

# ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES IN GHANA: SCHOOLING IN PERSPECTIVE

Eliasu Alhassan

University for Development Studies, Tamale NT0000-NT2701, Ghana.

## ABSTRACT

*This paper is a contribution to the debate on how social scientists especially sociologists use different theories to explain the purposes of schooling, the relationship between the purpose and the theory as well as the researchers own views about the theory, the purposes of schooling in Ghana and the meaning of schooling in Ghana. The study is the outcome of a review of secondary data, a desk study method with evidence from some focus group discussions with opinion leaders, teachers as well as students. Several key concepts, including the term theory, which we use throughout the study because what one believes varies according to one's belief system or perspective, the various theoretical frameworks are examined showing how these frameworks alter the interpretations people have of the purposes and effects of schooling. The study distinguishes between theories of transmission and transformation, functionalism and conflict theory as well as examines interpretive and critical theories in relation to schooling in Ghana. In conclusion the study gives a brief discussion of what he thinks may be future directions in the sociological theories informing schooling in Ghana.*

**Keywords:** Schooling, Theory, Sociology, Perspective, Education.

## 1. Introduction

In a very simplistic term, theory is a world view, a way we organize and explain the world we live in. In social science research, we generally use theoretical models or perspectives to organize our thoughts and inquiry. Theoretical models or perspectives are loosely interrelated sets of assumptions, concepts, and propositions that constitute a view of the world (Author in [5,15]) or some significant part of it. (Author in [12]) describes theory as a statement of the principles presumably regulating observed processes, or one that accounts for causes or relationships between phenomena. Human beings have created theories to explain the operation of the natural universe, such as theories stating the relationship between energy and mass, or between moisture and the growth rates of plants.

We also have developed theories to explain the workings of the social world, such as why job satisfaction and job performance are related, why people seem to develop conservative social attitudes as they grow older, or why higher occupational status usually is associated with higher levels of educational attainment.

In the realm of social science, people have observed throughout history that individuals who have higher levels of education

tend to have higher social status (Author in [2]). A number of theories or interpretations have been developed to explain this observation. At first people simply believed that the wealthy were smarter. Then, belief in the redemptory effect of education on human nature led first to a corresponding belief that acquiring education would ameliorate or eliminate baser human characteristics, including poverty, disease, and antisocial or immoral behavior.

In practice, this belief justified the institution of schools for the poor, compensatory schooling programs and a variety of social service interventions. Later developments in social theory have altered our beliefs about the role and purpose of schooling. Now, rather than leading to elimination of poverty and social differences, it appears that educational experiences in schools in Ghana may actually act to reinforce existing differences.

The theory about schooling described above is a social science theory. However, we have acquired from various sources rather unscientific and that we use to explain what goes on around us in the social world. For example, one of our students who had obviously been having difficulties with the men in her life sarcastically explained her favorite theory about them: Men go through a series of adolescent

stages and then they die. Obviously some theories are more valid than others in explaining phenomena but all of them help us to organize and understand our worlds. Many govern what we think about our educational experiences. At this point, you might stop to consider some of your own theories. What theories do you use to answer the following questions? Why are some students or teachers more successful in school than others? Why are teachers generally so little respected as professionals? Why is the public so dissatisfied with the public schools today? Reflect on these questions and attempt finding answers to them.

## 2. Theoretical Bases of Schooling

One of the primary theoretical issues addressed in the sociology of schooling involves social transmission and socialization. By this it means the process by which a society's ways of life, values, beliefs and norms, or standards for appropriate behavior are transmitted from one generation to the other. In traditional, functionalist view of social transmission, each elder generation passes on to each succeeding generation the rules and regulations, habits and appropriate behaviors for operating in the society. The task of Ghanaian individuals is to learn and accept their roles within the Ghanaian society especially with regards to traditions and customs. This came out clearly from the focus group discussions: Where the parents acknowledged the fact that they are key in school management and their actions or inactions affect the school positively or negatively. The task of individuals also involves the organization of social roles which individuals assume within society as the social structure.

Theories of transmission are concerned with the description of the structural aspects of society and their transmission from one generation to the next. Authors in [18, 20]. The theories are more concerned with how existing social structures facilitate the general functioning of society than that of change or social transformation. For example, a sociological analysis based on transmission theory examines the social system within a school to understand how the values and behaviors of the pupils or students are passed on. Ghana values such as respect, neatness,

efficient use of time and obeying school rules and authority, for example are evident in the daily activities of the classroom which are anchored by the transmission theory.

