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EXAMINING THE ROLE AND PURPOSE OF EDUCATION WITHIN THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Different perspectives have been used to explain the role of education in society. Some of these perspectives include the functionalist perspective, the feminist perspective encompassing the different forms of feminism which include radical feminism, liberal feminism, social feminism, integrationist perspective, and the Marxist perspective. These perspectives explain the role of education in society guided by different social theories. To put the paper into context, the paper briefly examines how these different theoretical perspectives view the role of education in society. The paper focuses on the Marxist perspective and how it explains the role of education. The Marxist view on education, explains the role in terms of how education maintains the capitalist system and the class struggle. The Marxist perspective views the education curriculum as unfair, oppressive, lacking relevance, and promoting social inequalities. This is seen as an extreme view, as education has in most cases created economic opportunities and social opportunities. The Marxist perspective, despite its radical approach to explaining the role of education, remains relevant in education as it helps us identify areas of conflict that need redress.

Key word: Functionalist, Marxist perspective, Feminist, Education, Curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sociologists and how they view issues of life is varied, but all seek to explain how society or aspects of society function. There are further disagreements on the role and purpose of education in society. The arguments are based on the different perspectives of education, which are the functionalist perspectives, the feminist perspectives, interactionist perspectives, the conflict perspective and contemporary perspectives among others. These perspectives influence the way we define the role and purpose of education. The paper briefly examines the views held by different perspectives in education, before focusing on the Marxist ideology and how it influences sociologists in describing the role of education in society. The paper examines the different views by looking at the advantages and limitations of the Marxist perspective. The following key terms are defined; education, role and Marxist sociologists.



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2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Education: The term education is at times confused with training. The definition of education is also influenced by the sociological perspectives. These include the functionalist, liberal, interactionist and the Marxist perspectives. Businessdictionary. com defines education the wealth of knowledge that an individual acquires through studying or experiences that the individual goes through in life (<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/education.html>) Retrieved 10 April 2013.

Gwarinda (1993) defines education as the process of developing desired equalities in children. There are two key elements that stand out in the two definitions of education. These are that education involves acquiring knowledge and skills, and that it is a process of developing the individual. In that respect education can be viewed as the process of receiving and giving valuable ideas and skills that enable individuals to function according to expectations of the society.

Role: Dictionary.com defines role as proper or customary function. At the same time the the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines role as a function or part performed especially in a particular operation or process. Role can therefore be defined as functions and contributions that education makes in society.

Marxist sociologists: These are scholars or people who believe in the teachings of Karl Marx and attempt to explain society and its behavior in terms of a class struggle between those who have and those who do not have.

3. VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES IN EDUCATION

To put the presentation into context, the paper examines other perspectives in education before moving on to the Marxist perspective of education. Within the context of the functionalist perspective, education is tasked with a variety of responsibilities. The functionalist perspective explains education in terms of roles that members of different institutions perform in order to satisfy societal needs. The functionalist perspective explains education it terms of a sub-system. These sub-systems contribute to the maintenance of societal values. The different proponents of functionalism identify the major roles of education as socialization, selection, creation of equal opportunity and the creation and promotion of meritocracy.

The feminist perspective aims at challenging male domination. The different forms of feminism generally agree that there inequality in society and such inequality has promoted male dominance in different spheres of life. It is aimed at challenging patriarchy. The different types of feminism include radical feminism, social feminism, and liberal feminism. Whilst they may differ on what approaches to take to address inequality in society, they concur that women are oppressed and education has been used to perpetuate patriarchy. The feminist argument on education has been that it has been used to maintain gender inequality. Education has done this through the use of gendered language in textbooks, gendered roles, gender stereotype and gender discrimination. In that regard, education as a socialization agent according the feminist view, enforces male dominance.

However, it is important to note that the problems in society cannot all be attributed to the dominance of one gender by another. Instead of blaming education for promoting inequality, it is prudent upon us all to use education as a tool to promote equality and equity. Education has to change the values of society. This is the philosophy that guides liberal feminism demands the creation of equality through the use of education, equal economic opportunities and through political and legal reforms. Within the same context, radical feminism proposes the focusing of women on improving their consciousness in order for every woman to recognize her own value and strength in order for them to offer collective resistance to the oppressive nature of structures within society.



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4. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Before discussing the role and purpose of education according to the Marxist perspective, it may be necessary to look at the role of education in general. Such role and purpose of education is influenced by the sociological perspectives. The functionalist perspective defines the role of education in terms of the contribution that it has to make in order to maintain value consensus and social solidarity (Haralambos, 1986). The other role and purpose of education according to the functionalist perspective includes instilling norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs within society. Education should be able to help the individual acquire skills. These skills should be relevant to the society in which the individual is a member.

The interactionist perspective focuses on interpreting and understanding meanings. The role and purpose of education is to help individuals understand their society through the meanings and symbols they make. The role and purpose of education is therefore to help the individual acquire and develop skills that allow him/her interpret, define situations, meanings which direct behavior in the process of constructing his/her social world (Haralambos, 1986). The functions of education can be summarized as that of socialization, cultural innovation, social integration, and social placement (Macionis, 1997).

