible actions, decides on the most appropriate action, undertakes it and change course where his initial predications are proved wrong. This theory suggests that, man in his interaction must engage in whole and full range of possible human associations whether by co-operation, conflict, domination or exploitation. This picture of social action is different from that gained from structural sociology, it is rather active defining and interpreting on the part of the social actor.

Symbolic interactionist believe that, without symbols, there would be no human interaction and consequently no human society. Symbolic interaction, according to its subscribers, is necessary since man has no instincts to direct his behaviour. Man is not genetically programmed to react automatically to particular stimuli for his survival but he must socially construct and live within a world of meaning. He for instance, must classify the natural environment into categories of food and non-food in order to meet basic nutritional requirements. In this way, men both define stimuli and their responses to them. In interaction, the scene is occupied by interacting individuals who modify their respective conducts regardless of position in the social structure, climates of norms and values or institutional settings.

Blumer (1966), viewed symbolic interactionism as resting on three basic premises as follows:

- a. Human beings act on the basis of meanings, which they give to objects and events rather than just reacting to external stimuli;
- b. Meanings arise from the process of interaction; and
- c. Meanings are the result of interactive procedures employed by actors within interaction contexts.

Implications of Symbolic Interactionism to the Educational Practice

Some of the implications are:

- Since this theory places emphasis on human beings that act towards social objects mainly in terms of the meaning they attribute to those objects rather than to their intrinsic character, teaching and learning should comprise of suitable social objects which will draw relevant meaning for the understanding of social reality.
- Man, through his interaction with other defined situations, develop meanings, which direct his action and so construct his own social action. By implication, classroom interactions upon which the learner works with the teacher must be rewarding interactions. This will form the basis for which the learner will construct his social action towards the school generally. Equally, the social interaction between the school management and the teachers as well as the community where it is situated must be cordial and warm.
- Since, symbolic interactionism sees social reality as far from being stable but the result of ongoing negotiations between mutually involved set actors, actors in the field of education must welcome changes that are brought about by negotiations as seen in the reviews of educational policies, programmes, laws and so on. Anticipated changes must be subjected to negotiations as reflected by the desires and aspirations of the people who are to benefit from the educational programmes.
- As the theory suggests that, meanings are constructed and reconstructed by social actors, learners must be given adequate

opportunities to solve problems in the class. Where a first attempt is unsuccessful, another should be given.

iii. Social Exchange Theory of Society

The view of the social life as a patterned exchange between individuals and groups has significant relevance in social reality as well as a long history. Exchange is the basis of economics where the amount of goods exchanged can be measured in monetary term. However, social goods are also exchanged as an individual who does a favour to another is rewarded with a smile, another favour or prestige.

Social exchange theorists appeared to have concentrated on one or the other form of social exchange theory. French sociologists such as Durkheim (1938) and Levi-Strauss (1956), have been the collectivist view of social exchange which emphasizes generalized exchange while British and American theorists, or notably, Homans (1950) and Blau (1956), have focused on the restricted exchange. In this situation, social exchange processes provide a benefit for the society in the form of a moral code of behaviour that determines social, economic and political interpersonal relationships in society. The act of reciprocity, which characterizes social exchange, influences the behaviour of many individuals who may not have engaged in direct-personal interaction because it sets the moral standards of the society.

The collectivist view of social exchange that, its principles have manifested overwhelmingly in the explanation of social reality cannot be underestimated. Some characteristics of social exchange theory include:

- Society survives on the basis of exchange between individuals or groups.
- Knowledge is acquired for the purpose of exchange between individuals or groups.
- The basis of interaction in human relation is the calculation of gains, losses or rewards for individuals or groups.
- In social exchange relationships, there is tolerance of one another and bargaining is an important feature.
- Reciprocity as a social norm modifies the behaviour of individual members of society.

- It is concerned mainly with the symbolism of exchange and its generalized nature. The important point is not what is being exchanged but the symbolic value of the relationship and its implications for the society as a whole.