Social transmission frameworks examined in this article are functionalism and conflict theory. In contrast to functionalist and conflict theories, a less static view of social transmission involves contrast sociology of control or action. Its central concern is the transformation rather than reproduction of the society. Authors in [9]. Central to this perspective is a different view of the role of individuals. Whereas static models of social transmission view individual students or pupil as passive, the transformative model views these individuals as active. They have the capacity to learn, attend school and become empowered or to engage in the critical thinking which permits them to identify the forces which oppress and constrain them. Author in [14]. Rather than to accept the world as it is, they become agents for social action and changes which potentially could improve their situation in life. Within this framework, interpretive theory and critical social theory are very important to remember because many of these theories overlap and many rely heavily on each other.

The primary difference between theoretical frameworks concerned with transmission and those addressing transformation is explained by author in [6], in terms of reproduction and production of culture. Reproduction, or transmission, is concerned with an examination of the ways in which existing social structures are exactly copied from generation to generation, regardless of external forces such as the activities or desires of groups or individuals. By contrast, theories of production, or transformation, give the specific activities and desires of individuals an important role in the creation of culture. The author in [6] refers to these theories as those which describe the ways in which both individuals and groups assert their own experience and contest or resist the ideological and material forces imposed upon them in a variety of settings. The analyses focus on the ways in which both teachers and students in schools in Ghana produce meaning and culture through their own resistance and

their own individual and collective consciousness. As explained in the group discussions, collectively the parents can push and assist the teachers to address the problems confronting the school in many ways

### **Functional Theory and the Purposes of Schooling**

Functionalists believe that schooling serves to reinforce the existing social and political order. Because they constitute the commonly held or conventional wisdom about schools. This article finds that the descriptions of the purposes of schooling in the following paragraphs sound quite familiar. The study examines other theories showing how interpretations of the purposes of schooling alter according to which theoretical perspective one holds. Despite their theoretical orientation, social science theorists would not necessarily disagree with the reality of how schools are organized in Ghana but they do disagree with their functions in the society or the purposes they serve in the society. They also disagree in their interpretations about the desired goals for schooling or what they think schools should be. Regardless of one's theoretical perspective, the purposes which the general public attribute to schools fall into four general categories namely intellectual, political, economic, and social.

#### **Intellectual Purposes of Schooling**

The three primary intellectual purposes of schooling are;

*To assist students in the acquisition of cognitive skills (reading, mathematics, etc.)*

*To assist students in the acquisition of substantive knowledge*

*To assist students in the acquisition of inquiry skills (evaluation, synthesis, etc.)*

If you were to ask as an individual parent, student or teacher why children attend school, the most common response would be, to learn, which implies acquiring the skills. In 2017, Ghana Minister for Education stated, that Ghanaian parents want their schools to do one thing above all others: teach their children to read, write, speak well and pass well Author in [3]. Businesses and industries in Ghana also view schools as institutions whose job is to impart to Ghanaian children both cognitive skills and a body of substantive knowledge in the natural

and social sciences. The recent outcry over the lack of knowledge and skills by basic school pupils in the northern part of Ghana has called to the attention of educators and the general public this purpose of schooling in Ghana and there has been an accompanying movement by neoconservatives toward a core curriculum change which would provide more effective the secondary liberal arts education to all students and this requires six years of primary education, six years of secondary education four years of university education in Ghana. Schools in Ghana serve four major political purposes:

*To educate future citizens for appropriate participation in the given political order.*

*To promote patriotism by teaching myths, history, and stories about the country, its leaders and government.*

*To promote the political development of their communities.*

*To assure order, public civility, and conformity to laws.*

Functionalists believe that schooling facilitates integration into and knowledge about the political system; it is a means by which common social and political values are transmitted to young people and others, like immigrants, who initially may not share them. The education of future citizens has been one of the most important goals of modern public schooling. Authors in [4, 10].

One of the earliest plans for a system of schooling that would provide free public primary and secondary education to both male and female children was introduced by Kwame Nkrumah after 1957 independence of Ghana. Nkrumah proposed that schooling at the basic and secondary levels in the Northern part of Ghana be free so as to bridge the gap between the north and the south hence schools were established in each locality so that all children would receive free public education. The children would learn reading, writing and computation. The most talented male child in each of these schools would then be selected for further education in the south at public expense.