5. THE MARXIST THEORY AND THE ROLE AND PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

The Marxist theory is based on the ideas of Karl Marx, a German sociologist. There are many other sociologists who supported or expanded Marx's ideas. Karl Marx sought to explain how society works. He explained society in terms of the economic contradictions and conflicts that were a result of an imbalance between classes within society. According to Marx the major sources of conflict was capitalism. The Marxist theory falls under macro theories. It looks at the broader society and is also known as the conflict theory, as it attempts to explain processes in society in terms of conflict.

Within the context of the Marxist sociologists, education in its present state is seen as a continuation of the oppressive nature of capitalism. They see education playing the role of maintaining the class structure. It maintains the classes of the ruling class and the working class. As a result Marxist sociologists are of the view that the curriculum and the education system focus on the values that favour the ruling class.

They also see the curriculum as unfair and education maintaining the status quo. Marxist sociologists argue that the skills acquired through education may not be relevant to the individual and society. They argue that education in its present form makes the subject class submit to ruling class ideology. Education in this case is found important in order to produce behavior that makes it possible for the majority of the subject class to fit into the lowest levels of the division of labour. As noted by Althusser cited by Haralambos (1986:180);

Education not only transmits a general ruling class ideology which justifies and legitimates the capitalist system; it produces the attitudes and behavior required by the major groups in the division of labour. It teaches workers to accept and submit to their exploitation, it teaches the 'agents of exploitation and repression', the managers, administrators and politicians, how to practice their crafts and rule the work-force as agents of the ruling class.

The quotation above raises a number of key issues about how the Marxists view the role of education in society. It demonstrates the economic class struggles that they say are common in a capitalist state. For the Marxist the only way to improve education is by getting rid of capitalism and replacing it with socialism and then communism. They see both ideologies replacing capitalism and the working class taking control of such institutions as education.

Within the Marxist perspective education is seen as producing workers for the capitalist system. It is able to provide workers that serve the system. As a result, the curriculum is seen as producing students who are obedient and subordinate as these are emphasized at school. Another view held by Marxist sociologists such as Bowles and Gintis is



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that whilst the curriculum is important, the hidden curriculum catered for students much more than the planned curriculum (Haralambos, 1986).

The Marxist view is that education is seen as promoting social inequalities. This is as a result of the grading system that exists in schools. Whilst sociologists may differ on the areas of focus in the socialization role of education, they seem to agree that education has a socialization function. Whilst the Marxist perspective views the present education system as unfair, it acknowledges that the curriculum socializes pupils to accept the roles that are assigned to them by society. Furthermore, pupils learn to work and share with others. At school this can be done through group work. Group work may include tasks that children do in competition and those they do as a team. The Marxist perspective has a bone of contention with the values children are being socialized into.

Apart from the socialization role, education performs a cultural function. Ezewu (1990) argues that education by its nature is a cultural process. He further notes that the basic aim of education should be the transmission of cultural heritage, preparation for adulthood and fitting into the community. Such a role of education has wide implications for teachers. This means that when dealing with children in Early Childhood Development (E.C.D) classes, the teacher has to be aware of the culture of the community. This will help the teacher when he/she plans activities for the class. The teacher should be able to make use of the local environment, which is part of their culture for children to understand and develop concepts. Such environment includes the language that the teacher uses, since language is part of culture.

Other roles of education include political role and economic role. Education may be used as an oppressive tool. Much depends on the nature of the curriculum. The Marxist view as noted earlier sees the education system as promoting capitalism. They find capitalism unfair. For the Marxists, the oppressed have very little chance of rising through education. In that regard, the education system if not revised might disempower the working class.

6. THE RELEVANCE OF THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE TO EDUCATION

The major of differences on the role of education to society appear to be between the functionalists and the Marxists. The Marxist view appears to be extreme in its attempt to explain issues in society. It tends to explain things within the context of economic conflict between two classes. Despite this view, the arguments by Marxist sociologists have been found to quite relevant when it comes to education. The Marxist perspective on the role and purpose of education reminds us of the problems that are found in society, and are associated with struggles within these classes. It also shows us the limitations of education to address these problems. The education system has at times maintained these classes. For example, in Zimbabwe we still have school classified according to where they are found. Some offer different curricula from government schools. Another important point about the Marxist view is that it places emphasis on action in order to correct past imbalances. The perspective also reminds us to challenge the status quo so as to bring about change in education. It forms the basis for curriculum innovation. The Marxist view promotes curriculum development to align it with the needs of society. It also reminds of the need to revise the curriculum to make it relevant to society. It recognizes the importance of the student.

Furthermore, it has an effect on how we plan our education. It reminds us that if education is to be relevant it has to empower the individual right from the earliest level of development. Children have to be socialized using a curriculum that caters for societal needs.

7. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

The Marxist perspective tends to dwell on economic relationship which may not be necessary in education. In fact, education has been able to cut across economic boundaries. The perspective does not show any flexibility when it comes to explaining problems in education. It does not recognize the important role that education in its present state has been able to remove classes based on gender, race and religion. It tends to extend political theorization to education, ignoring



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the reality on the ground. The focus on conflict might be misleading, as it is not always conflict that brings about change in education. Conflict may at times work against the goals of education.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper identified and defined three key terms. It briefly identified the different sociological perspectives on education, before discussing the role and purpose of education in relation to Marxist sociologists. The paper further assessed the Marxist view on the role and purpose of education. The assessment was done through looking at the relevance and limitations of the Marxist perspective. It may be concluded that whilst the Marxist perspective might sound radical, it has a positive contribution to make in education. It becomes more important for the purposes of curriculum development and design.

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