Some of the major areas of implication of social exchange theory on education include:

- i. Since the theory states that, knowledge is acquired basically for social exchange, it shows that, all acquired concepts, facts, generalizations, principles, ideas and so on in school by learners are for social exchange and so the process of knowledge acquisition should be effective enough to enhance the quality of what is being exchanged for the survival of the society.
- ii. By accepting that, the basis of interaction is the calculation of gains, losses or rewards for individuals or groups, social exchange theory remains as that, education must address the problems of society while society must advance the progress of education.
- iii. As this theory acknowledges the redistribution and reciprocity systems of society which govern social relations, the ideals of education for any particular society should be relevant to the individual and collective interest of members.
- iv. Since social exchange theory explains that, people while exchanging, accommodate others in the process of bargaining, the educational content should reflect the virtues for tolerance and should create conditions for better teaching and learning between teachers and learners.
- v. **Ethnomethodology Theory of Society:** This is one of the social action theoretical perspectives in sociology (others being symbolic interaction and phenomenology). It is a fairly recent sociological perspective founded by the American Sociologist, Harold Garfinkel in the early sixties. Haralambos and Heald (1998), stated that, it is the study of the methods used by people concerned with examining the methods and procedures employed by members of society to construct, account for and give meaning to their social world. Garfinkel sees people as 'members' rather than 'actors', which is the term preferred by interactionist. Ethnomethodologists assume

that, the social world has an objective reality, which is seen and experienced by everyone in the same way. The aim of ethnomethodology is to describe how people make sense of social situations using 'common sense knowledge'. Common sense knowledge is the shared meanings given to everyday encounters and provides the basis of social order. Poore (2000), explains that, ethnomethodology is the study of the way people make meaning in their social world. People make sense of every day activities and interpret their social world in order to know how to behave in it and maintain its existence. Ritzier (1996), observed that, ethnomethodology is the study of the body of common sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of. find their way about, in and out on the circumstances in which they find themselves. It is only deducible that, this theory is the study of ways in which people make sense of their social world in given social situations and as determined by the social activities undertaken by members of society.

Classroom Relevance of Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodological ideas though have not been directly related to education, an attempt is made to provide their relevance to the classroom situation as follows:

- i. The argument, that activities provide the basis upon which the social world can be interpreted and meanings deduced, suggests that, activities to be carried out in the classroom must be purposeful and carefully organized so that, meaningful learning can take place through the interpretive and sense making process of such activities;
- ii. As a social action theory, it is activity based. There is more emphasis on activities as a way of interpreting the social world. The importance of using activities ranging from drama to simulation games is that it helps in making learning more permanent, meaningful and vivid;

- iii. By rejecting and criticizing other theoretical views about the social world, we are reminded by this theory of the need to be critical minded. This calls on both teachers and students to imbibe the spirit of inquiry and further investigations about the social world.

Conclusion:

Sociology of education as a field of study is now both exclusion and complex. It is extensive in terms of its subject matter and research while complex in the range of theoretical approaches it brings to bear upon its interests. Its complexity as a discipline can as well be explained by the various theoretical approaches, which attempt to give descriptions to the changing social world. Quite a number of topics in the field, though have been extensively taught in Nigerian Universities and Colleges, their research points have not been confirmed. Incidentally, the focus, as suggested by the subject matter appears to have tilted towards British and American sociology and Sociology of Education.

Okobiah (1994), while assessing the state of sociology of education in Nigeria with the aim of raising issues and problems in the field, hoping to generate questions and challenges that would stimulate empirical researches and inquiry, has demonstrated that this discipline has to be made more relevant to the Nigerian society. Society in its uniqueness varies and so does education, which is its component, at least in its content and process. Sociology of education both in its content and process must therefore be predicated upon particular societies, to be made relevant and meaningful. The Nigerian Sociology of Education is expected to significantly evolve in this direction.

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