A final selection process would determine the most talented male child from all the schools, who then would attend the universities of Ghana at public expense. After independence of Ghana successive government continue in different forms of free education to

date. In Ghana Schooling serves two major economic purposes:

*To prepare students for later work roles.*

*To select and train the labor force.*

The economic purposes of public schooling include preparation of students for the work force by teaching attitudes, technical skills and social behavior appropriate to the work place. Schools also act as sorting machines (Author in [8]. In this role, schools first categorize students by academic ability then point them toward specific career goals appropriate to their ability. In this, schools create a meritocracy (Author in [15]. way. hierarchical social structure force. Such organized by ability, and distribute individuals accordingly to fill the diverse meritocracy by a complex modern industrial work force. Such less required assumes that no major external impediments stand in the way of success for able, hard - working individuals Author in [21]. The attitudes and behaviors which schools teach students include traits such as cooperation, conformity to authority, punctuality, gender appropriate attitudes, neatness, task orientation, care of property, and allegiance to the team Authors in [7, 16]. The schools also selected and trained students for later roles at various skill levels in the work force. Industrial growth was believed to be intimately linked to a nation's ability to increase its supply of skilled human capital. School business partnerships like the "Adopt a School" programs in which community businesses invest in particular schools are current examples of the belief in human capital.

In Ghana schools also serve as the primary agencies for the stratification thus creating a based hierarchical ranking of students for their later work roles in life. The concept of human capital and manpower planning came to dominate educational thinking in Africa, Authors in [4, 5]. The human capital school of thought which originated in the late 1950s, calculates the rate of return which people get by investing in years of schooling measured by lifetime earnings and diminished by the total costs of education, including opportunity costs or the amount of money not earned while in school Authors in [11, 12]. Human capital theorist view humans as economic resources. The teachers explained

that a lot of parents do not want to invest in their children at the basic levels and in the end spent huge sums of money to get them pass schools examinations at the secondary school levels which does not auger well for the development of the children,

They treat the laboring ability of human beings much like facilities and natural resources such as money which is needed for living. Physical capital can grow by being invested wisely; similarly, the value of human capital can be increased and enhanced by increasing the educational levels of the work force in Ghana. In Ghana children are viewed as resources having future value and as commodities in the labor market. Schools are believed to increase the capacity of humans by increasing their levels of skill and knowledge. By supporting public education, NGOs churches and philanthropist invested in the development of human resources in Ghanaian schools, schools serve three major social purposes:

*To promote a sense of social and moral responsibility in people.*

*To serve as sites for the solution or amelioration of social problems.*

*To supplement the efforts of other institutions of socialization, such as the family*

In traditional societies in Ghana, the family religious' institutions and the community served to transmit to children appropriate social and moral values for the maintenance of culture. As Ghana became more complex and industrialized, children do not always exactly follow the paths of their parents, the skills needed for work life become more complex and schools are called upon more and more to assist in the training and socialization of children. Since the nineteenth century, schools in Ghana have been viewed as the primary institution for solution of social problems. In fact, in the 1890s, the sociologist, Edward Ross, argued that the school had replaced the church and family as the primary institution for instilling social values, and described education as an inexpensive alternative to the police Author in [19] Social services have been incorporated into schools on the basis that children are well fed, rested and healthy children learn more readily and are not so likely to drop out of school. They also are

supported by the belief that children are more easily influenced in reform movements than are adults.

This analysis of the purposes of schooling is a backdrop for our discussion of the various theoretical frameworks which have informed education processes, particularly in Ghana in the twentieth century. It is important to keep in mind that people interpret the purposes of schooling in accordance with their theories about how schools relate to society. We have begun with the functionalist view, because probably is the one with which educationist are most familiar with. We now move to other views which, in our view, more closely correspond to the way schools and society actually are linked and that is the conflict theory.

It is a clear manifestation that all stakeholders in education have a big role to play and the function each stakeholder plays goes a long way to determine the success of the school achievement; this came out during the focus group discussions with the parents. Conflict theorists such as Karl Marx, Lewis Closer, Georg Simmel, and Ralf Dahrendorf cited in Author [16] believed that structural functionalist analysis with its emphasis on social equilibrium and maintenance of existing patterns was inadequate to explain the dynamism of social systems. They addressed certain issues not raised by structural functionalists. These include: sources and consequences of conflict in social systems, how do conflicting groups organize and mobilize and sources of inequality in society as well as how do societies change and transform themselves.

Marxists and neo - Marxists conflict theory states that the organization of a society is determined by its economic organizational bed and in particular the patterns of ownership of property. These theorists held that inequality of property or resource distribution in society is the major source of conflict in societies and in so far as schools are intimately linked to the kinds of economic opportunities individuals in society too are not left out in this conflict.

Conflict theory has led to a rethinking of the relationship between schools, social class structure and patterns of economic opportunity. It is the ugly face of the society which the society cannot do away with, the parents in the

discussions attested to the fact that even in our homes there are conflict but how to manage the conflicts when it arises is another matter of discussions. Having determined that the educational attainment of males is a good predictor of their ultimate socioeconomic status, Authors in [4,10] then noticed that the educational and socioeconomic status of fathers tended to be the same as that of their sons, indicating that status seemed to be inherited, rather than transcended.

The parents disagreed and explained that many of them here are not educated but they have been able to educate their children up to the university level and some are teaching in the universities in Ghana. Authors in [9,13] theories seemed to be perfect in highly educated countries where every parent is highly educated but the same cannot be applied completely in Ghana where the illiteracy rate is high.

Thus, the whole system of class status seemed much more inflexible than the egalitarian social ideology of western countries than African countries including Ghana. While interpretations differ as to whether individuals themselves or the system dictate the ultimate destinies of specific individuals, it became clear that the process of schooling, because of its close ties to job market was linked as closely to the structure of inequality as it was to opportunities.

The study employs these different perspectives to explain how schools promote inequality of educational access and perpetuate social distinctions. Each of these theory can be used both at what we refer schooling in the larger societal context and at the micro level or the smaller more individual level of classroom and school practice.

### **Sociological Analysis and Schooling**

Sociological thought is historical in that it continues to build upon, reject, change and reformulate what has come before. Interpretive and critical theories of education draw upon theories of production. Their commonality with each other and their difference with transmission theories is that they view actors within school settings as active, rather than



passive, participants in the social construction of their own reality.

Interpretive theory views schools as places where meaning is constructed through the social interaction of people within the setting. The study explains that the best way to understand the process of schooling is to study what goes on in schools as discussed by the focus group, communities and classrooms through an interpretive approach. This means studying real world situations using qualitative or descriptive rather than experimental methods of inquiry. Interpretive approaches are a major departure from the quantitative studies which once dominated educational sociology. Quantitative studies using analysis of census data or survey research methods relied on statistical analysis of demographic information.

The interpretive approach to the process of schooling gained prominence in the early 1970s when Michael F. D. Young in England announced the new sociology of education. In so doing, he heralded an approach whose key concerns were classroom interaction, utilization of the analytic categories and concepts used by educators themselves, and sociological studies of the curriculum itself. Author in [12]. This approach developed from an interest in the work of the cultural reproduction theorists particularly the work of Author [6] who was interested in describing exactly how the process of cultural reproduction took place, within the interpretive paradigm, the central concern of phenomenology is how people construct meanings in their interactions with one another. For example, the concept of what constitutes a good reader is developed through the interaction between teachers and students in classroom practice. In one classroom, children may learn that being a good reader means being able to sound words out quickly and efficiently. In another, children may learn that reading ability is assessed by how much of the text one comprehends author in [5].

An early example of the use of interpretive approaches is the work of Author in (1), who worked Author in [21] at the London Institute of Education in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She was interested in what teachers know about their students and what they consider suitable knowledge for discussion and

evaluation in the classroom. Careful use of observational techniques revealed that meanings constructed by educators resulted in differential treatment of pupils assigned to different ability categories. The teachers in the study, though denying that pupils ability was associated with social class, suggested in concrete cases that there was an intimate relationship between the social back ground and ability levels of their pupils.

Author [1] is a major American educational theorist currently active in developing critical theory in schooling. Their work has been stimulated in part by the inadequacy of both reproduction and interpretive theories to encompass and explain the relationship between schooling and society. Author [1] Apple contended that reproduction theory examines only the structural concerns of schools and that interpretive theories are limited to micro level examinations of classroom interactions despite the fact that the methods used by interpretive researchers were a real breakthrough in our understanding of how educators and students interact to create social reality. The use by Author [1] critical theory attempts to unite these approaches - macro and micro - into one lenses through which to view and understand the schooling interactional approaches to the study of schooling process. Thus, critical theory is a way to integrate macro structural and micro interactional approaches to the study of schooling.

Central to critical theory is the notion of power. It is critical of the current structure of society in which dominant socioeconomic groups exploit and oppress subordinate groups of people. Critical social theory assumes that schools are sites where power struggles between dominant and subordinate groups domination take place. A major theme of their study is an analysis of how dominant groups maintain power in school as well as how subordinate groups resist this domination.

Critical theorists again view schools much as do reproduction theorists as places in which a class-based society is reproduced through the use of the economic, cultural and hegemonic capital of the dominant social class. Critical theorists contend that the power of dominant groups is reinforced within schools,

maintaining the power of the upper and middle classes. Hence, by means of academic selection, socioeconomic stratification, and a governmentally imposed system of regulations which prescribe specific curricular and pedagogical modes, dominant, male and middle or upper - class cultural standards are imposed on children.

### **Beyond Critical Theory**

The study has stressed throughout this analysis the fact that social theories change over time to reflect new ways of thinking and the impact of new information. The first challenge to accepted social science theories that is of concern in this study is conflict theory which gave rise to the application of phenomenological approaches and critical theory to education as well as other social and scientific issues called post - positivism. It tackled the notion that scientific knowledge, especially as exemplified in classical physics, chemistry and mathematics was the ideal toward which knowledge should strive at and that scientists were infallible paragons of intellectual virtue and fortitude, worthy of emulation by lesser mortals, Author in [20] Post - positivists believe that knowledge no longer consists of true statements but of statements that have been rigorously tested and thus far not rejected.

As a consequence, reality cannot be immutable and fixed. Scientific truth and the reality it represents is neither verifiable nor completely falsifiable, it consists of whatever can, for the moment be subjected to rigorous empirical testing, compared with the results of other tests, and warranted to be the most complete and accurate explanation yet obtained Authors in [8, 11, 13].

Because it questioned infallibility of scientific inquiry, post positivism facility lacks on the capability of science and individual scientists to be objective. No longer could scientific inquiry be viewed as value – free. Critical theorists have used this position to question the methods, theories and interpretations of functionalists. Further, post-positivism helped to legitimate the use of non-experimental qualitative and naturalistic research - the kind carried out in the real world, not the laboratory. by ethnographers, qualitative sociologists and

symbolic interactionists. In the middle and late 1980s, critical theory came under its own attack by social theorists such as post-structuralisms. Authors in [2, 3, 6] and anti - rationalists Authors in [16]. While these approaches differ in their emphases and are as varied the researchers who espouse them, they all draw on the analytic constructs of earlier functionalist and conflict approaches as well as the post - positivists 'attack on hard science.

Sociologists also utilize the perspective of interpretive theorists, accepting the premise that reality is constructed of the sum of the realities of individuals interacting in any given setting. These approaches place great importance on presentation of the multiple voices Authors in [11] of all participants especially less powerful participants such as women, members of minority groups and students in social interaction.

These critics of critical theory share a belief that critical theory has merely substituted another form of hegemonic domination that of the white male working class for the elitism of traditional capitalists of bureaucrats. Because the theorists are primarily concerned with oppression of the working classes and because their models are based upon analysis of conditions which prevail in European societies critical theorists are whether consciously or not, read toward a working class European perspective. Included in this perspective place of patriarchal, male - dominated aesthetic values and forms of social organization as well as individualistic, rather than collective, forms of human liberation. Critics of critical theory believe that models of resistance to oppression which are appropriate for working and middle class males of European descent may be totally inappropriate for non - European, nonworking class human and non-male individuals.

Perhaps most important critical theory presents an oversimplified view of asymmetrical power relationships. Critical theorists assume that the end result of resistance, confrontation and open dialogue will be some kind of consensus However, while paying lip service to the existence of unequal power relation as, for example, those which exist between students and teachers -critical theorists have made no systematic examination of the barriers unequal

power relations create to the kind of expression and dialogue they advocate. Critical educators have defined student voices in terms of being different from but not necessarily opposed to the voice of the teacher or other students (Ellsworth 1988). However, especially in matters of cultural difference matters of truth, and questions of who is entitled to receive privileges. Further, the emancipation of students may be impossible cited by critical theorists which are predicated upon Western and European notions of power and group relations. Imposing this view on people who are not part or less authoritarian, say the critics, than other kinds of that tradition is no of oppression) Authors in [6, 14, 15].

### 3. Conclusion

Schooling is the social process by which members of a society particularly, youth acquire norms, values and specific skills by participating in formal educational institutions. The study has tried to give some idea of how the sociological theories which underlie social science thinking

affect the beliefs about the purposes of schooling and operation of schools in Ghana.

The purposes of Schooling in Ghana can be viewed primarily as training in the cognitive, intellectual, political, economic, or social realms. Researchers, Communities, Politicians, Educators and others interested in schools in Ghana vary in the way they believe these purposes should be slanted and how much emphasis should be accorded to each depending upon the theoretical orientations of schools. Sociological theories of schooling should include all stakeholders in schooling especially the behaviour of the parents, government and the parliamentarians since these key stakeholders contribute immensely to the development of the schools as well as the pupils and the students. The emphasis on the purposes of schooling by these theories creates further fertile grounds for the neglect of the activities that go on within and outside the school environment.

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